

On the Front Lines

The CIA in Afghanistan, 2001-2002 (U)

Henry A. Crumpton [redacted]

Withheld under statutory authority of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949 (50 U.S.C., section 3507)

“ In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks ... the President ... called for unilateral CIA covert action, operations with liaison services, and support to the US military's effort in the Afghanistan theater. ”

Editor's Note: The following essay reflects the perspective of a veteran officer of the Clandestine Service who led the CIA's campaign in Afghanistan from 20 September 2001 until 28 June 2002. As Chief of the Counterterrorist Center's Special Operations, he participated directly in unfolding events, from the White House to the front lines. Given the brevity of this overview and author's singular optic, much remains to be told. Nevertheless, the narrative is designed to contribute to the critical dialogue on how the United States should wage counterterrorism wars in the future. (S//NF)

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the President of the United States ordered the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) to launch a covert action war against the al-Qaida terrorist organization and its Taliban supporters in Afghanistan. This order, in response to a proposal submitted to the President by the head of the DCI's Counterterrorist Center four days after the attacks, called for unilateral CIA covert action, operations with liaison services, and support to the US military's effort in the Afghanistan theater. (S//NF)

By the second week of December, three months after the Presidential directive, all major Afghan

cities had fallen to US and allied tribal forces and surviving enemy forces were on the run. A core of [redacted] CIA and [redacted] US Army Special Forces (SF) personnel, [redacted] and US airpower had destroyed the Taliban regime and disrupted al-Qaida, with approximately 25 percent of the enemy's leaders killed or captured. More than 20 al-Qaida training camps and sanctuaries had been secured,

[redacted] E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c) [redacted] Some 5,000 to 10,000 enemy had been killed, while US casualties remained low.<sup>1</sup> And, finally, more than 5,000 prisoners had been rounded up, some of intelligence value. (S//NF)

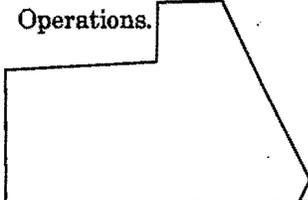
Although the global war against al-Qaida remains unfinished, the initial military campaign in Afghanistan succeeded. The collapse of the Taliban enabled the Afghan people to begin

<sup>1</sup> One CIA officer and one Special Forces soldier detailed to the CIA died in combat, both casualties of treachery—the first was killed by revolting prisoners; the second by an Afghan teenager manning a local roadblock. The US military suffered fewer than 100 casualties, the majority the tragic result of friendly fire or transport accidents. Northern Alliance and other allied tribal forces' losses were in the low hundreds. (S//NF)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

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reclaiming their country, and provided the US with an opportunity to build a partnership with an emerging government. (S//NF)

What were the elements of war in Afghanistan and how were they combined to produce such a dramatic outcome? "Internal elements"—those within the purview of the US government—included intelligence collection, combat capabilities, covert action, communications, bureaucracy, technology, strategy, politics, logistics, and

leadership. "External elements," presenting both challenges and opportunities, included geography, weather, history, tribal alliances, deployment of enemy forces, enemy tactics, regional politics, Afghan culture, and world opinion. Often these elements complemented one another, producing synergy and positive momentum. At other times, however, combinations of elements created stress and internal conflict. What did we learn in Afghanistan about how internal and external elements of warfare influenced each other

and were managed? And how can we apply these lessons to counterterrorism (CT) warfare in the future? (S//NF)

### Authority, Responsibility, and Leadership (U)

Clarity of purpose, clarity of command, and accountability are critical in war. At the outset of the Afghan war, the President conveyed unique and specific authorities to the CIA, via a Presidential Finding. He reinforced this directive with a visit to Headquarters on 26 September 2002. His message to the CIA leadership and those in CTC given responsibility for executing his orders resonated clearly: Destroy al-Qaida. His determination, which translated as raw political will and strong leadership, set the tone. From the President, via the DCI, the Deputy Director of Operations (DDO), and the Director of CTC, directly down to me, as Chief of CTC's Special Operations (CTC/SO), the authorities and responsibilities were clearly defined. (S//NF)

The White House and CIA leadership declared the major objectives, set broad parameters, expected results, and remained intensely engaged with hard questions and some deep concerns—yet they refrained from micro-management. The DCI provided daily briefings to the President and senior officials at the NSC. To reinforce the link between policy and operations, the DCI asked that I accompany

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**To their credit, CIA leaders demonstrated political courage and leadership by allowing unprecedented operational leeway.**

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him for these briefings on more than 20 occasions during the war. (The White House, of course, also received daily updates from the US military.) (S//NF)

To their credit, the DCI and other CIA leaders, especially the Director of CTC, demonstrated political courage and leadership by allowing unprecedented operational leeway, within a clear, complementary policy context that demanded accountability. Daily briefings through text, graphs, maps, and oral presentations kept them informed and provided the stimulus for constructive dialogue and guidance. Understanding the need for timely operational decision-making on the ground in Afghanistan, the CIA encouraged operators to operate. Not once did CIA leaders order CTC/SO to scrub a mission; but the same CIA leaders probed deeply prior to any major operation. Other leaders, less confident and more risk adverse, might have second-guessed operational decisions and tactical moves, or distanced themselves from responsibility—either action could have pulled the war effort into political/bureaucratic gridlock. Avoiding a repetition of errors made in Vietnam and Somalia, the White House and CIA leadership unleashed operational forces. In so doing, they facilitated the application of innovative and unconventional tactics, which led to victory, and, in the process, helped to forge a CT war congruent with broad US policy objectives. (S//NF)

#### HUMINT at the Core (U)

The US government's political-strategic understanding of the region, tactical military operations, and lethal covert action programs all depended on HUMINT. Rooted deeply in covert action operations against the USSR and its puppet government in Afghanistan from 1980 to 1992, CIA intelligence networks were expanded

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

The first insertion of an intelligence team to meet with Northern Alliance Commander Ahmed Shah Masood occurred in May 1997. (S//NF)

The al-Qaida attacks against US embassies in East Africa in August 1998 led to a limited Presidential Finding and a White House demand for increased intelligence collection focused on al-Qaida command/control/communications (C3) in Afghanistan. Liaison with the Northern Alliance improved.

