

# Colliding Discourses: The (Impossible?) Art of Persuasion in Afghanistan

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It is a fundamental mistake to see the enemy as a set of targets.  
The enemy in war is a group of people.  
Some of them will have to be killed.  
Others will have to be captured or driven into hiding.  
The overwhelming majority, however, have to be persuaded.<sup>1</sup>  
—Frederick Kagan

During two Afghanistan deployments, to Kandahar and later Kabul, between November 2009 and September 2011, I was employed in a part of the world of warcraft known in military circles as *non-kinetic influence activities*: activities undertaken to change minds, and hopefully actions, without relying on bullets and bombs. I want to explore briefly here my ten-month deployment to Kandahar in 2009-10, and what I hope will make it interesting to readers is how I experienced war through two radically different lenses. The first was as a military man with twenty-seven years of service, including ten as a non-commissioned Avionics Technician and the remainder as an Air Force Logistics Officer. The second was as an English Literature professor to no small degree influenced by the postmodern celebration of difference, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

You really couldn't ask for a more incongruent fusion of personas. The first lens is likely very familiar, even to those who haven't served in the military. We all know, for instance, how militaries seek to minimize ambiguity and maximize certainty, and how they operate in the realm of tangible goals and concrete objectives. They are grounded in discipline, organization, and structure; they break complex tasks down to specialized, manageable bits; and they view individuals—despite recognizing them as the critical lowest common

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<sup>1</sup> Kagan, Frederick. "War and Aftermath." *Policy Review* 120 (2003). Web. 5 Feb. 2012.

denominator—as relatively insignificant in the context of the whole. There is a reason that soldiers so often colloquially refer to a “military machine”: it is more powerful than us, can chew us up at will, and will remain long after each of us has passed through its gears.

The second lens may be less familiar to readers, but most of you can probably intuit that it is of a much different color than the first. In fact, it’s almost at the other end of the spectrum. The study of literature for the past three decades has increasingly been informed by the postmodern celebration of difference; it is very *much* about the individual. For instance, just consider how literature is never experienced exactly the same by two people, or even by the same person twice. Read a novel at twelve and forty-two and you’ll know what I mean. Postmodernism has taught us that social constructs like race, gender, sexuality, and class radically determine how words in a book can be translated into radically different meanings, depending on the reader. A poor, lesbian, oppressed, African American woman in the rural South, to illustrate, reads a much different version of *The Color Purple* than anyone else. Recognizing the inherent differences in meaning that language contains is crucial, in the world according to postmodernism, for it exposes “essentialism”—the notion that there is an “essentially gay” or “essentially poor” or “essentially Black” identity—as an illusion, a social construction. In the same breath that essentialist assumptions are exploded in a postmodern analysis, ambiguities, uncertainty, and difference become instantly celebrated. All meaning, we come to realize, is provisional, tentative. And structures themselves can be called into question for what they say about the relationships between those who have the power to establish them and those who find themselves subject to—and sometimes subjugated by—them. Literature, and its study in the twenty-first century, is about as far removed from a discourse of “machinery” as is imaginable.

Since most of you are likely very familiar with the first lens, I would like to get you imagining what it is like to look a little closer through this second, more

abstract lens, to show you how it proved beneficial (and at times problematic!) to me while I was performing influence activities overseas. So, after providing a very quick explanation of influence activities to situate non-military readers, I will highlight a few characteristics of the discipline of English Lit that I relied on to try to both understand and persuade others in the incredibly complex human terrain that is Kandahar, Afghanistan. I will then look at three specific influence activities that my team undertook in Kandahar to demonstrate those characteristics in action. As you move through the narrative, you may gradually conclude, as I have since having returned home, that the coalition's lingering status among Afghans—as one giant cultural outsider—is among the most significant obstacles to success in defeating the insurgency. Though not for a lack of trying, NATO efforts to understand and change Afghan culture have all but proven it to be an impossible nut to crack. Should we have known it from the start? I'll let you decide.

1. *To Boldly Influence Where No Man Has . . .*

Kinetic solutions are no longer the panacea of warfare. Rather, individuals need to view 'reality' through the eyes of another culture, specifically, the one with which they are interacting, in order to adapt their attitudes and behaviours to better influence.<sup>2</sup>  
—Emily Spencer

It is almost universally agreed, in theory at least, that influence activities are central to success in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment. Although kinetic force is sometimes necessary to establish security, the non-kinetic measures will sustain it. As the theory in Afghanistan has gone, if coalition forces can provide a framework of security robust enough to allow for development and reconstruction to occur, we will win the trust of the Afghan people, who will see

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<sup>2</sup> Spencer, Emily. "Brains and Brawn: Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as the 'Tool of Choice' in the Contemporary Operating Environment." *Canadian Military Journal* 11.1 (2010). Web. 10 Nov. 2011.

that their well-being is our foremost concern. Consequently, we will be able to encourage them to take the steps needed to shut the insurgency down “from the inside out,” so to speak. They will actively resist insurgent intimidation instead of staying frightened and passive, and they will no longer turn a blind eye to insurgents hiding in their villages but point them out to us for capture or arrest (or worse). They will reject insurgent demands for supplies, young men to fight, or information regarding coalition force movements and activities. Ideally, they may even take the physical risks necessary to remove insurgents themselves. Once enough internal momentum is generated, the theory goes, coalition forces can hand over the reins to Afghans—particularly to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) that we have been training all the while—and call it a day. Mission accomplished.

