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## **Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy**

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**AFGHANISTAN AND THE FUTURE  
OF WARFARE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ARMY  
AND DEFENSE POLICY**

**Stephen Biddle**

**November 2002**

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## FOREWORD

America's novel use of special operations forces, precision weapons, and indigenous allies has attracted widespread attention since its debut in Northern Afghanistan last fall. It has proven both influential and controversial. Many think it caused the Taliban's sudden collapse. For them, this "Afghan Model" represents warfare's future and should become the new template for U.S. defense planning. Critics, however, see Afghanistan as an anomaly—a non-repeatable product of local conditions. This monograph examines the Afghan Model's actual role in the fall of the Taliban, using evidence collected from a combination of 46 participant interviews, terrain inspection in Afghanistan, and written documentation from both official and unofficial sources.

The author, Dr. Stephen Biddle, argues that neither of the main current interpretations is sound: Afghanistan offers important clues to warfare's future, but not the ones most people think. The campaign of 2001-02 was a surprisingly orthodox air-ground theater campaign in which heavy fire support decided a contest between two land armies. Of course, some elements were quite new. Precision firepower was available in unprecedented quantity and proved crucial for success; special operations forces served as the main effort in a theater of war. In an important sense, though, the differences were less salient than the continuities: the key to success in both Afghanistan and traditional joint warfare was the close interaction of fire and maneuver—neither of which was sufficient alone, and neither of which could succeed without sizeable ground forces trained and equipped at least as well as their opponents. In Afghanistan, our allies provided these ground forces for us; where others can do so, the Afghan Model can be expected to prevail. Hence Afghanistan is not unique. But not all future allies have armies trained and equipped

to their enemies' standards. Without this, neither the bravery of our special operations forces nor the sophistication of our precision guided munitions (PGMs) can ensure an Afghan-like collapse in a resolute opponent—and this implies a very different set of policies for the armed forces and the Nation than many of those now prominent in the public debate on the war.

The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph as a contribution to the national security debate on this important subject.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

STEPHEN D. BIDDLE is Associate Research Professor of National Security Studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute (SSI). Before joining SSI in June 2001, he was a member of the political science faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has held research positions at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) in Alexandria, Virginia; the Harvard University Center for Science and International Affairs (CSIA); and the Kennedy School of Government's Office of National Security Programs. Dr. Biddle has presented testimony before congressional committees on matters of conventional net assessment and arms control, served as U.S. Representative to the NATO Defense Research Group study on Stable Defense, and is co-director of the Columbia University Summer Workshop on the Analysis of Military Operations and Strategy (SWAMOS). His research has won Barchi, Rist, and Impact Prizes from the Military Operations Research Society; most recently, his paper, "The Interaction of Skill and Technology in Combat" (with Michael Fischerkeller and Wade Hinkle), won the Society's 2000 Rist Prize. His publications include articles in *International Security*, *Survival*, *Security Studies*, *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, *The Journal of Politics*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, *Defense Analysis*, and *Military Operations Research*; shorter pieces on military topics in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Orbis*, *Defense News*, and *Joint Force Quarterly*; various chapters in edited volumes; and 24 IDA and NATO reports. He holds AB (1981), MPP (1985), and Ph.D. (Public Policy, 1992) degrees, all from Harvard University.

## SUMMARY

The defense debate tends to treat Afghanistan as either a revolution or a fluke: either the “Afghan Model” of special operations forces (SOF) plus precision munitions plus an indigenous ally is a widely applicable template for American defense planning, or it is a nonreplicable product of local idiosyncrasies. In fact, it is neither. The Afghan campaign of last fall and winter was actually much closer to a typical 20th century mid-intensity conflict, albeit one with unusually heavy fire support for one side. And this view has very different implications than either proponents or skeptics of the Afghan Model now claim.

Afghan Model skeptics often point to Afghanistan’s unusual culture of defection or the Taliban’s poor skill or motivation as grounds for doubting the war’s relevance to the future. Afghanistan’s culture is certainly unusual, and there were many defections. The great bulk, however, occurred after the military tide had turned—not beforehand. They were effects, not causes. The *Afghan* Taliban were surely unskilled and ill-motivated. The non-Afghan al Qaeda, however, have proven resolute and capable fighters. Their host’s collapse was not attributable to any al Qaeda shortage of commitment or training.

Afghan Model proponents, by contrast, credit precision weapons with annihilating enemies at a distance before they could close with our commandos or indigenous allies. Hence the model’s broad utility: with SOF-directed bombs doing the real killing, even ragtag local militias will suffice as allies. All they need do is screen U.S. commandos from the occasional hostile survivor and occupy the abandoned ground thereafter. Yet the actual fighting in Afghanistan involved substantial close combat. Al Qaeda counterattackers closed, unseen, to pointblank range of friendly forces in battles at Highway 4 and Sayed Slim Kalay. Al Qaeda defenders eluded detection or destruction



by American air attack and had to be overrun at Bai Beche, Highway 4, and Operation ANACONDA. At Tora Bora, failure to commit properly trained and motivated ground troops to traditional close combat probably allowed the al Qaeda quarry to escape.

None of this means that precision weapons or special operations forces are not tremendously valuable. Few 20th century combatants enjoyed anything like the power or efficiency of U.S. high-tech fire support in Afghanistan. But just as weeks of bombardment failed to kill the entirety of 1916's trench garrisons, so 2001's precision-guided fire support killed many but not all of its al Qaeda opponents. And even a handful of hostile survivors armed with modern automatic weapons can be lethal to unskilled militia allies, just as they were to poorly trained draftees in 1916.

The key to success, whether in 1916 or 2002, is to team heavy, well-directed fires with skilled ground maneuver to exploit their effects and overwhelm the surviving enemy. This kind of skilled maneuver, however, is beyond the reach of many potential indigenous allies. In Afghanistan, U.S. proxies with American air support brushed aside unskilled, ill-motivated Afghan Taliban, but against hard-core al Qaeda opposition, outcomes were often in doubt even with the benefit of 21st century U.S. air power and American commandos to direct it. Where we face opponents with the gumption and training to stand and fight, our allies need the same, even with all the modern firepower we can offer them.

This in turn implies that we should neither restructure the military to wage Afghan-style wars more efficiently, nor reflexively commit conventional U.S. ground forces in every conflict. Where we enjoy local allies with the needed skills and motivation, we can expect the Afghan Model to work, and we should use it. But we will not always be so lucky. In Iraq, for example, the lack of a credible, trained opposition bodes ill for an Afghanistan-style campaign without major American ground forces. Deep cuts in ground capability could thus be very risky in spite of our strengths in air power

or special operations forces. More broadly, though, we should be wary of suggestions that precision weapons, with or without special operations forces to direct them, have so revolutionized warfare that traditional ground forces are now superceded. Where our allies are good enough, they may provide the ground troops for us, but what Afghanistan really shows is that the wars of tomorrow—like those of yesterday—will continue to require skilled, motivated forces on the ground, in strength, if we are to exploit our technology's effects. Precision weapons are making that ground-air combination ever more capable, but against resolute opponents, neither air power nor conventional ground forces will be able to prevail without the other any time soon.

## **AFGHANISTAN AND THE FUTURE OF WARFARE: IMPLICATIONS FOR ARMY AND DEFENSE POLICY**

Wartime experience always shapes the postwar policy debate, and the campaign in Afghanistan has had an unusually prompt effect. The global war on terrorism is barely joined. Sporadic fighting is still ongoing in Afghanistan itself. Yet the apparent success of American arms there last fall and winter is already playing a major role in a series of debates over the future of the American military, the conduct of the continuing war, and even the shape of American foreign policy as a whole.

In particular, many now argue that in 2001-02, a novel combination of special operations forces (SOF), precision-guided munitions (PGMs), and an indigenous ally destroyed the Taliban's military, toppled their regime, and did so while neither exposing Americans to the risk of heavy casualties nor expanding the American presence in a way that might spur nationalist insurgency. In this new "Afghan Model" it is argued, small teams of elite commandos on the ground provided the targeting information needed for precision weapons to reach dispersed, concealed opponents. Until the commandos arrived, high-altitude bombing could do little against a country with few large, fixed targets. But once coalition bombing was guided by friendly eyes on the ground, many claim, it became possible for airpower to annihilate the Taliban infantry and armor that had stymied the Northern Alliance for the preceding 6 years of civil warfare, enabling even an unsophisticated, outnumbered ally to liberate the entire country in a matter of weeks.<sup>1</sup>

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1 See, e.g., Michael Gordon, "New' U.S. War: Commandos, Airstrikes and Allies on the Ground," *New York Times*, December 29, 2001, p. 1; Paul Watson and Richard Cooper, "Blended Tactics Paved Way for Sudden Collapse," *Los Angeles Times*, November 15, 2001; Thom Shanker, "Conduct of War is Redefined by Success of Special Forces," *New York Times*, January 21, 2002, p. 1; Vernon Loeb, "An Unlikely Super-Warrior Emerges in Afghan War," *Washington Post*, May 19, 2002, p. 16; John Hendren, "Afghanistan Yields Lessons for Pentagon's Next Targets,"

Many now believe that this Afghan Model could be used elsewhere with comparable effect. It has been widely reported that senior civilian Defense officials advocate its use against Iraq.<sup>2</sup> Many see it more broadly still—as a new “American way of war” applicable across a wide range of future conflict types. After all, almost any likely opponent has local enemies who could serve as indigenous allies, either domestically or in neighboring states threatened by our enemies’ ambitions—and we can employ special forces and precision weaponry almost anywhere. If this combination works elsewhere with anything like its effectiveness in Afghanistan, then it might enable us to win the wars of the future with minimal U.S. casualty exposure and political footprint.<sup>3</sup>

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*Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2002, p. 1; Rajiv Chandrasekaran and John Pomfret, “Aided by U.S., Pashtun Militias Move Closer to Kandahar,” *Washington Post*, November 27, 2001, p. 6; Ann Scott Tyson, “U.S. is Prevailing With Its Most Finely Tuned War,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 21, 2001, p. 1; Joseph Fitchett, “Swift Success for High-Tech Arms,” *International Herald Tribune*, December 7, 2001, p. 1; “Afghanistan: First Lessons,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, December 19, 2001.

2 See, e.g., Thomas Ricks, “Military Sees Iraq Invasion Put on Hold,” *Washington Post*, May 24, 2002, p. 1; Michael Gordon, “Iraqis Seek to Oust Hussein with U.S. Military Training,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2002, p. A10; Dave Moniz, “Afghanistan’s Lessons Shaping New Military,” *USA Today*, October 8, 2002, p. 13; Michael Dobbs, “Old Strategy on Iraq Sparks New Debate: Backers Say Plan Proven in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, December 27, 2001, p. A1; Rowan Scarborough, “Pentagon Uses Afghan War as Model for Iraq,” *Washington Times*, December 4, 2001, p. 1; idem, “White House Will Deal With Iraq,” *Washington Times*, December 20, 2001; idem, “Size of Force on Ground Key in Plan for Iraq War,” *Washington Times*, April 26, 2002, p. 1; Seymour Hersh, “The Iraq Hawks: Can Their Plan Work?” *The New Yorker*, December 24, 2001; “Afghanistan: First Lessons,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, December 19, 2001; Lawrence Kaplan, “Phase Two: Why the Bush Administration Will Go After Iraq,” *The New Republic*, December 10, 2001.

3 Prominent proponents of such views have included, *inter alia*, Richard Perle, R. James Woolsey, Stansfield Turner, Michael Vickers, Thomas Donnelly, Daniel Goure, Fareed Zakaria, and James Webb: see, e.g., Ronald Brownstein, “Hawks Urge Bush to Extend Military Campaign to Iraq,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 20, 2001; Bill Gertz, “Rumsfeld Advisor Says Widen the War to Include Saddam; Favors Airstrikes, Use of Local Forces,” *Washington Times*, February 28, 2002, p. A12; R. James Woolsey, “Objective: Democracy,” *Washington Post*, November 27, 2001, p. 13; Brad Knickerbocker, “War May Prod Military Reforms,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 3, 2002, p. 1; Tom Bowman, “Studying Lessons of Battle Success,” *Baltimore Sun*, December 17, 2001; “Location, Location, Location,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, February 27, 2002; Fareed Zakaria, “Face the Facts: Bombing Works,” *Newsweek*, December 3, 2001; James Webb, “A New Doctrine for New Wars,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 30, 2001; also Arnaud de Borchgrave, “Uniting Mission and Coalition,” *Washington Times*, February 22, 2002, who notes the broad support for such views among conservative intellectuals; Ken Adelman,

If so, the policy implications could be sweeping. It might, for example, make sense to restructure the U.S. military around the requirements of this new way of war, with larger special operations forces, modernized, longer-range aircraft and missiles, deep reductions in conventional Army and Marine Corps ground forces, major reallocations of Service roles and missions, and sweeping changes in joint military doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Modernization programs for systems originally designed to wage large-scale theater warfare, such as the F-22 Raptor air superiority fighter, the Comanche armed reconnaissance helicopter, or the V22 tilt rotor transport aircraft could all be challenged as backward-looking failures to reflect the new possibilities.<sup>5</sup> The case for expanding the ongoing war on terrorism to topple regimes in Iraq or elsewhere would be strengthened if the Afghan Model were seen as a cheap, effective way to leverage local allies in pursuit of American aims.<sup>6</sup> Most broadly, a powerful, widely-applicable means of waging war at global

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"Taking Exception: Cakewalk in Iraq," *Washington Post*, February 13, 2002, p. 27; James Phillips, "Keys to the Endgame in Afghanistan," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 1507*, December 6, 2001, p. 12; Michael Kelly, "The Air-Power Revolution," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2002, pp. 18ff. Such views are not limited to outside analysts. Robert Andrews, Principal Deputy to the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict, recently suggested that the combination of special forces and precision munitions in Afghanistan had "changed the face of war." Linda Kozaryn, "U.S. Special Operations Forces Change Face of War," *American Forces Press Service*, December 14, 2001. Many senior civilian defense officials are reported to believe that the Afghanistan experience validates a prior expectation that warfare has been revolutionized: see, e.g., Rowan Scarborough, "Army Officials Fear More Cuts," *Washington Times*, June 4, 2002, p. 6. President Bush himself characterized Afghanistan as "a proving ground .... The conflict in Afghanistan has taught us more about the future of our military than a decade of blue ribbon panels and think-tank symposiums." *White House Press Release*, December 11, 2001, "President Speaks on War Effort to Citadel Cadets: Remarks by the President at the Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina," p. 3.

