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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

MILITARY STRATEGY FOR DEMOCRATS:

THE KEY ISSUE IN AFGHANISTAN ISN'T THE NUMBER OF TROOPS WE SEND, IT'S THE MISSION THAT THEY'RE GIVEN — AND THAT'S WHY THE MILITARY DOCTRINE AND STRATEGY OF "COUNTERINSURGENCY" IS TOTALLY INADEQUATE AS A GUIDE.

BY JAMES VEGA

TDS STRATEGY MEMO – MILITARY STRATEGY FOR DEMOCRATS: THE KEY ISSUE IN AFGHANISTAN ISN'T THE NUMBER OF TROOPS WE SEND, IT'S THE MISSION THAT THEY'RE GIVEN — AND THAT'S WHY THE MILITARY DOCTRINE AND STRATEGY OF "COUNTERINSURGENCY" IS TOTALLY INADEQUATE AS A GUIDE.

By James Vega

The real decision America must face in regard to Afghanistan is not the precise number of troops that should be sent but rather the mission they are given to perform.

Last January, when Obama took office, there was a broad national consensus on this subject. On the one hand, there was universal agreement that US forces should prevent Al Qaeda from ever again using Afghanistan as a base for training camps or other terrorist facilities. Quite the contrary, there was wide approval of the goal of completely dismantling and destroying Al Qaeda as an organization.

Although it was not always explicitly stated, it was quite obvious that this would require preventing the Taliban from taking control of (1) the capital city of Kabul and several other major urban areas and (2) a number of key infrastructure installations like major airports, electric power stations and national highways. The commitment to destroy Al Qaeda also clearly implied the need to establish and maintain a certain number of observation posts, forward operating bases and other "in country" forces adequate to provide intelligence about terrorist activity in various regions of the country. Most Americans were entirely in agreement with this approach.

On the other hand, there was absolutely no support for the ambitious "nation building" and cultural reprogramming of the kind the Bush-Cheney administration tried in Iraq — a vast investment of soldiers, funds and resources aimed at transforming Iraq into a pro-American, free market utopia. Most Americans were not willing to sacrifice more American lives or resources in this ideological neo-conservative crusade.

Public opinion on these issues has not changed greatly since January and behind all the complex maneuvering of the last several weeks the view described above still appears to be Obama's view as well. There are difficult practical decisions about the proper number of troops that are needed to execute this strategy but the issue has become additionally and deeply confused in recent weeks because the influential military doctrine called "counterinsurgency" suggests a fundamentally different mission and strategy from the one described above. The current version of this doctrine is embodied in *FM-3-24 – the US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*.¹

The term "Counterinsurgency" — often abbreviated as COIN — has had phenomenally good press in recent years. On the one hand, it is frequently credited as being the strategy behind the success of the surge in Iraq. Yet, at the same time, it is also described in a way that makes it sound rather appealing to liberals. The most common one-sentence description of the doctrine is that it is focused on "*protecting the local population rather than killing the maximum number of enemies*" which makes it sound relatively cautious and even rather humane. Because it is usually presented in this appealing way, the approach has received remarkably little critical scrutiny.

(In fact, the general lack of clarity about what the doctrine actually entails was the major source of the confusion that emerged during the last few weeks. Last March, in the six-page *“White Paper of the Interagency Policy Group”*² that defined US policy toward the Af-Pac region, there was actually only a single paragraph specifically devoted to the role of counterinsurgency in protecting the Afghan population. It read as follows: *“Our counter-insurgency strategy must integrate population security with building effective local governance and economic development. We will establish the security needed to provide space and time for stabilization and reconstruction activities.”*

To people unfamiliar with FM-3-24 these words sounded comfortably vague and relatively benign. But based on standard formulas for estimating the appropriate size of forces in COIN operations a literal interpretation of the paragraph above could be argued to require the deployment of as many as 600,000 troops to Afghanistan. The COIN specialists in the Interagency Policy Group all understood this potential interpretation of the paragraph when it was included in the draft and now point to these two sentences as having represented a binding presidential commitment to a vast expansion of the US forces and mission. As a recent Washington Post article has outlined, however, a number of the non-COIN participants in the drafting of the White Paper absolutely did not intend these few words to represent a binding, open-ended commitment on Obama’s part for a massive increase in US forces)

More important than this specific confusion, however, is the fact that counterinsurgency doctrine has two fundamental weaknesses.

