

Courtesy of U.S. Army



Afghan worker surveys dam project in Badghis Province that will employ local residents and provide stable water source

War Comes to Bala Morghab

A Tragedy of Policy and Action in Three Acts

BY JOHN BESSLER

I need not here touch upon the well-known and far-reaching results of the holding of Duffer's Drift . . . and the ensuing victory gained by our side. It is now, of course, public knowledge that this was the turning point in the war, though we, the humble instruments, did not know what vital results hung upon our action.

—Lieutenant Backsight Forethought¹

As challenging as conventional war is, how much more so is the ongoing operation in Afghanistan? The need for concurrent stability operations, including counterinsurgency and capacity-building, adds layer upon layer of complexity to warfighting. As if the terrain

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and insurgents are not difficult enough, the policies that generate missions are often questionable and poorly grounded in the realities on the ground. What might seem a grand idea in the Presidential Palace and to Kabul-based planners can rapidly bog down in the realities of coalition warfare and the day-to-day friction associated with surviving and building capacity in a small province at the end of the policy and supply chain. And so, if the reader seeks a glimpse of what the majority of military operations might look like in the next 20 years, this view from Badghis Province proves a worthy example. This small operation, recounted here as a three-act play, may prove to have been one of the potential turning points in the war. The story of Badghis reacquaints the military professional of all the tribulations and friction of coalition warfare at the tactical and operational levels, gap between policy and operations, contradictions of winning hearts and minds, and challenges of day-to-day survival at an outpost of foreign policy. However, if Badghis is a story of friction and chance, it is also a story of military ingenuity and perseverance, as well as the Afghan people's struggle for human security. No doubt there are dozens of places like it in Afghanistan, and, as that experienced by Lieutenant Backsight Forethought in *The Defence of Duffer's Drift*, one from which we can learn.

Setting the Stage

This story takes place in Badghis Province's Bala Morghab district in 2008–2009. Badghis is located in the farthest northwestern region of Afghanistan, and is about as far as one can get from the day-to-day news coverage of the Western press. It is 3 hard days' drive from Kandahar and 4 from Kabul. The province consists of seven districts, one of which is Bala Morghab, which abuts Turkmenistan. Most of the province is

mountainous and comparatively temperate; winters are characterized by heavy snows, averaging 2 meters annually, with much rain and fog. Badghis has the highest concentration of Pashto speakers in the Northwest, transplanted there in the last century by the last Afghan king. The provincial capital of Qala-I-Naw was noted in 2008 for its fairly reliable electricity, some 2 kilometers of asphalt road, teacher's academy, hospital, and airport. There was less violence in Badghis in comparison to many other provinces, but it was far from a quiet place.

Badghis is one of the poorest and most rural of provinces in Afghanistan, and prior to 2006, few Westerners ventured there. From Kabul, it was viewed as a quiet and agrarian sector. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan's provisional government installed provincial governors around the country. Badghis had the misfortune of becoming the home of Governor Gul Mohammad Arefi. Unfortunately for Badghis's inhabitants, Arefi, and to a greater extent his successor Mohammad Ashraf Naseri, served as an aloof and condescending landlord, perceived as attempting to leverage the coalition and the United States for any and all perks he could garner. Naseri was indicted on corruption charges at least twice while in office. Both men were widely viewed as self-serving, disconnected from the province, and even more so from the outlying districts. In particular, Naseri spent far more time in Kabul "on business" than he did in his province. As far as it can be ascertained, in 2 years he never once traveled to Bala Morghab district.

Poor provincial governance aside, Bala Morghab's connections to the provincial and national apparatus have been tenuous for at least one hundred years. The Pashtun majority in Bala Morghab is a recent phenomenon. They live on land that, prior to their transplanting by the last Afghan king, belonged to local Tajiks and

Aimaqs. The Pashtuns have now been entrenched for more than a century, but they retain a latent fear that Tajik authorities will one day reclaim the Morghab River Valley and displace them. The valley's residents still view the Tajik-dominated provincial government with wariness and mistrust. The Tajiks's assimilation into the Communist Party during the Soviet occupation further fuels this mistrust. Any action taken by the provincial government is viewed along these schisms, and obtaining Pashtun "buy-in" to any effort launched by the provincial government is always necessary.²

In the fall of 2006, Spain contributed a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to the provincial capital of Qala-I-Naw as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) expanded mission, with the aim of fostering development and reconstruction throughout the seven districts.³ The Spanish, as every other member of the coalition, operated with national caveats that constrained certain actions and activities. Moreover, the Spanish army's small size dictated that it rotate the PRT on a 4-month basis. The Spanish government mandated that the PRT focus efforts within a 50-kilometer radius of the provincial capital. As one can imagine, the impact and reach of the PRT was minimized, given the province's great size (20,000 square kilometers) and number of inhabitants (500,000). Qala-I-Naw (which has a largely Tajik population) reaped the benefits from Spanish presence with a new hospital, teacher's school, and some asphalted roads. However, the PRT had little impact beyond the capital and less inclination to venture out. The Spanish PRT had no presence whatsoever in the frontier districts such as Bala Morghab during 2007–2008.

