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Zellen, Barry

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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



The GWOT Reconsidered

Barry Zellen, 7/1/2009

It's Not "Us against the Terrorists" or even the "West against the Rest": It's still "Tribe against the State," just as it's been for over five centuries.

President George W. Bush infamously declared "Mission Accomplished" on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003, formally announcing an end to major combat operations – only to discover that the war in Iraq was anything but over, and would soon enter into a chaotic phase as conventional operations transitioned to asymmetrical warfare. President Obama campaigned hard against the tactical and strategic errors of his predecessor, pledging to close down Guantanamo and withdraw U.S. combat troops from Iraq. But while passionately embraced by an anti-war movement that helped propel him to power, and the recipient of an arguably premature Nobel Prize for Peace, Obama is anything but a dove when it comes to America's continuing commitment to the War on Terror.

Even as he disengages from Iraq, Obama has been increasing America's troop levels in Afghanistan and calling for more aggressive military by Pakistan against its own Jihadist problem – announcing a 17,000 troop surge of his own on February 17, 2009 and less than a month later, considering further troops, to augment his first mini-surge. Today, he appears poised to announce a Lyndon Johnson-sized troop increase of 34,000 more boots on the ground. While engaging in an Afghani surge reminiscent of the very strategy he campaigned so hard against in Iraq, Obama nonetheless declared the "War on Terror" to be over. Not finished, nor won – but in rhetorical terms, the term "Global War on Terror" has been retired. Its retirement sprung to national attention on March 30th when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the press that the new administration had "stopped using the phrase, and I think that speaks for itself," adding that she had not "gotten any directive about using it or not using it. It's just not being used."

Around the same time, Pentagon staff received a memo from DoD's Office of Security Review explaining the White House "prefers to avoid using the term 'Long War' or 'Global War on Terror' (GWOT). Please use 'Overseas Contingency Operation.'" This new, less catchy phrase has been publicly used by several top officials – from the DoD to the OMB. But frustration with the GWOT's terminology is not new. Even President Bush came to regret the one-size-fits-all simplicity of the term he made famous, admitting in 2004, "We actually misnamed the war on terror, it ought to be the struggle against ideological extremists who do not believe in free societies who happen to use terror as a weapon to try to shake the conscience of the free world." Obama's rhetorical re-assessment of the GWOT into a series of nameless, and seemingly disconnected, Overseas Contingency Operations (or OCOs) has as much to do with the GWOT's controversial verbiage as it does with his desire to reshape the conflict along a more logical, and sustainable, axis.

Despite this change in terminology, Obama remains fully engaged militarily. The famed architect of the successful Iraq counterinsurgency, General David Petraeus, remains CENTCOM Commander, a post he has held since October 31, 2008; and thus far, Obama is applying America's counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine as developed by the previous administration. To succeed in Afghanistan will require acquiring a detailed cultural knowledge of the war zone, much as was painfully but effectively achieved in Iraq, in order to identify who among today's opponents might become, with proper incentives, new friends and allies – bringing order from the chaotic mix of tribes, sects, and pan-Islamic movements that define Afghanistan's fractious political geography.

Culture, Conflict and COIN

To gain insights into this new phase in the former-GWOT, and current OCO, I spoke with professor Alan C. Tidwell, Director of the Center for Australian and New Zealand Studies at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, who explained that “rather than think about culture as being blocs of history, ideology and practice, on some grand civilization scale, culture should be thought of as a local response or adaptation by people to local conditions and local histories.” He referred to the work of David Kilculen, one of the theorists who contributed to America’s successful COIN strategy in Iraq, whose work in Afghanistan now “points to a near global rejection of Talibanization of Afghanistan, but an acceptance of Sharia’s usefulness in civil, land and family matters.” As Tidwell explained: “Commonly in the West we look at Sharia’ law and we think of robbers hands being chopped off. Amongst Afghans many don’t care for the extreme ends of Sharia, but they warmly embrace the effectiveness of Sharia courts in non-criminal matters. This is local adaptation of practices to address local needs.”