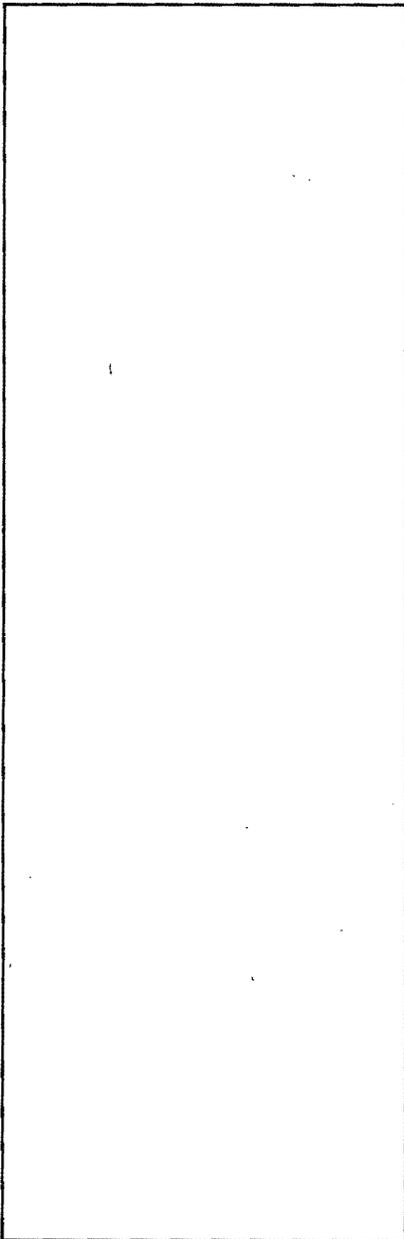
E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

<sup>2</sup> The Northern Alliance, a loose network of competitive tribal forces, included Tajiks, as the majority, but also Uzbeks, Hazaras, and others. (U)

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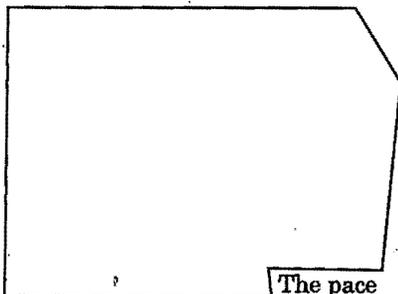
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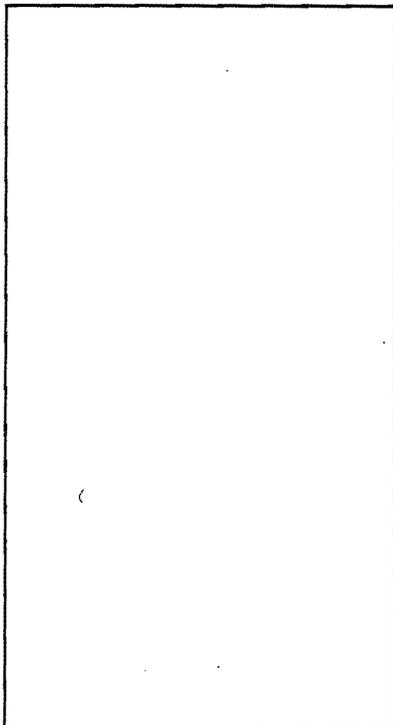
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**This agent inventory expanded exponentially after 9/11 when CIA officers started recruiting tribal armies.**

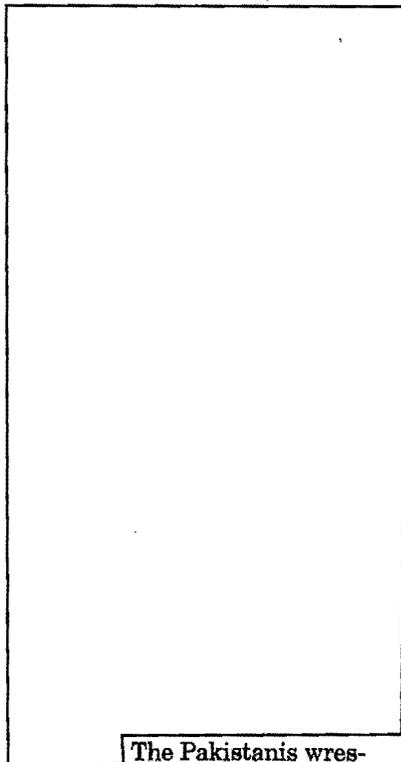
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The pace of operational activity again accelerated after the al-Qaida attack on the USS COLE in Yemen in October 2000. (S//NF)



Intelligence, the bulk from HUMINT, provided the means to measure a number of the external elements of war—including the strengths of allies and enemies—which formed the basis for US government internal decision-making on policy, strategy, and covert action (including psychological operations). HUMINT afforded the CIA considerable influence over strategic planning, with a covert action war at its center, which in turn led to more resources and more intelligence. (S//NF)



The Pakistanis wrestled with their fears of a new

<sup>8</sup> With no US Embassy in Kabul and the activities of al-Qaida spanning the globe, intelligence operations against Usama bin Laden (UBL) were handled by a Chief of Station (COS) heading a virtual Station at CIA Headquarters (CTC/UBL). (S//NF)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

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Afghanistan beyond their influence, but eventually succumbed to US pressure and played an important supporting role.

In Afghanistan, HUMINT was critical. SIGINT/

played an important role, as did imagery from NRO satellites, US military aircraft and drones,

Nonetheless, it was the fusion of technical collection with HUMINT that proved to be the formula for success. A dynamic system of checking and retasking multiple assets—human and technical—proved highly effective. For example, when a source reported the coordinates of an enemy camp using GPS (global positioning technology), the information would be forwarded to the Intelligence Community (IC) for evaluation and, if deemed credible, redirection of satellites, planes, and other collection systems to corroborate the report. New data on the site would lead to refined tasking for the original source.

