

Achieving Narrative Superiority to Succeed in Afghanistan

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As President Obama and President Karzai met in Washington, DC in May 2010, it was important for both leaders to recognize they are part of a powerful narrative. Their ability to clearly communicate their vision and to inspire their respective constituencies will determine how history treats their legacies.

In Afghanistan there is a cacophony of narratives. Historical narratives defeated great powers from Alexander the Great to the 20th century Soviet Union. It will not be the military implementation that will determine the success or failure of the present day campaign. The side with the most compelling narrative will succeed. As General Stanley McChrystal stated in September 2009, the allies need to “take aggressive actions to win the important battle of perception.”¹

The narrative can be defined as ongoing discussion of and collective opinion about events taking place in theater, and assigning value motivations and value judgments to the parties in conflict.

A compelling narrative requires the following ingredients in order to achieve narrative superiority:

1. **Rationale:** The rational argument the message makes and the psychological effect it aims to achieve.
2. **Evidence:** The evidence the message contains, if any is needed, for assertions made of its rationale. Providing evidence reinforces the narrative and persuades non-compliant parties that actions will align with words. Senior leaders provide tangible evidence in multiple ways – threat of force, launch military operations and/or provide aid. It depends on what is required to persuade non-compliant parties that stated intentions will be backed up by action.
3. **Comprehensibility:** The adequacy with which the message is translated into the language and culture of its recipients. Afghanistan is a warrior culture where pride and honor is paramount. Are all our messages taking critical cultural foundations into account?
4. **Emotional acceptability:** The appropriateness of the message’s tone to ensure it will not be rejected. Are the emotions used to deliver the message consistent with the aim of the message?

¹ Walter Pincus, “McChrystal Says Insurgents Are Winning Communications Battle”, *Washington Post*, September 27, 2009, p. A14

5. **Coordination:** The extent to which the message is delivered in a consistent and coordinated manner by all involved on our side to ensure it is sent as intended and the messages are received by targeted audiences to achieve compliance. This area needs considerable attention. The multiple organizations present on the ground find it difficult to coordinate coherent messaging.²

1) Historical Narrative Examples

Compelling narratives in history are etched in our minds. The image of the lone Chinese civilian carrying the shopping bags facing a single tank on Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the smashing of the Berlin Wall in 1989 continue to provide compelling narrative images of those occasions. Those pictures encapsulated the narrative and served as symbols to catapult people to embrace a narrative. "A picture is worth a thousand words."

The Saddam Hussein statue falling in Baghdad created a powerful image in the minds of the Iraqis and the US. What images and symbols are operating in the Afghan narrative today?

The lack of transparency and trust surrounding the disputed Afghan elections in 2009 served to undermine the Afghan people's trust in their government and the power of a new era of stability that Karzai and the West repeatedly promise to deliver.

The so-called global fight against terrorism is littered with competing narratives. Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups recognize the power of story combining grievances (perceived and actual), history and myth to augment their narrative of victimization to further radicalization.³

2) The narrative is the cornerstone to success.

Boots on the ground are not good enough. The military is an important component, but it is not the only part of the narrative. Civilians and military need to align messaging and to communicate to the local population in a meaningful way. The principles of communication teach us that in order to communicate effectively to the public it is important to first understand their perceptions⁴ (ingredient number three referenced above -- comprehensibility.) To persuade the public to embrace an alternative

² Dr. Nigel Howard, *Confrontation Analysis: How to Win Operations Other than War*, 1999, US Department of Defense

³ Frank Cilluffo, Daniel Kimmage, "How to Beat al Qaeda at Its Own Game", *Foreign Policy*, April 14, 2009

⁴ Baruch Fischhoff, B. 'Risk Perception and Communication Unplugged: Twenty Years of Process', *Risk Analysis*, Vol. 15, No. 2, (1995), pp. 137-145

narrative, you need to know how they perceive the current situation. This requires gaining a detailed understanding of the competing narratives in Afghanistan:

- The Taliban story that the 'infidels' (the West) are in a holy war attempting to defeat Islam;
- The Afghan government's opposition narrative competing with the Karzai government's narrative;
- The NATO narrative; and
- The locals and tribal leaders aligning their stories to reinforce their power and influence.

In a country where the literacy rate is 28.1%⁵ the majority of civilians' knowledge of their environment comes from stories passed down by the elders and/or senior tribal leaders. Story telling is the prime means of communicating what's happening in their world and whose cause to embrace. The US and its allies need to become good storytellers. Ultimately the persuasive power of story with images and actions to support the themes captures the imagination of the diaspora and rules the narrative space. The pull of this future gradually aligns people with the story.