4 On the force structure and policy implications of the "Afghan Model," see, e.g., Hunter Keeter, "Anti-Terror Campaign Could Speed Military Transformation," *Defense Daily*, November 21, 2001, p. 4; Michael Vickers, *The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, the FY 2003 Defense Budget Request and the Way Ahead for Transformation: Meeting the "Rumsfeld Test"*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, June 19, 2002; Moniz, "Afghanistan's Lessons Shaping New Military;" Scarborough, "Army Officials Fear More Cuts;" "Misdirected Defense Dollars," *New York Times*, January 16, 2002; Joseph Fitchett, "Campaign Proves the Length of U.S. Military Arm," *International Herald Tribune*, November 19, 2001, p. 1.

5 On the F-22, for example, see "Misdirected Defense Dollars," (unsigned editorial) *New York Times*, January 16, 2002.

6 See references in notes 2 and 3 above.

distances with minor risks would add major impetus to proposals for neo-imperialist conceptions of American foreign policy, in which unilateral U.S. military might underwrites a *Pax Americana* and advances American values and interests around the world.<sup>7</sup>

Others disagree. Many argue that the Afghan Model's success in 2001-02 was idiosyncratic—a product of unique local circumstances unlikely to recur in future conflicts.<sup>8</sup> Any real world outcome is a product of many contributing causes, some of which are replicable and others not; critics see nonreplicable features of the Afghan theater or the Taliban opponent as necessary preconditions for the outcome observed there. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it:

It is hard for me to imagine another Afghanistan. If you think about that situation, it is kind of distinctive. Now it doesn't mean that some of the things that are working there won't work elsewhere, but the totality of it is distinctive. I don't think we're going to run around with a cookie mold and repeat this.<sup>9</sup>

A related critique rests on the politico-military disadvantages of relying so heavily on local proxies who may not share our aims. Many such analysts point to the fighting at Tora Bora, where Afghan allies with different interests than ours apparently failed to press the attack and may

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7 For the neo-imperialist brief, see, e.g., Max Boot, "The Case for American Empire," *Weekly Standard*, October 15, 2001, Vol. 7, No. 5; Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire," *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1998; Sebastian Mallaby, "The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States, and the Case for American Empire," *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2002; Robert Kagan, "Power and Weakness, Why Europe and the U.S. See the World Differently," *Policy Review*, June-July 2002, no 113.

8 Prominent proponents of such views have included, *inter alia*, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Anthony Zinni, Arthur Cebrowski, Wesley Clark, Loren Thompson, and Andrew Krepinevich. See, e.g., Alan Sipress and Peter Slevin, "Powell Wary of Iraq Move," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2001, p. 1; Donald Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 3, May/June 2002, pp. 20-32 at 22; Tony Capaccio, "Afghan Lessons Don't Apply to 'Axis,' Generals Say," *Bloomberg.com*, February 20, 2002; Dobbs, "Old Strategy on Iraq Sparks New Debate;" Kim Burger and Andrew Koch, "Afghanistan: The Key Lessons," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, January 2, 2002; Bowman, "Studying Lessons of Battle Success."

9 Quoted in Rowan Scarborough, "Air Force Resists More Bombers, Prefers Fighters," *Washington Times*, December 26, 2001, p. 1.

have allowed Osama bin Laden to escape. To secure U.S. interests, they argue, will often require that U.S., not foreign, troops do the heavy lifting.<sup>10</sup>

If so—if Afghanistan was unique or if reliance on proxies is politically unsound—then the policy implications are very different than those seen by Afghan Model proponents. In particular, the case for expanding the war to Iraq is weakened (as this could require major U.S. ground forces rather than the Afghan Model's small commando teams), the rationale for a sweeping redesign of the U.S. military loses its most trenchant empirical support, and the military demands of a neo-imperialist foreign policy become much more burdensome.

To date, however, this debate has been conducted on the basis of only the most preliminary impressions of the war's actual conduct. The purpose of this monograph is thus to provide a more extensive body of evidence on the way the Model's elements were actually employed in Afghanistan, the nature and behavior of its targets, and the circumstances of the fighting—and to use this evidence to assess the Model's role in the Taliban's collapse on a more systematic basis.

The results suggest that none of the main current views offer a sound account of the war's actual conduct. The Afghan Model did not, in fact, work as its proponents now suggest; nor was its success due chiefly to unique properties of Afghanistan or the Taliban.

To account for what is now known thus requires a different explanation of the campaign's outcome—one resting neither on precision firepower per se nor on Afghan idiosyncrasies.<sup>11</sup> I argue below that the best explanation is that the Afghan campaign was actually far less different or

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10 See, e.g., Michael O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 3, May/June 2002, pp. 47-63; Barton Gellman and Thomas Ricks, "U.S. Concludes Bin Laden Escaped at Tora Bora Fight; Failure to Send Troops in Pursuit Termed Major Error," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2002, p. 1; Susan Glasser, "The Battle of Tora Bora: Secrets, Money, Mistrust," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2002, p. 1; William Arkin, "Dropping 15,000 Pounds of Frustration," *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2001.

unusual than most now suppose: it was a surprisingly orthodox air-ground theater campaign in which heavy fire support decided a contest between two land forces. Of course, some elements were quite new: the fire support came almost exclusively from the air; the air strikes were directed mostly by commandos whose methods, equipment, and centrality to the outcome were unprecedented; and the ground armies were mostly not countrymen of the commandos and air forces who provided the firepower.<sup>12</sup> In an important sense, though, the differences were less salient than the continuities: the key to success in Afghanistan as in traditional joint warfare was the close interaction of fire and maneuver, neither of which was sufficient alone and neither of which could succeed without significant ground forces trained and equipped at least as well as their opponents. In Afghanistan, our allies provided these ground forces; where others can do so, the Afghan Model can be expected to prevail. Hence Afghanistan is not unique. But not all future allies have armies trained and equipped to their enemies' standards. Without this, neither the bravery of our special operations forces nor the sophistication of our PGMs can ensure a quick Afghan-like collapse of a resolute opponent.

This in turn implies that we should neither restructure our military to wage Afghan-style wars more efficiently, nor reflexively commit conventional U.S. ground forces in every conflict. Where our allies' ground forces are good enough, the Afghan Model will work, and we should use it. But we will not always be so lucky. In Iraq, for example, the lack of a

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11 More precisely, the outcome I seek to explain is two-fold: 1) the Taliban's loss of military control over Afghanistan and their consequent fall from political power; and, 2) our ability to bring this about without major U.S. ground forces. Note that I do not necessarily assume that the Taliban or al Qaeda have been defeated in any final way, or that larger U.S. interests have (or have not) been secured. For now, these remain open questions, not empirical facts to be explained. By contrast, the outcomes enumerated above are now observed empirical events susceptible to explanation, and for which particular candidate explanations have become quite influential in the policy debate. My focus below is thus on the relative utility of the two major candidates (one focusing on replicable features of the Afghan Model, the other focusing on idiosyncratic properties of Afghanistan or the Taliban) as explanations of this two-fold outcome.

12 The latter, while not unprecedented (see below) was at least unusual.



credible, trained opposition bodes ill for an Afghan-style campaign without major American ground forces. Deep cuts in U.S. ground capability could thus be very risky in spite of our strengths in air power and special operations forces. More broadly, though, we should be wary of suggestions that precision weapons have so revolutionized warfare that traditional ground forces or close combat are now superseded. Where our allies are able, they may provide most of the ground troops for us, but what Afghanistan really shows is that the wars of tomorrow—like those of yesterday—will require tight integration of fires and ground maneuver at close quarters to exploit technology's effects. Precision weapons make this combination more powerful, but against resolute opponents, neither air power nor conventional ground forces alone will suffice any time soon.

I base these findings on a new collection of primary source evidence centered on a series of 46 interviews with key American participants in the conflict, ranging from Special Forces Sergeants to the Major General who commanded CJTF Mountain during Operation ANACONDA, and including subjects from the Special Operations Command, the U.S. Army, the U.S. Air Force, and the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>13</sup> These interviews were complemented with official written documentation on the conduct of the war and direct physical inspection of the Anaconda battlefield in Afghanistan's Shah-i-kot valley, together with available secondary source accounts, chiefly from the print news media. This body of evidence cannot be considered complete; a definitive history of the Afghan campaign would require years of research on a much broader range of issues. Rather, my intention here is to

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13 These interviews are documented in a series of audiotapes deposited in the U.S. Army Military History Institute's archive at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, together with other primary source documentation obtained for this project. Collectively, they comprise the Operation Enduring Freedom Strategic Studies Institute Research Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute, cited hereafter as MHI. For reasons of security, SOF personnel are identified below by rank and first initial only. Full identification of interviewees is available in the cited archival material at appropriate levels of classification.

focus on one key issue—the new Model’s role in the Afghan campaign and its implications for the future—and to muster as much evidence as can be produced in the near term, so as to make initial findings available sooner than a definitive history would permit, but with a stronger foundation in the evidence than the debate to date has offered.

I present the analysis in five steps. First I outline the key events in the Afghan campaign. Next I assess in turn the two main current explanations of the Taliban’s fall: first, the school that sees the causes as local and idiosyncratic; second, the school that situates them in replicable features of the Afghan Model.<sup>14</sup> I then present an alternative explanation, and show how it accounts more successfully for the available evidence. Finally, I discuss the resulting implications for the Army and for defense policy more broadly.

## **KEY EVENTS**

The bombing campaign began the night of October 7, 2001, and focused initially on destroying the Taliban’s limited air defense and communications infrastructure. American and British SOF teams had been conducting scouting missions in Afghanistan beginning at least a week prior to the first air strikes; by October 15, teams designated to make contact with the major Northern Alliance warlords had been inserted and begun preparations for combined offensive action against the Taliban.<sup>15</sup> Some of the first major combat actions occurred in the mountains south of Mazar-e-Sharif, as SOF teams working with Northern Alliance Generals Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammed fought their way north toward Mazar up the

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14 A third argument, that the Afghan Model is too dependent on politically unreliable proxies, is an important critique of the Afghan Model, but not one for which much new perspective can be provided using the evidence assembled here. I thus focus primarily on the two contrasting schools of Afghan Model proponents, and critics who focus on the role of local idiosyncrasies. None of the conclusions reached below are sensitive to one’s view on the political reliability of proxy forces.

15 Andrew J. Birtle, *Afghan War Chronology*, Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History Information Paper, 22 March 2002, pp. 2-3.



**Figure 1. Key Engagements.**

Dar-ye Suf and Balkh river valleys. The terrain and conditions here were extraordinary: at elevations of up to 6,400 feet, movement was restricted to winding mountain trails in which sheer rock faces were sometimes separated from thousand-foot drops by no more than a three-foot width of rocky path. With no vehicles able to negotiate such trails, commandos hauling loads of over 40 pounds of equipment per man were given Afghan mountain ponies with wooden saddles and told to ride along with Dostum's troops. Luckily, the SOF team commander assigned to Dostum had been a high school rodeo rider in Kansas, but none of the other Americans had ever been on a horse before. Their knees in their chests, balancing heavy rucksacks on their backs, they were instructed by their commander to keep their downhill foot out of the stirrups and to lean uphill

so if the pony lost its balance they would fall onto the trail as the pony went into the gorge. On particularly rocky stretches the team commander ordered his men to travel with weapons out and a round chambered to shoot immediately any pony that bolted before it could drag its rider to his death over the rocks.<sup>16</sup>

The first combat action in this sector came when Dostum's group took the village of Bishqab on October 21; this was followed by engagements at Cobaki on October 22, Chapchal on October 23, and Oimetan on October 25. The key battle came when Dostum's troops encountered hostile forces occupying old Soviet-built defensive positions at the hamlet of Bai Beche some 16 kilometers southeast of Keshendeh-ye Pa'in.<sup>17</sup> On November 5, Dostum's cavalry overran these defenses; shortly thereafter Atta's forces captured Ac'capruk on the Balkh river, and the door swung open for a rapid advance to Mazar, which fell to Atta and Dostum's forces on November 10.<sup>18</sup>

The fall of Mazar unhinged the Taliban position in northern Afghanistan. Taliban defenders near Bamiyan resisted briefly before surrendering the city on November 11; Kabul fell without a fight on November 13. A force of some 5,000 Taliban and al Qaeda survivors were then encircled in the city of Konduz, where they surrendered following a 12-day siege on November 26.<sup>19</sup>

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16 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

17 The November 5 offensive has sometimes been referred to as "the battle of Keshendeh-ye Pa'in", after the largest town in the area, or "the battle of Keshendeh-ya Bala", a closer, though smaller, town, six kilometers west of the Taliban lines. Below I refer to it by reference to Bai Beche, the smallest but also closest village to the fight and the name typically used by the SOF participants in the MHI documentation to refer to the action. All the names above, however, refer to the same battle. Naming conventions for historical battles are ill-defined; the actual Waterloo battlefield, for example, is closer to the town of Braine-l'Alleud than it is to Waterloo, but Waterloo is easier for English speakers to pronounce.