I. Counterinsurgency doctrine defines implausibly ambitious objectives.

*FM-3-24 defines counterinsurgency operations as nothing less than “armed social work”*³ and bluntly asserts that such campaigns cannot win unless they succeed in protecting the civilian population and rebuilding the economy. The manual specifically lists four major objectives (1) Security from intimidation, coercion, violence and crime; (2) Provision of basic economic needs, (3) Provision of essential services such as water, electricity, sanitation and medical care; (4) Sustainment of key social and cultural institutions.

Just within the category of “essential services”, the detailed list of the objectives needed for success is startling:

- criminals detained
- timely response to property fires
- water treatments plants functioning
- electrical plants open
- power lines intact
- all schools open, staffed, supplied
- roadways and bridges open
- hospitals and clinics open and staffed

- trash collected regularly
- sewage system operating

There are similarly detailed lists for security, governance and economic development. The manual energetically argues that nothing less than extensive “armed social work” of this kind can defeat an insurgency. As it dramatically states: *“The decisive battle is for the people’s minds... lasting victory comes from a vibrant economy, political participation and restored hope”*.

The extraordinarily expansive role envisioned for us troops by FM-3-24 is underlined by the rather startling fact is that this role is indistinguishable from that which British military personnel played in India and many other British colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries. As the list above demonstrates, the soldiers in a COIN campaign are not just “helping” the civilian population or passively protecting them. They are directly in charge of managing the entire physical, social and economic infrastructure of the area and region in which they are deployed.

II. In Counterinsurgency doctrine the only recognized objective of a campaign is to completely crush the insurgents — the doctrine has no conceptual framework for analyzing objectives like truces, treaties, cease-fires or negotiated settlements.

FM-3-24 frequently tends to suggest the mental image of a basically peaceful village or urban area beset by a small but disciplined cadre of subversives infiltrating from outside. One of the most prominent charts in the book, for example, asserts the following: *“In any situation, whatever the cause, there will be (1) An active minority for the cause (2) A neutral or passive majority and (3) An active minority against the cause.”*

The manual offers five basic examples of the major categories of insurgency (1) Lenin and the Bolsheviks, (2) Che Guevara and rural guerilla bands, (3) the People’s War of Mao Tse Tung and Ho Chi Minh, (4) the IRA and (5) religious or ethnic guerilla movements. This typology very strongly reinforces the image of “*insurgents*” as a small subversive minority infiltrating a passive population. The image is powerfully reinforced by a dramatic table that lists the specific tactics these “*insurgents*” employ:

“Ambushes, Assassination, Arson, Bombing and High Explosives, Chemical, Biological, Radiological or Nuclear weapons, Demonstrations, Denial and Deception, Hijacking and Skyjacking, Hoaxes, Hostage Taking, Indirect fire, Infiltration and Subversion, Kidnapping, Propaganda, Raids or Attacks on Facilities, Sabotage, Seizures.”

This quite vividly underlines the image of insurgents as a fringe group of violent subversives who victimize innocent people. With only one or two exceptions, in fact, the list above makes the conceptual category “*insurgents*” indistinguishable from that of “*terrorists*”.

What follows from this is a basic vision of “insurgents” as a small and irremediably evil group who must always be crushed rather than negotiated with.

This results in a fundamental intellectual weakness in current counterinsurgency theory — the doctrine has absolutely no concept of civil war. This is quite literally true. In the glossary of military terms in FM-3-24 the term “civil war” simply does not appear. The local government (no matter how weak, corrupt or venal) is always defined as the “Host Nation” that must prevail.

“Insurgents”, on the other hand, are always defined as subversives who must be crushed. The result is that situations that have all the characteristics that most Americans would define as a civil war are described instead using terms that are far more appropriate for describing infiltration by small subversive minority.