Historically, the successes of counterinsurgencies are dependent on the power of the narrative to win the will of the people and to achieve clear alignment between actions and messaging. Israeli actions in Lebanon against Hezbollah in 2006 illustrated the importance of tactical successes failing to support the narrative via a strategic success. Combined with the perceived Israeli indiscriminate bombing leading to civilian casualties while Hezbollah were well dug in, the narrative of the 2006 military engagement in Lebanon was of extensive suffering for civilians with no clear military knockout blow in defeating Hezbollah's ability to launch rocket attacks against northern Israel.

3) The West and the Government of Afghanistan are ineffective in competing for narrative dominance.

The theater is aptly named.⁶ Indeed it is a theater where commanders and statesmen alike compete for the attention of the local diaspora and the populace back home. It is up to the senior decision makers to draw attention to their story and to dominate the narrative. There are several reasons why the West and the Government of Afghanistan are not dominating the narrative. First, the objective of dominating the narrative is not at the heart of the planning process. It is tangential at best. Currently, the ripple effects of our actions contribute to the Taliban narrative. The lack of clarity of the narrative we convey is compounded by the fact that we are not skilled storytellers. Fourth, the void

⁵ CIA Fact Book

⁶ General Sir Rupert Smith, *Utility of Force*, New York: Random House, 2007.

is filled with their own compelling stories, often at odds with the stability and governance we seek. Fifth, at a fundamental level we do not understand local culture. We have a cursory understanding of Afghan culture, but after nine years the US and its allies still find it difficult to predict the impact of culture on local decision-making.

The Taliban are focused on winning the narrative. They recognize an inexpensive yet effective means to 'win' entails disorientating and terrorizing the public – a classic terrorism tactic.⁷ By forcing the fights to the street, the Taliban aim to disrupt individuals from carrying out their daily lives to such a degree that they view Karzai's government as incapable of protecting and governing its people - fueling the perception of insecurity.

One should not forget the Taliban's rise to prominence prior to 9/11 was backed by the narrative that they could provide order out of chaos.

Meanwhile, the US military and her allies are able to point to many engagements on the battlefield that have been won by removing the Taliban and AQ affiliated groups from various locations. But all too often the tactical military success is overridden by a strategic failure due to the loss of the narrative. The US military lacks the public communications efficiency of the Taliban who do not require multiple layers of bureaucracy to publicize and post information concerning battle engagements. The Taliban public communication process is not too short of "click, record and upload."

"The Taliban have become highly skilled in the dark-arts of propaganda; so much so that senior ISAF figures often lament their own inability to run an equally efficient media operation."⁸

Efforts are being made to improve the process in the military, but they must counter the tight decision-making cycle time of the enemy. Could the military forces engaged on the ground provide a rapid debrief on what occurred for their commanding officers to release? Underlying the inability of the current command structure to respond rapidly to an incident is the organizational structure, reward system and natural communication channels. Our metrics of success in kinetic terms are at odds with the metrics for success in winning the narrative. Kinetic military options need to be viewed as a message – a powerful, credible threat that persuades non-compliant parties that we not only threaten to invade Kandahar or Marjah, but we are capable of invading and holding the territory. So far, we have not demonstrated our ability to do so, long-term.

⁷ Grant Wardlaw, *Political Terrorism: Theory, tactics and counter-measures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

⁸ Ian Pannell, BBC News, Kabul, May 19, 2010.

However, after the initial success of the conflict (the fighting required to win control of the city), there are multiple confrontations that need to be won before we are able to declare the operation a success. Thus, it is imperative to see the kinetic messaging as part of a series of confrontations. In our tenth year for Afghan operations, commanders on the ground recognize military success will not come by destroying the enemy but will require knowing how and when to make them allies. As one US Sergeant put it – “My goal is to get people to stop shooting at my soldiers and support [the Afghan] government.”⁹

Ideally, the threat of military kinetic messaging suffices to move the non-compliant parties to compliance. Once parties are willing to be compliant a “compliance plan” needs to be created that outlines promises of compliance and sanctions that will be instituted if the promises are not kept.

A similar theme of winning the tactical battle but losing the narrative theme is found in neighboring Pakistan. With the Taliban ranks and logistical support fuelled by Pakistani safe havens and supporters, Islamabad’s handling of the narrative directly impacts the chance of success in Afghanistan. For example, while Pakistan’s military campaign in spring 2009 to repel Taliban backed forces in the Northwest region won some great military successes, Islamabad’s subsequent handling of refugees threatened to undo the accomplishments.