## 2. *The Theory, the theory*

To be sure, there have been many instances of localized success of this doctrine throughout the nation over a decade since 9/11—many of you reading this will have been a part of those successes—but broadly speaking, theory continues to be trumped by the overwhelming reality that we have not fundamentally altered Afghanistan in ways that need altering. And nor should we have been expected to, of course: not in a decade. Today, and on the widest scale, the Afghan public does not trust its government. It does not trust coalition forces. It does not trust its own police although the Afghan National Army has made good strides to gain confidence. It does not understand this model called “democracy” that the West has tried to superimpose on top of millennia of what amounts to tribal, anarchic living. Simply put, most Afghans have not seen their lives improve in ways promised in 2001, whether in terms of economy, development, security, or stability. Most opened their arms to foreign intervention after 9/11; most have been disappointed since. No small part of that disappointment must fall on their own laps, of course, on their unwillingness or

inability to fight for themselves, but we, too, are complicit. We, after all, rolled in promising change.

Despite this rather dire characterization of the current state of affairs, one thing is certain: failing to understand and influence Afghans did not happen for a lack of *effort*. Influence activities are designed to prompt people to contemplate different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, and my team, like so many others, tried some conventional and innovative approaches to changing minds. To illustrate, some concrete examples of influence activities might include:

- providing disinformation to insurgents for direct tactical combat advantages or, more broadly, to cultivate internal dissent and diminish morale
- delivering cultural awareness training to friendly forces to minimize inadvertent contraventions of cultural decorum
- engaging in a joint civil-military venture to hire villagers to clean out culverts or build roads in order to stimulate a local economy: and to minimize the chance that young men will be enticed into joining the insurgency
- maneuvering tactical units to make insurgents assume a certain routine is being established
- demonstrating religious respect by funding mosque repairs
- adopting a less aggressive body posture when doing foot patrols in a village
- using an unmanned drone to drop a bomb on insurgents planting IEDs in a road
- talking to farmers about the need to avoid digging in fields near roads, especially at night
- explaining to Afghans why we—strange people with strange languages and customs from places they've likely never heard of—are in their country in the first place

- creating and distributing different forms of media to educate the local population about matters of health, development, governance, or security
- respecting religious and secular holidays
- engaging in dialogue with legitimate public figures, those exercising power behind the scenes, and, if feasible, illegitimate powerbrokers: including insurgents themselves
- sniping an enemy from a concealed position 500 meters away
- avoiding driving large military vehicles in congested urban areas
- distributing food or medical supplies to a population affected adversely by the conflict going on around them
- separating local insurgents from out-of-area fighters
- shaping the conditions for reconciliation and reintegration of insurgents
- establishing “911” tip lines for residents to phone in security concerns
- establishing a joint honors and awards program with the ANSF to recognize exceptional work
- hiring freelance journalists to write stories about progress
- providing financial and other support to the public media to encourage free speech

Though different in many cases, each of these examples points to an activity designed to “influence” in its own particular way. I include examples of violence in the list to acknowledge that some forms of influence are aggressive and violent, or what we often call “kinetic.” We can tend to think that influence by default involves some kind of benign urging, but in a combat environment, this is not—and cannot realistically always be—the case. Sometimes, sadly, the most effective form of influence is fatal. However, my role in Kandahar focused on the non-kinetic forms, so I’ll stay in my lane.

In Kandahar, we attempted most of the non-kinetic influence activities in this list. We performed classical psychological operations functions against insurgents, like deception, disinformation, or spreading and countering propaganda. Mostly, however, our efforts were domestically focused, as would be expected in a COIN environment. We tried to influence a wide range of target audiences: not only insurgent but also potential insurgent, the general Afghan population, men, women, teenagers, businesspeople, the unemployed, the illiterate, the ANSF, what intelligentsia remains, and a host of other demographic groupings. We even tried to influence our own forces by providing cultural awareness training: identifying and giving specific direction on holidays with significant religious and historical import; providing information about important figures in Kandahar society; giving direction on how to properly engage with key leaders; and telling soldiers what to expect during key public and private Afghan social events.

We also informed and educated Afghans about the steps that their new government, GIRoA—the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—was trying to take in order to improve their lives (“trying” here is the active word). We tried to measure and, in turn, shape public perceptions of the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police by providing information to the public about upcoming projects with job opportunities, or scheduling visits of mobile medical and veterinary clinics. We funded the acquisition and distribution of soccer uniforms for kids, helped the University of Kandahar with printing, publishing, and computer costs, and worked behind the scenes to support those elements of Afghan society that could help engender the public perception of some kind of normalcy of life: the press, media outlets, small businesses, or even women’s sewing groups. And more. We tried much, much more. But *how* did we determine how to create the best messages and get them across?

### 3. *English Lit: You're Kidding, Right?*

*I asked my Brigade Commanders what was the number one thing they would have liked to have had more of, and they all said cultural knowledge.*<sup>3</sup>

—LTG Peter Chiarelli

LTG Chiarelli's Brigade Commanders in Iraq are articulating a request also often heard in Afghanistan, and while having more cultural knowledge would be great, the practical constraints of getting it are virtually prohibitive. After all, consider what we *mean* by cultural knowledge. To truly understand a culture—say the culture of the American South, or California's wine country, or the Midwest, or Northern Canada—would take much more than some classroom study or even months of close observation. It would take years of living there, learning the nuances, the colloquialisms, and the mannerisms of a variety of groups and subgroups. It would take developing an appreciation for local tastes, longstanding grievances, and the struggles that people have had to overcome in both recent and distant memory. It would require understanding how geography and terrain influence perception. In other words, it would take *time*: the one thing that we've never had enough of in Afghanistan.

So it is that statements like LTG Chiarelli's must be put in context. What his commanders are actually doing is expressing frustration related to feeling the full alienating impact of their status as linguistic and cultural outsiders. They know they are on deployment for about a year. They know that no matter what kind of pre-deployment training they have had, it will be utterly insufficient. They know that it will take several months to even start to understand the human and cultural terrain of the district they've been deployed to. In essence, they know that, although their key task is to be able to "read" the environment, in order to predict and plan (and to manage and control: two things militaries need to excel at to

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<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Numrich, S.K. "Human Terrain: A Tactical Issue or a Strategic C4I Problem?" *Institute for Defense Analyses*. 20 May 2008. Print.



win) such reading is, in fact, virtually impossible. Catching glimpses and fragments of understanding, just as they think they are starting to make sense of it all, they redeploy home. The next rotation (or as we often called all of them in Kandahar: *Roto Zero*) will arrive, and the cycle will begin anew. It is not unlike, perhaps, the feeling that English professors feel when that new batch of freshmen shows up for the first class of composition.