18 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int. See also Dale Andrade, *The Battle for Mazar-e-Sharif, October-November 2001*, Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History Information Paper, March 1, 2002, pp. 2-3. Meanwhile, roadbound Taliban and al Qaeda reserves moving from the stronghold of Sholgerah were decimated by American air interdiction as they moved initially south to reinforce the defenses of Bai Beche and Ac'capruk, then as they fled north toward Mazar after November 5: MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2002; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

Many of the prisoners taken at Mazar were subsequently detained at the 19th century mud fortress of Qala-e-Gangi west of the city. On November 25, a revolt at the prison killed one American and gave rise to a 2-day struggle before control was reestablished on November 27.<sup>20</sup>

With the fall of Kabul and Konduz, attention shifted to the Taliban's stronghold of Kandahar in the south. SOF teams in support of Hamid Karzai's forces advanced on the city from the north; teams in support of Gul Agha Shirzai advanced from the south. The result was a series of battles at Tarin Kowt and Sayed Slim Kalay north of the city on November 18 and December 2-4, respectively, and along Highway 4 south of Kandahar from December 2-6. On the night of December 6, Mullah Omar and the senior Taliban leadership fled the city and went into hiding, ending Taliban rule in Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

Allied forces subsequently tracked a group of al Qaeda survivors thought to include Osama bin Laden to a series of redoubts in the White Mountains near Tora Bora. The redoubts were taken in a 16-day battle ending on December 17, but many al Qaeda defenders escaped death or capture and fled across the border into Pakistan.<sup>22</sup>

In March a second concentration of al Qaeda holdouts was identified in the Shah-i-kot valley and surrounding mountains east of Gardez. In Operation ANACONDA, a combined offensive by two battalions of U.S. regular infantry from the 101st Airborne and 10th Mountain

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19 MHI: Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int.; Birtle, *Afghan War Chronology*, pp. 6, 8; Michael Sherry, *The Course of Operation Enduring Freedom in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan*, Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History Information Paper, March 15, 2002, p. 2; John Carland, *The Campaign Against Kandahar*, Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History Information Paper, March 4, 2002, p. 2.

20 MHI: Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.; Andrade, *The Battle for Mazar-e-Sharif*, p. 4.

21 MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032802p, MAJ C. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Carland, *The Campaign Against Kandahar*, pp. 2-5.

22 Sherry, *The Course of Operation Enduring Freedom in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan*, p. 3.

divisions, supported by allied Afghan and Western troops and special operations forces from seven nations, descended on the al Qaeda defenders, killing many, dispersing the rest, and bringing to a close the major combat operations in the country as of this writing.<sup>23</sup>

### **EXISTING VIEWS: THE TALIBAN'S FALL AS IDIOSYNCRATIC**

Were these results the products of local idiosyncrasies? Afghanistan is certainly an unusual place, and the Taliban were unusual opponents.<sup>24</sup> Several of their peculiarities might in principle have been necessary preconditions for the Afghan Model's success, including:

Poor enemy morale or motivation;

Poor enemy military training and expertise;

Lack of popular support for the Taliban regime;

The ease of defection in Afghan culture;

Surprise;

Taliban dependency on fragile sources of outside support; or,

Availability of contiguous, secure territory for resupplying and reequipping proxy forces.

Yet on closer inspection, the evidence suggests a weaker causal role for these idiosyncrasies than some now suppose.

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23 Sherry, *The Course of Operation Enduring Freedom in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan*, p. 4.

24 In fact, prior to 9-11, members of the Army's experimental test pilot community routinely used Afghanistan as an illustrative example of an environment too strange to design aircraft around, as the practical definition of "outlier:" personal communication, COL John R. Martin, U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute.

### **Atypically Poor Enemy Morale.**

The native Afghan Taliban, for example, were fighting only to prevent the extradition of a foreigner, Osama bin Laden, whom many of them resented anyway. They might be expected to display only limited commitment to such modest stakes, and hence poor morale and combat motivation would hardly be surprising. Future opponents, by contrast, for whom much more could easily be at stake, might be better motivated. If poor enemy morale were a necessary precondition for the Afghan Model's success, then the Model might not succeed elsewhere.<sup>25</sup>

Yet much of the actual fighting was shouldered, not by Afghan Taliban, but by foreigners, and especially by al Qaeda—and these foreign troops were much better motivated than their Afghan comrades. Our opponents in this campaign were not a monolithic or homogeneous military. Instead, their three major components (the indigenous Afghan Taliban, the predominantly foreign al Qaeda, and other, non-al Qaeda foreign allies of the Taliban) differed in many important respects.<sup>26</sup> Among the most important of these differences was combat motivation: whereas the indigenous Afghan Taliban quit the field quickly, the foreigners did not. On the contrary, there are numerous reports of foreign fighters threatening to kill any Afghan Taliban who fled the front lines.<sup>27</sup> At Bai Beche, Konduz, Sayed Slim Kalay, Highway 4, and elsewhere in the theater, al Qaeda fighters launched counterattacks to

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25 See, e.g., John Keegan, "The Changing Face of War," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, November 26, 2001; David Perlmutter and Mohammed El-Bendary, "Phase 2: Redefine What it is to 'Win,'" *Los Angeles Times*, November 26, 2001; Kevin Whitelaw, "Round One," *U.S. News and World Report*, November 26, 2001.

26 Below, "Taliban" refers collectively to all hostile forces in Afghanistan. "Afghan Taliban" refers to the indigenous Afghan component of the Taliban's military forces. "Foreign Taliban" refers to all non-Afghan components, both al Qaeda and non-al Qaeda. "Al Qaeda" refers exclusively to the forces trained in bin Laden's camps and associated with his organization.

27 . MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2002; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

try to close with American and allied forces.<sup>28</sup> In Operation ANACONDA, al Qaeda defenders not only stood their ground against overwhelming American firepower, they actually reinforced their positions in the midst of the battle: their fighters were willing to advance into the teeth of a fierce bombardment to enter the Shah-i-kot Valley from safer positions elsewhere and seek battle with our forces.<sup>29</sup> These are not the actions of unmotivated or unwilling troops. The non-Afghan Taliban have shown themselves to be resolute combatants with the motivation to stay in the field when there seemed to be something to be gained militarily from doing so.

These better motivated foreigners were responsible for much of the fighting in the campaign's key actions. Though comprising under 25 percent of the regime's overall troop strength, the hard-core foreigners were allocated disproportionately to the critical sectors of the front and bore an increasing fraction of the combat load beginning in late October.<sup>30</sup> By early-to-mid November, American special forces teams were reporting predominantly al Qaeda, rather than Afghan, opposition in the critical battles for Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar.<sup>31</sup> The Afghan Taliban's tendency to quit the field following their initial defeats doubtless evened the numerical odds for the decisive battles in November and December, but the key engagements at

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28 MHI: 032602p, CPT M. int.; Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2002; Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H., et al. int.

29 MHI: Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 041802a, COL Smith int.

30 Strength estimates for Afghan armies are necessarily inexact. Most accounts, however, credited the Taliban overall with some 40,000-50,000 troops in fall 2001, of whom 8,000-12,000 were foreign. The foreign combatants—and especially the Arabs—had served as the Taliban's shock troops during the civil war, and were widely reported to be better trained, better disciplined, better motivated and better equipped than the Afghan Taliban. On Taliban strength, composition, and motivation, see Anthony Davis, "Foreign Fighters Step Up Activity in Afghan Civil War," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 13, No. 8, August 1, 2001; Ali Jalali, "Afghanistan: The Anatomy of an Ongoing Conflict," *Parameters*, Spring 2001, pp. 85-98; Senior Defense Officials, "Background Briefing on Afghanistan," *Defense Department News Transcript*, October 12, 2001, 1:10 pm, pp. 7-9.

31 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, MAJ C. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.



Bai Beche, Sayed Slim Kalay, and Highway 4 were all fought against motivated, resolute opponents—as were the later actions at Tora Bora and ANACONDA. If poor enemy morale were a necessary precondition for the Afghan Model to succeed, then the Model should thus have failed after its initial victories in October, yet it did not.

### **Atypically Poor Enemy Training.**

The Afghan Taliban were often very poorly trained soldiers. Many had little or no formal military instruction, and Afghan ranks swelled and shrank with the seasons and the fortunes of war as troops went home to their villages or took up arms depending on the crop cycle and apparent military need.<sup>32</sup> In fact, former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General Wesley Clark has referred to them as “the least competent adversary we’ve faced since the Barbary Pirates.”<sup>33</sup> Other enemies might well be better trained; if the Afghans’ poor skills were a necessary precondition for their defeat, then their collapse might be hard to replicate elsewhere.

Yet here, too, the distinction between Afghan and foreign Taliban is important. The al Qaeda soldiers in the key battles were much better trained than the Afghan Taliban. Unlike the latter, which were often closer to a civilian militia than a professional army, the al Qaeda troops were committed, full-time soldiers. Osama bin Laden’s infamous training camps served primarily to prepare these troops for combat on Afghanistan’s front lines, and taught them a curriculum not radically different from orthodox Western armies’.<sup>34</sup> While the result may not

32 See, e.g., Jalali, “Afghanistan: The Anatomy of an Ongoing Conflict;” Senior Defense Officials, “Background Briefing on Afghanistan,” p. 8. On the Taliban incompetence thesis more broadly, see, e.g., Jeffrey Record, “Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War,” *Parameters*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Summer 2002, pp. 4-23.

33 Quoted in Michael R. Gordon, “New’ U.S. War: Commandos, Airstrikes and Allies on the Ground,” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2001.

34 Though bin Laden’s camps trained both conventional soldiers and terrorists, the latter for undercover work abroad, the former made up the great majority of the camps’ population and output: C.J. Chivers and David Rohde, “The Jihad Files:

always have been up to contemporary Western standards, there is no reason to suppose that al Qaeda's skills or training were not at least comparable to those of most other likely opponents, few of whom are trained to Western standards either.<sup>35</sup> The Afghan Model's ability to prevail against this better-trained opposition suggests that atypically poor enemy skill was not a necessary precondition for success.

### **Atypical Lack of Popular Support for the Enemy's War Effort.**

Many Afghans hated the Taliban and chafed under the harshness of their regime.<sup>36</sup> This surely weakened their Afghan soldiers' morale, and presumably reduced the material and intelligence assistance a state might otherwise expect from its citizens. Enemies with stronger popular political support could well be much harder to defeat.

Yet the Taliban's unpopularity was hardly unique. Many other potential opponents' regimes are at least as unpopular: Saddam, for example, hardly governs by the will of the governed. If unpopularity makes a military unable to resist American arms, then this hardly makes Afghanistan unrepresentative of the future.<sup>37</sup>

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Training the Troops," *New York Times*, March 18, 2002, pp. 1ff.

35 For a discussion of one particularly germane example, see the treatment of Iraqi Republican Guard skills in Stephen Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood: What the Gulf War Tells Us About the Future of Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 2, Fall 1996, pp. 139-179 at 158-61. On shortcomings in al Qaeda troops' mastery of their Western training syllabi, see MHI Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Lecklenburg int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Murphy int.; Tape 041902a, MAJ Busko int.

36 See, e.g., Record, "Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War," pp. 4-23.

37 There is some empirical support for the notion that democracies' greater popular support conveys important military advantages over non-democratic opponents: see, e.g., David Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 1, March 1992, pp. 24-37; Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, "Democracy, War Initiation and Victory," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 92, No. 2, June 1998, pp. 377-89; idem, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3, June 1998, pp. 259-77; D. Scott Bennett and Allan Stam, "The Declining Advantages of Democracy," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3, June 1998, pp. 344-66. It

Nor were the Taliban uniformly hated. In southern Afghanistan, their traditional stronghold, they remained popular throughout the war and indeed to this day. In fact, in November the conventional expectation was that Kandahar and the south would prove much harder to conquer than Mazar and the north, given the former's greater sympathy for Mullah Omar and his regime.<sup>38</sup> These concerns proved unfounded, but not because the southern public failed to support the government. Moreover, the foreign Taliban were apparently undeterred by public opinion in Afghanistan—they were waging a jihad whose legitimacy in their minds was unrelated to the political views of Afghans, and they fought hard regardless of the latter. On balance, there is little reason to assume that the Taliban's degree of popular support was either unique or an essential precondition for their collapse.

### **Atypical Enemy Willingness to Defect.**

The acceptability of defection in Afghan military culture is certainly unusual to Western eyes. Not only do many Afghans consider it normal and acceptable to switch sides in war, but most of their senior commanders know one another personally from their service against the Soviets. Hence it is probably easier to persuade an opponent to defect in Afghanistan than in much of the rest of the world.<sup>39</sup> And there were certainly many defections in fall and winter of

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is far from clear, however, whether democracies' superior performance is attributable to popular support or to other cultural, educational, or civil-military traits that correlate with regime type: see Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democratic Effectiveness?" paper presented to the American Political Science Association 2002 Annual Meeting, Boston MA, September 1, 2002.

38 See, e.g., Jane Perlez with Michael Gordon, "Savoring Strength in the North, U.S. Worries About Weakness in the South," *New York Times*, November 12, 2001, p. B4; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Support Deepens for the Taliban, Refugees Report," *Washington Post*, November 8, 2001, pp. A1ff; "Opposition Troops Advance Toward Kandahar," *CNN.com*, available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/asiapcf/central/11/24/ret.afghan.kandahar>.

39 See, e.g., Sharon LaFraniere, "Defectors Flee as Negotiations Resume," *Washington Post*, November 20, 2001, p. 8; David Lamb, "Missteps Toppled Taliban, Analysts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, December 27, 2001. For counterarguments holding that Afghanistan's ease of defection is actually fairly widespread among tribal or clan cultures, see MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., 2 July 2002.

2001-02. If the Taliban's loss of combat power resulting from these defections were a necessary precondition for our success, then the 2001-02 outcome might well be an anomaly.

