



From Enduring Freedom to Enduring Insurgency

Long-term consequences of US strategic decisions regarding Operation Enduring Freedom

– Michael Seibold –

*We've tried to understand the fundamental challenge
before us, and we think we do.*

(Colin Powell, October 2004)

*It's an illusion to think that there is a military solution for
Afghanistan.*

(Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, July 2006)

Introduction

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was launched on 7 October 2001 as a response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in order to "destroy the Al Qaeda network inside Afghanistan along with the illegitimate Taliban regime which was harbouring and protecting the terrorists"¹. After slow initial progress, the military strategy employed was altered. Instead of strategically bombing major targets such as communication and military centres (of which there were few), the "Afghan model" was adopted: US Special Operations Forces (SOF) joined the troops fielded by the Northern Alliance (NA) commanders and called in air strikes to destroy opposing Taliban forces. This approach proved effective, leading to a rapid victory over the forces fielded by the Taliban. By the end of November, the Taliban, who had controlled more than 85 percent of the country before OEF, had largely been driven out of Afghanistan². OEF and the "Afghan model" were, consequently, praised as a novel form of warfare enabling the US to defeat similar opponents, projecting their power and deterring states from providing sanctuaries for terrorists³.

¹ General Tommy Franks, cited from: Cyrus Hodes/Mark Sedra, 'Chapter Four: International Military Support', in *Adelphi Papers* 47:391 (2007), 43-50; here: 44.

² Cf. Benjamin Lambeth, *Air Power against Terror. America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom*, Santa Monica 2005, 130.

³ Cf. Richard Andres/Craig Wills/Thomas Griffith, 'Winning with Allies. The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model', in *International Strategy* 30:3 (2005), 124-160.

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However, OEF was a pyrrhic victory. Despite the installation of an internationally backed central government under Hamid Karzai in Kabul and NATO-plans to proceed from phase 3 (stabilisation) to phase 4 (transition) and 5 (redeployment)⁴, an insurgency led by the Taliban emerged and increasingly gained momentum. Initially only attacking “soft” civilian targets, the insurgents became bolder over time, attacking military targets, too. The number of overall attacks and the number of suicide bombings also increased considerably in the past years (3 in 2004, 17 in 2005 and 123 in 2006)⁵. By late 2007, there was considerable Taliban presence in more than 54 percent of the country⁶.

This essay argues that OEF revitalised an ongoing civil war and, hence, was a short-term victory that paved the way for an ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan. US policy both on a grand-strategic and operational strategic level contributed to this: An inappropriate – or altogether lacking – grand strategy led to an exacerbation of the existing situation in Afghanistan. The US launched OEF without any goals beyond the destruction of al-Qaida and the toppling of the Taliban regime. Lacking a commitment to state-building in the aftermath of a military campaign, the only hope to end the internal conflict would have been the annihilation of the opposing side, namely the Taliban and al-Qaida forces. However, US operational strategy, the “Afghan model”, did not achieve such total destruction of the enemy: Enough forces could retreat in order to regroup and “fight another day”. On the contrary, certain characteristics of the model, such as cooperation with Afghan warlords actually contributed to the insurgents’ cause by further destabilising the situation and disenchanting the population whose hearts and minds need to be won in every counter-insurgency operation.

This essay will describe the grand and operational strategy of the US as related to OEF and their repercussions within Afghanistan, and thus show how OEF led to *enduring insurgency* rather than *enduring freedom*.

Repercussions of US-Strategy

“Grand Strategy”

Strategies are allocations of means to reach desired goals; grand strategies are “bundles of security, economic and political strategies based on assumptions about how best to advance national security and build international order.”⁷ The “global war on terror” (now the “long war”⁸) could qualify as such a grand strategy being a multi-faceted response to the threat to national security posed by global terrorism.