Fortunately, there is a different kind of “reading,” a cognitive “advance copy” if you will, available to develop the basic tools for assessing human and cultural terrain; it comes courtesy of—you guessed it—the study of literature. In the same way as studying military history prepares infantry and artillery officers to anticipate tactical and strategic combat maneuvers, studying literature can prepare soldiers to anticipate common human “maneuvers.” Literature exposes and analyzes human desires, frustrations, and hopes, and it can train soldiers to be on the lookout for a vast range of possible emotional and psychological responses to conflict and confrontation. Shy of actually living in a foreign environment, imaginatively rehearsing human dynamics in advance can be an invaluable preparatory step toward mitigating the sheer cognitive overload that a cultural collision produces. My academic background developed all of these skills, and so before showing you some of the actual projects where I was able to employ them in useful ways, I want to take a minute to look at that background in a little more detail.

But first, a quick defense . . . My experience has been that no shortage of people—military and civilian alike—assume that English majors (and profs) often do little but sit around emoting about Wordsworthian Romantic poetry, debating the merits of proper grammar, or ruminating over the relative value of long-dead authors. Perhaps some of you have even heard it put along these lines: “Well, English is ultimately pretty useless. I mean, it doesn’t even pay well. But hey: they’re not hurting anyone, and maybe we need that artsy kind of stuff every now and then.” Dismissive though this may sound, I have to grant that it is not

entirely untrue. For instance, we certainly don't get paid like corporate execs and, no, we don't hurt anyone (unless lecturing students to death counts).

Seriously though, we do, of course, accomplish a little more than this depiction suggests. Modern literary studies have become richly theoretical over the past two decades, both self-generating and incorporating from other disciplines an array of critical models which interrogate all types of literary and cultural products. Art, of which literature is but a part, has become subjected to readings based on gender, class, economics, psychology, environment, linguistics, evolution, and more. Key in these assessments is the sheer *critical* acumen that is brought to bear on a text. Literary scholars, and the students we teach, have learned to treat writing—fictional, poetic, dramatic, political, scientific, or otherwise—with a healthy critical suspicion, if for no other reason than we realize the often subtle power that language holds. Our business is to assess how words get invested with meaning, how they can appear invisible to those who use them, and how they can lead to all sorts of injustices when people overlook the fact that language is not merely used to describe the world but a tool, a process, and an interaction that in many ways *creates* the world. Language, in other words, is never passive.

In an online discussion forum response to a student question—“*Why do we need to learn this? Is my commander going to send me a poem and ask me to explicate it?*”—one English professor compiled a list of twenty-one reasons why people might consider the study of literature as an academic career path.<sup>4</sup> Before adding a few of my own reasons and describing how they were useful in the context of Afghanistan, consider four of hers. While you read, I invite you to muse over how they might be useful for soldiers battling an insurgency in a foreign country:

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<sup>4</sup> Huntress. *Freethought-Forum.com*. 20 Feb. 2012. Web.

1. *To open our minds to ambiguities of meaning.* While people will "say what they mean and mean what they say" in an ideal world, language in our world is, in reality, maddeningly and delightfully ambiguous. If you go through life expecting people to play by your rules, you'll only be miserable, angry, and disappointed. You won't change them. Ambiguity, double entendres, and nuance give our language depth and endless possibility. Learn it. Appreciate it. Revel in it.
2. *To teach us to see individual bias.* In a sense, each of us is an unreliable or naive narrator, but most of us mindlessly accept the stories of certain friends or family without qualification. We should remember that they are centers of their own universes, though, just like we are. They are first-person narrators—not omniscient—just like we are. The only thing that suffers when we appreciate individual bias is our own gullibility.
3. *To encourage us to question "accepted" knowledge.* As children, most of us were taught to believe what we're told and those basic hypotheses provide our schemas, or building blocks, of knowledge. As we grow, we learn to question some ideas while rejecting the offensively alien ideas outright, often without real examination. However, human progress often results from the rejection of assumed "facts." The difficulty lies in spotting our own unexamined assumptions. The more ideas we expose ourselves to, the more of our own assumptions we can root out to question and either discard or ground our lives in.
4. *To explore ethical complexities.* Only children find ethical rules cut and dried. Literature forces readers to challenge their simplistic ethical conceptions and sometimes their outright condemnation of others' actions. For example, we believe lying is wrong. But what do we mean? Do we never lie? Have you ever met a person rude enough to follow this rule implicitly? Be advised, though: ethical exploration is a mature endeavor; it is not for the thin-skinned.

These are brilliant answers, really, and I couldn't have written them any better myself. I do want to add a few of my own, though, so let's start by going back to my opening statement about how influence activities involve trying to persuade people to think and act differently.

First, what do we mean by “people”? It should be self-evident enough, right? Well, yes and no. To start, by “people” I mean more than just Afghan people. I mean *humans*, and the study of literature lends itself to much more than just understanding individual characters in a text and why they do what they do in the narrative. It is a guide for understanding humanity itself because studying literature is, ultimately, the study of humanity, including the study of what makes us *humane* or not. Like for those of us who study it for a living, literature doesn’t just describe but interrogates how and why people think, feel, experience, and behave in the wide variety of ways that we do. As I say to those students who argue, “Hey, Sir, why can’t we just let this be a story,” authors don’t sit down and write for months or years on end “just” to tell a story. They write because they have critiques to make about the world they live in, key observations to make, judgments to pass, and debates to invoke in the minds of readers. They are interested in conscious and subconscious motivations, needs, frustrations, joys, and raw complexities. Like the writing of it, the study of literature demands critical faculties and nurtures tangible tools to actively engage with, and hopefully understand a little better, the human condition.