In 2007, the Afghanistan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) within the Ministry of Interior (MoI) convened a District Development Assembly consisting of

representatives from across the country. The assembly's purpose was to make government development interventions more visible and responsive to the needs and priorities of communities at district level.⁴ One of the focuses of this effort was the district of Bala Morghab. Representatives from Bala Morghab's 100,000 inhabitants and 133 villages identified poverty, poor economic conditions, and lack of opportunity and jobs as their main problems. The agriculture and livestock sectors suffered from several concurrent years of drought, and what little transportation network existed was destroyed by the Soviet invasion in 1979. Lack of fuel and electricity accelerated ongoing deforestation—even prized pistachio forests were cut down to provide for heat and cooking. Finally, health

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care was lacking. Many villagers in remote areas had to travel several days to find medical support in one of the four inadequate basic health clinics. However, what was most telling in the assessment was the lack of community concerns about security. Insecurity, foreign fighters, and war were not among the complaints. These observations support an earlier 2005 Badghis survey in which only 1 in 214 negative incidents reported in the entire province was categorized as "insecurity."⁵

Up until 2008, there was little Western concern with, or intrusion into, Bala Morghab district, and even less connection between this "Pashtun pocket" and provincial and national Afghan authorities. The Spanish PRT remained committed to its development projects in and around the relative safety of the

provincial capital, and few Westerners—and fewer Afghans—paid any attention to this quiet backwater district. Compared with the more violent South and East, ISAF's Western Region was quiet and, as a result, last in priority for just about everything, from supplies and replacements to medical evacuation helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Such was the scene in 2008, when ISAF brought the war back to Badghis through the police reform program known as Focused District Development (FDD).

ACT I: A Troubling Start

Focused District Development refers to the ISAF police training program for Afghans. The program began in late 2007 and systematically sought to address security sector reform in Afghanistan by focusing on key districts throughout the country.⁶ A primary feature of this program conceived by the Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC–A)—endorsed by ISAF and adopted as policy by the Afghan government—was that the primary responsibility for determining priority districts lay squarely with the Afghan government. A concept paper written by CSTC–A planners in early 2007⁷ described the idea as a whole-of-government approach⁸ to improve quality of life across the board. While civil security was being developed through police reform, training district prosecutors, educating district council members in governance, building infrastructure projects, and developing the economy would be undertaken in concert with each other. In this way, success in one sector (such as civil security) could be reinforced by concomitant success in others.

The police reform portion of FDD begins with a joint Afghan MoI–U.S. police mentor team reviewing the law enforcement needs within a particular district, taking special note of deficiencies in force numbers, quality,

and leadership. Based on this appraisal, an Afghan MoI team then recruits new Afghan National Police (ANP) members from that district, sends them to a regional training center for 8 weeks, and then reinserts them after graduation. The relatively well-trained Afghan National Civil Order Police provides the security and civil control during the 2 months that the local recruits are in school. Following graduation, the trained ANP members return home equipped with new uniforms, weapons, and police vehicles—and hopefully a sense of professional ethics and responsibility.

The district selection process was supposed to be a joint recommendation from the provincial governor and ISAF regional commander, approved at the national level, based on availability of support, potential of creating stability, and a holistic assessment of the probability of success. In 2008–2009, however, the selection process hinged on simply whether a U.S. Police Mentor Team was available, how agitated or peaceful the district appeared, and a subjective assessment of the quality of the district police chief. What was definitely not a factor in deciding which district to select for FDD was the availability of development, governance, and essential service resources for a whole-of-government approach. Unfortunately, the main drivers for implementation soon became civilian political agendas and military expediency. As a consequence, rather than completing a jigsaw puzzle of a whole-of-government approach, the CSTC–A plan appeared more like a single puzzle piece of military effort surrounded by emptiness. But the military is great at implementation and the CSTC–A planners went into overdrive to execute their portion—that which focused purely on the police training/reform process. Largely left out were the Afghan national level

ministerial programs that should have been involved in such an approach.

Bala Morghab was selected to be among the first FDD districts. In spring 2008, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) dispatched an unannounced force to assess road conditions as a prelude to the later police reform process. Antigovernment forces operating along the frontier, to this point unforeseen, attacked this force and bloodied the nose of the ANSF. While hardly a major action, ISAF Regional Command–West (RC–W) immediately requested the postponement of the FDD, deducing correctly that the district was not nearly as quiet as previously thought. However, as in all things military, politics held ultimate sway. Not only had President Hamid Karzai promised Minister of Interior Ahmad Moqbel Zarar that he would execute FDD in Badghis before parliamentary elections in September, but he specifically chose Badghis because of its relative tranquility (it would be “an easy win”), and thereby a manifestation of success and a ploy to garner votes from the “Pashtun Pocket.” Inopportunistly, no one thought to inform the people of Bala Morghab what was happening and to seek their insights and support.

So—appropriate or not, informed or not—FDD in Bala Morghab got under way. Regional ANSF and ISAF forces proceeded with military planning to move into the district beginning in June of 2008. Despite the Kabul-directed policy and subsequent military operation to enable it, ISAF headquarters gave scant consideration toward any sort of media or information campaign nor sought to energize a whole-of-government effort to coincide with the military operation. No evidence exists that anyone gave much thought to the other stability operations lines of effort at all.⁹

Beyond the obvious political agenda of Bala Morghab’s FDD selection was a second, more strategic motivation: the ultimate completion of

the Ring Road. In Badghis Province, the famous Ring Road was a potholed dirt path passable only to four-wheel-drive vehicles, motorcycles, donkeys, and foot traffic. A modern asphalted road would open up the Northwest, allowing the export of produce and textiles, as well as allowing education, goods, and services to flow in.