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**Electronic mapping technology, an intimate partnership with the US military, and fast offensive action turned out to be the key to targeting.**  
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In the final analysis, the CIA unilateral HUMINT networks developed over the last two decades provided both the critical intelligence reporting and the muscle for covert action in Afghanistan. (S//NF)

#### Targeting (U)

CIA targeting support played a crucial role in deconflicting target proposals, facilitating precise air and ground attacks, and sustaining the overall intelligence cycle of collection/fusion/targeting/operations. Afghans have long been expert at targeting, as British and Soviet invaders could attest. Al-Qaida also excels at ambushes against fixed sites outside combat zones, rather than large-scale military engagements. The CIA and the US military needed to target and destroy such adept enemies before they could acquire a head on our positions. (S//NF)

A revolutionary targeting system using electronic mapping technology, an intimate partnership with the US military, and fast offensive action turned out to be the key. CTC/SO created a

special targeting unit

directly linked with eight other US government entities, most importantly NSA and CENTCOM.<sup>5</sup> The CIA's Office of Military Affairs also played an important role.

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

<sup>5</sup> The US military Central Command, based in Tampa, Florida, was under the command of Gen. Tommy Franks. CENTCOM oversees all military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia. (U)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

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The CTC/SO targeting unit disseminated its product to the field, directly assisting US pilots and CIA and US military forces to outmaneuver and engage the enemy. Importantly, the same fused, all-source intelligence that enabled dynamic targeting also benefited HUMINT collection, psychological programs, and covert action operations. (S//NF)

**The Right People (U)**

The right people, bringing their imperfect mix of experience, pride, emotions, and instincts, were the cornerstone of US success in Afghanistan. On 11 September 2001, the CIA had no component, no staff, and no support mechanism structured to launch and manage this unique war against a terrorist army hiding in a fractured land on the far side of the globe. Fortunately, the CIA—especially CTC and the DO's Special Activities Division (SAD)—had developed the expertise over the years to build such an organization. (S//NF)

Within days of 9/11, the Director of CTC recalled me from a foreign assignment to establish and lead CTC/SO. My deputy was a Naval Academy graduate with 26 years of government service, who had worked CT targets in South Asia. CTC/SO included a covert action ops officer, a former Marine

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

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The chief of reports, a 25-year veteran, marshalled a small cadre of specialists to manage and disseminate the HUMINT. Senior analysts brought a wealth of knowledge, including practical experience tracking counternarcotics targets.

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

Military liaison officers included a Special Forces (SF) colonel, a commander, and analysts—all superb, proven performers. They were given complete access to CTC/SO information and immediately assumed invaluable, fully integrated roles. (S//NF)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

The Headquarters component focused on strategic goals, linked policy and operations, assembled and disseminated intelligence, and coordinated support for the vanguards of the war: the CIA teams deployed into Afghanistan. (S//NF)

In Afghanistan, the CIA teams operated semi-autonomously as a

network so that they could respond to widely varying geographic, tribal, and tactical conditions. Each collected local information, received broad all-source intelligence from CTC/SO, assessed its own situations, made decisions, coordinated with Headquarters to gauge strategic consequences, and, most of all, executed its core mission, which was to find and use all means to destroy al-Qaida. A centralized CIA command element inside Afghanistan, or, worse, based in the United States, would have impeded the better-informed, dispersed teams on the ground. CTC/SO's immediate aim, therefore, was to deploy and support teams and encourage their tactical autonomy within a strategic plan congruent with US government policy objectives. (S//NF)

These teams blended diverse talents and boasted highly experienced leaders who excelled in missions demanding independence and initiative. Despite the erosion of CIA paramilitary (PM) capabilities since the end of the Cold War, CIA had managed to retain a core of PM officers in SAD.

most formerly from the US Special Operations community, SAD nonetheless provided the backbone for CIA teams deploying into Afghanistan. Many of these PM officers were cross-trained and experienced operations/intelligence officers.

At the same time, CIA operations officers with these requisite

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

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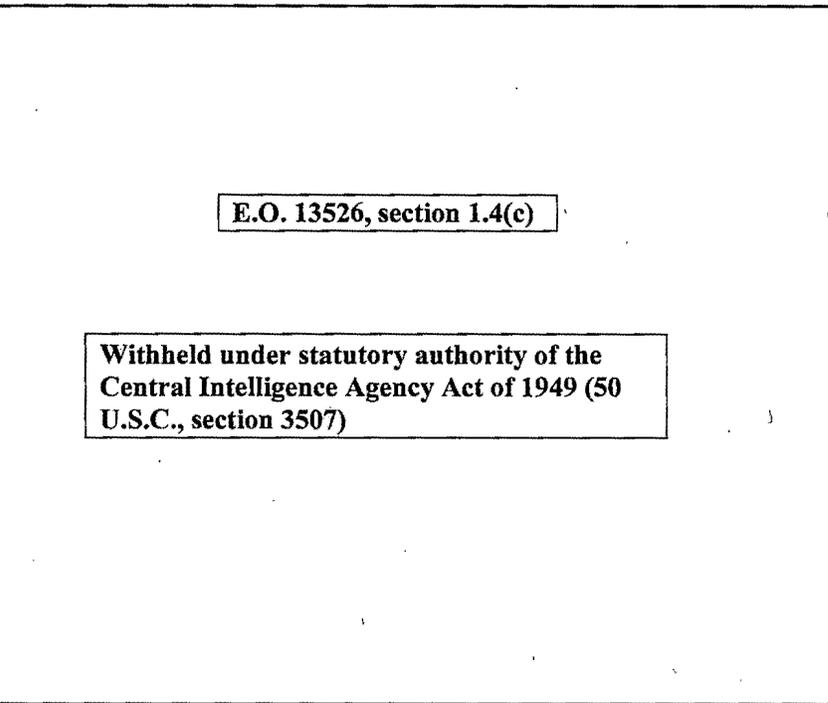
qualifications had little if any military experience or training, other than basic CIA weapons familiarization. Yet, the right combination of personnel with the right team leadership proved sufficient for the mission.