“People” also refers to alternative cultures, times, and places. Literature forces us to consider similarities and differences, continuities and disjunctions, when we confront characters from worlds other than our own, even when those worlds are imaginative constructs in some of the far-out reaches of science fiction or fantasy or the distant historical past. Most importantly, I believe, it shows us our common human qualities. No matter what country or culture you’re reading, stories share common themes, and in Afghanistan one striking narrative is that parents there, like parents everywhere, want a better life for their children than they themselves had. Other common Afghan narratives include family tensions, social tensions, and class and economic tensions, in- and out-group dynamics, philosophical and religious inquiry, and even investigations into what constitutes good art or “beauty.”

Great literature throws these subjects out for us to confront, and it rarely offers tidy solutions, because life isn't tidy and neither are we. Literature thus also functions to force us to interrogate our own complicity in the untidiness of the world around us. In the process of staring at ourselves in the mirror of literature, we learn to ask tough questions; we also learn to keep an open mind—and heart—when looking for answers that are more often than not ridiculously complex. In a place like Afghanistan, where it can be tempting to overlook diversity and simply view an entire nation as some homogenous Other, because it seems to make it easier to make sense of “them,” the consequences of overlooking complexity can be disastrous. Anyone who has struggled to piece together the myriad of family, clan, and tribal power relationships in a rural village, to try to figure out who, exactly, is in charge, will know what I'm talking about.

Perhaps the biggest advantage that a background in literary study gave me in Afghanistan was that it encourages thinking in symbolic and metaphoric—that is, *abstract*—terms. *All* language is symbolic: what are words if not arbitrary squiggly symbols clumped together in groups, groups that only mean what they do because a critical mass of people all agree that they mean what they do? I tried always to remain cognizant of the arbitrary nature of my own language system and the unique bias that I and those around me would have because of it. Consider the fundamental concepts of time and space and what your Western sense of them is. They are completely different when considered from an Afghan perspective. Most Kandaharis, for instance, live an isolated, traditional, rural, agrarian existence, where time is measured in seasons. It is also measured in very short spans—they are more likely to look ahead only a few days or weeks rather than months or years—in large part because of thirty years of conflict and the scarcity and low life expectancy rates it has generated. Similarly, most do not travel much beyond the immediate confines of their village: they simply have had no reason to, historically. Consequently, their concept of space, and interest in

larger spaces, is extremely limited: most couldn't even identify their own nation on a map. Even fewer would be able to glean the real meaning of putting a satellite in space or a man on the moon.

Recognizing these fundamental differences in perception forced me to see myself as part of one, not *a* or *the*, system of meaning, which in turn allowed me to challenge existing assumptions that many of my fellow soldiers had about the Afghan people: especially about their cultural, religious, and social norms, which were often easily dismissed as “backward.” Dominated as Afghanistan is by a powerful oral tradition, a host of clan and tribal relationships, and a fusion of religious and cultural norms unlike those seen anywhere else in the world, walking in prepared to look for how power was rooted in and supported by abstract forms of communication was invaluable. War is a serious, literal event. Individuals and families literally have their lives disrupted and destroyed. Bodies are literally injured, maimed, and rendered useless. People become literally dead. However, warfare, and especially insurgency warfare, is loaded with abstraction. Consciously or not, people turn to and, in fact, *rely on* symbols, metaphors, and rhetoric to sustain their beliefs. As much as the material, concrete activities going on around them, abstract ideas can determine whether people will embrace, tolerate, or reject an insurgency. Or us.

To put this into a more concrete context, consider how, in Afghanistan, insurgents rely strongly on the richly symbolic narrative of “repelling foreign invaders.” We heard it in almost every piece of their propaganda. Central to this meme, this idea that gets transmitted culturally from generation to generation, like a gene does biologically, is the idea of the *mujahedeen*, the “freedom fighter” character brought into the popular imagination in the West through Sylvester Stallone's character Rambo in the third installment of the *Rambo* franchise. Although commonly understood in the Western world to have originated in the Afghan struggle against Soviet occupation, it actually has much deeper, and more powerful, historical roots. “Muhajirs,” or immigrants, formed a

crucial part of Mohammed's initial following.<sup>5</sup> Today, insurgents invoke the term *mujahedeen* to recruit, to try to shame Afghans who might otherwise resist them into silence, and to internally maintain cohesiveness. "Repel foreign invaders and you, too, will become a mujahedeen" is a powerful and effective abstraction because it taps into a long and proud Afghan history of repelling that has gradually become mythologized: "We kicked out Alexander the Great. We kicked out the Soviets. And more foreign invaders in between. To be a good and honorable Afghan, you must now help us repel these new foreign invaders. Send us your young men; if they die, they will be heroes in death." The degree to which people are influenced by abstract ideas such as this can make the difference between merely *knowing* about a cause and *supporting* it. One of the central reasons we are still in Afghanistan over a decade after 9/11, I contest, is that we've grossly underestimated the grip of such abstraction on the average Afghan imagination.

*Imagination.* Above all else, studying literature encourages its development, the chief benefit of which is that it in turn nurtures empathy: the ability to see, *to imagine*, the world through someone else's eyes. Reading literature is foremost an imaginative enterprise—reading literally creates images in the mind's eye—and those who study it develop an elastic imagination, an ability not only to probe a little deeper to see what makes humans similar, and different, across time and space, but also to react to the ambush of strangeness that is launched when we confront a foreign culture. I cannot overstate how seeing, or trying to see, through the eyes of another culture, gender, sex, social class, economic condition, ethnicity, skin color, or nationality is not merely some leftist utopian quest. In war, it has concrete tactical advantages. It allowed me to tailor propaganda. It improved how we countered it. It encouraged innovative approaches to problem-

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<sup>5</sup> Lane, Edward William. *Arabic-English Lexicon*. 1863-93. New York: Ungar, 1956. Print.

solving. Above all else, it gave my commander an enhanced ability to do something that all commanders need to do: *anticipate*.