The district center of Bala Morghab sits in the middle of this future corridor, astride the Morghab River. A bridge dating from the 1950s routes the road directly into the town’s bazaar. Comprised of 8 to 10 sections of steel pipe laid side by side across decaying concrete abutments and topped with sheet metal, the bridge sorely needed replacement. The coalition assessed the bridge at a 14-ton capacity, but even the Afghan police and locals ran vehicles across it one at a time for safety reasons. Part of the ISAF agenda for this FDD round was to use the increased security to bring a new temporary bridge to the town, which would allow the old bridge to be refurbished to Ring Road standards.

It was fundamentally a good idea. Unfortunately, no one had involved Bala Morghab. It turned out that what the elders and villagers really wanted was to have their mosque completed. Started years before with funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), work on the mosque had ceased 2 years previously with increased threats and violence against the workers.¹⁰ An opportunity existed, but no one from Kabul engaged with the elders to see what they wanted and no one consulted with the District Development Committee, MRRD, Spanish PRT, or U.S. Department of State or USAID representatives embedded with the PRT. Come hell or high water, ISAF was bringing a bridge—and little more.

By July 2008, the RC–W staff, Italian observers, mentors, and Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), U.S. Army Embedded

Training Teams (ETTs), and U.S. hired contractors had guided the assigned Afghan National Army (ANA) corps headquarters and one brigade through a cursory planning exercise and rehearsal for the planned movement to Bala Morghab district. However, no one worked the details of the plan to identify, much less mitigate, the whole mélange of friction points: the long, difficult, and nonsecurable route; lack of route-clearing equipment; lack of a coordinated communications network; and many other impediments to success. From a professional military viewpoint, there was an appalling lack of attention to detail. Recognizing this, newly assigned U.S. mentors insisted on a more thorough planning effort, this

properly led and motivated, Afghan soldiers are terrific fighters

time including the one-star Italian headquarters; ANA, ANP, and Border Police leadership; and even attempting to bring ISAF-Kabul into the effort. Ultimately, however, the only energy expended on Bala Morghab was that of the mentors and local Afghan army and police leadership. Consequently, the plan was simple to the extreme: move a brigade of ANA with their U.S., Spanish, and Italian mentors up the single Ring Road route into the Morghab Valley, occupy key terrain in the valley, and conduct FDD.

Meanwhile, the Afghan forces planned and rehearsed. Properly led and motivated, Afghan soldiers are terrific fighters. What the Western Zone Afghans were not so good at was logistical planning. While they could prove themselves surprisingly capable of planning and executing complex brigade operations if properly motivated, their support planning and execution was typically abysmal, and they could not be expected to remain in the field for more than a

few days. Operations not closely supervised by mentors tended to run out of steam because of food, water, and fuel issues after about 36 hours. Unfortunately, due to the isolated nature of Bala Morghab, distance from the Afghan army home garrison (200 kilometers), and length of time to train the new police (8 weeks), the operation required a persistent presence of at least two battalions of ANA in the field for nearly 60 days.

Chatter about enemy activity along the route and in the Morghab Valley increased exponentially as D-Day approached. As the day neared, the Italian brigadier general responsible for ISAF operations in the West consented to commit his Spanish explosive ordnance disposal contingent to protect convoy movements. The Spanish bomb dogs and robots, in theory, would expedite the advance by searching for and clearing anticipated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along the route, particularly in places where mud-walled compounds on each side of the road restricted movement and limited maneuver room. However, the Spanish team only added to the friction. A late-discovered Spanish government caveat required 1 full day of vehicle maintenance for every full day of operating. The entire attack plan nearly fell apart as the PRT mentors frantically searched for a resolution to this dilemma. The 3-day unopposed march would take nearly a week if the Spaniards were integrated into the convoy movement. As it turned out, during the tactical road march phase from the garrison in Herat to Qala-I-Naw, two platoons' worth of Spanish vehicles broke down and had to be recovered, further complicating matters and throwing the fragile timeline even more into disarray.¹¹

On August 8, 2008, the movement into the Morghab Valley started from Qala-I-Naw. The movement remained uncontested until the road made a sharp 180-degree hairpin turn adjacent

to the tactically important village of Akazai. In this turn, constrained by mud walls on one side and steep hills on the other, a fight erupted with exploding IEDs covered by ambushing anti-government forces. From here, the combat spread into the cornfields that run south into the Morghab Valley.

Insurgents contested the final 20 kilometers of the march with IEDs, small arms, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), firing from the cornfields and from behind the mud walls lining the roadway. The column had no choice but to run the gauntlet since the adjacent hills were too steep for vehicles to climb. As ANA forces and their U.S. mentors dismounted to clear the cornfields, often the attackers would drop their weapons several rows behind them, pick up farm tools, and then claim to be just farmers in the field. It was not until well after dark that the column closed into the designated forward operating base, a cotton factory compound. The casualties after the movement amounted to two ANA and one U.S. killed and a dozen ANA and several U.S. wounded.