However, the rationale underlying Operation Enduring Freedom does not represent such a grand strategy: Apart from the short-term goals of ridding oneself of the al-Qaida facilities and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, there existed no long-term political agenda – OEF took the shape of a punitive expedition. Military action and the defeat of al-Qaida and their allies in Afghanistan appeared not so much as a means to reach the goal of greater stability in the region and more security for the US, but as ends in themselves. Political goals beyond these military objectives were not of prime importance. Consequently, the proposal to create a new government to provide peace and stability only appeared as an afterthought⁹. Likewise, US resistance to engage in state-building is a clear indicator that no political goals or commitments beyond the immediate military ones existed¹⁰. This resulted in a campaign without the clear political objective postulated by Clausewitz. Consequently, OEF was begun by a leadership that “had no clear idea of what the endgame would look like [...]. Secretary Rumsfeld would later freely admit that the war was initiated with no clear road map and that he and [CENTCOM-Commander] General Franks found themselves constantly adapting to changing events as they occurred.”¹¹ This holds true for the military and the political sphere.

In sum, there was great “difficulty of finding a strategy that could reconcile the Administration’s immediate war aims with a set of broader, longer-term strategic considerations – such as stability in Afghanistan and in the region surrounding it.”¹² It has been argued that the US decision for a war – with the ensuing danger to stability – could only

⁷ John Ikenberry, ‘American Grand Strategy in the Age of Terror’, in *Survival* 43:4 (2001), 19-34; here: 25.

⁸ Cf. Michael Howard, ‘A long War?’, in *Survival* 48:4 (2006), 7-14.

⁹ Cf. Warren Chin, ‘Operation ‘Enduring Freedom’: a Victory for a Conventional Force Fighting an Unconventional war’, in *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14:1 (2003), 57-76: here: 62.

¹⁰ Cf. Cyrus Hodes/Mark Sedra, ‘Introduction’, in *Adelphi Papers* 47:391 (2007), 7-10; here: 8.

¹¹ Lambeth, *Air Power*, 61.

¹² Carl Conetta, *Strange Victory: A Critical Appraisal of Operation Enduring Freedom and the Afghanistan War*, Cambridge (Ma.) 2002, 10.

⁴ Cf. Hodes/ Sedra, ‘International Military Support’, 45.

⁵ Cf. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan*, Kabul 2007, 43.

⁶ Cf. Senlis Afghanistan, *Afghanistan on the Brink*, London 2007, 8.

have been carried out because the US lacked a coherent long-term strategy involving Afghanistan. The country was at the periphery of US thinking and attention – its destabilisation was deemed tenable¹³. The US initiated OEF with the goal of militarily defeating the terrorists. The main incentive to launch the operation was the possibility of capturing or killing Osama bin Laden and other high-ranking terrorists, thus decapitating the al-Qaida network. In addition, it was hoped that the action would deter states from supporting terrorists as well as “terrorising the terrorists”¹⁴. Furthermore, OEF was designed to deprive al-Qaida of the training facilities for terrorists thus reducing their ability to strike again. However, these al-Qaida training facilities served mainly as military boot camps for the struggle against the Northern Alliance¹⁵. Consequently, even after all the camps in Afghanistan had been destroyed, the al-Qaida striking potential was believed to have decreased by 30 percent only¹⁶. These potential gains were offset by a number of factors: Firstly, the US would get involved in a civil war that had raged for more than two decades, and which could not be mastered by the Soviet Union. Such Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) conflicts tend to entangle the participants into prolonged struggles¹⁷. US engagement could stir up a hornets’ nest and embroil them in a long-term civil war. Secondly, the Afghan conflict is a transnational affair, involving Pakistan and other neighbouring countries. US-engagement would affect and destabilise the whole region – and especially the Muslim nuclear power, Pakistan. Thirdly, OEF constituted an invasion of a Muslim country. It might, thus, serve as another example of US imperialism and as a rallying point for Islamists. Despite these dire potentials implications, the US – lacking a coherent strategy or any concept regarding post-war Afghanistan – engaged in the “graveyard of empires” (Bob Woodward) whose strategic location, volatile interior situation and lack of political perspective had deterred earlier US-administrations from doing so¹⁸.