In summary, the realm of literary study taught me to imagine, forecast, and be prepared to negotiate difference. Such negotiation lies at the core of building bridges with the Afghan public. It also improves the understanding of motivations, whether those of insurgents, of those who knowingly, unwillingly, or unwittingly support them, of friendly Afghan security forces, and even of coalition troops themselves, who were, after all, serving in Afghanistan in many instances not merely because they were ordered to. In a COIN environment, understanding—and influencing if necessary—how our own team views the conflict and the actual, real people involved in it can determine success or failure.

#### 4. *Words Into Deeds*

Demonstrating the practical value of my grounding in literary and cultural studies is more important than the words I've used to describe it so far. Three specific influence activities I designed in Kandahar underscore the practical merits of the intellectual skills that training in the discipline develops. I am not out on a recruiting campaign here, and there are other ways to access these skills than by getting a PhD in English Lit. Where they are not being made available, they need to be made so, now. Preparing intelligently for future asymmetric conflicts—the kinds of conflicts we will continue to face in the twenty-first century—demands that leaders give their soldiers the right tools to do the job.

#### *Pashto Proverb Booklet*

The most “literary” piece of brainstorming I had in Afghanistan was a project I developed with my cultural advisors called the Pashto Proverbs Booklet. Although only about ten pages long, it included dozens of proverbs that most Afghans would easily recognize. The value of the booklet lay not so much in what the proverbs said but in their utility as a cultural icebreaker. Afghans would consider our attempt to learn and speak their language, and recognize their



Figure 1 – Pashto Proverbs Booklet

Pashto Proverb	Literal Translation and Implied Message	Phonetic Pronunciation	Occasion for Use
دکبر کاسه نسکور ده.	<i>The bowl of pride always ends upside down</i> - If someone is too proud or arrogant, they will become nobody because no one is God, no one is perfect. Today's rich man may be tomorrow's poorest man.	Dah kEEbah kAHsa naskOOrah dah	Used to warn someone that he will end up with problems if he continues being arrogant.
خپله ژبه هم کلاده هم بلا.	<i>Your own tongue can bring you a castle or a monster</i> - What you say and how it's said affect your fate, future.	KhphALa zhABha humm balAda humm khAlada	If questioning someone to encourage them to tell the truth. Also, to show empathy for those who have been threatened by INS (i.e. the INS tongue is "monstrous").
خپل عمل د لارې مل .	<i>Your future is determined by your actions</i> - You are accountable for all of your actions, good or bad, and you will answer in the future for them.	Khah-phAL- ahmAl dah LAHri mahl	Multiple possibilities: use your imagination.
مور د وړي له حاله څه خبردی .	<i>A fed person knows nothing about the situation of the hungry</i> - some people who are well fed (i.e. wealthy) care little about the poor and needy.	Morh dhawAjay pahal sah- khabAR day	To evoke charity and cooperation and to remind those with power of the social responsibility they have to their villages for security and prosperity. To gain a second-order effect, stress that you recognize that we come from a land that has much, and we in fact left that land to come here to help bring peace and prosperity to Afghans. Why? Because we are proud to help.
کور بار تر منزله نه رسیږي.	<i>A tilted load will never reach its destination</i> - 1. dishonesty is eventually uncovered, and when you are caught, you can never be trusted again. 2. something off-balance will tip over and never reach its destination (i.e. tilted saddlebags falling off a horse)	Kuzh bahr tahr- manzALa na- rrha-SEE jhee	Often used in this context: a person you suspect of being dishonest says something. You warn him about the importance of being honest. He sticks to his story but is later caught in his lie, revealing his dishonesty. Saying this is like saying "I told you so."

ANTI-CORRUPTION PROVERBS

traditions, as a gesture of respect, a move on our part to say that we recognized and understood that we were outsiders in their homeland. We hoped that Afghans would reciprocate with their own offerings of respect and understanding, in the process taking a small step forward on the fragile bridge of trust.

The booklet broke the proverbs down by category. As you can see from Figure 1, these particular proverbs are from a category on anti-corruption. Anti-corruption is a sore spot with many Afghans, some of whom even see coalition efforts over the past decade as merely the propping up of a political regime in Kabul that is corrupt, inefficient, and illegitimate. Sharing kernels of wisdom such as these proverbs contain, even in badly spoken Pashto, struck me as a useful way to broach a sensitive subject like anti-corruption with the local population. Other categories in the booklet contained proverbs thematically focusing on anti-narcotics, ANA and ANP roles and capabilities, governance, accountability, the insurgent use of children as IED emplacements and early warning systems, education, sanitation, and health. We printed a few thousand of these booklets and disseminated them among the entire Task Force.

I knew full well that some would get tossed in the trash as irrelevant, that they might be mocked by subordinate units who saw anything coming out of the Task Force Headquarters as disconnected from “ground truth,” and that others might even get torn to shreds by soldiers bearing (often legitimate) individual grievances against Afghans. Some, we hoped, would get used by those troops willing, and not ordered—you can’t order someone to be genuine—to take the small risk of setting their egos aside to risk extending an open palm in a foreign tongue. On the whole, we weren’t disappointed.