Throughout the night, sporadic small arms and RPG fires from the surrounding cornfields struck the cotton factory. The compound had walls on only three sides and head-high corn grew alongside, making for a thoroughly sleepless night. Clearing operations over the next several weeks pushed the perimeter back several hundred meters, but the insurgents fiercely resisted it. During these engagements, the ANA and their U.S. mentors did the heavy lifting, while ISAF provided perimeter security and controlled close air support to the extent to which their rules of engagement would allow, but they did not participate in offensive operations.¹²

The overall ISAF strategy at the time was “shape, clear, hold, and build.” Of these, the activity of shaping holds primacy in these types

of operations. *Shaping* requires a manipulation of the environment to achieve effects that allow the clear, hold, and build phases to succeed. In a counterinsurgency environment, shaping includes a molding of attitudes and opinions of locals and key leaders, as well as the more tangible kinetic effects and development projects.¹³ Part of the *shape* for Bala Morghab should have included strategic communications prior to arrival. Military planners assumed (wrongly) that Afghan national- and provincial-level officials had coordinated with district leaders, when in fact there had been no contact whatsoever. As soon as the dust settled, the ANA commander called a meeting with district leadership. No one from the Afghan civil government even offered to participate. The provincial governor had flown to Kabul for another lengthy stay just as the attack was beginning and had left no one in charge. Consequently, it was left to the local U.S. and ISAF commanders to engage with our local “hosts” to discern their concerns and needs. It was the coalition—not the Afghan government—that was now forced to assume the leading political role.

The failure of Kabul planners to create an environment for success became glaringly obvious at the first shura, when the senior villager opened the meeting with “We didn’t know that the Russians were coming back”; so much for efforts aimed at shaping attitudes and expectations before arrival. Thus far, the only effects the locals could ascertain were firefights and fired haystacks, wounded and killed livestock by stray rounds, and tan and green Ford Rangers and sand-colored up-armored Humvees flattening the irrigation ditches and driving over crops.¹⁴ Small wonder there was no flag-waving with the coalition’s arrival.

Further complicating matters, FDD planning required the construction of a headquarters for the district police, police mentor team, and

ANSF, and from which coalition forces could live, plan, and operate. In rural districts, these headquarters normally took shape initially as a combat outpost and later transformed into a new police district headquarters. The ruins of an old cotton factory served this function at the outset. Unfortunately, even this was ill-planned. Initially, U.S. mentors secured a right of entry from Kabul's Interior Ministry—the Afghan equivalent of eminent domain—but within 48 hours of arrival in the valley, ISAF received word that the right of entry had not been properly coordinated within the labyrinthine Afghan ministry system and was invalid. The “fraudulent” seizure of the cotton factory generated at first dozens, then literally hundreds of land claims for compensation by the valley's farmers for crop damage, irrigation rights, and land use. Capitalizing on the opportunity, the locals not once referred to it as a “government land grab”—in every single shura and meeting over the next 10 months, the activities were referred to as a “coalition” or “ISAF” operation, and not an Afghan government operation. The ill-contrived and poorly coordinated efforts in Kabul, which so negatively affected the shape phase added to the burden on ANA and mentors' shoulders as they wrestled with other issues beyond their control.

ACT II: Coalition Friction

The Afghan brigade and their mentors spent August and September 2008 in the Morghab Valley in foxholes. When the brigade headquarters and two of the three battalions pulled out in mid-September, it was certainly not because the “clear” phase was concluded or security had vastly improved, but because more pressing strategic missions needed to be met—voter registration and highway security. For security in the valley, the brigade left two understrength companies of ANA infantry

(about 150 soldiers) in place for the winter of 2008–2009. Along with 24 U.S. partnering ETT troops and about 60 ISAF troops, they confronted a growing challenge—mere survival.

Building a Forward Operating Base (FOB) is never easy, but doing so is far more taxing when in an economy-of-force operation. U.S. forces remained short of everything: building material, barrier and construction material, and power generation equipment. Not only were supplies in short supply, but those which were available were difficult to transport. Everything was made harder by having to rely on the single, unimproved, easily interdicted route. More than 100 kilometers long, the route could not be patrolled or even regularly monitored by air. To expedite resupply, lighter supplies were airdropped or flown in by helicopter, if available. Airdrops from Bagram included everything from HESCO barriers to water and fuel. Troops often grappled 55-gallon fuel drums across the drop zone in 110-degree heat or through shin-deep mud, when the single small Bobcat bucket loader which supported the FOB was not available.

However, many supplies had to be hauled in by truck: generators, portable toilets, tents, plywood, fuel bladders, fuel, and gravel. Local U.S. logisticians tried to support the local economy by contracting local truckers and laborers. Recognizing the road as the Achilles' heel of the operation, the regional insurgent base easily thwarted the coalition in a most nonkinetic fashion—they simply contacted the contractors, drivers, and workers and threatened them and their families. In a few cases, trucks were hijacked or burned and drivers were roughed up, or in two cases killed. Military operations were required to bring any substantial shipments into the area.

The single route proved extraordinarily challenging. Every movement required good weather, robust security forces, and 2 days to

travel from Qala-I-Naw, the last reasonably secure waypoint on the journey. Every trip along the path was a combat operation requiring bounding overwatch, route clearance, and deliberate IED-awareness and counterambush techniques. Tough enough for seasoned U.S. or coalition soldiers, it was much more so for the scarcely trained ANSF forces, who took losses on virtually every single convoy. Those items that were too large to go by air either waited for an assembled combat column to go by ground, or simply did not go at all.