The profound conceptual problem this creates for counterinsurgency theory is dramatically illustrated by the case of Iraq. On the one hand, General Petraeus’ “counterinsurgency” strategy is regularly credited with the success of the surge, but, in fact, FM-3-24 has absolutely no language or conceptual framework with which to analyze the role of the cease-fires that were arranged between the US and the Sunni Awakening Councils and the Sadrists. Yet these deals were central to the temporary reduction of violence that is considered the major accomplishment of the “surge”. The common sense description of what Petraeus did in those negotiations was to arrange two truces that temporarily calmed a bitter inter-ethnic civil war. But Petraeus’ objectives and strategy in those negotiations cannot even be coherently expressed — much less systematically analyzed — within the conceptual framework of current counterinsurgency theory which reduces all conflicts to clashes between a “host government” which must be defended and “insurgents” who must be crushed.

These two basic weaknesses of counterinsurgency theory — the doctrines’ wildly ambitious social objectives and its myopically narrow conception of “victory” — are directly reflected in *General Stanley McChrystal’s August “Commander’s Assessment”*⁴ of the situation in Afghanistan. The assessment raises two critical issues.

I. McChrystal’s strategic approach will ultimately require huge numbers of soldiers and resources — far more than are now being discussed.

The Commander’s Assessment defines dramatically ambitious goals for a counterinsurgency campaign: The campaign must:

“...earn the support of the Afghan people and provide them with a secure environment.”

...focus on operations that bring stability while shielding [the civilian population] from insurgent violence corruption and coercion.

...protecting the people means shielding them from all threats....

...protecting the population is more than preventing insurgent violence and intimidation. It also means that [coalition forces] can no longer ignore or tacitly accept abuse of power, corruption or marginalization.”

This is a completely different objective than the goal of neutralizing Al Qaeda and will demand resources far beyond anything that has been publically proposed. John Nagl — one of the three authors of FM-3-24 — has repeatedly warned that actually doing the “armed social work” envisioned in FM-3-24 will require far more troops than anyone is currently discussing. This is how *Michael Crowley summarized Nagl’s view in the January, 2009 New Republic*.⁵

Nagl’s rule of thumb, the one found in the counterinsurgency manual, calls for at least a 1-to-50 ratio of security forces to civilians in contested areas. Applied to Afghanistan, which has both a bigger population (32 million) and a larger land mass (647,500 square

miles) than Iraq, that gets you to some large numbers fast. Right now, the United States and its allies have some 65,000 troops in Afghanistan, as compared to about 140,000 in Iraq. By Nagl's ratio, Afghanistan's population calls for more than 600,000 security forces. Even adjusting for the relative stability of large swaths of the country, the ideal number could still total around 300,000--more than a quadrupling of current troop levels.

Moreover, from a purely military point of view, if we are eventually going to end up sending 300,000 troops, it is vastly preferable to "bite the bullet" sending the bulk rapidly to dramatically alter the tactical situation rather than in small dribbles over a period of several years.

Nagl also notes that in the longer term, maintaining such large numbers of soldiers in Afghanistan will create nearly irresistible pressure to reinstate the draft and will require a massive increase in the military budget — one that will eventually necessitate new taxes.

For Nagl and many other conservatives, these are sacrifices that all Americans should be gladly willing to make. They point to the example of the stalwart working class and middle class British families who sent generation after generation of their sons to fight in India, Asia, Africa and the Middle East during the era of the British Empire. Most ordinary British citizens at that time fully accepted the need for large garrisons of British troops doing "armed social work" in British colonies around the globe on an essentially permanent basis. By the 1920s many British families had proudly sent three or four successive generations of their young men to fight "For the Empire" as their noble patriotic duty.

It is dubious, however, that a majority of Americans share this perspective and are willing to make the same kind of commitment today. The current arguments over sending 40,000 or 50,000 more troops are therefore really just preliminary skirmishes in a much larger battle to convince the American people to support a full-scale, 300,000 soldier counterinsurgency campaign that may last for decades.

II. McChrystal's approach recognizes the profound lack of support that exists for the current Afghan government and the strength of the Taliban, but it cannot conceptualize the struggle as, in certain key respects, a civil war. As a result, in his strategy US forces will not play any direct, productive role in facilitating negotiated settlements.

