Our generals failed in Afghanistan

By JASON DEMPSEY | Foreign Policy | Published: October 18, 2016

The ascent of David Petraeus and the Army's rediscovery of counterinsurgency doctrine led many to believe that the military had dramatically adapted itself for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately the transformation was only skin deep. Petraeus was a myth, and the intellectual father of the Army only in the eyes of the national media. The institutional inertia of the military bureaucracy never caught up with the press releases. The result was a never-ending series of public pronouncements by senior leaders about the importance of counterinsurgency, accompanied by a continuation of Cold War-era personnel and rotation policies that explicitly short-changed the effort.

Upon taking command in Afghanistan in 2009, General Stanley McChrystal made the rounds of his subordinate units and asked each of us, "What would you do differently if you had to stay until we won?" At the time I was in charge of operations for a brigade in the middle of a tough fight in eastern Afghanistan. It was absolutely the right question, but in retrospect it was also a trick question. The answer was to get the right people into the fight, keep them there long enough to develop an understanding of the environment, and hold them accountable for progress, but that was not something the military was interested in doing. Instead, we stuck with a policy that rotated leaders through the country like tourists.

Taking the lessons of unit cohesion from Vietnam, the military has followed a policy in Afghanistan where entire units rotate in and out of country every seven, nine, or 12 months. This model, more than the policy of individual rotation in Vietnam, ensures
both tactical proficiency and unit cohesion at the soldier level. But it also is completely ill-suited for a counterinsurgency campaign. It makes sense to limit the time soldiers spend conducting tactical operations, but leaders attempting to establish the kind of relationships and understanding necessary to be effective in counterinsurgency must be kept in place much longer. By changing out entire units so frequently, our policy has guaranteed that military leaders rotating through Afghanistan have never had more than a superficial understanding of the political environment they are trying to shape.

The shortcomings of this rotation policy in counterinsurgency have been further reinforced by an institutional culture and personnel management system that places a low priority on the advisory mission. From the beginning of our efforts in Afghanistan the advisory mission was promoted publicly but given a low priority in execution.

The premier example of this mismatch between what military leadership said we were doing, and what the bureaucracy was actually prioritizing, can be found in the story of the AfPak hands program. The program was launched by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen, and lauded as the key to shaping Afghanistan by creating a cohort of expert officers from across the services that would have the language skills and experience to build the kind of long-term relationships needed to build an effective Afghan security apparatus. While a priority for the Chairman, the effort was never embraced by the services.
Despite the fanfare and stated importance of the program, mismanagement and misplay were rampant as this specialized cadre encountered personnel systems unable to support non-traditional career paths. Caught between career managers that saw the program as a deviation from what officers "should" be doing - leading tactical units - and a deployment system that often led to random staff assignments instead of partnered roles with Afghan leaders, the program quickly became known as an assignment to be "survived" if not avoided altogether.
A leaked briefing from the Army G-1, the service's head personnel officer, to the Chief of Staff of the Army in 2014 confirmed that the AfPak Hands program had become a dead end for military careers. Officers who had participated in the program were being promoted at a fraction of the rate of those who had not. There are only two explanations for this outcome: Either the Army was sending sub-par officers to serve in the program, or officers were being punished for deviating from the traditional career track. Whichever it was, both explanations reveal that the effort to train and advise the Afghans was simply not a priority for the Army.

Similar challenges faced those who served on Security Force Advise and Assist Teams. These teams, like the AfPak Hands program, were always ad hoc and widely considered assignments to avoid, as they did not align with traditional career paths. And in the end, the rigidity of the military's 1950's-era personnel system simply overwhelmed any desires to prioritize the counterinsurgency mission. Centrally managed and organized around rigid career development templates, this personnel system does a magnificent job of sustaining a peacetime military that is prepared to fight and win tactical battles at the onset of a conventional war, but is not built to go beyond placing square pegs in square holes.

Preserving the conventional warfighting capabilities produced under that system for a future war is a valid concern. But after 15 years of conflict with little success to show for our efforts it is past time to ask our military leaders, "What war are we waiting for?"