Yet the overwhelming majority of defections in this campaign occurred *after* the military tide had turned, not before. The largest mass turnovers came with the fall of the northern cities of Mazar-e-Sharif and Konduz on November 10 and 26, respectively.<sup>40</sup> The key battle in the north, however, was east of Keshende-ye Pa'in near Bai Beche on November 5. Prior to this, the Northern Alliance and its accompanying SOF teams had been forced to work their way methodically up the Dar-ye Suf and Balkh river valleys, fighting their way from one Taliban defense line to the next. The Taliban, however, had chosen to make a stand at Bai Beche, pushing all available reserves forward to reinforce these positions. Once Dostum broke through their lines, the Taliban thus had nothing left to back them up and the result was a rout: "the dam broke," as one Special Forces soldier described it, with the Taliban retreating in disorder and unable to rally or establish new blocking positions.<sup>41</sup> The Taliban's consequent loss of the Dar-ye Suf corridor made Mazar-e-Sharif untenable, and when it fell their entire position in northern Afghanistan collapsed.<sup>42</sup> By the time the major defections occurred in mid-to-late November, the military outcome in the north had thus been determined. By contrast, before the battle at Bai Beche, the SOF commanders operating in the north reported few if any defections to the forces they served with.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, even

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40 Some 3,000 surrendered in and around Mazar, with up to another 5,000 at Konduz; many others switched sides in the fighting at Tiengi Pass just south of Mazar: MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., 2 July 2002; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Andrade, *The Battle for Mazar-e-Sharif*, p. 4; Sherry, *The Course of Enduring Freedom in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan*, p. 2; Birtle, *Afghan War Chronology*, pp. 6, 8.

41 As quoted in Andrade, *The Battle for Mazar-e-Sharif*, p. 3. See also MHI: Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

42 Note, however, that much hard fighting remained in the south, where predominantly foreign troops sought to defend Kandahar and its approaches: see, e.g., Carland, *The Campaign Against Kandahar*.

43 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.

after Bai Beche, few *al Qaeda* voluntarily defected, and in fact they continued to resist stubbornly around Kandahar in the south through December 6, and fought hard at Tora Bora and ANACONDA well into 2002.<sup>44</sup> Some were captured when overrun or encircled, and many tried to blend into the population and slip away once their defenses had been breached, but most of the voluntary defections were by Afghan Taliban—and even for them, many stayed and fought at least until the tide of battle turned against them. Defections in the Afghan campaign were thus important, but they were *effects* not causes; consequences of military failure not determinants of it.

### **Atypical Susceptibility to Surprise.**

The Afghan Model surely surprised the Taliban. Though neither SOF nor PGMs were new, they had never been combined in quite this way before, presenting a novel problem to defenders.<sup>45</sup> Other potential opponents, however, have now seen the Model in use and are surely studying means of thwarting it. The Taliban's ignorance of the Afghan Model is thus probably unique to Afghanistan—our next opponent will not be caught as unsuspecting as the Taliban were in October.

Yet while the Taliban were initially surprised, they adapted quickly. As early as October 22, American SOF teams were reporting that Taliban vehicles in their sectors had been smeared with mud to camouflage them.<sup>46</sup> By Bai Beche they were already making aggressive use of overhead

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44 Dostum, for example, is reported to have been uninterested in soliciting defections from foreigners, preferring to kill these rather than trusting them to serve with him. MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.

45 For nearly a decade, the U.S. Army has been emphasizing the integration of SOF and regular forces in its exercises at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Ft. Polk, Louisiana; moreover, SOF worked extensively with indigenous allies, (including the direction of air strikes on their behalf) in the Vietnam War. For more on historical precedent, see the discussion below. These efforts, however, have not had such a high profile that one could expect potential opponents to have focused on them heretofore.

46 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int. This became widespread throughout the theater: see, e.g., Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H., et al., int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.

cover and deliberate concealment.<sup>47</sup> In the fighting north of Kandahar and along Highway 4 in December, al Qaeda defenses were well-camouflaged, dispersed, and making use of natural terrain for expedient cover.<sup>48</sup> This pattern continued through Operation ANACONDA in March, by which time al Qaeda forces were practicing systematic communications security, dispersal, camouflage discipline, use of cover and concealment, and exploitation of dummy fighting positions to draw fire and attention from their real dispositions.<sup>49</sup>

Others may adopt different countermeasures, but those the Taliban turned to by early November were the natural choices one could expect an adaptive opponent to try to implement when faced with capabilities like the Afghan Model's. Again and again, from Western Front armies' response to artillery and machine guns in 1916-18, to the German Wehrmacht's response to Allied air supremacy in northwest Europe in 1944, to the Vietcong and North Vietnamese armies' response to U.S. firepower in Vietnam, armies facing overwhelming firepower have dispersed, exploited cover and concealment, restricted their radio transmissions, and adopted camouflage.<sup>50</sup> In fact, this

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47 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int. On al Qaeda's use of cover and concealment in southern Afghanistan, see Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.

48 MHI: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.

49 See, e.g., MHI: AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, 25-29 March 2002; Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 041902p, COL Clarke int.; Tape 041802a, COL Smith int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.

50 See, e.g., Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1985; Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994; G.C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West*, London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1940; Timothy Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, Ft. Leavenworth KS: U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, 1981, Leavenworth Paper No.4; Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, New York: HarperCollins, 1983, pp. 105-334; National Archives (hereafter NARA) RG 338 FMS MS P-162, Walter Harzer, Oberst a.D., Der Einsatz der 9.SS-Pz.Div. "Hohenstaufen" im Westen vom 20. Juni 1944 bis 31. Oktober 1944, p. 23; NARA RG 338, FMS MS B-470, Generalmajor Sylvester Stadler, 9.SS.Pz.Div, 20.6.44-24.7.44, p. 16; NARA RG 242 T-354-623, SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 2, Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Kriegstagebuch Nr. 157/44, 15.7.1944 02.00 Uhr, paragraph 6; Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986.

pattern parallels the approach suggested by several U.S. Marine Corps officers assigned to oppose an operational concept resembling the Afghan Model in a pre-9/11 exercise.<sup>51</sup>

Much of the actual fighting in Afghanistan thus came against an opponent who had already begun to adopt the standard countermeasures that one would expect to see against the kind of firepower we employed there; the effects of surprise were attenuated rather quickly in this campaign. Yet the loss of surprise did not prevent us from continuing to prevail on the battlefield. Surprise per se thus does not appear to have been a necessary precondition for success in Afghanistan.

### **Atypical Enemy Dependence on Vulnerable Sources of Outside Support.**

The Taliban had certainly enjoyed important outside support. They were largely a creation of the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, which continued to supply them with materiel, tactical advice, and intelligence throughout the civil war. Shortly after September 11, Pakistani President Pervez Musharaff threw his support to the United States and pledged to end ISI assistance to the Taliban, who could thus have expected to lose a major source of outside assistance. Relative to other potential opponents, the Taliban might thus be considered unusually vulnerable to such a cutoff.

Yet aid withdrawal was probably not decisive. The key battles were fought in early November and December. Pakistani aid continued to reach the Taliban until at least October 12, and may have continued even after that.<sup>52</sup> Most militaries stockpile supplies against the possibility of

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51 Maj. John Schmitt, "A Critique of the HUNTER WARRIOR Concept," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 82, No. 6, June 1998, pp. 13-19; Capt. Michael Lindemann, "An Opposing Force Perspective of Advanced Warfighting Experiment HUNTER WARRIOR," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 82, No. 6, June 1998, pp. 20-26.

52 Douglas Frantz, "Supplying the Taliban: Pakistan Ended Aid to Taliban Only Hesitantly," *New York Times*, December 8, 2001, pp. 1ff.

interdiction, hence supply cutoffs typically take time to affect battlefield outcomes. Even if all outside sources had dried up instantly on October 12, it is unlikely that such a short period of isolation could have induced catastrophic military consequences for the Taliban. And in fact, American inspection of captured Taliban positions indicates that they remained well-stocked (especially with ammunition) through at least March 2002.<sup>53</sup> Nor does the withdrawal of Pakistani intelligence or tactical advice appear to have had decisive effects. Sympathetic civilians have regularly provided al Qaeda with information on Allied movements with or without help from the ISI; this problem was aggravated with the return of Afghan Taliban fighters to their home villages following their initial defeats, placing thousands of still-hostile observers in villages across the country.<sup>54</sup> Enemy tactics, moreover, typically improved, not decayed, as the war has progressed and more sophisticated al Qaeda fighters replaced less-skilled Afghans—withdrawal of ISI tactical assistance hardly undid the Taliban tactically.<sup>55</sup> In all, there is little basis to see the Pakistani aid cutoff as a necessary precondition for success.

### **Atypical Availability of Safe Havens for Training and Equipping Indigenous Allies.**

The Northern Alliance controlled an unusually large contiguous territory in which they could be resupplied, retrained, and reequipped: perhaps 10-15 percent of Afghanistan's total land area was under their control prior to American intervention.<sup>56</sup> Other potential allies might not enjoy such extensive or contiguous safe havens. If resupply,

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53 MHI: AFZS-LF-B, Memo, Operation Polar Harpoon Intelligence Summary, 23 March 2002; AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, 25-29 March 2002; Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.

54 MHI: Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 041802a, COL Smith int.; also Ilene Prusher, "Al Qaeda Plotted New U.S. Attacks," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 18, 2002, p. 1.

55 See the preceding discussion of Taliban tactical adaptation and associated references.



retraining, and reequipment were necessary preconditions for the Afghan Model's success, then this territorial advantage might make the 2001 outcome idiosyncratic.

Yet here, too, the tide turned before its effects could become decisive. Most of the key SOF teams were calling air strikes and supporting Northern Alliance offensives within hours of arriving in Afghanistan—the fighting was well under way before the Americans could do any significant retraining, and before any major resupply could be accomplished.<sup>57</sup> Once the battle was joined, moreover, the high tempo of operations made it impossible for American SOF to pause long enough to conduct training. Some food and other humanitarian aid arrived quickly, but few weapons and little ammunition were dropped prior to the critical battle at Bai Beche: Dostum's first significant lethal aid delivery was not until 2:00 a.m. on November 5, that is, the predawn hours of the day of the battle itself. And even then, this aid was limited to small arms, ammunition, and rocket propelled grenades—no heavy weapons or armored vehicles were provided.<sup>58</sup> Most of the key battles were thus fought by Afghan allies with skills and equipment little different from what they had in the civil war; Afghanistan's suitability for retraining and reequipping played little role in the outcome.

## **EXISTING VIEWS: AFGHAN MODEL LETHALITY**

There is thus substantial evidence that the campaign was not merely a fluke, hence its implications may have some real meaning for the future. But are those implications necessarily the ones that Afghan Model proponents now see? In fact, they are not—because the Model did not

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56 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001-2002*, London: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 160.

57 MHI: Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.

58 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int. Atta's forces received a misdirected lethal aid drop originally intended for Dostum (who was to distribute the materiel equally among the several warlords in the region) the night of October 31-November 1, but this aid was used only by Atta's troops: *ibid.*

actually work in Afghanistan the way most now think it did. And its actual performance implies a less radical departure from past military practice than many Afghan Model proponents argue.

For the Afghan Model to be a widely applicable template suitable for restructuring the U.S. military, several key features must have obtained in Afghanistan:

SOF and standoff sensors must have been able to find key targets for precision engagement;

PGMs must have been able to kill the targets found, at standoff ranges; and,

The indigenous allies' role must have been undemanding.

The first two conditions are logically necessary for the efficacy of the PGMs around which the Model is built—strike systems must be able to find and kill the critical targets at long range, before enemies can close with and overwhelm the small SOF teams on the ground. The third, however, is at least as important. We can almost always find local allies, but armies vary widely in skill, equipment, and motivation; some will be capable of demanding tasks, but others not. Much of the Model's apparent power in Afghanistan was due to the perception that our local allies there were not terribly capable; if SOF and PGMs can make conquerors out of such modest material then they can do so in many other places, it is often supposed. In particular, the key roles implied for the allies are to screen U.S. SOF from hostile patrols or infiltrators too small to make good targets for PGM attack; to mop up surviving remnants; and to occupy abandoned territory (it is often politically important that local forces be the ones to take control of the ground that the PGMs effectively clear). If the allies' mission becomes much more demanding than this, then both the generality and the novelty of the Afghan Model come into question—after all, allies like the Israelis or the British

have always been capable of impressive feats with or without American PGMs; the claim that the Afghan Model is a revolutionary departure rests on the perception that it turned an overmatched militia into a juggernaut.

In Afghanistan, however, these three conditions were not always met. SOF and standoff sensors found many targets, but could not ensure acquisition of properly concealed opponents. PGMs were very lethal, but against well-entrenched positions they could not destroy enough to prevent survivors from halting unsophisticated attackers. Our indigenous allies' role was undemanding at times, but far more challenging at others. In particular, significant numbers of properly prepared al Qaeda positions eluded SOF and remote target acquisition and survived even extensive air strikes. To take such positions required orthodox combined arms, fire-and-maneuver tactics—even with the intense precision fire support available in this campaign. Such tactics are difficult to execute, and require skills and leadership many potential indigenous allies lack; in fact, not all our Afghan allies in 2001-02 were up to the job. Where the available ground forces faced skilled enemies but had the necessary skills themselves, American firepower brought decisive victory. But where our ground elements lacked the needed skills or motivation, offensives against capable enemies stalled and outcomes were frequently in doubt in spite of American air support. In Afghanistan, friendly ground forces were mostly as good as their enemies, hence our theater offensive as a whole overwhelmed the Taliban and drove their regime from power. But the variations in tactical behavior in this campaign produced important variations in local outcomes—and these differences teach important lessons about how future wars with different balances of ground force skill and motivation might turn out.<sup>59</sup> These lessons in

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59 That is, by reducing the unit of analysis from the theater campaign to the tactical engagement it becomes possible to increase the number of cases for analysis and create important variance in independent and dependent variable values. This in turn permits much more discriminating causal analysis than would otherwise be possible in a single-case research design. On this technique of subunit analysis and the associated methodological considerations, see, esp. Gary King, Robert Keohane

turn imply a different understanding of cause and effect in Afghanistan, a different model for the future of warfare, and different implications for Army and defense policy.

To show why, I address each of the three key conditions in turn.