Nonetheless, the new FOB emerged over a period of months through the brute physical efforts and force of will of the soldiers. The 360-degree protective walls gave the coalition some breathing room, but the troops washed their clothes in buckets until February and got their first real shower in December—a full 5 months after operations had commenced.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) side of the FOB improved slightly more rapidly than the U.S. side. Keen on improving the poor living conditions for their troops, RC-W bent over backward to make the Alliance side livable—often at the expense of the U.S. priorities, routinely bumping U.S. priority-1 loads for 20-kilogram wheels of parmesan cheese and weightlifting sets. The prevailing attitude of RC-W leadership at the time was one of “they’re our helos, so we have the final say on what the loads are.” Unfortunately, at RC-W headquarters, there was no central air planning cell to coordinate, vet, or establish priorities among the U.S., Italian, and Spanish needs. National sympathies, unencumbered by guilt, a sense of teamwork, or tactical acumen, unfortunately too often dictated what moved north, and in what priority.

The FDD process also involved providing the newly minted ANP with equipment. This included brand-new Ford Ranger pickup trucks.

In early October 2008, the 13 trucks, with the lettering still bright white on the doors, gave a sense of a new beginning to the Bala Morghab police as they completed their 8 weeks of training. After graduation, the trucks were loaded aboard flatbed trucks as part of a combat column of ANA vehicles, which would escort them into the valley. However, once the column arrived in Qala-I-Naw, the Italian headquarters issued an order forbidding any OMLT members from continuing north. The order was directed at all NATO personnel, citing the worsening security situation and anticipated road closure due to winter weather.¹⁵ Even though this order violated a CSTC-A directive stating that all ANA forces would have mentor presence at all times during operations, the order held. Having no mentors meant no coalition eyes or ears to observe, support, or assist any ANA operations. No coalition oversight preordained no redundant communications, no overwatch or ready reserve of firepower, and no way to ascertain the credibility of ANA radio reports.

Knowing that the Italians’ edict against further support would not curb the ANA’s desire to deliver the vehicles before winter weather, and understanding ANA enthusiasm far outweighed their capabilities, the mentors lobbied in vain to force the RC-W commander to provide NATO ground and air support and to provide coverage to the ANA column. When the NATO mentors pulled out, the ANA escorting the ANP Rangers stalled in Qala-I-Naw. After 4 weeks of resupply, reorganizing, and waiting in the vain hope that RC-W would relent, ANA leadership ordered the column to move. U.S. forebodings materialized on Thanksgiving Day 2008, when the front of the unmentored ANA column came under heavy fire, and the ANA forces totally disintegrated—only 10 kilometers from the FOB. Insurgents disabled the lead

vehicle in a chokepoint, successfully destroyed another several hundred meters behind the lead, and then swarmed the trapped column in between as the ANA fought back, ran off, or were captured or killed.

The Italians, who had at least monitored the ANA radio network from Herat (200 kilometers away), realized the ANA soldiers were in trouble. They scrambled two attack helicopters, which confirmed the worst—the column had

district elders rejected every proposed site along the river as infeasible for the simple reason that the new bridge would empower whichever landowner on whose property it lay

been broken in half and stopped. In the front section, several ANA vehicles were on fire, and ANA bodies were strewn in clumps. Too late to influence the ambush, the Italian attack helicopters conducted a few strafing runs on the confirmed enemy and provided some breathing space for consolidation and reorganization by the ANA. Stragglers from the front of the convoy successfully reached the FOB, and extrication of the column's rear half was achieved. The ANA experienced 17 killed, 20 wounded, and 24 captured. Of the 13 new ANP Ford Rangers, only 2 made it into the FOB—7 were captured by antigovernment forces, and the last 4 were sent back to Qala-I-Naw where they languished until the following spring.

ACT III: A Bridge and Policy to Nowhere

Throughout the summer and into late autumn, RC-W remained under tremendous Afghan political (and NATO) pressure to deliver on their original promise of a bridge, in spite of

the community's insistent preference for completion of the mosque. ISAF had conceived of the gift of a new bridge as a potential boon to the local economy and as a way to guarantee a military-strength bridge across the river. Conceived without regard for local desires and concerns, it naïvely presumed local gratitude.¹⁶ The plan called for ISAF to divert traffic across a temporary bridge to be erected nearby while upgrading the old bridge over a period of 2 years. When completed, the reconstructed old bridge would accommodate heavier commercial and military traffic and support the eventual completion of the Ring Road. The entire drama surrounding this project soon became symbolic of the futility of the half-measures by which ISAF and Kabul had approached the entire Bala Morghab operation.

Just like the failure to properly shape the area of operations, the debate over simply *where* to site the temporary bridge became a subject of intense local debate and drama. The old bridge exited right into the bazaar area, on public property. Since this was public property, no single landowner had primacy over the commercial traffic—all benefited equally. While ISAF and RC-W planners understood the engineering concerns of where a temporary bridge needed to be placed, they completely ignored the important cadastral (land ownership) issues associated with the project. Blind to how this “gift” disrupted the power base in the district, ISAF never considered the consequences of the shift of implied power and status to the landowner on whose property the temporary bridge would go. For the district elders, it was the single most important consideration. Unsurprisingly in hindsight, district elders rejected every proposed site along the river as infeasible for the simple reason that the new bridge would empower whichever landowner on whose property it lay. ISAF

engineers simply wanted to lay a bridge, but in the end, the cadastral issues and local politics proved far more contentious than river speed and depth, bank grade, and soil composition.