### *Afghan Holiday Strategy*

Given the distinctive fusion of Pashtunwali, Islamic history, and attempted military conquest by outsiders that defines Kandahar, the first thing that struck me upon arriving was that nobody had taken the time to extensively assess and

inform our own forces about how Kandaharis celebrate and commemorate their traditions. Coalition forces had been in the country long enough to know that the tempo of operations slows down annually during Ramadan, and I myself had maybe 30 minutes of pre-deployment training that was devoted to understanding the general significance of Ramadan to Muslims. But that was about it. To me, and certainly to my Afghan cultural advisors, who I didn't actually meet until I was on the ground in Afghanistan, this represented a fundamental ignorance of the value of belief systems to Afghans, and especially of the power of symbolism, metaphor, and rhetoric that underlies them.

Figure 2 – Sample Page from Afghan Holiday Strategy Calendar

## Afghan Holiday Strategy – Shaping NATO Minds

Gregorian	Lunar	Type	Name	Description	Influence Activity
December 18, 2009	1 Muharram	Islam	First of Muharram	Islamic New Year celebrating Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina (16 Jul 622 AD)	Cultural Awareness Directive
December 27, 2009	10 Muharram	Islam	Ashura	Martyrdom of Muhammad's grandson Imam Hussain - Shia/Sunni split	Cultural Awareness Directive
February 14, 2010		State	Liberation Day	Commemorates the mujahedeen struggle against the Red Army & exit of the Soviet Union	Cultural Awareness Directive: INS will try to exploit "mujahedeen" label – counter by promoting ANA as "qahraman" (heroes)
March 21, 2010		Persian	Nawruz	Persian New Year	FRAG O

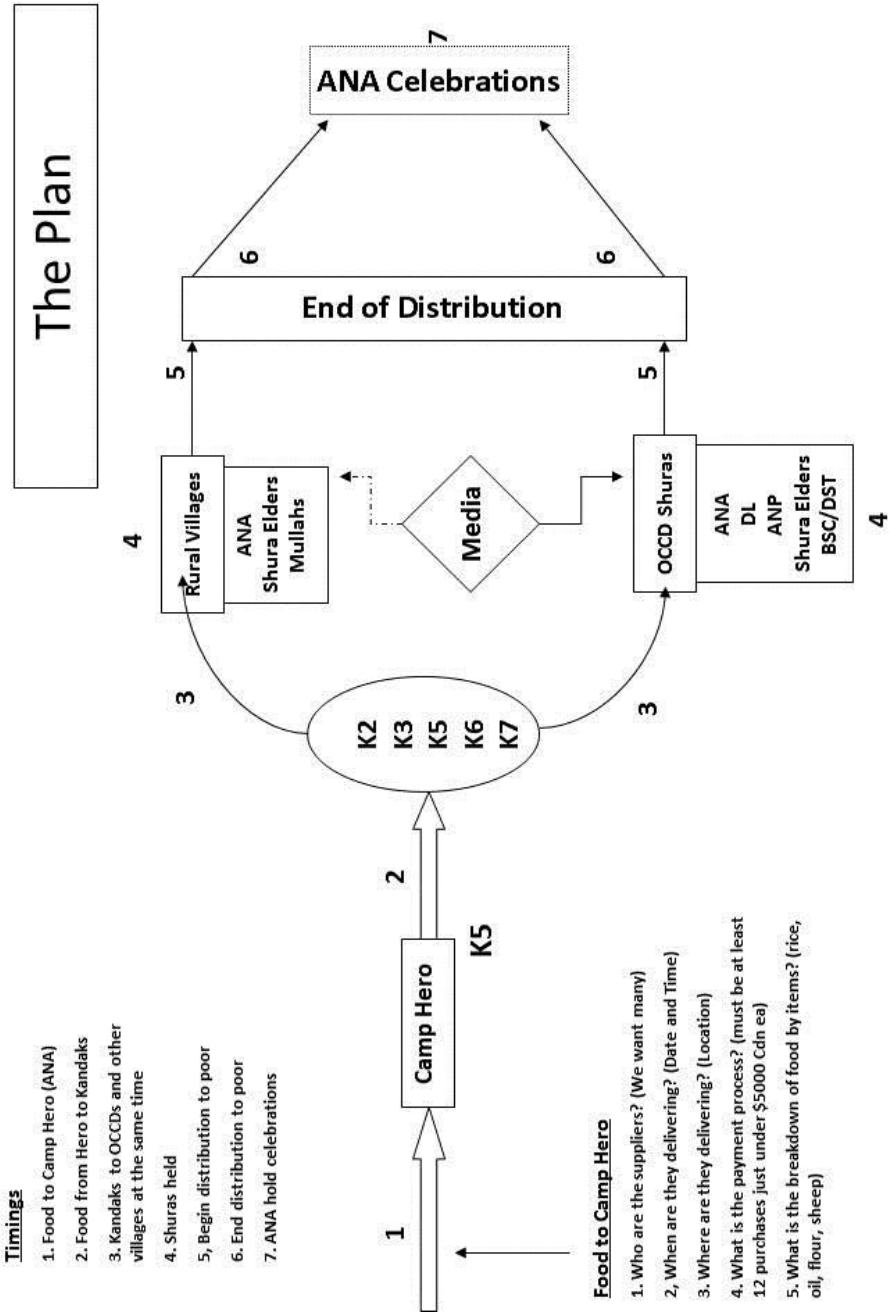
To remedy this cultural black hole, I tasked my staff to sit down with our cultural advisors and identify every holiday—Islamic or secular, modern or traditional, big or small—in the Afghan calendar. From here, we then prepared

and released, well in advance, extensive directives to all members of the Task Force. These directives informed them of a holiday's historical significance, and they gave specific directions on the anticipated movements of people (i.e. to shrines or monuments), potential security threats (i.e. insurgents target public gatherings for a mass propaganda effect), and the actions that we expected the Task Force to take, if any. Afghans are a proud people. They value custom and decorum—and especially public expressions of it. So, depending on the importance of the holiday to Afghans, we would arrange for our senior leaders to release public messages of congratulations and meet with, host dinners for, and even provide gifts to their Afghan military, political, and civil allies.