General McChrystal's assessment very clearly describes the strength of the Taliban:

In many places, a Taliban "shadow government" actively seeks to control the population and displace the national government and traditional power structures. Insurgent military operations attract more attention than this silent war but are only a supporting effort.

The QST [one of the major Taliban groups] appoint shadow governors for most provinces, review their performance, and replace them periodically. They established a body to receive complaints against their own "officials" and to act on them. They install "shari'a" courts to deliver swift and enforced justice in contested and controlled areas. They levy taxes and conscript fighters and laborers. They claim to provide security against a corrupt government, criminality and local power brokers... In short, the QST provides major elements of governance... They erode traditional social structures and capitalize on vast unemployment by empowering the young and disenfranchised through cash payments, weapons and prestige.

McChrystal is also extremely clear in exposing the tremendous weakness of the current Karzai government.

The weakness of state institutions, malign actions of power-brokers, widespread corruption and abuse of power by various officials, and [the coalition's] own errors have given Afghans little reason to support their government. These problems have alienated large segments of the population. They do not trust [the Afghan government] to provide their basic needs such as security, justice and basic services.

[There is a] crisis of popular confidence that springs from the weakness of government institutions and the unpunished abuse of power by corrupt officials and power-brokers, a widespread sense of political disenfranchisement...

In order to keep his analysis within the conceptual framework of FM-3-24 and counterinsurgency theory, however, McChrystal does not interpret these two facts as indicating that the conflict in Afghanistan in key respects resembles a civil war rather than an insurgency. Despite his recognition that the Taliban is the effective government in many areas of the country and that the Karzai government lacks popular support, The COIN framework obliges him to consistently characterize the Taliban as troublesome “insurgents” destabilizing the “Host Nation” that the US is pledged to defend.

The only goal he defines for his forces, therefore, is complete victory, and not any negotiated settlement.

...Accomplishing this mission requires defeating the insurgency, which this paper defines as a condition where the insurgency no longer threatens the viability of the state.

Success will be achieved when the government has earned the support of the powerful Afghan people and effectively controls its own territory.

As a result, even though there has been widespread discussion about the possibility of negotiating truces with major elements of the Taliban in Afghanistan — truces similar to those that were negotiated in Iraq — McChrystal dismisses any proactive role for his forces in advancing such negotiations.

In the Afghan conflict, reconciliation may involve government-led high-level political settlements. This is not within the domain of the coalition forces responsibilities but coalition forces must be in a position to support appropriate Afghan reconciliation policies.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the implications of this view — that at the same time that the US military must take a huge and central role in conducting “armed social work” all across Afghanistan, it has absolutely no useful role in encouraging potential negotiated settlements or other cessations of hostilities?

Let's be honest. This flies in the face of both military history and the writings of most major military strategists. Historically — From Caesar to Eisenhower and from Sun Tzu to Basil Liddell-Hart — the specific strategy and tactics that a military commander or strategist employed during war were always supposed to be profoundly shaped by the kind of peace he wanted to achieve. McChrystal's decision to define all negotiations as entirely the province of

non-military actors — a view which follows from the framework of FM-3-24 — results in a very substantial constriction of his own perspective to very narrowly military objectives. It creates the troubling possibility that those narrowly defined objectives may come in conflict with larger strategic goals and attempts to resolve the conflict.

Conclusion: there are two major problems with the doctrine of “counterinsurgency”

1. Counterinsurgency doctrine sets vast goals for the U.S. social control of the local population and economy — goals that require vast commitments of soldiers and money. Britons during the era of the British Empire were willing to make such commitments, but it is dubious that Americans share this view.
2. Counterinsurgency doctrine defines total victory as the only objective and treats negotiated settlements as outside its area of responsibility. It describes even large ethnic or other groups that control and administer large sections of a country with exactly the same terms used to describe a small band of subversive infiltrators.

Let us begin by admitting the somewhat embarrassing fact that the “armed social work” approach that counterinsurgency doctrine champions actually reflects an ethos that is in certain respects almost nostalgically colonial. British colonial administrators in India considered their two major tasks to be, first, the creation of a new pro-British social and economic order for the civilian populations under their control and, second, ordering in the troops to crush any locals who opposed their social engineering. The neo-conservative advocates of modern counterinsurgency doctrine have precisely the same basic philosophy.