(S//NF)

In all types of weather and combat conditions, SAD [redacted] along with the US military air infrastructure, served as the umbilical cord for the CIA teams. SAD pilots flew helicopters (Russian MI-17s) and fixed wing aircraft into Afghanistan.

(S//NF)

Of the seven CIA teams deployed in the first wave of insertions from 27 September until 19 November, the Northern Alliance Liaison Team (NALT) led the way into the Panjshir Valley. Within 16 days of the attacks on US soil, this team was inside Afghanistan. Chief/NALT, a veteran operations officer, spoke Farsi/Dari and knew many of the key Afghan political players. His deputy, a former Special Forces soldier and veteran PM operations officer, provided complementary military expertise. (From the Pentagon's perspective, this would be the equivalent of generals leading an A-team-sized unit into the heart of the fight.) The eight-member team included operations officers, PM officers, a medic, and a communications specialist. They averaged 45 years of age and 25 years of professional experience. Members of the NALT recombined them-



selves at will with US military units on the ground as specific mission requirements evolved.

(S//NF)

The remaining six teams, Alpha through Foxtrot, averaged eight members, all experienced in Third World crises. Each included multiple officers with foreign language capabilities, including Farsi/Dari, Uzbek, Russian, and Arabic; [redacted]

[redacted] All but one team leader spoke some local language or dialect. Two team leaders would receive the Intelligence Cross for supreme valor on the battlefield. These teams, like the NALT, combined with the US military for specific missions. Some teams included SF ele-

ments at the time of insertion. Many team members performed remarkable tasks, like the medic who amputated the leg of an Afghan soldier using only a Leatherman tool. Team Delta members and SF forces captured a senior Taliban intelligence official, deep in hostile territory. Team Alpha directed a Northern Alliance element to rescue two US journalists, lost and trapped by fighting near Konduz. NALT [redacted] in Pakistan, tracked Western hostages and supported their rescue and extraction from Afghanistan. Some teams led Afghan forces into combat. (S//NF)

The CIA and IC effort encompassed scores of components and thousands of people making criti-

**E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)**

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The lean teams and support branches were able to move quickly and nimbly around bureaucratic barriers within the Agency and the IC—strong Agency leadership and IC support also facilitated this. Importantly, Afghan allies viewed such small teams as courageous partners rather than an invading army. (S//NF)

**Money and Supplies (U)**

Funding flowed in a torrent. The CIA teams literally slept on millions of US dollars. The financial incentive for assets and tribal army commanders to cooperate was substantial and immediate. (S//NF)

Just as critical were the supplies that kept the teams and Afghan allies warm, fed, and capable of combat.

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

Moreover, customized bundles and unconventional requests proved the norm rather than the exception. For example, when an ethnic Uzbek commander told us that his most critical need was horse feed, CTC/SO's experienced logistics officers made the purchases and worked with the US Air Force to airdrop the

cal contributions. CIA logistics officers and military aircrews purchased, packed, transported, and air dropped weapons and gear to teams inside Afghanistan. Firearms instructors, cartographers, computer technicians, analysts, soldiers, reports officers, translators, security officers, medics, pilots, communicators, and many others played vital roles.

qualified personnel. The CIA depended on the ingenuity of a small number of superior field communicators, and, later, US military assistance, because of antiquated tactical communications gear and the limited number of qualified field communications officers. The CIA lacked sufficient foreign-language-qualified operations officers. DIA, blessed with experienced officers, yet burdened by a cumbersome bureaucracy, contributed minimal information and resources. (S//NF)

In sharp contrast to the massive IC effort, fewer than [ ] CIA personnel were dedicated exclusively to the operation, either inside Afghanistan or in CTC/SO [ ]

Yet, there were shortfalls within the Community. NSA struggled to provide tactical SIGINT support, due to a shortage of

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supplies within days of the  
request.

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

Portable hospitals  
were purchased and shipped.  
Armored vests, medical packs,  
Korans, food, binoculars, toys,  
knives, pickup trucks, grenades,  
saddles, and

plus hundreds of other  
items were pushed to the field.  
CTC/SO never rejected any tacti-  
cal supply request from one of its  
teams. (S//NF)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

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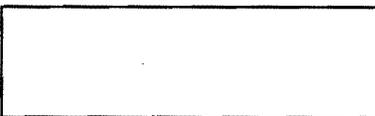
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*Afghanistan*

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E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

Despite these Washington-based issues, the CIA forged a solid partnership with CENTCOM, [redacted] and US air components. While the debate with the Pentagon centered on power and control, the dialog with CENTCOM and others focused more on how to achieve victory. The CIA provided HUMINT, psychological operations experience, cash, lethal covert action capabilities, [redacted] and entrée to tribal allies (plus the political guidance required to leverage and coordinate these Afghan allies). In turn, the US military offered combat expertise, awesome firepower, logistics and communications architecture, IMINT, and SIGINT. In some cases, the personal relationships between CIA and US military personnel, many developed in such CT battlefields [redacted] [redacted] facilitated the partnership. (S//NF)

The near *ad hoc* formation of these flexible CIA/SF teams—supported by US airpower and the melding of organizational authorities—and the defiance of restrictive doctrine and cultural norms made the partnerships work. CENTCOM's Gen. Franks embraced and expanded upon this evolving concept of war during a critical 3 October 2001 planning session. Moreover, the close links forged in the field with US military warfighters, especially SF, [redacted] and the Air Force, proved extraordinary. In