For the Persian New Year, *Nawruz*, we developed a plan to have the ANSF deliver humanitarian aid to the poorest of the poor. It was part of my strategy to get the ANSF thinking about how to coordinate with political leaders, incorporate media coverage into their actions, and create an atmosphere of trust with their own people. Afghans have had notoriously bad experiences with the ANSF, particularly the police, and this was a chance to make good. In fact, the ANSF were actually my primary target audience. Since I knew that the Afghan public would surmise that NATO was behind the operation (Afghans know that their own government has neither the funding nor the organizational will to pull something like this off independently), two second-order effects I hoped for were, first, to have Afghans see coalition forces as respecting one of their most cherished traditions, and second, to see us and their own security forces offering them a tangible glimpse of normalcy in the face of thirty years of conflict.

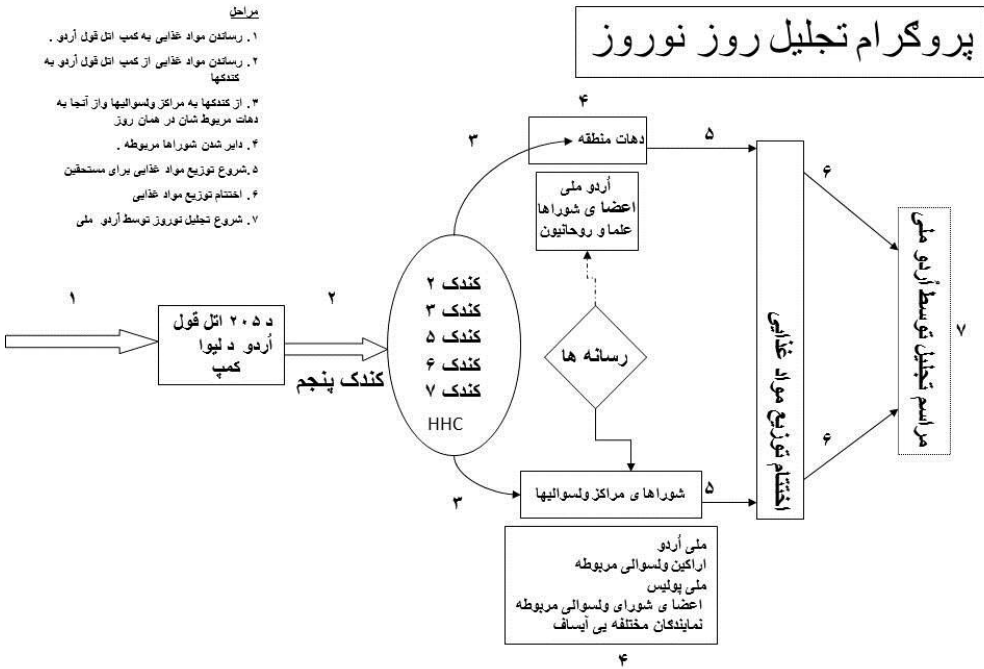
OPERATION NAWRUZ, the first ever influence-led operation in Kandahar, was tremendously successful. At the end of the two-day operation, the ANSF had provided enough food for 15,000 people for a month, had worked with local political and religious leaders, and had gained positive media coverage as far away as Kabul. As for whether we achieved the second-order effects, I have no clue. One of the central problems in performing influence activities in a place

Figure 3 - Operation *NAWRUZ*



like Afghanistan is that it is almost impossible to tell whether what you have done will have effected permanent change in someone’s mind. Minds are so ephemeral, nuanced, and influenced by other variables that they are impossible to quantify. So goes the nature of counterinsurgency.

Figure 4 - OPERATION *NAWRUZ* (Translated into Pashto for the ANSF)



*Media Operations*

When I arrived in Kandahar in November 2009, I inherited a media operations program that had been in place since about 2007, when Canadian forces started building up in the province. It was being run by PSYOPS personnel, and they employed conventional means to deliver fairly conventional messages. Through a series of contracts with local radio stations in Kandahar City, they ran generic “White” advertisements (“White” means completely truthful—Canadian COIN doctrine prohibits performing Black or Grey PSYOPS on civilians) designed to

promote the Afghan National Army (ANA) as the “proud warriors” or “true defenders” of Afghanistan, support Afghan National Police (ANP) recruiting efforts and, most often, simply relay messages of public interest. Such messages might include the location and timing of an upcoming mobile medical or veterinary clinic, the opening of a government office, advice on sound sanitation practices, how to report a discovered IED or suspicious person, or the planning and completion of reconstruction and development projects being done jointly by coalition and Afghan engineers. All of these messages were created in the name of sharing useful information, protecting the public, and demonstrating our concern for their well-being. Selling ourselves was never our main effort because we knew that actions on the ground, and not words, mattered more in that respect.

As readers having served in Iraq or Afghanistan will know, however, this is all well and fine until we consider the most important target audience of all: rural people living well beyond the airwaves of a major center. They are most strongly subjected to insurgent propaganda and recruiting and more likely than urbanites to support the insurgency. American and British PSYOPS teams have a good history of responding to media coverage gaps like this by setting up “Radio-in-a-Box” (RIAB) local radio stations in rural areas (we Canucks had never done it before, to my knowledge, certainly not in Kandahar). Staffed and run by a combination of coalition forces and coalition-friendly locals, RIABs have the ability to shape the nature of the messages that Afghans are receiving. This is important not only for countering insurgent propaganda, but also for just airing information of interest to rural audiences. The obvious disadvantage is that those audiences immediately know that “we” —foreign military forces—are running the radio stations, so they treat what they hear with varying degrees of cynicism and distrust.