Thus, added Tidwell, “Rather than focus on what elements of culture are objectionable, the focus becomes to what extent does the practice stabilize the situation. From this point of view policy becomes contingent upon the degree to which culture satisfies local humanitarian, population and stabilization needs.” Tidwell noted that “the challenge, of course, is to learn from those areas where this clash is being dealt with effectively and apply those lessons appropriately to other contexts.” Whether a proper understanding of the underlying tribal governing structures can provide us with a platform for stability, Tidwell observed, “depends very much upon the extent to which both sides to a given conflict are open and willing to engage in dialogue. Enhancing tribal structures through training in modern accounting, management, communication and so on contribute to the strength of tribal governing structures. Equally, however, states and their bureaucrats must be willing to provide for the expression of tribal interests and concerns within the state system.”

For example, in Australia and New Zealand, where Tidwell has much experience, indigenous people and the modern state are “creating ways of working through land conflicts. This is not to say that they have resolved their problems absolutely, but they have established the grounds for dialogue on how to best address those conflicts. In each case the legal system has been used to address the question of land title, and legislation has been passed that providing a way forward for addressing this question. Compare this to the situation in the Philippines. There, conflict exists on the question of indigenous land title, and legislation has been enacted to address this question. The promulgation of that legislation, however, has been quite problematic. The key matter of political will remains unresolved in the Philippines whereas the matter of public will has very much been resolved in both Australia and New Zealand.” One reason why success can be so uneven across one region, Tidwell explained, is that “in both Australia and New Zealand systems of good governance exist both amongst the indigenous people as well as on the part of the state. Whereas, comparatively speaking, good governance does not feature strongly in the Philippines.”

Whether a proper understanding of the underlying tribal governing structures can provide us with a platform for stability, Tidwell observed, “depends very much upon the extent to which both sides to a given conflict are open and willing to engage in dialogue. Enhancing tribal structures through training in modern accounting, management, communication and so on contribute to the strength of tribal governing structures. Equally, however, states and their bureaucrats must be willing to provide for the expression of tribal interests and concerns within the state system. For example, in the context of land management it should be recognized that both tribal people and the state have an interest in environmental sustainability. Recognizing the interdependent interests is a vital step towards establishing the basis for peace and stability.” The lessons of Kilculen’s work, Tidwell noted “simply put is: ‘don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.’ Recognize where people prosper through tribal governance, where the indigenous culture effectively manages conflicts and embrace those. The critical element is to understand the root causes and underlying conditions that foster conflict. The only way to really understand those underlying roots is to collect data at the local level and the best way to do that is to go amongst the local people and talk with them.”

I also spoke with our colleague Harold L. Ingram, a Senior Analyst in the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Office of Strategic, Proliferation and Military Analysis (INR/SPM) who is currently a senior intelligence advisor to the Afghanistan Interagency Operations Group (AIOG), and is a founding member of the Intelligence Community’s Afghanistan Analyst Exchange Panel. He has literally gone amongst the local people for many years. From October 2001 to January 2003, he flew over 100 ISR missions over Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF); after

completing his OEF activation, he returned to the State Department and volunteered to return to Afghanistan, where he helped establish the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and served as political liaison and foreign policy advisor to the 82nd Airborne Division's Task Force Devil and 10th Mountain Division's Task Force Warrior in Kandahar. He returned from a second PRT tour in 2005, serving as primary political officer at both the Asadabad and Jalalabad PRTs in Afghanistan's Regional Command East AOR. "Based on my experiences in Afghanistan, we do see a continuation of tribal systems and governance. Village elders still come together in tribal shuras/councils to gossip, discuss local politics and other topics of interest, to hear and attempt to resolve disputes—ranging from allegations of theft, property rights disputes, and even capital crimes of murder or adultery."

Ingram observes that "tribal dynamics and communal factors have always played the dominant role in rural Afghan society. The current effort to establish a strong central government has largely failed because historically there has never been a strong central government, and the natural local resistance to such an entity has coalesced." He believes tribal governing structures and processes can provide a platform for stability and peace, so long as "we are willing to identify those pre-existing tribal mechanisms and help the central governments adopt those (or at least recognize those) tribal structures"—such as "tribal shuras, jirgas, Arbakai (police), and tribal Lashkars (militias)." Ingram added that "the advantages of incorporating pre-existing tribal structures and processes is that they are typically already largely accepted and proven in areas where the central government does not have (and has not had) an effective presence." In Afghanistan, "we have faced opposition from local tribes who saw us as uninformed interlopers attempting to come into their rural valleys and villages to tell the locals that their centuries old tribal structures and processes for security and dispute resolution are bad and must be replaced—but then we have attempted to replace the pre-existing tribal structures with corrupt local judges or police that only serve their own interests and end up driving a wedge between the local population and the central government rather than endearing the people to their government." He has found that "in most of these rural tribal areas, the people might be willing to tolerate a central government presence so long as it does not attempt to disturb, disrupt or overthrow their pre-existing structures and processes."