Operational Strategy¹⁹ – repercussions of the “Afghan model”

The operational strategy was determined by the necessity to retain a “light footprint” (to prevent further antagonising of the *umma*) and the unwillingness to commit numerous ground forces to

Afghanistan for fear of being embroiled in the civil war: The more forces are deployed, the more difficult extraction becomes. Hence, the “Afghan model” eventually adopted in Afghanistan foresaw the deployment of a few SOF-teams (numbering 300-500²⁰) to support the indigenous US allies by directing precision strikes against the Taliban forces opposing them²¹. The stalemate that had developed between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban was quickly overcome once the “Afghan model” was applied, and the Taliban forces were beaten and largely driven out of the country. Although it can be – and has been – argued that other factors, such as internal heterogeneity of the Taliban and bribes played a similarly important role²², the “Afghan model” can be credited with having had a significant military impact, allowing the 15,000 NA fighters to overcome the 50-60,000 Taliban by obliterating their front lines and interdicting any reinforcements²³. The physical and psychological destructiveness of the aerial bombardments were shown around Mazar-e Sharif when a few 15,000lb BLU-82s destroyed the entrenchments and ‘persuaded’ the surviving Taliban fighters to surrender²⁴. The “Afghan model”, in defeating the Taliban forces, has demonstrated its utility as a military tool *on the battlefield*. Indeed, it has been praised by some not only as such, but as a “less costly and more effective method of accomplishing U.S. security objectives”²⁵ and as a primary option for future conflicts.

In contradiction to this optimism, however, the “Afghan model” has proven flawed on two tiers: Firstly, the model, despite defeating the Taliban forces on the battlefield, i.e. those troops facing the NA²⁶, failed to accomplish the main goal of OEF, namely the destruction of al-Qaida and the capture or elimination of its and the Taliban leadership. The failure to catch bin Laden or Mullah Omar had repercussion on the global “war on terror” as well as on the conflict within Afghanistan, for there remained a capable opponent to launch an insurgency. Secondly, the *modus operandi* of the model itself laid the

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.* 10f.

¹⁴ Lambeth, *Air Power*, 40.

¹⁵ Paul Hastert, ‘Operation Anaconda: Perception Meets Reality in the Hills of Afghanistan’, in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28:1 (2005), 11-20, 13.

¹⁶ Cf. Conetta, *Strange Victory*, 5.

¹⁷ Cf. Thomas Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone. On War in the 21st Century*, Rapid Falls 2004.

¹⁸ Cf. Andres/Wills/Griffith, ‘Winning with Allies’, 155.

¹⁹ Operational Strategy is understood here as the allocation of means to reach ends on the operational level of war.

²⁰ Michael O’Hanlon, ‘A flawed Masterpiece’, in *Foreign Affairs* 81:3 (2002), 47-63; here: 49.

²¹ The “Afghan model” is not a novel concept, however. A similar technique was used in the Vietnam War when SOF supported the operations of indigenous tribes such as the Montagnards against the North Vietnamese. Cf. Andres/Wills/Griffith, ‘Winning with Allies’, 130.

²² Chin, ‘Victory for a Conventional Force’, 66.

²³ O’Hanlon, ‘Flawed Masterpiece’, 49.

²⁴ Cf. Gary Schroen, *First In. An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, New York 2005, 335f.

²⁵ Andres/Wills/Griffith, ‘Winning with Allies’, 125.

²⁶ Even the degree to which this was accomplished by the “Afghan model” has been questioned. Cf. Stephen Biddle, ‘Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare. The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq’, in *International Security* 30:3 (2005), 161-176.

foundation of a further severe destabilisation of Afghanistan. The operational strategy employed in Afghanistan exacerbated and caused warlordism, ethnical cleavage and weakening of the central authority, and, thus, paved the way for the insurgents.