My background proved useful in offsetting this distrust. For our RIAB in Panjway’I District I, the birthplace of the Taliban and one of the toughest places

in the country to discern, let alone change, what is going on in Afghan minds, we needed some inventive programming. We started by broadcasting only traditional Pashto music. Panjway’I is ultra-conservative, and people do not want to hear Bollywood, or as one caller told the DJ, “that demon Pink.” We also set up a “contest hotline” (just a cell phone, of course) where listeners could phone in, answer a simple question, and win free cell phone minutes. We offered public service announcements, like those that would be heard in the city, but we tailored them to meet rural agrarian interests: the scheduled deliveries of wheat seed; the start of a project to clear culverts that would pay young Afghan men; or advance warnings that our engineers were about to blow up discovered IED caches, for instance. We also used it as a venue for the only face of the official Afghan government present in the district on a regular basis, the District Leader, to occasionally address residents.

The station slowly gained traction with listeners. It was good, but it occurred to me that it needed an even more intense local flavor to encourage listenership. Part of my academic interest in oral-dominant cultures reminded me that tribal peoples simply love a good story. Anyone who has been to Iraq or Afghanistan, where indigenous populations still exist in relatively traditional modes of living, will likely have first-hand experience in this cultural uniqueness. Afghans are an oral people. They have an estimated 25% literacy rate. They can sit around and talk, or listen, for hours on end, and in ways that would drive most Westerners mad. I have first-hand experience with this in the classroom, where I teach First Nations’ literature and culture. Storytelling is circular, not linear. It is usually not plot or character-driven but richly descriptive. It often has its “key theme” buried deeply underneath layers of narrative, demanding multiple reads to get “the point”—if in fact there is one. It can drive students who expect a linear, “logical” narrative model a little bonkers; anyone having been invited to sit in on an Afghan shura will have felt something similar.



One way of tapping into this Afghan love of story, it seemed to me, would be to actually have them tell each other their own stories: on the air. The idea was risky, because it would involve sending an outsider, our DJ, out to interview and tape locals, who are suspicious of all outsiders. He was willing to take the risk. To get the idea off the ground, my cultural advisors—who were never out of arm’s reach during my entire tour—and I created an interview matrix, which we updated weekly. It included some longer term projects designed to educate the people of Panjway’I as well, to get them thinking about the bigger world around them (in hindsight, a woefully optimistic aspiration):

Figure 5 - RIAB Programming Framework

<p>Examples of Routine Interview Topics</p>	<p>Special Projects: Socio-Cultural Specials (30-90 min specials on one of the following subjects; will bring in experts where required)</p>
<p><u>Entertainment</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- interview listeners to talk about radio programming</li> <li>- interview listeners to talk about games people play (kites, marbles, cards)</li> <li>- get them to talk about the role of poetry &amp; storytelling in Panjway’I</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role of Public Memory</li> <li>- Global Islam</li> <li>- Tribal History in Canada and the USA</li> </ul>
<p><u>Business and Industry</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- interview business owners</li> <li>- get one to explain the process for licensing</li> <li>- get one to explain trade routes &amp; nearby markets</li> <li>- allow people to express concerns about transportation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Afghan Life “Then and Now” (Under the Soviets &amp; Taliban vs. life today) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Afghan Cultural Diversity</li> <li>- Rural vs. Urban Living</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<p><u>Education</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- interview teacher</li> <li>- describe school system, university and tech college</li> <li>- interview a mullah about role of informal education</li> <li>- interview leaders to get them to discuss importance of education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Food Culture</li> <li>- The Role of Clothing and Adornment</li> <li>- The Meaning of Music</li> <li>- Home Remedies</li> </ul>
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Because of rural Afghanistan’s strong family, tribal, and clan bonds, it is not uncommon for people from one village to spend most of their lives never coming into contact with those from a village down the road. Interviews like these allowed us to capture local stories which, in the very act of public sharing and airing, we hoped would engender a broader sense of community and belonging. Afghans were looking for propaganda; instead, we gave them a venue to talk to each other, a chance to “virtually” meet their neighbors and, perhaps for the first time, begin *imagining* themselves as part of something bigger. As with so many of the influence projects we started in Kandahar, I was gone long before having had a chance to see how successful the entire undertaking turned out to be. If the death threats the DJ received from insurgents as I was preparing to leave Kandahar were any indication, then we must have been doing something right. War is absurd.

5. *Conclusion?*

As U.S. and NATO forces stand poised to begin a massive withdrawal of combat troops, the long debate has already begun over how best to characterize the last eleven years. Have the sacrifices been worth it? Is Afghanistan another Vietnam? Did we achieve any meaningful success at all? I’ll leave these questions for political pundits, military historians, and online bloggers to have a field day with. For me, the questions that linger, even today, are more direct: Did

I succeed in encouraging our forces to take strides to better understand the Afghan people? Did I successfully influence at least some Afghans to take up their own cause? Did I convince even one insurgent to lay down his arms and peacefully rejoin his community? How out of touch was I with “ground truth” in devising some of my projects? Was what *I* tried worth it?

When I imagine Afghanistan, looking into my own mind’s eye to focus on my deployment, I can say with confidence that yes, at least for a while, some people’s lives were better as a result of my being there. I like to think that I am not alone, that there are many others out there who feel that they made small differences in the lives of some, for a while, and often by using their own specialized skills and experiences. Their stories and histories are fully beginning to flow now. I, for one, anticipate the plunge into what promises to be a deep river and my hope is that this particular stream about non-kinetic influence might feed in meaningful ways into that river. There is a public consciousness in North America still struggling to come to terms with what this conflict has meant, and part of helping the public may be to remind them that, like a literary text, Afghanistan “means” differently for every individual soldier who has experienced it. Like them, many of us have “read” this war, sometimes with pride, occasionally with horror, and often with no small degree of ambivalence.

As of yet, Afghanistan is a tale without a climax. Could it also be one without a conclusion?

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