Unfortunately the swathes of refugees became ‘floating voters’ in the narrative battle on who provides them support and succor. Following the military offensive, the vacuum presented by the lack of governmental support provided an opening for extremists to provide humanitarian support. This assisted in creating a positive narrative for the extremists’ cause and provided an opportunity for them to gain new recruits from the refugee camps.

Currently our skill set is lacking. First, soldiers are not trained to map human confrontations in a consistent way so they are able to transfer their knowledge of the human confrontations up and down the chain, and to their relief when their tour is complete. As General Scales (ret.) noted, “the art of feeding the operational narrative requires skill at maneuvering across the expanse of human perceptions rather than an expanse of territory.”¹⁰ Second, skills are lacking in the most powerful way to communicate with the people – storytelling. We need capacities and capabilities that build and represent the narrative in a powerful story that aligns with a better future for the people with passion and authenticity.

⁹ Greg Jaffe, “War of Persuasion”, *Washington Post*, 16 May, 2010, A1

¹⁰ Robert Scales, “The Past and Present as Prologue: A View of Future Warfare Through the Lens of Contemporary Conflicts”

In addition, our actions on the ground undermine our ability to communicate a genuine narrative. We are either reactive rather than proactive or our proactive statements are not compelling enough to reach the front page of the paper to counter the competing narratives. For example,

“After First Denying Involvement, US Forces Admit Killing Two Pregnant Afghan Women & Teenager”

US-led forces have admitted for the first time to killing two pregnant Afghan women and a teenage girl during a nighttime raid in eastern Afghanistan on February 12th. NATO officials initially denied any involvement but were later forced to admit to the killings after the *Times of London* and other news outlets published accounts of survivors who described how the atrocity was carried out by US-led forces.”

(*Democracy Now!*:

http://www.democracynow.org/2010/4/6/after_first_denying_involvement_us_forces)

"America's Secret Afghan Prisons": Investigation Unearths New US Torture Site, Abuse Allegations in Afghanistan

A new investigation by journalist Anand Gopal reveals harrowing details about US secret prisons in Afghanistan, under both the Bush and Obama administrations. Gopal interviewed Afghans who were detained and abused at several disclosed and undisclosed sites at US and Afghan military bases across the country. He also reveals the existence of another secret prison on Bagram Air Base that even the Red Cross does not have access to. It is dubbed the Black Jail and is reportedly run by US Special Force. (Interviews Anand Gopal and Scott Horton, *Democracy Now!* Thursday, Feb 4, 2010)

The West and the Government of Afghanistan will continue to operate below par in dominating the narrative unless they understand their competitors. What are the competing narratives and how do they counter these narratives? What will it take to build a coherent narrative in partnership with the Government of Afghanistan? Our ability to build a coherent narrative within ISAF is handicapped (see¹¹ report from Pentagon to Congress outlining military and civilian structures). Genuine trust and cooperation between the Obama administration and the Karzai government is lacking. President Karzai is scarred by the scandals surrounding the 2009 presidential election, and his subsequent remarks referencing “joining the Taliban” did not endear him to his western allies.

In order to be successful in Afghanistan, the West needs to achieve Narrative Superiority. It is essential to win the narrative space. We will outline the pathway to Narrative Superiority. The West needs to build beyond the reduction in troops to leave behind a powerful narrative that can be sustained by the Government of Afghanistan to ensure an enduring stability and security.

¹¹ Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, April 26, 2010, page 18

4) Way Forward

There are 11 steps to winning the narrative in Afghanistan.

1. *Understand the competing narratives*

To win in Afghanistan requires understanding the competing narratives evident across the country and regions. For Karzai and the West to develop a compelling narrative of their own to persuade the constituent groups to embrace their narrative first requires understanding the current decision-making frame of the people. The military kinetic element is key in establishing a credible threat to obtain compliance. But to win requires an enduring peace via narrative supremacy demanding coordination across political, military, economic, social, and infrastructure elements.

2. *Define the narrative audiences*

During General Petraeus' leadership of US and coalition forces in Iraq, he identified four key audiences critical to winning the narrative: Iraqi civilians, insurgents, the Arab community in the Middle East, and American public opinion at home. Similarly Afghanistan faces four audiences: Afghan populace, Taliban and warlords vying for control, the regional powers (Pakistan), and US public opinion.

3. *Agree on the narrative*

Only after identifying the competing narratives and key audiences can the West and the Karzai government seek to develop a compelling narrative of its own. It's a lot more than simply freedom, democracy and liberty – it must resonate strongly with the Afghan people to withstand, endure and grow in the face of domestic and international challenges.