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

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**Friction was inevitable  
 ... DOD/J2 questioned  
 every major  
 geostrategic objective  
 of the CIA/CENTCOM  
 plan.**  
 ”

the end, common sense, fortified by overwhelming mutual commitment to the mission, outweighed bureaucratic and doctrinal constraints. (S//NF)

**Strategy (U)**

The Afghan campaign involved combining the internal elements of war managed by the US government with key external factors—primarily the nature of the enemy and his terrain—into an interdependent, flexible plan for execution. (U)

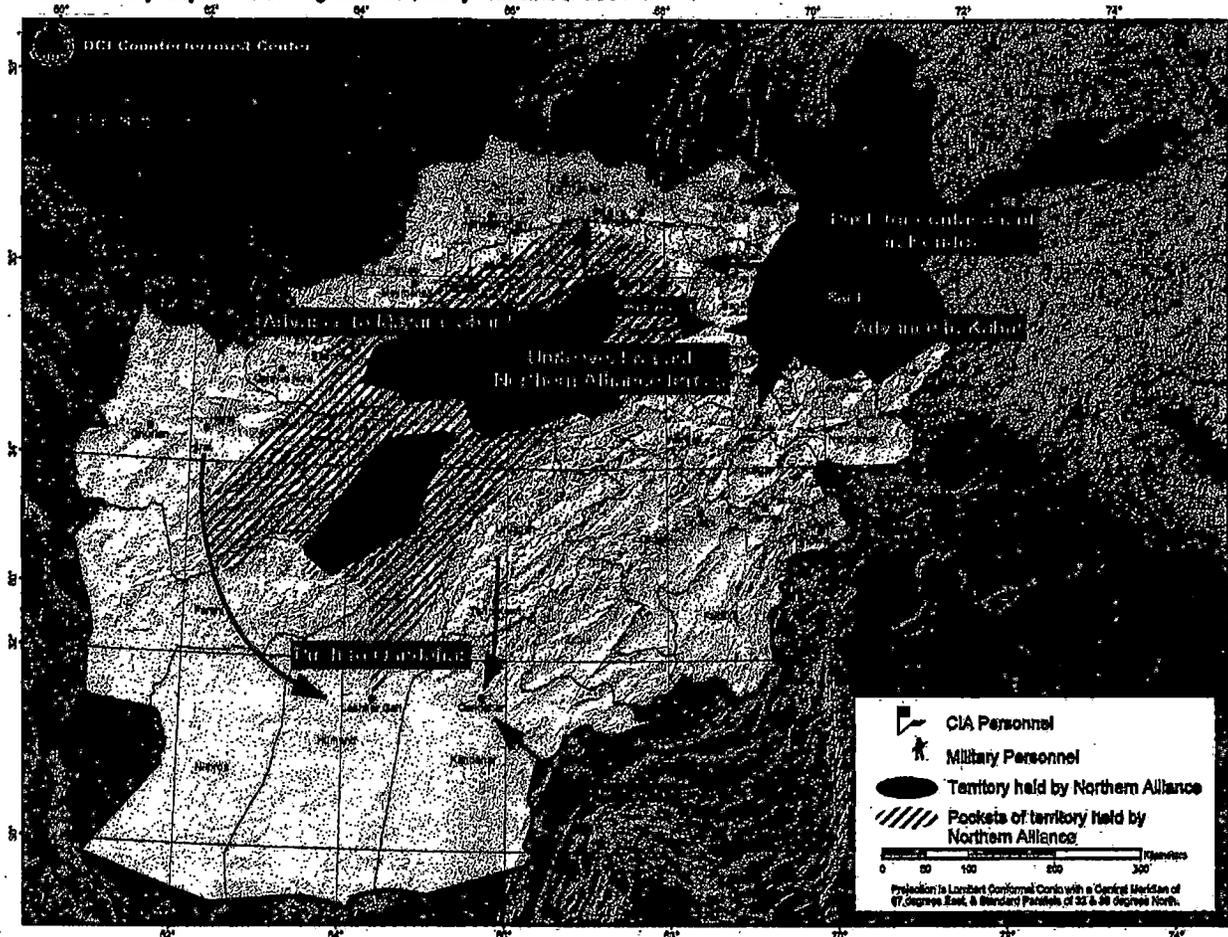
The first question: “Who is the enemy?” Sun Tzu stressed the importance of defining the enemy with precision, focusing on critical nodes, and recruiting, coopting, marginalizing, frightening, coercing, or using any other means to parse enemy forces. He wrote: “Those who win every battle are not really skillful—those who render others’ armies helpless without fighting are the best of all.” In CTC/SO, we operated on the understanding that the enemy was not Afghanistan, not the Afghan people, and not even the Taliban as a government or institution. The enemy was al-Qaida, particularly the terrorists’ command and control network and their specific

Taliban leadership allies. The Taliban as a fighting force presented merely a secondary target, an obstacle toward the ultimate objective. (S//NF)

The CIA launched an intensive and comprehensive psychological operation to capitalize on the Afghan tradition of switching sides as battles evolve and induce defections through cash payments, food, supplies, and threats (especially effective when backed by precision bombing). The psychological operations offered potential allies in the Taliban ranks choices of survival, means to enhance prestige, hope, and personal gain. The center of gravity rested in the minds of tribal commanders who had aligned with the Taliban as a matter of political advantage. The CIA operations sought to shift that center of gravity. (S//NF)

The reality of northern Tajik and Uzbek opposition and Pashtun ambivalence toward the Taliban regime and, especially, its al-Qaida allies, prompted our central strategic and psychological theme: The war was cast as a battle by Afghan patriots against the foreign Arab, Chechen, and Pakistani terrorist invaders. Following this theme, the role of the United States would be to provide the unifying strategy, coordinated C3 across tribal/factional lines, fused intelligence, airpower, supplies, and political leverage for the Afghan allies, in critical partnership with CIA operatives and US soldiers, to

## Allied Military Objectives in Afghanistan, Early November 2001 (S//NF)

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wage a fast-paced war on the ground. (S//NF)