The entire bridge project rapidly became a morbid joke among the professionals working for the coalition staffs in RC-W, ANSF, provincial government, and U.S. mentors as discussions dragged on. As there had been no shaping done, no feeling out the elders, no discernment of their real wants and needs, and no promotion of needs and advantages of a bridge over the long term, political hubris and arrogance ruled most of the Kabul government's decisions associated with the bridge's final location. As a result, the hard feelings and unresolved issues—over land tenure, the “right” of ISAF and the government to use land and property illegally acquired, and even the occupation of Bala Morghab—remain today, and ISAF owns the consequences.

Eventually an agreement received acceptance from all parties. Since the bridge was “temporary,” a 2-year arrangement was made to place the new bridge where ISAF engineers believed that it would fit. However, antigovernment forces still owned the elders' sympathies. Without popular support for the ANA and the coalition, antigovernment forces would (and did) own the valley and approach road, and nothing in the way of bridge supplies would come without antigovernment forces exacting a price. But what was to be done? ISAF had committed to building a bridge, and had to get the bridge abutments poured and cured before bad weather killed any chance of completing the bridge before winter. ISAF became expedient rather than strategic in their thinking.

Concerns over ensuring that the abutments would be poured to standard also surfaced. October was well under way and engineers calculated that it would take 20 days for

the concrete to cure in good weather, which ended the first of November. Quality control personnel from the Afghan government, ISAF, or other sources were not available for sustained observation of the contractor. It was commonly believed either that the contractor was connected to the insurgents directly, had paid them off in order to proceed, or that ISAF had brokered a deal with intermediaries in order for him to work unmolested. Regardless, he completed his work about a week ahead of the scheduled bridge delivery. As feared, the abutments proved substandard and in no way were they ready for the floodwaters of spring; at first flood in late March, as predicted, the bridge became unusable as floodwaters threatened its collapse. Back in October, however, when it mattered, ISAF was more concerned about winter weather thwarting their promised bridge delivery date than the risk of a substandard bridge; at that time it was “full steam ahead” with little to no concern for either the bridge's quality or—far more important—the lasting consequences of failure.

One more tragedy beset the ISAF bridge effort. Movement of the steel spans for the bridge required several contracted, all-wheel-drive, heavy-duty flatbed trucks. Bridge pieces were hastily loaded in Kabul as ISAF scrambled to get them overland to Bala Morghab before the autumn rains turned the road into a morass. However, once the Kabul contractors driving the bridge reached the Badghis border, they refused to go any farther. It was well known among the contractors that they were on what was truly the last 100 kilometers of bad road, and while ISAF was willing to pay truckers five times the going rate, they could not get any regular trucking companies to accept. Desperate to get the bridge moved, and with the ever-accommodating Bala Morghab elders acting as intermediaries, ISAF



Afghan National Civil Order Police member turns in weapon for maintenance during marksmanship training

NATO Training Mission—Afghanistan (Julian Carroll)

began negotiating with “local contractors” to move the bridge. A provision came back from the Bala Morghab interlocutors, which was stunning in both its simplicity and its implications: “If ISAF moves the bridge, or if a single ISAF vehicle escorts the bridge, the road will be mined and we will blow up the bridge. However, if ISAF does not escort the bridge convoy, then we will allow it to pass, but only if we bring it in ourselves.”

Caught between their adversary’s demands and their own inability to act or revise an increasingly meaningless political promise, ISAF relinquished. Less than 96 hours later, amid a cloud of announcing dust and hoopla, the bridge convoy arrived, unscathed and ahead of schedule in the Bala Morghab bazaar. ISAF UAVs watched the “successful” convoy across the long frontier road. However, what the UAV could not see were the smiles on the Bala Morghab elders’ faces as they lurched into the bazaar and delivered the bridge, intact and on time, with no “help” from ISAF whatsoever. All the credibility, credit, implied power, and message ISAF so wantonly pursued went to the insurgents that day for pulling the delivery off—and there was not one person in the valley, or in ISAF, who did not know it.

The official opening ceremony for the temporary bridge took place just 4 days after the disastrous Thanksgiving Day ANP convoy attack. Attended by the provincial governor, chief of staff of the Afghan army, ISAF commander, new provincial governor, and every ANSF general officer in the West, the ceremony was a somber and mechanistic affair for all but the insurgents and elders. The shot-up Afghan police trucks parked against the wall of the cotton factory and the political and strategic ramifications of 24 ANA soldiers still held as prisoners were heavy on everyone’s mind. As for the bridge itself, we already know its fate.

The Curtain Call

At every curtain call, actors come back to the stage for special recognition. Yet as in most tragedies in plays and real life, the true value of the curtain call is to consider the roles each played and the greater lessons each of the roles teaches about moving forward in life. The tragedy that was Bala Morghab offers professional lessons regarding how a strategy of shape, clear, hold, and build must be pursued. With some reflection, we can learn lessons that will prepare us for the future.