### **Target Acquisition in Afghanistan.**

In the campaign's early stages, enemy targets were exposed and relatively easy to acquire. The Afghan Taliban commonly deployed on ridge crests, silhouetting themselves for SOF observation. Afghan defenders made little or no effort to camouflage or conceal their positions. They engaged in casual, exposed movement in the target area, often emerging to inspect bomb craters while still under surveillance. Armored vehicles and crew-served weapons were deployed without revetments or apparent efforts at cover or concealment. As a result, their positions were easily identified for PGM targeting, sometimes from extraordinary distances.

At Bishqab on October 21, for example, U.S. SOF observers acquired Taliban targets at ranges of 8-10 kilometers.<sup>60</sup> At Cobaki on October 22, Taliban observation posts were easily spotted at 1500-2000 meters.<sup>61</sup> At Zard Kammar on October 28, Taliban defensive positions were visible from a mile away.<sup>62</sup> At Ac'capruk on November 4, exposed Taliban combat vehicles and crew-served weapons on hillsides west of the Balkh river could be identified from SOF observation posts on the Koh-i-Almortak ridge line some 4-5 kilometers distant.<sup>63</sup> At Polanyi Canyon near Bamiyan on November 7, Taliban positions were plainly visible from more than four kilometers away.<sup>64</sup> Taliban

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and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 217-23.

60 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

61 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

62 Kirk Spitzer, "Green Berets Outfought, Outthought the Taliban," *USA Today*, January 7, 2002, pp. 1ff.

63 MHI: Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.

counterattacks, as at Tarin Kowt on November 18, were conducted in the open with no evident attempt at concealment, dispersal, or covering fire to keep U.S. or allied observers' heads down or to complicate target acquisition.<sup>65</sup>

This changed as the campaign continued and as the opposition shifted increasingly from Afghan Taliban to al Qaeda. In the November 5 battle at Bai Beche, for example, al Qaeda's defensive works greatly complicated American target acquisition. While American SOF observers knew they faced an interconnected trench system with the enemy somewhere within it, and while particular strongpoints could be identified for engagement, al Qaeda's local cover and concealment were good enough to prevent the SOF from locating the entirety of the enemy's individual fighting positions, many of which could not be singled out for precision attack.<sup>66</sup>

By the December fighting along Highway 4 south of Kandahar, not even this was available. In fact, concealed al Qaeda defensive positions among a series of culverts and in

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64 MHI: Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int. Some targets in this region were visible at ranges of up to 10 kilometers: *ibid.*

65 MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 041902p, COL Clarke int.; see also Karl Vick, "In a Desert Outpost, Afghan War Was Won," *Washington Post*, December 31, 2001, pp. 1ff.; Peter Finn, "Wounded Army Captain Details Teamwork Against Taliban," *Washington Post*, December 11, 2001, pp. 1ff; Jonathan Weisman, "A Soldier's Story: U.S. Backbone Wins Battle," *USA Today*, December 26, 2001, p. 5. Note that the Taliban military's compartmentation and poor communications meant that learning often proceeded at different rates in different parts of the front. In the north, for example, Taliban defenders who had seen the effects of Allied bombing at Bishqab, Cobaki, and Oimetan had already begun to adopt careful camouflage and overhead cover by November 5 at Bai Beche, whereas Taliban defenders around Ac'capruk, which had not been extensively bombed before November 4, did not. MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.. Similarly, the Taliban experience in the north filtered down to units in the south more slowly than it did among units within the northern fighting—hence the early southern counterattack at Tarin Kowt was massed and exposed in the open, rather than covered and concealed as were their later efforts at Sayed Slim Kalay or along Highway 4. In each case, however, the affected units learned quickly from their own experience, and adaptation followed rapidly after the initial air strikes.

66 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int. Similarly, a system of bunkers dug into a hillside southeast of Sholgerah at Tash Kanda could not be located despite repeated attempts by a variety of American reconnaissance systems to pinpoint it for precision engagement. Although intelligence reports indicated its presence in the area, the actual positions could not be located until American SOF drove past it on the ground during the post-Bai Beche pursuit up the Dar-ye Suf River valley: *ibid.*

burned-out vehicle hulks alongside the road remained wholly undetected by any friendly element until their fire drove back an AMF (Afghan Military Forces—our Northern and Southern Alliance allies) advance. An al Qaeda counterattack in the same sector using a system of wadis for cover approached undetected to within 100-200 meters of AMF and American SOF positions along the highway before opening fire on friendly forces.<sup>67</sup>

At the village of Sayed Slim Kalay north of Kandahar between December 2-4, concealed al Qaeda defenders likewise remained undetected until they fired upon unsuspecting U.S. and AMF attackers. An al Qaeda counterattack using local terrain for cover maneuvered into small arms range of friendly defenders before being driven back.<sup>68</sup>

At Operation ANACONDA in March 2002, an intensive pre-battle reconnaissance effort focused every available surveillance and target acquisition system on a tiny, ten-by-ten kilometer battlefield. Yet fewer than 50 percent of all the al Qaeda positions ultimately identified in the course of the fighting on this battlefield were discovered prior to ground contact. In fact, most fire received by U.S. forces in ANACONDA came from initially unseen, unanticipated al Qaeda fighting positions.<sup>69</sup>

How could such things happen in an era of persistent reconnaissance drones, airborne radars, satellite surveillance, thermal imaging, and hypersensitive electronic eavesdropping equipment? The answer is that the earth's surface remains an extremely complex environment with an abundance of natural and manmade cover and concealment available for those militaries capable of exploiting it.

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67 MHI: Tape 032602a, CPT H., et al., int.

68 MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.

69 MHI: Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.; Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 041802p, LTC Preysler int.; Tape 041902a, MAJ Busko int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Murphy int.; Tape 041902a, CPT Lecklenburg int.



**Figure 2. Al Qaeda Fighting Position Sanger, Objective Ginger, Shah-i-kot Valley.**

Figure 2 provides a concrete illustration of this problem in the form of a photograph of an al Qaeda fighting position from Objective Ginger on the Anaconda battlefield.<sup>70</sup> The yellow arrow indicates the al Qaeda defenders' location; without the arrow, there would be no visible sign of a combat position even from the nearly point blank range at which this photograph was taken. Overhanging rock in turn provides cover and concealment from overhead surveillance systems. In principle one might hope to observe resupply movement or al Qaeda patrols into or out of such positions, or to overhear radio communications from its occupants. Al Qaeda soldiers wearing the flowing robes of local herdsmen and traveling in small parties among the mountains, however, are nearly impossible to distinguish at a distance from the noncombatants who tend goats or travel through

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<sup>70</sup> Photo taken from MHI: AFZS-LF-B, Memo, FOB 3/3 SSE Support Intelligence Summary, March 25-29, 2002.



**Figure 3. The Whale, Shah-i-kot Valley.**



**Figure 4. Objective Ginger, Shah-i-kot Valley.**



such areas as a matter of routine.<sup>71</sup> And defenders able to operate under radio listening silence while communicating using runners, landlines or other non-broadcast means can reduce signals intercepts to a level that makes identification of specific fighting positions very problematic. Against such targets, it is far from clear that any surveillance technology coming any time soon will ensure reliable target acquisition from standoff distances.

Nor are positions such as this one rare anomalies or atypical of Afghan terrain more generally. Figures 3 and 4 show broader samples of the Shah-i-kot battlefield on which Anaconda was fought, including the features known as “The Whale” (after a similar rock formation at the U.S. National Training Center at Ft. Irwin California) and Objective Ginger, respectively.<sup>72</sup> Almost any of the dozens of shadows, crevices, or folds in the earth scattered across these landscapes could house positions like the one shown in Figure 2. And this is just a tiny subset of even the Anaconda battlefield, which is itself a tiny subset of Afghanistan as a whole. The natural complexity of such surfaces offers any adaptive opponent with the necessary training and skills a multitude of opportunities to thwart even modern remote surveillance systems. Against such opponents, remote surveillance will still detect some targets, and remote sensors remain crucial assets, but the only sure means of target acquisition is direct ground contact: a ground force whose advance threatens objectives that the enemy cannot sacrifice and thus must defend compels them to give away their locations by firing on their attackers. Skilled attackers can eventually locate any defensive position by observing the source of the fire directed at them—and this, in fact, is how the majority of the al Qaeda positions at Anaconda were found.

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71 The author observed many such individuals and small parties among the high ridge lines and mountain valleys of Paktia Province during helicopter travel between Bagram AFB and the Shah-i-kot valley in April 2002.

72 Photographs taken by the author, April 20, 2002.

Nor is this problem unique to Afghanistan or its mountainous terrain. Militarily exploitable cover is commonplace in almost all likely future theaters of war. For targets who observe radio listening silence, as al Qaeda now does, foliage, for example, degrades all current remote sensor technologies; urban areas provide overhead cover, create background clutter, and pose difficult problems of distinguishing military targets from innocent civilians.<sup>73</sup> Each is widely available. More than 26 percent of Somalia's land area is wooded or urban, as is more than 20 percent of the Sudan's, 34 percent of Georgia's, or 46 percent of the Philippines'.<sup>74</sup> This cover, moreover, is often distributed in small, widespread patches. On the GOODWOOD battlefield of 1944 in Normandy, for example, over 80 percent of all one-kilometer grid squares now contain at least some forest or urban cover (though only 26 percent of the total land area is covered).<sup>75</sup> In most countries, the central geostrategic objectives are urban areas; even where the bulk of the national land area is open desert (as in Iraq), the cities are both the key terrain and an ample source of cover from overhead sensors (Baghdad alone covers more than 300 square kilometers).<sup>76</sup> Among the most important themes in the history of modern tactics is the growth of methods for exploiting such cover to reduce vulnerability to modern firepower—the “empty battlefield” that has characterized

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73 See, e.g., Alan Vick, et al., *Enhancing Air Power's Contribution Against Light Infantry Targets*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996, pp. 13-30; Peter Brooks and Edward Smith, “Evaluation of Airborne Surveillance Systems,” *IDA Research Summaries*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1996, pp. 4-5; Dominick Giglio, “Overview of Foliage/Ground Penetration and Interferometric SAR Experiments,” *SPIE Proceedings*, Vol. 2230, 1994, pp. 209-17; Tony Capaccio, “An Army Bosnia Review Rates JSTARS a ‘White Elephant,’” *Defense Week*, November 25, 1996, pp.1ff; idem, “NATO Strikes Must Pierce the Fog of War,” *Defense Week*, Vol. 15, No. 7, Feb. 14, 1994, pp.1ff; Captain Kristin M. Baker, untitled, *Military Intelligence*, October-December 1996, pp. 27-29; Lt. Col. Collin A. Agee, untitled, *Military Intelligence*, October-December 1996, pp. 6-12. For a more detailed discussion, see Stephen Biddle, “The Past as Prologue: Assessing Theories of Future Warfare,” *Security Studies* Vol. 8, No. 1, Autumn 1998, pp. 1-74 at 24-6.

74 Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook, 2001*, available at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>

75 *Institut Geographique National Carte Serie M761, Feuilles XVI-12 (Caen) and XVI-13 (Mezidon.)*

76 <http://media.maps.com/magellan/Images/BAGHDA-W1.gif>

the modern era is a product of skilled armies' ability to find cover sufficient to thwart standoff target acquisition and to exploit this cover to perform meaningful military missions without excessive exposure.<sup>77</sup>

This is not to suggest that modern sensors are useless or that anyone anywhere can fight effectively from cover opaque to standoff observation. To find and exploit cover while taking or holding ground requires a very demanding set of tactical skills. Historically, armies have varied widely in their ability to do this, and in fact the Afghan campaign itself displays substantial variation in the Taliban's ability to do so: the Afghan Taliban early in the fighting were systematically unable to do so; only the foreign Taliban and al Qaeda encountered later in the campaign proved able to contest territory from covered, concealed positions. The less skilled the opponent, the more exposed they will be to remote target acquisition. And no army can disappear utterly: diligent reconnaissance will always uncover part of an enemy's dispositions; the better the sensors, the more they will find, and today's sensors can find enough to be a crucial contributor to success in theaters like Afghanistan. But this is not to say that they can find enough—on their own—to break a skilled, resolute opponent by standoff fires alone. Even today's best sensors are still far from an ability to acquire most or all of a hostile force that has learned to exploit the natural complexity of the earth's surface for cover and concealment—as our experience against al Qaeda in 2001-02 demonstrates.

### **PGM Lethality in Afghanistan.**

The second logical requirement for Afghan Model effectiveness is PGM lethality: standoff weaponry must be

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<sup>77</sup> Modern fire-and-movement, combined arms tactics turn on exploitation of natural cover: Stephen Biddle, "Land Warfare: Theory and Practice," in John Baylis, James Wirtz, Eliot Cohen, and Colin Gray, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 91-112; also Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945*; Jonathan House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001; John English, *On Infantry*, New York: Praeger, 1984.

able to kill the targets acquired. As with target acquisition, however, lethality varied widely in Afghanistan as a function of the targets' tactics.

Where the Taliban presented exposed or massed targets in the open, PGMs were extremely lethal. At Tarin Kowt on November 18, for example, Taliban forces tried to recapture the village by advancing in a column of vehicles up an exposed road. Frightened AMF defenders were prepared to abandon the village, but precision air strikes called in by American commandos located on an overlooking ridgeline decimated the Taliban column, whose survivors fled the scene in disorder.<sup>78</sup> Taliban reserves ordered forward to reinforce their defenses at Bai Beche were caught moving in the open along Highway 326 between Sholgerah and Keshendeh-ye Pa'in and were slaughtered by American airpower; officers who surveyed the scene afterward said it brought to mind the infamous "Highway of Death" leading out of Kuwait City in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.<sup>79</sup> Taliban armored vehicles and heavy weapons left parked on the surface were routinely destroyed by pinpoint PGM attacks as at Bagram on October 20, Oimetan on October 25, Ac'capruk on November 4-7, or Polanyi Canyon on November 7.<sup>80</sup> Crude foxholes dug in the open without overhead cover or effective concealment were regularly annihilated by precision bombing with satellite-guided 2,000 pound Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs).<sup>81</sup>

Where fighting positions were properly prepared, however, they were much harder to destroy—even with modern PGMs. At Bai Beche, for example, al Qaeda's fighting positions offered ample overhead cover and

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78 Carland, *The Campaign Against Kandahar*, p. 3; Vick, "In a Desert Outpost, Afghan War Was Won;" Finn, "Wounded Army Captain Details Teamwork Against Taliban;" Weisman, "A Soldier's Story."