Ingram thus believes that "recognizing this aversion to central government 'interference' can help the central government gain more acceptance locally by focusing its limited resources only on areas, activities, and/or structures that the local people are not able to handle themselves"—such as "establishing a national army outpost, helping to build a school, clinic, dig a well, etc." He has identified several methods and processes developed in Afghanistan that could be applied to other battle zones of the GWOT. Among these are demonstrating the government's ability to provide tangible goods, and to deepen its ties to important local actors, building informal and formal mechanisms of consultation among officials and local communities which are all critical to contesting the insurgents'/opposition's claim that government institutions serve nothing more than the best-armed or well-connected. Additionally, he recommends that we focus our efforts on supporting effective local provincial- or district-level governance; promoting and supporting domestic NGOs; correcting tribal and ethnic imbalances—thereby "formalizing and empowering existing tribal governance, security and mediation structures" which is "likely easier and more effective than attempting to remove, combat, and/or dissolve existing tribal organizations;" engaging local religious leaders and formalizing clerical linkages, friendliness to, and/or relationships with the government and government officials; and expanding the reconciliation or re-integration process of "former" insurgents, enemy combatants, and/or enemies of the state like the Taliban.

An anonymous but well informed source who spoke with me on these matters observed that "tribal allies ally themselves with the side that provides the greatest incentives, such as protection and autonomy from corrupt and oppressive central governments. Policy choices lead to support for central governments while military necessity requires provision of incentives for tribes. So American counterinsurgencies persist until Congress and the media decide to stop them." But he added, "Unfortunately, we find ourselves involved in two simultaneous – and interconnected – insurgencies that are being fought as if they were large scale terrorist operations. As such, there are far too many 'black' teams when 'white' SOF is needed. Enormous efforts are made to find and eliminate two extremist leaders rather than create large number of indigenous forces who are trained and led by Special Forces teams."

He recalled the successful Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program devised in 1961 to counter the Viet Cong in Vietnam's Central Highlands and which effectively organized tribal minorities—and suggested a CIDG-modeled operation "that involved nearly connected areas of responsibility could have

closed much of the Afghanistan border with Pakistan where Taliban safe havens exist." But, as he noted, "few lessons were learned from the last insurgency."

As the famed poet and philosopher Santayana once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But as the even more famous poet and philosopher Yogi Berra once explained, "It ain't over 'til it's over." While lacking an inspirational name, the former-GWOT now stands at an important crossroads. As America's military attention pivots from Iraq to Afghanistan, it is essential to look beyond the rhetoric of the conflict, and to focus instead on the underlying roots of this conflict, which can often be traced to the complex tribal mosaic that defines Afghanistan's political topology at the valley- and village-level.

Armed with detailed cultural knowledge and understanding, coalition forces will be positioned to challenge their opponents with more than new terminology—offering up field-tested ideas that have proven their worth under fire, just as they did in Iraq. That way, the day may finally come when America can wind down its final "Overseas Contingency Operation," and genuinely declare a hard-fought, and well earned, "Mission Accomplished" to the long war once known as the Global War on Terror.

Tribal Dimensions of World Conflict

America's Vietnam experience, too often perceived as a military failure or at least an historic failure of institutional learning and military innovation as John A. Nagl has argued, was in fact full of tactical and strategic innovations that proved successful in the field of battle from the conflict's earliest days.