The next question: "How to gain lethal access to the target?" The answer came in two parts: Quality intelligence collectors and covert action forces, calling upon unilateral assets and tribal allies, would serve as the first component; Special Operations Forces, directing precise airstrikes, would be the second. These two partners, CIA and SF, would merge to form an epoxy that would bind tribal ground forces with US air power. The joint

CIA/SF teams would provide timely, specific geographic coordinates, using hand-held GPS devices, laser designators, and real-time communications. US forces would define geographic location in exact terms, and, with uncompromised speed, strike enemy forces with quality psychological operations, lethal covert action, unconventional ground attacks, and ultramodern munitions from all quarters. (S//NF)

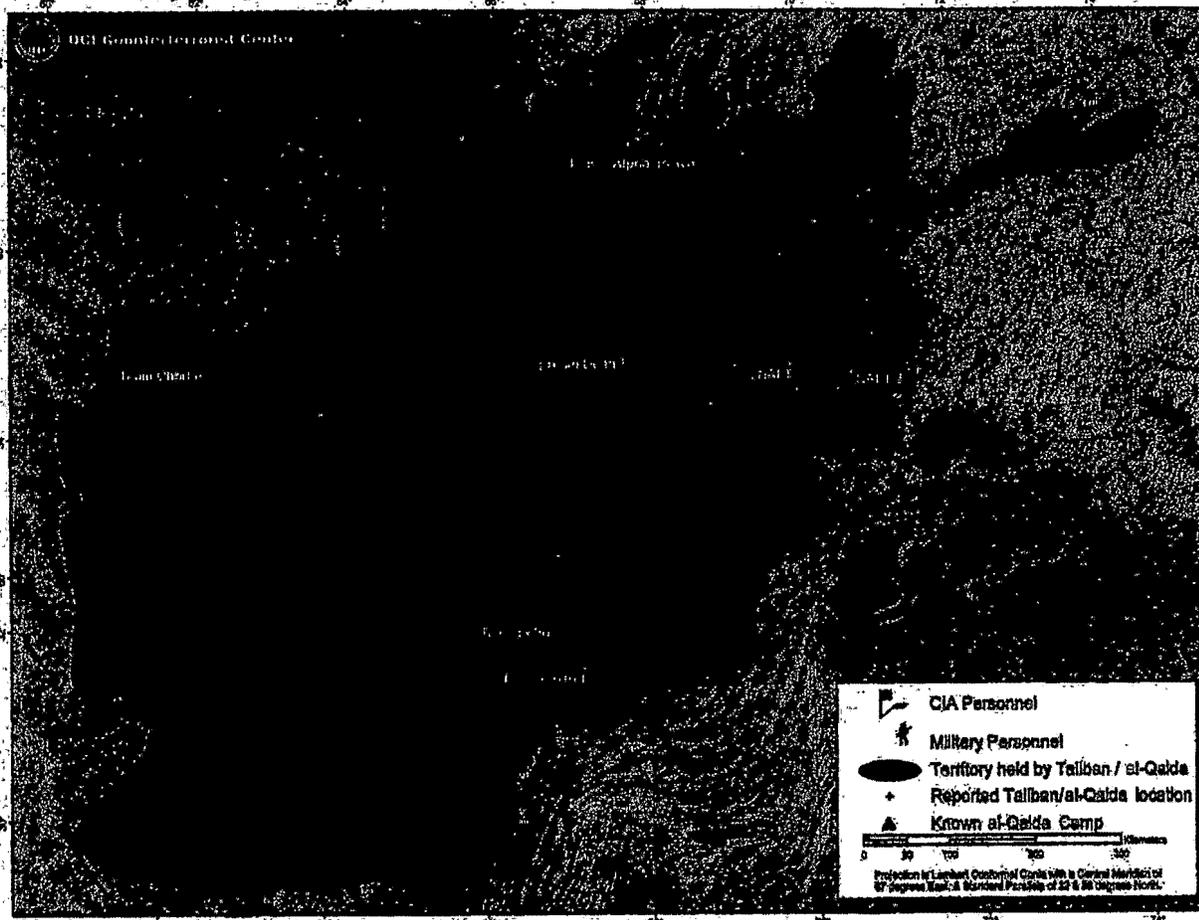
The practical application of US strategic thinking evolved into a three-phase war plan:

*First*, unconventional ground warfare and conventional airpower would defeat any massed al-Qaida and Taliban forces that did not defect or flee.

*Second*, US and allied forces would locate and eradicate remaining al-Qaida pockets.

*Third*, and most difficult, the United States would seek to

## Territorial Holdings in Afghanistan, 2 December 2001 (S//NF)

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capture or kill specific al-Qaida leaders, designated High Value Targets (HVTs). (S//NF)

Phases One and Two, of course, could overlap with Phase Three. This, in fact, was how al-Qaida's second-in-command, Mohamed Atef, was killed in a US airstrike. But, where to begin Phase One? With the Taliban controlling or influencing about 80 percent of the country, the few areas of Afghan tribal opposition dictated the answer. CIA teams would begin work with the strongest allied Afghan forces, where the local com-

mander demonstrated sufficient ability to protect an inserted team and the means and will to attack the enemy. (S//NF)

#### Phase One: Taliban/Al-Qaida Armies (U)

Where to attack? Through Northern Alliance partners, CIA had access to the mountainous northeast corner of Afghanistan, including the Panjshir Valley, which opened into the Shomali Plains north of Kabul. Other allied tribal elements, loosely folded under the Northern Alliance, held ragged chunks of

territory throughout the rough central section of Afghanistan. Ethnic Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, with a few Pashtun allies, exercised varying degrees of influence in these areas and knew the enemy well. In fact, they were engaged regularly in skirmishes and artillery exchanges with Taliban forces. In the south, Pashtun agent networks and potential Pashtun tribal allies held no territory and there was no organized allied tribal army, certainly nothing comparable to the Northern Alliance that had armor, artillery, and a few aircraft. (S//NF)