Warren Buffett famously observed that if you've been playing poker for half an hour and don't know who the patsy at the table is, then you are the patsy. We've been in Afghanistan for 15 years. Afghans know how to manage the American officers passing through their country. American officers rotating through Afghanistan on short-term deployments can never fully understand the network of relationships behind the formal chain of command. I saw this firsthand in 2012 after working to relieve a clearly incompetent commander. After several months of cajoling his chain of command, this man was relieved. I had been told of his family connections, but felt
his incompetence was surely enough to keep him out of uniform. Of course, I was wrong. By the time I returned in 2014, two generations of advisers had passed through and he had reassumed command.

When we have not been oblivious to this dynamic we have reacted with indignation. After all, don't the Afghans care about winning the war?

A common joke in large hierarchical bureaucracies like the American military is that things aren't going well because "higher headquarters can't plan, and subordinate units can't execute." This describes the current view of military leaders in that larger strategic failings are out of the military’s lane, while any faults in execution must
surely fall on the shoulders of the Afghans. Left unexamined is how our approach to the war was both ill-suited for the task at hand and ultimately constrained our strategic options.

In discussing what the Afghans need to be ready to fight the Taliban, a senior Pentagon official recently said, "The local forces need air support, intelligence and help with logistics." Yet, unaddressed by this official, and largely unasked by anyone, is why the Afghan military needs these capabilities when the Taliban have been able to achieve such success without them?

This would be a good first question for the next president to ask as he or she faces a steady stream of senior military officers asking for "more men, more money, and more time," because the answer reveals the superficiality of the military's approach to Afghanistan.

Our current exit strategy entails the creation of a massive security force designed for a nation with neither the effective bureaucracies nor functioning civil society that are required to sustain and control such a force. Of course, it will take decades to secure Afghanistan with this model. And even then there is no guarantee of success. So long as the military pays only lip-service to counterinsurgency the president will be hearing the same refrain of "more men, more money, and more time" for years to come.

_Dempsey retired from the Army in 2015, last serving as special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He currently serves as an adjunct Senior Fellow at the Center for New American Security and Director of the Military and Veterans Initiative at Columbia University._
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2 US troops killed fighting ISIS in Afghanistan

By MISSY RYAN
and THOMAS GIBBONS-NEFF
The Washington Post

Two U.S. servicemembers were killed during operations against Islamic State in eastern Afghanistan, the Pentagon said Thursday.

Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said the deaths occurred overnight in Afghanistan’s Nangarhar province, where a small but virulent ISIS cell poses a threat to Afghan and U.S. coalition forces.

An Afghan military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss current operations, said that there had been a joint U.S.-Afghan operation in a village near Nangarhar’s Achin district Wednesday but he was not aware of any casualties. He noted, however, that it had been a long day of fighting.

Navy Lt. Chris Donohue, a spokesman for U.S. forces in Afghanistan, confirmed that the incident happened close to Achin and near where U.S. aircraft dropped a massive 22,000-pound bomb, called a GBU-43, two weeks ago. The bomb targeted a sprawling ISIS tunnel complex, and although Afghan officials said between 36 and 100 ISIS fighters were killed in the strike, the U.S. military has not announced what exactly the massive bomb accomplished.

The deaths mark the third time this year that a member of the U.S. military has died in combat in Afghanistan. On April 8, Army Staff Sgt. Mark R. De Almeida, 37, of Edgewood, Md., was killed by small-arms fire, also in Nangarhar.

DOD allowed to set troop numbers in Iraq, Syria

By TARA COFF
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has authorized Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis to set troop levels in Iraq and Syria without White House approval, the Pentagon confirmed Thursday.

The switch gives the Pentagon more autonomy to determine how many forces are required in the fight against ISIS.

“The president has delegated authority to the secretary of defense to determine force management levels for Iraq and Syria. No change to current authorized force levels has been made,” said Pentagon chief spokeswoman Dana White.

“This does not represent a change in our mission in Iraq and Syria to defeat ISIS,” White said, noting that delegating troop level decisions to the secretary of defense “enables military commanders to be more agile, adaptive and efficient in supporting our partners, and enables decisions that benefit unit readiness, cohesion and lethality.”

Under the previous administration, decisions to return forces to Iraq and to deploy forces to Syria were tightly controlled by the White House and announced by President Barack Obama. The number of forces allowed in either country was governed by official force management levels, caps that had little bearing on the actual number.
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