79 MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COLJ. int., 2 July 2002; Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

80 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032802p, CPT D. int.; Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int.; Dana Priest, "'Team 555' Shaped a New Way of War," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2002, pp. 1ff.

81 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int.

reinforced firing positions from which attackers could be engaged without exposing the garrison. Though the defenders could not all be located individually within this trench system, American commandos knew the system's extent and thus called for heavy bombing across the entire position for more than 2 days. Yet even after all this, enough defenders survived to thwart Dostum's initial attack.<sup>82</sup>

In the Qala-e-Gangi fortress uprising, the renegade prisoners were quickly driven out of the above-ground prison yard and isolated in a handful of small underground chambers whose locations and perimeter were well-known. These were then pounded by allied airpower: entire ammunition payloads of multiple AC-130 gunships and no fewer than seven 2,000-pound JDAMs were expended against this tiny area. Yet the defenders survived and continued to resist until succumbing only to the medieval technology of flooding by cold water.<sup>83</sup>

In Operation ANACONDA, well-prepared al Qaeda positions survived repeated aerial attack by U.S. PGMs. On Objective Ginger, for example, American infantry inadvertently disembarked from their assault helicopters almost on top of an unseen al Qaeda position on March 2; after being pinned down for much of the day, they were extracted that night. American troops then spent much of the next 10 days fighting their way back toward the Ginger hilltop from more secure landing zones well to the north. In the meantime, American aircraft pounded the hill. Yet in spite of over a week of sustained heavy bombing, al Qaeda positions on Ginger survived to fire upon U.S. infantry when the latter finally reached and overran the objective. One dug-in al Qaeda command post was found surrounded by no fewer than five JDAM craters, yet its garrison survived and resisted until they were overrun by U.S. infantry.<sup>84</sup>

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82 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.; Tape 032602p, MAJ M., MAJ K. int.

83 MHI: Tape 032602p, MAJ M. int., MAJ K., int.

84 MHI: Tape 041802p, LTC Lundy int.; Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Tape 100702p, LTC Townsend int.; Birtle, *Afghan War Chronology*, pp. 14-16.

This is not to suggest that precision firepower is not extremely lethal, or that even well dug-in al Qaeda defenses did not suffer heavy losses from precision engagements. But the evidence does indicate that a combination of cover and concealment can allow defenders, though battered, to survive modern firepower in sufficient numbers to mount serious resistance.

Nor is this the first time that properly prepared defenses have survived massive firepower, precise or otherwise. French defenses at Verdun in 1916 endured a 2-day German artillery barrage equal to about 1,200 tons of explosives—in nuclear parlance more than a kiloton, or more explosive power than the W48 tactical nuclear warhead—yet enough of the entrenched defenders survived this maelstrom to halt the German assault.<sup>85</sup> In 1917, German defenses at Messines absorbed more than a kiloton of explosive power *per mile* of frontage, yet still halted the ensuing British offensive.<sup>86</sup> At Cassino on March 15, 1944, German positions in the village were struck by 300 tons of bombs in a single day, yet defeated the associated Allied infantry advance.<sup>87</sup> On July 18, 1944, more than 4,500 Allied aircraft, three corps' worth of artillery, and naval gunfire from two Royal Navy cruisers and the monitor *Roberts* deposited more than 8,700 tons of explosives—over eight kilotons of firepower—on just seven kilometers of German frontage in less than three hours in Operation

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85 C.R.M.F. Cruttwell, *A History of the Great War, 1914-1918*, Chicago: Academy, 1991 ed. of 1934 orig., p. 245; weight of explosive per shell inferred from John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, New York: Random House, 1977, p. 235. For W48 yield, see Thomas Cochran et al., *Nuclear Weapons Databook Vol. I: U.S. Nuclear Forces and Capabilities*, Cambridge: Ballinger, 1984, p. 54.

86 On the eve of the battle, British General Hubert Plumer is said to have observed to his staff: "Gentlemen, we may not make history tomorrow, but we shall certainly change the geography." Ian Hogg, *The Guns, 1914-1918*, New York: Ballantine, 1971, p. 131. On the artillery program at Messines, see John Terraine, "Indirect Fire as a Battle Winner/Loser," in Corelli Barnett, et al. *Old Battles and New Defenses: Can We Learn from Military History?*, London: Brassey's, 1986, pp. 7-32 at p. 11; weight of explosive per shell is computed from Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, p. 235, and Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 363.

87 Martin Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969, pp. 433-48.

GOODWOOD.<sup>88</sup> Yet the entrenched Germans halted the subsequent British armored advance, killing more than one-third of all the British armor on the continent in the process.<sup>89</sup> Firepower on such scales is tremendously destructive, and each of these defenders suffered heavily under such barrages. But even fantastic volumes of firepower alone cannot annihilate defenses outright. Precision allows crushing firepower to be delivered using vastly fewer platforms, but to expect precision to accomplish what literally nuclear-scale fires have not been able to attain in the past is to ask too much of new technology. The village of Cassino was struck by far less accurate weapons than the al Qaeda defenders of Objective Ginger, but this tiny 500 by 700 meter Italian hamlet was still hit with the equivalent of more than 300 2000-pound JDAMs, which was more than enough to reduce every building in the village to rubble—but not enough to exterminate its defenders.<sup>90</sup> The problem at Verdun, Messines, Cassino, or Operation GOODWOOD was not any inability to turn defenses into crater fields or reduce specific buildings to rubble without today's precision—the problem was that resolute defenders can survive even within crater fields and rubble piles to mount serious resistance. Firepower is critical, but against resolute, well-prepared defenders it has rarely been sufficient by itself in the past; taken together, Bai Beche, Qala-e-Gangi, and Operation ANACONDA suggest that it may not be now, either.

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88 Department of the Scientific Advisor to the Army Council, *Military Operational Research Unit Report No. 23: Battle Study, Operation "Goodwood,"* October 1946, declassified 16 January 1984, pp. 13-20; L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West, Vol. I: The Battle of Normandy*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962, pp. 337-40.

89 Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1961, p. 193; Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, New York: HarperCollins, 1983, pp. 385-6.

90 Note that almost 1,000 tons of bombs, plus another 2,500-4,000 tons of artillery shells, were directed at the German positions—of this total, 300 tons of bombs and an unknown volume of artillery fire fell within the limits of the village itself: Blumenson, *Salerno to Cassino*, pp. 433-48; map 9, p. 323. Though less than half the total firepower thus fell within the objective area, this was still a crushing tonnage in absolute terms.

## **The Role of Indigenous Allies in Afghanistan.**

The third logical precondition for a broadly applicable Afghan Model is that it be effective without placing heavy demands on indigenous allies' tactical sophistication. Here, too, experience in Afghanistan varied importantly.

Early in the campaign, it was not uncommon for Taliban defenders to withdraw after SOF-directed standoff bombing destroyed key positions. At Polanyi Canyon, for example, the AMF advance following initial air strikes found only abandoned (or destroyed) Taliban positions and met no residual resistance.<sup>91</sup>

This, too, changed after the early engagements. The remainder of the campaign saw extensive close combat. Moreover, this close combat was neither trivial nor wholly one-sided: many of the outcomes were close calls, involving initial reverses, heavy AMF losses, or both.

At Bai Beche on November 5, for example, the dug-in al Qaeda defenders refused to withdraw in spite of over 2 days of heavy American air strikes. To dislodge them, Dostum's AMF cavalry was ordered to charge the position. The first attempt was driven back. The American SOF attached to Dostum's forces observed this reverse and began calling renewed airstrikes against the al Qaeda positions in anticipation that Dostum would eventually order a second assault. In the process, however, a SOF warning order to the cavalry to prepare for another push was mistaken by the cavalry as a command to launch the assault, with the result that the cavalry began its attack much sooner than intended. The surprised Americans watched the Afghan cavalry break cover and begin their advance just as a series of laser-guided bombs had been released from American aircraft in response to the SOF calls for air support. The SOF commander reported that he was convinced they had just caused a friendly fire incident: the bomb release and the AMF cavalry advance were way too close together for official

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91 MHI: Tape 032702a, CPT T. et al. int.



doctrinal limits, and the air strike would never have been ordered if the SOF had known that the cavalry was then jumping off for the second assault. As it happened, the bombs landed seconds before the cavalry arrived on the position. In fact, the cavalry galloped through the enormous cloud of smoke and dust that was still hanging in the air after the explosions, emerging behind the enemy defenses before their garrison knew what was happening. The defenders, seeing Dostum's cavalry to their rear, abandoned their positions in an attempt to avoid encirclement.<sup>92</sup>

The result was an important victory—in fact, the victory that turned the tide in the campaign. But the battle involved serious close combat (cavalry overrunning prepared, actively resisting defenses), and the outcome was a very close call. Dostum's assault profited from an extremely tight integration of movement with suppressive fire—far tighter, in fact, than either Dostum's troops or their supporting SOF would ever have dared arrange deliberately. Luck thus played an important role in the outcome. Dostum might well have carried the position eventually even without the good fortune of an extraordinary integration of fire and movement; this was clearly a crucial battle, and he would presumably have redoubled his efforts if the second attempt had failed. But as fought, the outcome involved an important element of serendipity.

Nor was Bai Beche unique in demanding hard fighting at close quarters. As noted above, al Qaeda counterattackers reached small arms range of U.S. and AMF forces before being driven back at Sayed Slim Kalay and at Highway 4.<sup>93</sup> At Konduz in late November, al Qaeda counterattackers penetrated AMF positions deeply enough to compel supporting American SOF teams to withdraw at least three times to avoid being overrun.<sup>94</sup> In Operation ANACONDA, AMF forces associated with General Mohammed Zia and

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92 MHI: Tape 032602p, CPT M. int.

93 MHI: Tape 032802a, MAJ D. int.; Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.

94 MHI: Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2, 2002.

supported by American SOF were assigned to drive al Qaeda defenders from the “Tri-cities” area (the villages of Shirkankeyl, Babakuhl and Marzak); they were instead pinned down under hostile fire from prepared defenses in the surrounding mountainsides and eventually withdrew after they proved unable to advance. Only after the al Qaeda defenders pulled back under joint, multinational attack by allied airpower, U.S. infantry, and multinational SOF, were the AMF able to enter the Tri-cities and adjoining ridgelines.<sup>95</sup> At Tora Bora, massive American bombing proved insufficient to compensate for the AMF’s unwillingness to close with dug-in al Qaeda defenders in the cave complexes of the White Mountains; many now see this ground force hesitancy as having allowed Osama bin Laden and much of his command structure to escape capture and flee into neighboring Pakistan.<sup>96</sup>

Among these examples, the fighting along Highway 4 in December is particularly instructive. Shirzai’s Afghans here were divided among two factions. The first, commanded by Haji Gul Alai, were very capable troops by Afghan standards. They used terrain for cover and concealment, maintained good intervals between elements in the advance, moved by alternate bounds, exploited suppressive fire to cover moving elements’ exposure, and were able to exploit the effects of American air strikes by coordinating their movement with the bombing (which many AMF factions could not). The second faction, by contrast, were much less skilled: the attached SOF commander characterized them as “an armed mob—just villagers given weapons.” Their tactics consisted of exposed, bunched-up movement in the open, with no attempt to use the terrain to reduce their exposure, and little ability to employ supporting or suppressive fires. At the Arghestan

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95 MHI: Tape 042002p, LTC Gray int.; Memorandum for the Record, COL J. int., July 2, 2002.

96 See, e.g., Barton Gellman and Thomas Ricks, “U.S. Concludes Bin Laden Escaped at Tora Bora Fight; Failure to Send Troops in Pursuit Termed Major Error,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 2002, p. 1; William Arkin, “Dropping 15,000 Pounds of Frustration,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2001.

Bridge on December 5, this second faction launched an assault on a dug-in al Qaeda position south of the Kandahar airport. Driven back repeatedly, they proved unable to take the position, in spite of U.S. air support. Only after these troops were withdrawn and Haji Gul Alai's forces took over the assault the following day could the al Qaeda positions be taken.<sup>97</sup>

What conclusions should be drawn from this experience? Will American infantry be needed any time the United States uses force? Not necessarily: where our Afghan allies met their enemies on something like an equal tactical footing, U.S. air power and small SOF teams made all the difference. With such support, unsophisticated allies overwhelmed unsophisticated opponents at Polanyi Canyon and Tarin Kowt—and better-skilled allies beat comparably skilled, resolute opponents at Bai Beche and Highway 4.

But does this mean that American air power can turn unskilled, unsophisticated allies into conquerors even when facing enemies with superior skill and resolution, as many now suppose? No. By and large, the Afghan campaign pitted ground forces of roughly comparable ability and equipment: the net result of years of civil warfare had been a stalemate in which the Taliban had proved unable to dislodge the Northern Alliance from the roughly 15 percent of Afghanistan that it held prior to September 11. But though the typical combat units on each side were thus about equally matched (as the stalled pre-intervention battle lines imply), both armies were actually diverse mixtures of better- and worse-trained, more- and less-motivated troops—and this diversity offers a couple of valuable opportunities to observe instances of unequally-skilled forces in combat. In such unequal fights as the first day at Arghistan Bridge and the assault on the Tri-cities in Anaconda, the results suggest that where our allies are substantially overmatched tactically, American air power and SOF support per se may not be enough to turn the tide.

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97 MHI: Tape 032602a, CPT H. et al. int.; Memorandum for the Record, CPT H. int., July 2, 2002.