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The northern option for insertion and attack, however, ran the risk of alienating potential Pashtun allies in the south and east. CIA did not want to spark a north/south civil war. With that in mind, [redacted] pushed for a delay in the attack to allow erstwhile Pashtun forces to rally and gain strength against the Taliban. But [redacted] Chief/NALT lobbied hard for the insertion of more teams in the north, US airstrikes against enemy forces, and tribal forces attacking in coordinated mass. After debate, with no significant Pashtun resistance in sight, CIA moved forward with the northern option, with the anticipation of Pashtun forces eventually joining the fray against the Taliban and al-Qaida. A fast and decisive attack would, the CIA

assessed, prompt most Afghans to take advantage of the US momentum and seek to join the winning side. (S//NF)

How best to engage and destroy the enemy? Recent history provided the answer. In the summer of 1997 Northern Alliance forces had controlled Mazar-e-sharif and the landbridge to Uzbekistan, and had managed to cut Highway One, which runs from Kabul north to Konduz, thus encircling thousands of Taliban forces in the Konduz/Talaquan area. The Taliban however, had maintained an air link to their surrounded forces and kept them resupplied. Taliban operatives eventually bribed Gen. Dostum's subcommanders to switch sides, forcing Dostum to flee Mazar and breaking the potential seige. (S//NF)

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CIA and the US military aimed to repeat this encirclement of Taliban/al-Qaida forces. In October/November 2001, with US airpower controlling the skies, CIA/SF (Teams Alpha and Bravo) supplied and directed allied Afghan ground forces to drive north, capture Mazar, and establish a landbridge to Uzbekistan. Concurrently, in early November, Northern Alliance forces struck from the eastern mountains and drove westward with a northern and southern pincer movement around the Konduz area. Hazara Shia forces, assisted by Team Delta, pushed from Bamian to the east, while Northern Alliance armies, assisted by the NALT, blasted south through the Shomali Plains toward Kabul and also swung westward to cut Highway One and gain control of the Salang Tunnel. This closed the loop, trapping enemy forces in the Konduz pocket. In coordinated movements, Ismail Khan's forces supported by Team Charlie cut the National Ring Road in the far west, to interdict enemy resupply efforts, and then pushed to Herat and eventually Shindand Airfield. (S//NF)

The Pashtun south remained a greater challenge, given that

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**Psychological operations proved critical in the preparation and manipulation of the battlefield in favor of the United States.**  
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E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

tribal allies controlled no territory. Team Echo, inserted into an area near Torin Kowt under Hamid Karzai's influence, rallied sufficient forces to establish a tenuous operational base. Surrounded by enemy forces, Team Echo, with US air power, managed to destroy an attacking Taliban convoy on 17/18 November and fight its way south to Kandahar. Chief/Echo played a pivotal role, convincing tribal councils to cooperate and then leading Karzai's unproven forces into battle. This specific success not only achieved a critical military objective, but linked the south to the north because Karzai enjoyed a degree of respect throughout Afghanistan. Advocating a nation-state more than tribal turf, he was acceptable to the Northern Alliance as a potential partner. The Northern Alliance, for its part, agreed not to move beyond Kabul.

Team Foxtrot and tribal forces loyal to Shirzai moved in



FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY  
CIA MI-17 helicopter in Afghanistan through night vision scope. (U//FOUO)

from Pakistan and battled west to Kandahar. (S//NF)

In coordination with these attacks, CIA directed all covert action assets to initiate sabotage and ambush operations against enemy forces throughout Afghanistan. One Pashtun warlord in eastern Afghanistan [redacted] attacked Arab convoys as they fled from urban areas to mountain hideouts. (S//NF)

For every CIA/SF team, psychological operations proved critical in the preparation and manipulation of the battlefield in favor of the United States: The CIA and tribal partners induced thousands of Taliban to switch sides or flee. Moreover, psychological operations and cash helped to recruit allies, improve force pro-

tection, and lay the foundations for local political development after the war. (S//NF)

How to attack? Success would require surprise, speed, and precision in concert with balancing the political/military needs of Afghan allies and combining the strengths of CIA, Special Forces, [redacted] and US air power. (S//NF)

The advantage of surprise in these military operations would prove crucial. Many Taliban leaders and the al-Qaida hierarchy, especially Usama bin Laden, expected, planned, and hoped for a slow, ponderous, massive US invasion of Afghanistan, with large firebases, providing them stationary targets, much like they experienced during the Soviet occupation. The concept of mas-

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

Afghanistan

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**The Agency was too thin on the ground and CENTCOM too slow to close the porous loop ... allowing al-Qaida commanders to slip over the border into Pakistan.**

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sive, overwhelming US force was enshrined in the "Powell Doctrine," exercised brilliantly by the Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Gulf War. Al-Qaida knew this and assured its foot soldiers that the United States would present substantial targets.

Moreover, the enemy expected US political leaders to order withdrawal in the face of casualties, as they had in Somalia. Multiple HUMINT sources had reported these enemy expectations. Deployment of a few teams of intelligence operatives, unconventional warriors, and [redacted] commandos behind enemy lines to recruit and rally tribal armies and attack simultaneously in multiple directions, accompanied by precise airstrikes, seemed more than improbable to enemy leaders. (S//NF)

Given al-Qaida's global network, demonstrated capabilities, con-

firmed efforts to acquire CBRN weapons, and preference for multiple terrorist acts, the US Intelligence Community and policymakers understood the possibility of follow-on attacks in the wake of 9/11. Washington needed to destroy the primary al-Qaida sanctuary, Afghanistan, and their C3 immediately. There was no time to shift significant US forces into the region, much less plan and launch a conventional campaign. (S//NF)

Moreover, winter loomed and the prospects for clear skies were diminishing. With the United States dependent on helicopters and small fixed-wing aircraft for mobility, the battle required conclusion prior to the end of December; otherwise the effort could slip several months. The US response demanded speed and flexibility to match the variable conditions on the ground. (S//NF)