Half-measures in a Whole-of-Government Context Will Fail. There have been multiple competing layers of complexity, friction, misunderstanding, and stressors associated with the entire episode at Bala Morghab. The misunderstanding and poor implementation of policy at the highest levels, failure to properly shape the environment prior to operations, and failure to execute a comprehensive, whole-of-government plan led to a bifurcated, unsynchronized muddle on the ground. The surprise arrival of the FDD, FOB construction issues, and the entire bridge saga are only symptoms of the greater failures. There was no one in the national or provincial government who knew the district and village leadership—or seemed to be concerned about what they thought. Government agencies did not work together at any level and did not take ownership for that portion of the enterprise that logically fell under their purview. None of the projects was locally requested, desired, or properly coordinated even though all the projects involved local land tenure/land rights and required local support. While it is true that at the end of the day the FOB and bridge were in place and FDD did “happen,” it is also true to state that all three projects were characterized more by ignorance and brute force than whole-of-government efforts. Operations were poorly executed and often incongruent with

each other—there was no way to achieve synergy among them. Quite literally, the whole was less than the sum of the parts.

Shaping Has Primacy. Shape, clear, hold, and build is a sound concept, but the most important critical aspect of this strategy in a counter-insurgency environment is *shaping*. Shaping is much more than simply softening up a target; it is the foundation on which all else builds. A campaign begins with knowing, understanding, and motivating the people who are about to be affected. Shaping starts long before an operation begins to ensure ownership of a plan by the legitimate government and local population affected. It is the shaping that smoothes the path for operations and makes it difficult for the adversary to menace, disrupt, or inhibit progress on the agreed-upon activities and projects.

Unity of Purpose. Patience, compromise, understanding, and negotiating skills are at least as important, and probably more so, to the coalition leader's repertoire as is combat savvy, tactical and operational intuition, and the ability to read the battle. *Unity of purpose* is the term best suited to describe the goal and how a leader must attempt to shape any operation where disparate actors, motivations, national caveats, and coalition logistical challenges abound. Unity of purpose provides a common aim-point toward which different contributing factors can guide their actions between calls back to their national headquarters.

Local Ownership. There is a social fabric inherent to all stability operations, and this lies mostly in the local networks that build resiliency and structure into societies. It applies to what is and what can be. Local ownership goes beyond simply understanding the history, motivations, and agendas of villagers. These must be interpreted into meaningful constructs for understanding what people do and can embrace as their own. The cadastral

issues in Bala Morghab remain unresolved to this day. To a largely agrarian society (as most of the Third World is), land is often all that people—the “decisive terrain” in counterinsurgency—have for their livelihoods and that of their progeny; therefore, it is the single most important motivator among them. ISAF’s ignorance of the cadastral issues—acquisition of land for the FOB, where to put the bridge, military and police checkpoints—reflected no awareness of a prime motivation of support or opposition as well as missed opportunities for early collaboration and better local solutions. Without proper insight of what motivated the decisive terrain, the coalition sought to solve the problem (as they perceived it) the only way they knew how—by pouring more troops and treasure into more combat actions to “bring increased security.”

Continuity of Governance. The national government of Afghanistan sought to work through “the problem of Badghis” without a proper basis of understanding the local conditions. Not having village and district leadership connected to and integrated with the provincial and national

not to engage with local leaders well in advance of policy implementation is a recipe for failure

governments meant that policies and operational plans were formed in a vacuum, neither based in local knowledge nor locally supported. Kabul fed FDD from the top-down: policy/strategy decisions (flavored with agendas, nepotism, and politics) were forced on the locals. Not to engage with local leaders well in advance of policy implementation is a recipe for failure. Activists opposing government initiatives can easily propagandize

and influence locals against government actions, through coercion, terror, or misinformation. A lack of trustworthy government agents who work with and through community leaders at the village level enables those opposing the government to hold sway. By contrast, the insurgents worked from the bottom-up, influencing the decisions of the elders in a variety of ways.

Sympathies Are a Force Multiplier. Brute force and ignorance—the tongue-in-cheek characterization of the old Soviet bloc style of warfare—does not work in a 21st-century counterinsurgency environment. Not until the true terrain—the population—is sympathetic to the government’s plans can real progress be made. Only to the degree to which the government provides acceptable rule and well-being to the village populace will any military operation enjoy success. The attitudes and inclinations of the inhabitants of the 133 villages in the Morghab Valley were a “force multiplier.”¹⁷ The degree to which the people were sympathetic and supportive of one side multiplied the positive effects of actions on that side and marginalized good or magnified the bad of the other. Where the people trust ISAF, ISAF is in charge. Where the people trust the insurgents, the insurgents are in charge.¹⁸ Elders often stated, “We can control our sons, but only when the Taliban aren’t around.” The fact that the sons were used by insurgents either as fighters or as leverage against local leaders reflects the pervasive influence the insurgents had in the district.

To this day, it is unclear how many true insurgents are in the district, and how many of those were actually hard core as compared to co-opted, opportunist, or partially loyal. It is likely that only a hard-core cadre was in the region in 2008–2009, controlling the populace in much the same way as in classic insurgencies.¹⁹ The coalition in the Afghanistan experiment will

continue to pour treasure and talent into these efforts. Nevertheless, until the Afghan government can address the needs of the average citizen in a way that marginalizes the current powerbrokers, and until the coalition understands how to influence the decisive terrain in the valley, there will be little progress. Unfortunately, the whole-of-government concept never made it off of the paper and into practice, at least not in 2008 or 2009. As a result, then, shape, clear, hold, and build could not work as envisioned. Rather than pulling on the multiple needs with a strong braided rope, the government offered a few strands pulling in different directions, on different problems, for different purposes. Military planners, on the other hand, charged on with implementing FDD, little realizing that their single strand of police training/reform meant little without the braided strength of all the other needed efforts. As a result, even well-intentioned efforts were expended piecemeal and ultimately consumed in the larger tragedy of Bala Morghab district and Afghanistan. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ E.D. Swinton (later Major General Sir Ernest Swinton), “The Defence of Duffer’s Drift,” *Infantry Journal*, April 1905, available at <www.cgsc.edu/carl/resources/csi/swinton/swinton.asp>.