Even where the balance of skills was closer to parity, as at Bai Beche, the results could still be perilously close calls.

If SOF-directed air power had simply annihilated Taliban forces at standoff range, as some now suppose, then even a radically unsophisticated army would have been sufficient to walk in and occupy the blasted ruins. But in Afghanistan, though air power could destroy most of a hostile force, it could not annihilate well-prepared defenses outright. Nor could it defeat well-directed, skillfully concealed assaults by itself. The result was a series of close combat actions, rather than a war fought exclusively at standoff ranges. And in these actions, even a few al Qaeda survivors, properly motivated and armed with modern automatic weapons, could mow down large numbers of unsophisticated indigenous soldiers caught exposed in the open. To survive long enough to take advantage of the tremendous firepower leveled by American air support thus still required the fundamental combat skills of cover, concealment, dispersed small unit maneuver and local suppressive fire. Novice troops without these fundamentals either found themselves pinned down and unable to advance or driven back with heavy losses. Better-skilled troops able to advance under fire, on the other hand, found the precision firepower of American air strikes to be a decisive advantage. And where Afghan Taliban irresolution or exposure left an undefended battlefield following American air strikes, then even unskilled allies did indeed prove able to occupy the abandoned ground.

The results thus suggest that where the troops on the ground are comparable—either both skilled or both unskilled—American precision fires can make the difference. But where an unsophisticated ally is pitted against an enemy with the skills and motivation to survive precision engagement and fight back when attacked, then poorly trained allies will be unable to take advantage of the enormous potential that precision fires bring. Even with precision air support, indigenous allies thus need a

combination of skill, motivation, and equipment at least broadly comparable to their enemies' to prevail.

### **A NEW EXPLANATION: THE AFGHAN CAMPAIGN AS ORTHODOX THEATER WARFARE**

Neither of the main views in the current debate is thus wholly satisfactory. On the one hand, the campaign's idiosyncrasies were less decisive than often assumed. On the other hand, the systematic lessons most commonly drawn are at odds with the war's actual conduct—the fighting did not unfold as the Afghan Model supposes.

A more satisfactory accounting would be to view the campaign neither as a fluke nor as a military revolution, but rather as a surprisingly orthodox example of modern joint theater warfare—albeit one with unusually heavy fire support for ourselves and our allies. While the Afghan campaign was unique in some respects and new in others, it is easy to exaggerate the war's distinctiveness. There were important continuities between Afghanistan and prior military experience—and these continuities were at least as important for the campaign's outcome as its differences.

The campaign, after all, centered on a struggle between two sizeable armies. Although public attention has tended to focus on the role of Western air power and the handful of commandos who directed it, the purpose of that Western role was to tip the scales in an ongoing, preexisting land war. The Taliban and Northern Alliance forces whose struggle this air power was meant to influence deployed together some 60-80,000 troops (let alone the Southern Alliance forces that arose as the fighting moved south).<sup>98</sup> These troops were striving to take and hold ground in very orthodox ways prior to the American intervention, and al

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98 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001-2002*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 160, and references in note 30 above. By comparison, Serbian forces in Kosovo numbered about 40,000 on the eve of the 1999 NATO air campaign: William Arkin, "Operation Allied Force: The Most Precise Application of Air Power in History," in Andrew Bacevich and Eliot Cohen, eds., *War Over Kosovo*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, pp. 1-37 at 14.

Qaeda continued to contest control of key geographic points through the end of Operation ANACONDA in March.<sup>99</sup> In fact, American commanders were surprised by al Qaeda's willingness to stand their ground and fight for the Shah-i-kot valley at ANACONDA; CJTF Mountain had expected them to melt away in guerilla fashion once struck rather than reinforcing a dug-in territorial defense-in-place as they actually did.<sup>100</sup> The campaign as a whole, moreover, produced extensive close combat, the great majority of which was waged by conventional infantry.

Of course, the outcome of this territorial struggle was affected profoundly by SOF-directed precision air power—this ultimately made the difference between stalemate and victory. But it did not do so by itself. Tightly integrated ground maneuver was necessary to exploit its effects once the Coalition began to encounter chiefly foreign Taliban and al Qaeda opponents with significant skill and motivation. To overcome skilled, resolute opposition required both precision fire *and* maneuver; neither alone was sufficient in Afghanistan.

This, however, was hardly new. In fact, the necessary synergy between fires and maneuver has been at the heart of most great power military doctrines since at least 1918. The history of modern tactics is largely a story of the discovery of its importance in the crucible of the Western Front and the subsequent spread of such methods across nations and over time.<sup>101</sup> The German tactical system that first broke the Western trench stalemate in March 1918, for example, was centered on new methods for integrating suppressive fire and movement via dispersed formations that used local terrain for cover.<sup>102</sup> Allied armies had learned similar lessons from hard experience in the

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99 In fact, press commentaries in October were describing Taliban positions south of Mazar-e-Sharif as resembling a First World War trench system: Peter Baker, "Taliban Fortifies Capital for War," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2001, p. A1.

100 "Operation Anaconda," briefing slides, CJTF MTN G3; MHI: Tape 041902p, LTC Briley int.

101 For more detailed treatments, see Biddle, "Land Warfare: Theory and Practice;" House, *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century*.

trenches and adopted similar methods by war's end (albeit with less complete implementation in the field).<sup>103</sup> The German tactics that wrought blitzkrieg in 1939-41 were partly a matter of exploiting the tank's new mobility, but largely a product of a heavy emphasis on combining fire and movement in balanced, combined arms formations.<sup>104</sup> Germany's opponents had allowed their skills in integrating fire and maneuver to atrophy in the interwar years, but under the pressure of hard fighting these skills were gradually recovered, contributing centrally to the end of blitzkrieg after 1941 and the gradual triumph of allied arms by 1945.<sup>105</sup> Israel's success against poorly-trained Arab infantry in 1956 and 1967 led them to de-emphasize orthodox fire and maneuver in favor of an imbalanced stress on the shock effect of mounted maneuver per se; they paid for this imbalance with their heavy losses against better-prepared Egyptian infantry in the Sinai in 1973.<sup>106</sup>

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102 Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1981, Leavenworth Paper No. 4, pp. 37-44; Bruce Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918*, New York: Praeger, 1989; English, *On Infantry*, pp.18-22; Rod Paschall, *The Defeat of Imperial Germany, 1917-1918*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1989, pp. 130-8.

103 Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945*, pp. 61-148; Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, pp. 84-191; Paul Kennedy, "Britain in the First World War," in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. I, Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1988, pp. 31-79 at pp. 51, 69-70; Ian M. Brown, "Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-piece Attack, 1917-1918," *Journal of Military History* 58, July 1994, pp. 421-44.

104 J.P. Harris, "The Myth of Blitzkrieg," *War in History*, Vol. 2, No. 3, November, 1995, pp. 335-352; James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992; Manfred Messerschmidt, "German Military Effectiveness Between 1919 and 1939," in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness, Vol. II, The Interwar Period*, Winchester, MA: Allen and Unwin, 1988, pp. 218-55; Matthew Cooper, *The German Army 1933-39: Its Political and Military Failure*, London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1978, pp. 113-21.

105 Bidwell and Graham, *Firepower: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904-1945*, pp. 205-81; Peter Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999; Michael Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994; David Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed*, Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1995.

106 Jonathan M. House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare: A Survey of Twentieth Century Tactics, Doctrine, and Organization*, Ft. Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army

American doctrinal writers initially responded to the Israelis' 1973 experience by substituting a one-sided emphasis on anti-tank fires for the Israelis' converse overemphasis on maneuver; by 1982 this imbalance was remedied by a return to orthodox fire-maneuver synergy in the new doctrine of AirLand Battle.<sup>107</sup>

Nor was it new that the fires and the maneuver were provided by different nations in Afghanistan. In Vietnam, our late-war, post-withdrawal policy was precisely to support a South Vietnamese proxy with American air power, much as we did with our AMF proxies in Afghanistan. Of course, the ultimate outcome was much more favorable in Afghanistan. In part, this is due to air power's greater lethality in 2001-02. But the difference is also due in part to the different balance of maneuver skills on the ground in these two conflicts. In Afghanistan, our proxies were generally a match for their enemies tactically, and in key battles like Bai Beche they were able to integrate their maneuver closely with our fires. In Vietnam, by contrast, the southern Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was generally less skilled and motivated than its northern foes—and American air support was correspondingly less decisive.<sup>108</sup>

As in Afghanistan, however, there were exceptions to the general rule in Vietnam, too, and these exceptions offer some instructive parallels. In the 1972 Easter Offensive, for

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Combat Studies Institute, 1984, pp. 172-80; Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. I*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990, pp. 14-116; Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement, October 1973*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1975; George W. Gawrych, "The Egyptian High Command in the 1973 War," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 4, Summer 1987.

107 Robert Doughty, *The Evolution of U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine, 1946-76*, Ft. Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, 1979, Leavenworth Paper No. 1, pp. 40-46; John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973-1982*, Ft. Monroe, VA: Historical Office, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1984; Paul Herbert, *Deciding What Has to be Done: General William E. DePuy and the 1976 Edition of FM 100-5, Operations*, Ft. Leavenworth KS: U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, 1988, Leavenworth Paper No. 16.

108 On tactical skill in the ARVN and PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam—the North Vietnamese army), see, e.g., George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1996 ed., pp. 233-4, 265-6.



example, North Vietnamese attackers who had previously waged a mostly guerrilla war were thrown into a conventional, large-unit armored assault. With little experience in such tactics, they had great difficulty combining arms, coordinating attacks, or exploiting terrain for cover. American air power thus found massed, exposed targets in the open and inflicted heavy losses, enabling our ARVN proxies to contain the offensive.<sup>109</sup> By contrast, in the South Vietnamese Lam Son 719 offensive in February 1971 it was the ARVN which found itself in an unaccustomed role, launching its first major airmobile assault without American advisors (who were forbidden to accompany them to their objectives in Laos); the North Vietnamese were here implementing very familiar tactics, waging just the sort of conventional defense they had practiced in more than a decade of continuous warfare against American and French attackers. American air strikes here enabled the ARVN to get as far as the Laotian village of Tchepone, but ARVN maneuver skills left much to be desired and losses were correspondingly heavy; the ensuing ARVN withdrawal left much of their equipment behind and proved so harrowing that no similar offensive was ever again attempted.<sup>110</sup> These actions from the early 1970s were actually much

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109 See, e.g., Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 196-201; G.H. Turley, *The Easter Offensive: Vietnam, 1972*, Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1985; Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, pp. 194-205. Note that in Lam Son 719, as in many other 20th century battlefields, even heavy firepower was not sufficient to annihilate properly prepared defensive positions. One American helicopter pilot in the battle, for example, reports that he flew through the dust cloud of a B-52 strike against North Vietnamese defenses, yet took small arms fire from surviving defenders in the bombed area: personal communication, COL Douglas Lovelace, USA, ret'd., Carlisle PA, October 7, 2002.

110 Dave Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, San Rafael, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1978, pp. 238-43; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History*, New York: Viking, 1983, pp. 628-31; House, *Toward Combined Arms Warfare*, pp. 164-68. The comparison, of course, is imperfect: success in 1972 could also be attributed to air power's greater efficacy against tactical attackers, and the mixed results of 1971 could be attributed to air power's lesser efficacy against dug-in defenders, rather than the variance in relative tactical skills I note above. To distinguish these competing effects would require additional cases, which are unavailable. My purpose here, however, is not to explain the relative importance of mission and skill in Vietnam, but merely to demonstrate that a pattern of American air support succeeding when the supported proxy is a match for its enemy's skills but not otherwise is not wholly unprecedented.

more like Afghanistan than many now suppose: where our Afghan allies met opponents with superior tactical skills, even lavish, radically-precise air support proved insufficient; where they met their enemies with something like equal skills and motivation, American firepower made all the difference.

By contrast, many now believe that in Afghanistan we turned a ragtag militia into conquerors who subsequently overwhelmed a superior enemy by simply walking forward in the wake of our precision bombing. This belief is largely responsible for the general perception of military revolution in Afghanistan—and if the war had really been fought this way, then the perception would be right. But the war was not actually fought this way. And what did happen was much closer to the long-standing historical precedent on the need for integrating fire and maneuver to overcome skilled, resolute opponents.

Of course, this is not to suggest that nothing has changed since 1918. In particular, the form that fire support has taken has changed dramatically since then—and the increases in firepower’s range, precision, round-for-round lethality, responsiveness, and flexibility have obviously been dramatic in recent years. In a sense, these changes have been revolutionary if considered chiefly in terms of their effect on the way fires have been provided.

Moreover, the increasing lethality of standoff precision engagement has made the combination of fire and movement much more powerful where both elements are present. Tight integration of JDAMs or laser-guided bombs with skilled ground maneuver is far more effective today than were 77 mm field guns and German *stosstruppen* in 1918. This is an important development and has greatly increased the real military power of the United States today relative to any plausible foe.<sup>111</sup>

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111 For more detailed discussions of the effects of technological change on the relative capability of skilled and unskilled ground forces, see Biddle, “The Past as Prologue.”

But what new technology has *not* done is to enable us to succeed using either fire or maneuver alone. The Afghan campaign—like the Western Front in World War I, the invasions of France, Poland, or Russia in 1939-41, the Northwest European campaign of 1944-45, the Mideast Wars of 1956-1982, or any of dozens of other, similar examples—was a joint air-land struggle in which the ability to combine fire and maneuver by diverse arms made the difference between success and failure. Seen in this larger context of the underlying determinants of campaign outcomes in modern warfare, this continuity in the need for a demanding system of integrated fire and maneuver is at least as significant for the future of warfare—and for the policy decisions that turn on this—as the accompanying changes in the technology of precision firepower.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

It is thus a mistake to see Afghanistan as a radical break with prior military experience. As in any war, it brought continuity as well as change—and the continuity was crucial both for understanding the campaign's outcome and for projecting its policy implications. This view of Afghanistan as continuity in turn implies a different perspective than either of those now current in the debate on the war.