1. The Failure to decapitate al-Qaida and the Taliban

The limitations of the Afghan model manifested themselves in the third phase of OEF, beginning in early December 2001²⁷. By then, the second initial aim of the operation had been achieved: Most of the Taliban forces in the field had been defeated, and the Taliban regime had been toppled. Simultaneously, the US had tracked down the al-Qaida leadership, including bin Laden, and around 2,000 fighters in the Tora Bora cave complex in eastern Afghanistan²⁸. This offered the possibility to decapitate the enemy, thus reaching the primary goal of the operation and concluding the war. In accordance with the "Afghan model", the al-Qaida forces were to be destroyed in their caves by air-launched precision guided munitions (PGMs) directed by SOF. The Afghan allies and the Pakistani troops were entrusted with the task of sealing off the border to Pakistan to prevent the al-Qaida forces from retreating²⁹. The outcome of the Tora Bora operations was a disappointment, however, for when the fighting was concluded in mid-December, bin Laden had escaped. Likewise, the al-Qaida forces were not totally destroyed, and only a few were captured whilst the majority escaped³⁰. Clearly, the Afghan model had failed to yield the desired result in this – critical – case. The US had given in to the temptation of air power (Lawrence Freedman): There had been an over-reliance on technology to destroy the enemy hidden in this mountainous region. As operation *Anaconda* showed later, even the precision weapons employed by the US could not destroy the al-Qaida forces all by themselves³¹ – air-power would not conquer, so infantry had to do more than just occupying. Also, the use of indigenous allies had proven problematic. The Afghan and Pakistani troops that were to prevent any al-Qaida attempts to escape from the region, were unable and unwilling to do so, or were bribed by al-Qaida to turn a blind eye³². The US and their allies did not share the same goals: "It is not clear that these allies had the same incentives as the United States to conduct the effort with dogged persistence."³³ The NA

commanders were content with the defeat of the Taliban forces and much less eager to engage al-Qaida. Rather, they wanted to use their forces to secure and – if possible – expand their own base of power in Afghanistan.

Having seen the effect PGMs and indigenous forces had had against the Taliban in November 2001, the US planners were convinced that these elements would suffice against the Tora Bora redoubts. Consequently, they did not deploy the US Marines available at base "Rhino" to seal off Tora Bora³⁴. The failure to do so contributed to the failure to capture large numbers of al-Qaida fighters and any high-ranking al-Qaida operative. According to a CIA operative, "the biggest and most important failure of CENTCOM leadership came at Tora Bora when they turned down my request for a [US-]battalion [...] to block bin Laden's escape"³⁵.

2. Long-term repercussions of the Afghan model

The support of the NA warlords has been described a "devil's bargain that cost America leverage and control on the strategic level"³⁶. The local commanders helped the US to defeat the Taliban. At the same time, however, the US – involuntarily – helped the warlords to pursue their personal or tribal schemes for power and to remain the most important actors in Afghanistan. The warlords' focus on their own goals has been demonstrated by the lack of enthusiasm at Tora Bora and the occupation of Kabul by NA troops against the will of the US³⁷. Consequently, the US alliance has had a centrifugal effect on the Afghan situation which considerably weakened the endeavours to create a stable central government: Afghanistan remains scattered among the warlords fighting each other for more power and badly governing the areas occupied by them³⁸. Furthermore, they engage heavily in the production and exportation of drugs which had been interrupted by the Taliban (deemed as un-Islamic by them)³⁹. In this situation of chaos, exploitation and drug production, the (austere) alternative propagated by the Taliban becomes more attractive. It is, thus, a replica of the situation which enabled the Taliban to rise to power in the 1990s. Additionally, the weakness of the central government⁴⁰ allows the warlords to side with the

²⁷ Cf. O'Hanlon, 'Flawed Masterpiece', 54

²⁸ Cf. Lambeth, *Air Power*, 149ff.

²⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁰ Hastert, 'Operation Anaconda', 14.

³¹ Cf. Stephen Biddle, 'Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare', in *Foreign Affairs* 82:2 (2003), 31-46; here: 39.

³² Cf. Andres/Wills/Griffith, 'Winning with Allies', 145.

³³ Cf. O'Hanlon, 'Flawed Masterpiece', 54.

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.* 57.

³⁵ Cited from Hodes/ Sedra, 'International Military Support', 44.

³⁶ Conetta, *Strange Victory*, 17.

³⁷ Cf. Schroen, *First In*, 339-351.

³⁸ Cf. Cyrus Hodes/Mark Sedra, 'Chapter One: Warlordism', in *Adelphi Papers* 47:391 (2007), 11-15.

³⁹ Cf. *Idem*, 'Chapter Three: The Opium Trade', in *Adelphi Papers* 47:391 (2007), 35-42.

⁴⁰ Karzai is referred to as the "Mayor of Kabul".

Taliban if they believe such a realignment to be profitable.

Another consequence of the operational strategy employed during OEF is the ethnic cleavage created by mainly supporting Tajiks and Uzbeks, i.e. the tribes composing the NA: "Rather than following a 'Taliban versus anti-Taliban' axis, [the] conflict reoriented along purely ethnic, tribal, and sect lines"⁴¹. Although some Pashtun tribes later joined the coalition, the Pashtun were disenchanted by the facts that only their areas were subject to intense US bombardment and that the northern tribes took Kabul on 13 November 2001⁴².

The disproportionate advancement of Tajik interests is reflected in the composition of the Afghan National Army: Representing 25 percent of the population, the Tajiks provide 45% of all army personnel⁴³. Such ethnic conflict and rupture of the Afghan society facilitate the insurgents' cause.

Conclusion

The US were faced with a multi-level dilemma in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Any intervention in Afghanistan would entail the destabilisation of the country and – possibly – the region. Only a long-term commitment might have averted such an outcome, yet planners were aware that the public would not approve a prolonged US involvement. This – and the possible Muslim resentment of a large-scale "infidel" invasion – meant that the US would have to retain a "light footprint" in Afghanistan. However, such a light footprint, i.e. the presence of few American forces, did not allow for a conventional campaign to defeat the enemy, and bore the risk that the US would be unable to accomplish its goals for OEF. In consequence, the US relied on airpower, incorporated into the "Afghan model", to achieve its aims. This model was instrumental in defeating the field "armies" of the Taliban, but it had several long-term repercussions negatively affecting the stability of Afghanistan. The failure to seal off Tora Bora and capture bin Laden and his lieutenants left the cadres of the future insurgency alive and well. Also, the reliance on warlords meant that attempts to stabilise the country by inaugurating a central government were undermined from the very beginning. The renaissance of warlordism – and the ensuing banditry and drug production – have recreated the situation that allowed the Taliban to seize power in the 1990s. This chaotic, violent situation was (and is) the ideal breeding ground for the long-term insurgency currently taking place in Afghanistan and provides al-Qaida with a large, populous recruitment area.

These consequences of their actions were deliberated by US decision-makers. The lack of any binding strategy for the country, however, allowed them to disregard stability concerns in the pursuit of bin Laden and his companions. The attempt to "carry out major strategic change on the cheap"⁴⁴, without a long-term commitment did not work as intended. Operation Enduring Freedom laid the foundations for enduring insurgency in Afghanistan.

⁴¹ Conetta, *Strange Victory*, 18.

⁴² *Ibid.* 19.

⁴³ Cf. Antonio Giustozzi, 'Auxiliary Force or National Army? Afghanistan's 'ANA' and the Counter-Insurgency Effort, 2002-2006', in *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18:1 (2007), 45-67; here: 61.

⁴⁴ Barnett Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', in *Foreign Affairs* 86:1 (2007), 57-78; here: 78.

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