Indeed, even after America withdrew from the fight, weary from the loss of life and determined resistance of its opponent, its abandoned partner, the ARVN, fought on, holding its own for two more years against an opponent that was continuously re-supplied by the Soviets, even as its own military resources were depleted. And after the South fell to North Vietnamese forces, patterns of land ownership did not undergo the same radical transformation as in the North: collectivization simply never happened, even in the face of a decisive military defeat to the Communists. And in the northern highlands of that once-divided country, the tribal Montagnard and Hmong allies of the United States, while collectively punished by Hanoi with a continued lack of infrastructure development in their villages for decades to follow the war, continued to live as they always had, indifferent to Hanoi and never truly conquered. Enduring patterns of political order that were nurtured by the United States thus survived, even after South Vietnam's military defeat, suggesting that with a recommitment of political will to "stay the course," America may well have won a resounding and enduring victory in Indochina.

To some revisionist historians, and to former President Richard Nixon (as recounted in his reflections on the war in his 1987 opus, *No More Vietnams*) the trend lines in Vietnam were pointing toward a probable victory for the United States at the time of its withdrawal, and the salient lesson to be learned, just as President Bush bravely acknowledged when facing up to the difficult challenges confronting us in post-Saddam Iraq, was that the war could only be lost by our own default. As the surge has demonstrated, even a nominal increase in military power (in the case of Iraq, a restoration of a mere 30,000 men of arms proved enough to defeat an insurgency festering across a nation of 28 million) when smartly applied, in conjunction with the necessary cultural knowledge of the battlespace, can be enough to turn the tide of war from all but certain defeat to a decisive and enduring victory.

An important tool applied in our long war in Indochina and re-applied after major combat operations concluded in Iraq and Afghanistan is currently known as Human Terrain Mapping, or HTM, a mapping of the cultural topography of the battlespace, to help guide warfighters in the violent Sunni heartland of Iraq, a land where our opponent blended in with a populace that seemed inherently inimical to American power, and where determining friend from foe could be challenging in the best of times. As learned in America's successful COIN effort in the Sunni heartland of Iraq, coalition warfare with sub-state tribal entities can turn the tide of war, helping to achieve a military victory in a struggle considered by many to have been a lost cause, and which, through innovation and determination, as well as a crash course on cultural knowledge, could pacify a region universally viewed as hostile territory. HTM, as one component of an approach to coalition warfare at the tribal level, helped to snatch a victory from the jaws of defeat, proving that President Bush's intuition as commander was correct, and that the salient lesson of Vietnam was not that the cause was lost, but that a smarter and more committed application of military power, and a quicker process of integrating successful battlefield innovations into evolving doctrine, could change the outcome of the conflict and thus reverse the very flow of history.

The tribal dimension of America's Indochina war effort was notably successful, and can provide later generations with insights on how to effectively wage sub-state proxy warfare or tribe-state coalition

warfare. Indeed, in the years since Saigon fell, methods cultivated during the war in Indochina would prove successful time and again, first in protecting the Kurdish and Shi'ite enclaves of Iraq from Saddam's vengeance in 1991, carving out secure republics within the body politic of a decreasingly sovereign Iraq; then helping to secure a Bosniak enclave from the remnants of war-torn Yugoslavia, and later an increasingly sovereign Kosovar-Albanian enclave within the boundaries of Serbia-proper; and now in pacifying the fractious zones of conflict that define the Long War, from Iraq to Afghanistan and Pakistan and beyond.

The tribal foundations of world order, while little studied compared to other pillars of international stability, are an important part of the structure of international politics, and are of increasing salience as the distance from Europe's largely ethnoculturally homogeneous nation-states increases: instead of finding increased anarchy, one encounters weaker manifestations of state power along with smaller units of international durability such as tribes, clans, and sects. Recognizing these tribal components of world order and integrating them into international security policies, is thus an important first step toward understanding the fabric of international relations, and toward achieving an enduring victory in the long but un-named war that has been the focus of our efforts since the day the Twin Towers fell, and with it both our sense of security and our prior conceptualization of international relations.

Barry Zellen is the author of *Arctic Doom/Arctic Boom: The Geopolitics of Climate Change in the Arctic* (Praeger, October 2009), as well as *Breaking the Ice: From Land Claims to Tribal Sovereignty in the Arctic* (Lexington Books, March 2008). His next volume, due out in December 2009, is *On Thin Ice: The Inuit, the State and the Challenge of Arctic Sovereignty* (Lexington Books).

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