Perhaps most fundamentally, it suggests that Afghanistan was neither a revolution nor a fluke. The Afghan Model will not always work as it did in Afghanistan, because we will not always enjoy allies who match up so well against their enemies. But where we do, we can reasonably expect the Model to be roughly as lethal as it was last fall and winter. The Model is thus at once oversold by its proponents and undersold by its detractors: it can work under some important preconditions, but those preconditions will not always be present.

This in turn implies some very different directions for U.S. policy than many of those now current in the debate on Afghanistan.

### **Implications for Force Structure and the Design of the American Military.**

Many now see the Afghan campaign as evidence that the American military can be redesigned to emphasize long-range precision engagement at the expense of close combat capability.<sup>112</sup> If the Afghan Model can do everywhere what it did in Afghanistan, it would make sense to restructure our forces to reduce dramatically the ground forces that make up such a large fraction of today's military, and shift toward a much greater reliance on standoff precision engagement forces and the SOF teams needed to direct their fires.

This argument is not completely without merit. In fact, it will be possible—sometimes—to repeat the new Model's Afghan performance. In Korea, for example, many analysts believe our South Korean allies could provide at least the match for their enemy's skills that the AMF did for the Taliban, and this would suggest that large U.S. ground forces may be less necessary for the defense of the peninsula than often supposed.<sup>113</sup>

It would be dangerous to assume, however, that such allies will always be available. In a world of diverse military organizations, we will sometimes enjoy allies who can

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112 See references in note 4.

113 Note, however, that this does not necessarily imply a U.S. ground force withdrawal from South Korea as the appropriate policy. Whatever their military utility, American ground forces serve a variety of political and diplomatic purposes, and a withdrawal from South Korea would send international political signals that the United States might not wish to send. Moreover, the proximity of key objectives like Seoul to the border may require larger forces for their defense than would be needed in theaters without such outlying resources. Either way, though, the South Korean army demonstrates that indigenous allies do sometimes exist with the skills for the Afghan Model to perform as it did in Afghanistan. On the South Korean army, see, e.g., Michael O'Hanlon, "Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea is Easier than the Pentagon Thinks," *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4, Spring 1998, pp. 135-70.

match our enemies but sometimes we will not. And where we do not, the Afghan experience offers little reason to expect the new Model to prevail.

This in turn suggests that an unbalanced U.S. military dependent on standoff precision engagement would be a high-risk posture. At times it would succeed; at others it would fail badly. A balanced, all-arms force structure with the ability to integrate precision fires with skilled American ground maneuver thus reduces risk and offers important leverage in a world where we cannot know exactly where or with whom we may be forced to fight.

Of course, to argue that America must retain a balanced force is not to show that any given ground force size or composition is necessary: how much of a shift away from today's structure could be safely accommodated? No study of Afghanistan per se can answer such a question—it clearly turns on a variety of considerations much larger than the conduct of this specific conflict. But the discussion above does provide a number of important insights that must be reflected in any adequate analysis of American force structure at large.

Most important, this monograph suggests that standard assessments based largely on mounted or aerial warfare against exposed armored targets are dangerously misleading. Almost all major force structure analyses are now built around the use of formal computer models whose ability to represent dismounted warfare against dispersed, covered, concealed targets in complex terrain is very limited. For over 40 years, the analytical community has focused on an expected conflict between massed armored forces operating mostly in the open. The *corpus* of models and other tools that emerged from this effort reflect this focus and treat warfare mainly as a problem of interactions among armored vehicles and major weapon systems. The role of dismounted soldiers has been largely ignored, whether on the attack or the defense, or in simple terrain or complex. Whether this has ever been an adequate

treatment of real combat can be debated. But it is clearly at odds with the kind of warfare practiced in Afghanistan last fall and winter. The Taliban briefly presented just the kinds of static, exposed, point targets that current models assume, but quickly discovered that such postures are suicidal in the face of American air power. They then dispersed into covered and concealed positions—both in the defense and the attack—and conducted most of the campaign in a style of fighting very different from that assumed in today's standard analytical tools. This was not guerrilla warfare (at least, not in the major actions through the fall of Kandahar and the end of Operation ANACONDA): the Taliban sought to hold ground and deny access to key cities and other strategic objectives. But they did so from fighting positions intended to avoid exposure through cover and concealment, and these positions succeeded in evading discovery or destruction long enough to thwart initial advances by AMF ground forces on multiple occasions. We can expect most future opponents to try to fight much the same way—it is the traditional response of armies to high-firepower opposition. Warfare against dismounted, covered, concealed, and dispersed targets will thus be the norm for American arms in the future. To assess military requirements using tools that cannot address such combat is to reach findings that are meaningless at best, and dangerous at worst.

The effects of this error, moreover, are not unbiased: other things being equal, mistaking a war of dismounted cover and concealment for one of exposed armored battles will underestimate the American forces needed. This is because such an error mistakenly assumes the type of warfare we do best. The American military is extremely adept at destroying massed, exposed targets in the open, and this is precisely why the Taliban abandoned such postures: they realized they would fare much better if they avoided exposure. To calculate the force size needed to destroy a given fraction of an enemy's exposed, massed major weapon systems is thus to underestimate the

difficulty of the real military problem to be faced against enemies who avoid such tactics, and hence such a calculation will underestimate the size or strength of the forces needed to solve it. Of course there are many assumptions needed to model any given campaign, and one could easily make many of them in ways that would either over- or under-estimate final force requirements. This in turn means that any given study could exaggerate, as well as underestimate, our needs: the effects of overestimating the enemy's will to fight or military skills, for example, could more than compensate for errors in projecting their posture. But among the more important inherent, built-in assumptions on which current models are built is the assumption of massed armored warfare—and the analysis of Afghanistan above suggests that *this* assumption's marginal effect on the typical model-based study will be to reduce artificially the study's findings for U.S. force requirements. To reach sound conclusions as to the needed size of the American military, one must thus take this problem into account in a systematic way.

### **Implications for American Foreign Policy and the Conduct of the Ongoing War.**

Among the most serious potential errors stemming from a misreading of the Afghan campaign would be to underestimate the costs of future American military action. If Afghanistan were evidence of a new American way of war that could defeat enemies quickly and cheaply, with little U.S. casualty exposure and a limited U.S. political footprint, then a neo-imperial foreign policy underwritten by frequent American military intervention would seem attractive to many. Similarly, it would make intervention in any given theater in the ongoing war on terrorism seem more attractive by reducing the expected costs.

Here, too, there will be times when optimistic expectations can be met. Where we enjoy indigenous allies with the necessary skills and commitment, the costs to

America of intervention may well be no higher than those of last fall and winter. We cannot, however, assume this for all cases. For a neo-imperialist policy to make sense, one must therefore be willing to pay real costs in at least some important theaters.

One such theater is Iraq, the focus of perhaps the most pressing immediate decision confronting the conduct of the ongoing war. Would our potential allies in Iraq be good enough for the Afghan Model to succeed? The Iraqi military our proxies would face is hardly among the world's most skilled or resolute. At most, one might consider them semi-skilled and variably motivated.<sup>114</sup> Our potential allies, on the other hand, are demonstrably worse. The Kurds have shown themselves in multiple actions against Saddam's Republican Guard to be even less adept than the Iraqis.<sup>115</sup> The Iraqi National Congress (INC) has no military yet at all, whether skilled or not. Given the time and the space, American special operations forces could in principle provide the needed skills by training the indigenous forces, but it is far from clear that either the time or the space is available. In Afghanistan, current estimates allow up to five years to raise and train an Afghan national army.<sup>116</sup> If raising and training an INC army would take anywhere near this long, it would pose serious policy problems—not least of which being the time it would give Saddam to further his WMD program. After all, the President now argues for prompt regime change in Iraq on the grounds that to delay would risk allowing Saddam to complete a nuclear weapon. In the meantime, Saddam would have every incentive to attack any sanctuary we might use rather than waiting for us to complete the training; even if he

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114 See, e.g., Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood," pp. 139-179 at 158-61; James Pardew, "The Iraqi Army's Defeat in Kuwait," *Parameters*, Winter 1991-92, pp. 17-23; Murray Hammick, "Iraqi Obstacles and Defensive Positions," *International Defense Review*, September 1991, pp. 989-991.

115 See, for example, International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey, 1991-1992*, London: Brassey's, 1992, pp. 94-98; idem, *Strategic Survey 1996/97*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 154-7.

116 John F. Burns, "Gratitude and Doubt in New Life of Afghans," *New York Times*, September 11, 2002.



withheld chemical or biological weapons, it is not clear that we could defend the sanctuary from a determined conventional attack without a trained ground force in place. A Kurdish army might be quicker to train than an INC force, but reliance on Kurdish allies would pose diplomatic difficulties for U.S.-Turkish relations, and we would still have to defend the training sanctuary against potentially determined attack in the meantime. For the Afghan Model to perform the way it did in Afghanistan requires adequately skilled ground forces; barring substantial retraining of either Kurdish or INC armies, these ground troops would have to be some combination of our own and allies' such as Britain's.

Of course, it is entirely possible that Saddam's forces might quit without a fight; many did so in 1991, and the Iraqis are weaker now than they were then. But it is worth recalling that not all of Saddam's legions gave in without fighting in 1991: the Republican Guard, by contrast with Iraq's regular conscript infantry, fought back when struck by Coalition ground forces.<sup>117</sup> They fought poorly, and even in the Guard, combat motivation was hardly fanatical. Yet Saddam's best troops did not simply quit in 1991. Modern autocrats invest heavily in promoting the loyalty and political reliability of their praetorian guards, and in tying their fate to that of the regime they serve.<sup>118</sup> In 1991 this sufficed to keep some Iraqis in the field, risking their lives for the regime until the battle was demonstrably lost. In 2002 it is possible that the Guard might choose otherwise—but maybe not. To invade without sufficient ground forces on the assumption that there will be no fighting to be done would thus be a major gamble.

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117 Biddle, "Victory Misunderstood" at pp. 149-52.

118 See, e.g., Steven David, *Third World Coups D'Etat and International Security*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987; Amos Perlmutter and Valerie Plave Bennett, eds., *The Political Influence of the Military*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980, pp. 205-208; Eliot Cohen, "Distant Battles: Modern War in the Third World," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Spring 1986, pp. 143-171.

## **Implications for Army Transformation.**

The analysis above suggests that Afghanistan does not imply a wholesale restructuring of the American military—but this does not mean everything should stay the same. The Army is transforming, and will continue to do so; as it does, it is important to pay special attention to the kinds of targets encountered in Operation ANACONDA and increasingly from the Afghan campaign's earliest days: dispersed, dismounted, covered, and concealed.

To cope with such targets requires aggressive, realistic training and a combination of arms—including effective, plentiful precision engagement systems. But among the essential requirements for such warfare is an ample supply of highly skilled dismounted infantry. And the relative proportion of this infantry to accompanying mounted elements is likely to have to increase over time. Ever-more-lethal precision engagement technology is driving our opponents increasingly into cover and increasingly into complex terrain—and these are the postures that demand the largest proportion of dismounted strength in the American combined arms mix. Hence the demand for dismounted infantry in Army combat units is likely to rise over time.

By contrast, many visions of the future Army would leave the Service without sufficient dismounted strength for this kind of warfare. Some, for example, now propose designs for ground forces centered on mounted warfare at standoff range, using new information and precision engagement technologies to destroy opponents at a distance without exposing Americans to risky close combat and thus without the need for large numbers of expensive, labor-intensive dismounts. Beliefs that the American public is too casualty-averse to tolerate battlefield losses drive force planners to de-emphasize the role of vulnerable, thin-skinned, dismounted infantry in favor of higher-technology approaches that substitute capital-intensive remote surveillance and precision firepower for labor-

intensive close combat. Interpretations of the Afghan experience that see our success there as the result of precision engagement systems breaking hostile formations at standoff ranges give powerful impetus to such proposals.

These interpretations, however, are fundamentally flawed. Ground forces' unique contribution to warfare of the kind seen in Afghanistan is their ability to cope with targets who reduce their exposure to deep attack by dismounting, dispersing, covering, and concealing themselves. And this unique ground force contribution resides in dismount-led combined arms forces for close combat in potentially complex terrain. These may be expensive, they may be labor-intensive, and they may pose casualty risks—but if we care about mission effectiveness against the kinds of targets we encountered in Afghanistan and will likely encounter in the future, then we must accept those costs and design the force to be effective, not just inexpensive, against the kinds of enemies it is increasingly likely to face.<sup>119</sup>

Precision engagement offers tremendous capability—but only if we exploit its effects via tight integration with ground maneuver. And increasingly, if Afghanistan is any guide, the kind of maneuver we will need will include a heavy dose of dismounted, labor-intensive, close quarters fighting.

As a whole, then, we should be wary of claims that Afghanistan represents a revolution in warfare with the potential to motivate sweeping changes in American defense policy and the structure of the American military. Of course, there is much that a study of a single conflict cannot prove about the future; perhaps Afghanistan will be unrepresentative of the emerging challenges the American military will face in years to come. Yet many of the claims for

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119 For other arguments that Army dismounted strength may have to increase in the future, see, e.g., Robert B. Killebrew, "Reinventing the Army for the 21st Century," *Army*, Vol. 50, No. 6, June 2000, pp. 12-18; idem, "Toward an Adaptive Army," *Army*, Vol. 52, No. 1, January 2002, pp. 21-26; idem, "Deterrence with a Vengeance," *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 136, No. 3, October 1998, pp. 76-81; Frederick J. Kroesen, "The Future of Land Warfare: An Opinion," *Army*, Vol. 52, No. 6, June 2002, pp. 10-13.

Afghanistan's uniqueness bear less weight than one might easily have supposed. Even if it cannot provide complete answers, this conflict does offer important lessons about the future. And perhaps the most important of these lessons is that warfare's future may have more in common with its past than many in the current debate would have us believe.

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