² See International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Stability Operations Integration Cell (SOIC), “Murghab District, Badghis District Narrative Assessment, 5 May 2010,” available at <<http://publicintelligence.net/ufouo-stability-operations-information-center-soic-murghab-district-assessment/>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Most facts throughout this section derive from the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, “Summary of District Development Plan for Bala Morghab District,” November 2007, available at <www.mrrd.gov.af/>.

⁵ Provincial Development Plan, Badghis Provincial Profile, 8.

⁶ *Security sector reform* is the set of policies, plans, programs, and activities that a government undertakes to improve the way it provides safety, security, and justice. It further aims to provide an effective and legitimate public service that is transparent, accountable to civil authority, and responsive to the needs of the public. It may include integrated activities to support defense and armed forces reform; civilian management and oversight; justice, police, corrections, and intelligence reform; national security planning and strategy support; border management; disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration; and concurrent reduction of armed violence. See Field Manual (FM) 3–07, *Stability Operations* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army, October 2008), 6-1, available at <www.usacae.army.mil/cac2/Repository/FM307/FM3-07.pdf>.

⁷ Unclassified Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan J5 Concept Paper, “Enhancing the Capabilities of the Afghan National Police: A Focused District Development Strategy,” October 6, 2007.

⁸ A *whole-of-government approach* is an approach that integrates the collaborative efforts of the departments and agencies of the U.S. Government to achieve unity of effort toward a shared goal. See FM 3–07.

⁹ See FM 3–07 for a discussion on stability operations lines of effort.

¹⁰ As of spring 2010, the U.S. forces partnering with the Afghan National Police in Bala Morghab promised Commander’s Emergency Response Program funds to start work again on the mosque. See ISAF SOIC.

¹¹ Route clearance packages (RCPs) are prized items in Afghanistan, where so many routes are unpaved and therefore easily interdicted with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This Spanish contingent was in no way characterized as an RCP, but it was capable of detection and remote detonation of any discovered ordnance

wired as an IED or not. It was all that Regional Command–West (RC–W) had at the time, and operations elsewhere in theater precluded any RCP from being transferred temporarily to RC–W. As recently as October 2010, the Italian army remains interested in acquiring a more robust route clearance capability.

¹² Close air support, with a mixed ISAF–U.S. force, was at this time an entire tragi-comedy—a debacle—unto itself. ISAF, operating under its rules of engagement (ROE), has far more restrictive guidelines (self-defense only) than U.S. forces, which operated at that time under Operation *Enduring Freedom* ROEs. This created enormous friction when U.S. forces were in close combat with Afghan National Army forces against enemy forces and requesting close air support, which was (in RC–W) exclusively controlled by the ISAF tactical air controller. More than once, bombs would not drop because the controller himself did not believe he had the authority based on “self-defense,” while Embedded Training Team members were in serious danger of being overrun.

¹³ In the shape phase of the strategy, the United States and its allies and partners conduct reconnaissance to identify the key leaders, key infrastructure, tribal dynamics, and tribal relationship with the Afghan government, as well as the economic status of a given area. Clearly, the Afghan government and ISAF failed to realize or implement this. See Anthony H. Cordesman, “‘Shape, Clear, Hold, and Build’: The Uncertain Metrics of the Afghan War” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2009), available at <<http://csis.org/publication/shape-clear-hold-and-build-uncertain-metrics-afghan-war>>.

¹⁴ See ISAF SOIC regarding villagers’ perceptions of ISAF behavior as recently as spring 2010.

¹⁵ This RC–W decision had more to do with the impending change of command for the commander. He was under an enormous amount of pressure from the Italian Ministry of Defense to minimize risk to Italian troops as they prepared to rotate out of theater at the end of the month.

¹⁶ An email recollection of events from my predecessor, reflecting on decisions in late 2007, illustrates the lack of coordination or consideration of a comprehensive, integrated plan to support this district: “The Bridge was actually pushed by many constituents, me included. In fact, the [U.S. mentor headquarters] may have been the primary driver initially, since nobody else in that [area of operation] pushed for anything. Our main consideration in pushing for this project was to establish infrastructure that would allow support to [Bala Morghab] from both RC–W and RC–[North]. At that time we believed it made sense to repair or replace the [Bala Morghab] bridge in order that military traffic have a safe route across the Morghab River from the west.”

¹⁷ A *force multiplier* is a capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment. See Joint Publication 1–02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, November 8, 2010), available at <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary>.

¹⁸ ISAF SOIC.

¹⁹ For a superb deeper look at this, I strongly recommend Jeffrey Race’s *War Comes to Long An* (University of California Press, 1972). Although a treatise on the Communist Party’s work to overthrow the province in the run-up to Saigon’s eventual fall, how the Party (substitute the words “antigovernment foe” for “Party,” if you like) viewed the mechanics of insurgency is enlightening.