Speed also afforded the CIA a significant bureaucratic advantage. The inserted teams outpaced other US government entities, reducing what von Clausewitz called the "friction of war." In other words, with the green light blinking from the Commander-in-Chief and the NSC, CIA moved faster than other components, thereby avoiding delays created by redundant planning, repeated coordination, and fretful debate. (S//NF)

#### **Phase Two: Al-Qaida Concentrations (U)**

How to locate and destroy al-Qaida pockets, in the aftermath of the Taliban defeat? Phase One strategy was unsuitable for Phase Two, as the Taliban collapsed as a unified fighting force and al-Qaida remnants fled to high mountain sanctuaries. Some Pentagon pessimists were stunned at the overwhelming success. Even CENTCOM and CIA, while confident of victory, were surprised and unprepared for the rapid pace of success and the demands of enemy pursuit. The strategy of Phase One, whereby tribal allies

Withheld under statutory authority of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949 (50 U.S.C., section 3507)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(a)

## E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

carried the mass weight and occupied ground, would not apply as effectively in Phase Two. Small numbers of al-Qaida forces, much better trained and equipped than the defeated Taliban armies and rag-tag Pakistani volunteers, retreated to redoubts outside the traditional homelands of victorious, celebrating tribal allies, many of whom, at this point, were more interested in the spoils of war than hunting hardened Arab and Chechen fighters ensconced in mountain caves. (S//NF)

During the December battle for the Tora Bora redoubt, allied Afghan fighters served as blocking forces, with some success in the north but very little in the west, where al-Qaida commanders—including bin Laden—and some of their men slipped over the border into Pakistan. CIA operatives on the ground expressed to CIA Headquarters their concern about the limited abilities of Afghan and Pakistani allies, but the Agency was too thin on the ground and CENTCOM too slow to close the porous loop.

[REDACTED]

The Pakistanis captured some, but many others fled to sanctuaries in Pakistan or to their home countries. Nevertheless, the enemy was routed, a critical sanctuary was captured, and time was not wasted.

Lawrence of Arabia said: "Better to let them do it imperfectly than do it perfectly yourself, for it is their country, their way, and your time is short." (S//NF)



Rough terrain seen from Agency helicopter on mission in Afghanistan. (S//NF)

The key to victory in Tora Bora rested, again, on the union of CIA, SF, and US airpower.

<sup>8</sup> Joint Direct Attack Munitions use a guidance kit to convert unguided, free-fall bombs into all-weather "smart" munitions. (U)

In the March 2002 battle of Shahikot, after weeks of preparation, the US military worked the target with significantly larger numbers of US forces and even greater firepower than at Tora Bora. As many as 800 enemy were killed. Nonetheless, the weeks of delay enabled al-Qaida to prepare and many escaped to the Waziristan tribal area of Pakistan. CIA-sponsored tribal blocking forces, again, did not shut down enemy rat lines across the border. (S//NF)

E.O. 13526, section 1.4(c)

## Afghanistan

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**What of the future? We must have leadership at every level, with empowered warriors on the ground.**

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**Phase Three: High Value Targets (U)**

As expected, the last phase proved the most difficult part of the campaign. CIA/SF teams, using psychological tactics against local Afghan groups, managed to purchase access, mobility, and sometimes cooperation; however, seldom did this translate into actionable intelligence against al-Qaida leaders who bought their own influence and time to flee. The High Value Targets slipped into the Afghan/Pakistan border area, where some stayed, while others dispersed worldwide, with some captured later by local authorities working with CIA stations.

(S/NF)

**Conclusion (U)**

*The strategy outlined above . . . sets high goals in very uncertain, shifting terrain. We are fighting for the CT objectives in the Afghan theater, but we are also fighting for the future of CIA/DOD integrated warfare around the globe. While we will make mistakes as we chart new territory and new methodology (such as the integration of Predator collection/attack and tactical ground warfare), our objectives are clear and our concept of CIA/DOD partnership is sound. Please keep up the outstanding effort . . . as we enter the next phase.*

CTC/SO cable to the field,  
5 Oct 2001 (S/NF)

The external elements of war—primarily the cultural and geographic conditions inside Afghanistan—deeply influenced how US leaders shaped the internal elements of war under their control into a successful strategy and campaign. Senior government leaders endorsed the CIA's proposal to deploy semi-autonomous teams to conform to the fractured geopolitical nature of Afghanistan. Surprise and speed, instead of a slower conventional US response, confounded enemy expectations and threw them into disarray. Well-funded psychological operations, which reinforced such Afghan cultural traditions as honorable defection in tribal/clan warfare, won combatants to the allied effort. A nuanced psychological campaign nourished Afghan suspicion of al-Qaida “foreign invaders” while, paradoxically, facilitating the entry of our own forces. Repeated demonstrations of courage and dedication by CIA and US military personnel resonated deeply within the Afghan cultural context and won converts. Raw lethal power, impacting on call on behalf of local allies, resonated even more deeply. (S/NF)

What of the future? What have we learned from the Afghan campaign? We have the might and

the will to win the war on terrorism, but we will need more if we are to claim victory in a conflict that stretches before us for many years. We must have leadership at every level, with empowered warriors on the ground. We must learn the art of this unique and evolving conflict, which requires greater introspection and intelligence collection than past wars to determine the optimum balance of internal and external factors to achieve strategic and tactical success against a new kind of enemy. (S/NF)

All the tools of the US government must be applied, in integrated joint operations supported by all-source intelligence wrapped around a HUMINT core. And HUMINT must drill deeply into the enemy's capabilities, plans and intentions, and motivations. Why someone fights determines who and how he fights. We must craft a strategy to exploit the physical, political, and cultural battlefield. We must accept new approaches premised on the annihilation of enemy leadership and sanctuaries, and seek to resolve the origins of their profound discontent. Above all, we must have the right people to carry the battle to the enemy wherever found. (S/NF)