

## **In Afghanistan, a US protection racket strategy may help**

By Christopher Dickey  
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Long ago and far away in the wars of Central America, I learned from a Guatemalan general (who had been trained by the French in Algeria and coached by the Israelis) that a war against guerrillas is essentially a protection racket. Civilians are helpless and indecisive, caught between the government forces and the insurgents, and thus unreliable. They might help you in the morning, then help your enemy in the evening. So the message the government has to send is as clear as it is cruel: We can protect you from the guerrillas, but the guerrillas cannot protect you from us – and you've got to choose.

If you listen to American generals talking about Afghanistan today, you'll hear them emphasizing the protection part of that message, but ignoring – even denying – the punishment. Essentially they're saying, "We can protect you civilians from the Taliban (we hope), but the Taliban don't have to protect you from us because we are nice guys who are going to help you build your country, and in fact we're worried about protecting you from us, too, because there's so much 'collateral damage' these days." The whole effect is almost as confusing for the troops as it is for Afghan civilians, and every effort at clarification creates more mystification.

Thus US General Stanley McChrystal, the hard-driving American commander who took over a few weeks ago, went so far as to tell his troops at Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan on June 25 that they have to make a "cultural shift." This war isn't about killing the enemy and accepting collateral damage as inevitable. "When you do anything that harms the people you just have a huge chance of alienating the population," he said. A few days after McChrystal's remarks, in a widely reported incident, Marines trapped Taliban fighters in a residential compound, then allowed them to send out the women and children – only to discover the fighters had slipped on burqas and walked out as well.

Retired US general Dan McNeill, a former NATO commander in Afghanistan, told the BBC this week that the main difference between the way the Russians fought their failed Afghan war in the 1980s and the way we Americans are fighting ours is that if we had a tank column wiped out by mujahedin, we would never exact revenge by leveling the village full of civilians that the insurgents fired from. But – this is where it got a little confusing again – McNeill wanted the BBC listeners to know there is a difference between killing regular civilians and killing civilians forced by the Taliban to take up arms and become combatants. In McNeill's view, the civilians can choose – indeed have to choose. "There are a large number of insurgents who likely are reluctant fighters, but they have an option," said McNeill. "They can come over [to the US-backed government side]. Some have come over."

As it happens, one of the rare examples we do have of tribesmen taking up arms against the Taliban was reported out of Nangarhar Province last week by The Wall Street Journal. The Shinwari clan was promised government development money (renting loyalty is nothing new in Afghanistan). They were promised protection by the government, which they may or may not have believed. And they were promised something else, according to the report: "The government 'told us that if we don't stop harboring the Taliban, the Americans will bomb us,' said Ismat Shinwari, an elder who attended a meeting of tribal elders and provincial officials two months ago." Sounds like the same old protection racket.

Is there really something that makes this counterinsurgency campaign different than other "savage wars of peace," as Kipling called them? It's a myth that guerrillas win every war, but it's a fact that when they've been crushed, in almost all cases the counterinsurgent forces have employed the same cruel lessons. The British tactics in the Second Boer War included the creation of the first "concentration camps." The grim American pacification of the Philippines in the first decades of the 20th century, the brutality of the British in Malaya during the 1950s, the Guatemalans in the 1980s, the Peruvians in the 1990s – these were all what might be called war-criminal enterprises. Indeed, some of the latter-day perpetrators have been prosecuted for what they did. But their strategies won.

Ah, you say, what about the Iraqi paradigm? There, the surge in troop levels to secure the cities combined with the newfound willingness of the Americans to cut deals with former nationalist insurgents and put them on the payroll. Convincing them that American forces really would leave helped, too, since the presence of US troops was widely and fiercely resented. But Afghanistan is a bigger, rougher, more populous, multitribal, and more primitive country by far. It is just as resentful of foreign forces, whatever their motives. And the Obama administration, trying to show its patience and perseverance, is starting to give the impression it will never pull out. Finally, while most Iraqis wanted to return to the comforts of modern civilization, most Afghans have never experienced them. This looks like a classic guerrilla war: a struggle by peasants against usurpers and occupiers.

In hopes of finding some thread to follow out of the Afghan labyrinth, I called a former guerrilla commander from the mountains of El Salvador, Joaquin Villalobos, who now works out of Oxford University. As a young man in the 1980s, his sure sense of when to kill and when to be kind made him one of the most formidable Central American insurgent leaders in what was then a very crowded field. Now older and perhaps even wiser, he has been serving as an adviser to the government of President Alvaro Uribe in the fight against Colombia's narcoguerrillas.

"Afghanistan," said that Villalobos, "is super complicado."

"In the old days, your problem was to defeat the enemy, and it didn't matter which way you did it," the veteran guerrilla told me. "We had rural societies that were cut off from each other; you could eliminate your enemies without

people seeing, and you could create a long peace that way. But in a world that is more interconnected, the idea of human rights has become more universal, and there has developed a direct relationship between human rights and military effectiveness.” Is McChrystal reading Villalobos? They seem to be very much on the same page.

As Villalobos sees it, the power to intimidate is much more limited than it used to be, and the risk of too much intimidation is that you will scare civilians right into the arms of your enemies. (Indeed, this was one of Al-Qaeda’s big mistakes in Iraq.) “Too much discussion about human rights has been about ethics,” said Villalobos, “and it’s not only an ethical problem, it’s an operational problem. The army of the future needs officers that are sociologists and soldiers that are social workers.

“It’s not just a matter of handing out chocolates. You have to be able to distinguish between the armed enemy and the unarmed enemy, the population that supports the enemy and the population that doesn’t support the enemy,” said Villalobos. “The soldiers who don’t know how to distinguish friend from enemy wind up multiplying the enemy.”

So far so good for McChrystal’s strategy. But then we got down to specifics. “You have to learn to discriminate if you’re going to win,” said Villalobos. “And in Afghanistan, that’s the problem. You don’t know how to do that. You don’t speak the languages; you don’t understand the cultures. And then you have two other problems. First, you are the invader, the outsider.” And that’s not going to change. “And second, you add to this the problem with your own record of human-rights violations.” Villalobos mentioned the Iraq horror picture show at Abu Ghraib in 2004 and the long history of abuses at the Bagram military base.

To achieve anything in that sort of environment, soldiers have to be willing and able to move around among the public. But the “force protection” that is at the heart of so many US military tactics and procedures makes that awkward if not impossible. You can’t convince the people you can protect them from the insurgents, after all, if you look like you’re not sure you can protect yourself. They just ask why you’re there in the first place. And that question is increasingly hard to answer.

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