But is there an alternative? Counterinsurgency is so widely discussed these days that it often seems as though there are no alternative military doctrines and strategies to consider. But in fact alternatives do exist. During the 1990s the US had substantial experience with various kinds of “peacekeeping” operations — military actions that used limited numbers of troops to achieve limited aims. In the case of the Balkans, for example, peacekeeping operations were employed to prevent the military takeover of key cities, to separate combatants, and to carry out certain humanitarian interventions.

Peacekeeping operations have their own extensive literature of military doctrine and strategy. One basic source is the manual *“United Nations Peacekeeping Operations – Principles and Guidelines.”* General Wesley Clark’s books *Waging Modern War* and *Winning Modern Wars* also provide further information.

In the case of Afghanistan, resolving potential conflicts between these two military doctrines is actually rather straightforward. A classic counterinsurgency strategy based on FM-3-24 is actually entirely appropriate for dealing with Al Qaeda but is not appropriate for the Taliban. In the case of Al Qaeda it is indeed proper to aim at crushing the organization completely and depriving it of any support from the local population. With the Taliban the problem in certain respects more closely resembles a peacekeeping operation — preventing them from seizing major cities, seeking truces, cease fires and negotiated settlements and intervening in humanitarian crises.

There are two groups who will tend to resist the replacement of a purely counterinsurgency approach with a combination of both counterinsurgency and peacekeeping doctrine — the military and the neo-conservatives.

In the case of the military, it is easy to understand and sympathize with the preference they hold for conflicts that present a clearly defined enemy and an unambiguously defined military victory. It is an inherent part of their military training, philosophy and esprit de corps. As a result, they generally tend to prefer counterinsurgency operations to peacekeeping operations. But, realistically, America's objectives and military mission in Afghanistan are not grandiose and imperial as were Great Britain's objectives in India and elsewhere. On the contrary, the U.S.'s most important objectives are limited and defensive — to prevent a Taliban takeover of the country and to continue dismantling and neutralizing Al Qaeda. As a result, while one can understand and sympathize with the military point of view, there are larger strategic considerations that can appropriately be judged to override their preferences in this area.

There should be far less sympathy for the neoconservative point of view — one which is ultimately an attempt to manipulate the US into a long, resource-draining military occupation of Afghanistan by claiming that anything less than full-scale, “armed social work” by several hundred thousand US soldiers is “cowardly”, “weak” and a failure to “support the troops”.

Not only are such claims essentially dishonest but, more important, they have pernicious collateral effects on the men and women in the military.

America's troops are already overstretched, overcommitted and increasingly uncertain about the role they are expected to play in Afghanistan. It is profoundly demoralizing for them to hear politicians and commentators describe a mission that is reasonably defined as “prudent” as being instead tantamount to a cowardly retreat and humiliating surrender.

The truth is that there is nothing weak or inferior about the role our soldiers are playing in Afghanistan today. Throughout military history — from the borders of the Roman Empire to the walls of Constantinople, at the gates of Vienna and on the Hungarian plains soldiers have stood on ramparts and watchtowers to guard their homes and countries against attack by foreign invaders — Goths, Huns, Mongols and Ottoman Turks. Standing guard to defend one's home and country against attack is as heroic and honorable a task as any in military life.

The covert imperial ambitions of the Neoconservatives — ambitions that lead them to disparage anything except the total domination of another country and complete “victory” over any indigenous groups who refuses to submit to U.S. rule — do a profound disservice to America.

Let us say it clearly. A sensible and limited military mission is not the same as a surrender and a second attempt to expend American lives and resources in an arrogant attempt to transform a complex Muslim country into a pro-American utopia is not heroic, manly, brave or strategically wise.

1 <http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24fd.pdf>

2 http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan_pakistan_white_paper_final.pdf

3 http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/_memos/tds_memo_MS_08.pdf

4 http://www.whitehouse.gov/assets/documents/afghanistan_pakistan_white_paper_final.pdf

5 <http://www.tnr.com/article/obama-vs-osama>