4. *Identify narrative channels*

Successfully communicating the narrative requires identifying the channels with the narrative forming the bedrock of enduring stability. Key questions that need to be addressed include what instruments do you have to deploy? What channels do you have that will multiply and disseminate the narrative to “go viral” - all of which requires master storytellers in a country where illiteracy is 71.9%. If successfully done, ‘Going viral’ should see the narrative evolve and deepen into key parts of Afghan social and institutional life from first providing the basic needs of society: safety, shelter and food, to achieve enduring institutions, a thriving entrepreneurial climate and a strong social fabric.

5. *Create narrative metrics*

Key metrics must be employed to capture, track and analyze the performance of the narrative. They include:

- Viable communities to conduct business and comply with local laws;

- Stability in area (not only number of violent incidents on the decline but how the people perceive the state of security);
- Cost of transporting goods decreases due to increased security;
- Number of girls returning to school increases or at the very least the ability of youth to access job skills increases
- Societal wellness (e.g. access to health care and drinking water); and
- Support for Afghan Government increases (current measure notes 24 percent of key districts (29 out 121) support the Karzai Government).¹²

6. *Create competing narrative maps*¹³

Complementing the metrics is a narrative map that would provide a visual representation of the competing narratives running through Afghanistan, from planning military engagements through to developing infrastructure projects and brokering power agreements among various constituency groups (e.g. warlords and tribes). Reference to the narrative map will help anticipate the ripple effects and guide strategies for managing human confrontations.

7. *Move from superiority to supremacy*

Attaining supremacy requires the narrative going viral. Success entails the Afghan police and Army along with the Afghan government understanding how the narrative is key to winning the will of the people. Governments are constantly managing confrontations. In Afghanistan the confrontations have multiple conflicts nested within the confrontations. It is difficult to distinguish the key confrontations and the confrontations that will only serve to distract attention and drain resources. Senior leadership must focus on confrontations that when won will achieve the desired objectives.¹⁴

8. *Undercut the Taliban's narrative*

The pathway to gaining superiority requires undermining the credibility of the Taliban narrative. Failure to do so will ensure the lack of progress as witnessed to date in Afghanistan.

9. *Generate a self-sustaining narrative*

A successful self-sustaining narrative is one that has momentum requiring minimal or little assistance externally. It should have its own life with a vibrant story that is perpetuated because people embrace the story and witness evidence of its importance in their daily lives.

¹² "Overall assessments indicate that the local population sympathizes or supports the Afghan Government in 24% (29 of 121) of all Key Terrain and Area of Interest Districts."

Pentagon Report to Congress, April 26, 2010

¹³ Confrontation Manager™ and CoNexus®

¹⁴ General Sir Rupert Smith, National Defense University Speech, Washington, DC, September 2009

10. View kinetic engagements thru the narrative lens

The Afghan Police and military need to master how kinetic operations support the narrative. The police and the military need to understand that their role is to create the context for resolving confrontations. Ideally the threat of force is sufficient to create a context for managing confrontations. If not, the kinetic operations always need to be viewed as creating the condition for the confrontations to be managed – for compliance agreements to be outlined with sanctions and promises clearly defined.

11. Create a way to reinvent the narrative when required

A successful narrative must be able to reinvent itself when required as Afghanistan moves to strong institutional governance.

In sum, we map the narrative, monitor the narrative and evolve the narrative.

5) Conclusion

The Afghanistan challenge and solutions need to be seen from the perspective of a narrative. Given the personalities in power there is a unique opportunity to align the narrative and to communicate with power and conviction. First, President Obama is probably one of the best presidential orators the US has had for a generation. Making greater use of that attribute is one capability that can be leveraged to the advantage of the West. Second, US Secretaries Gates and Clinton have built a collaborative framework for their respective Departments. Their respect for one another and their ability to address the critical issues positions the US well to address the lack of an aligned, compelling narrative.

In addition to employing powerful, strategic leaders to frame the narrative, it is important for the troops on the ground to reinforce the narrative.

Our vision is narrative **supremacy**, but clearly we will not succeed in Afghanistan without (at least) **narrative superiority**. Even though the narrative is key to a successful campaign the West and the Government of Afghanistan have been ineffective in competing for the narrative. In order to exit theater we must successfully achieve narrative superiority, and once we have exited the narrative will be sustained if we achieve narrative supremacy.

This focus does not require more resources but a different allocation of resources and different mindsets and skill sets in order to achieve our mission.

The metrics of success must assess and verify the performance of the narrative, and we need to promote our people based on performance in areas that to date have not been recognized as key capabilities in theater. Our ability to create a narrative (based on rational arguments with realistic targeted psychological aim), to communicate the narrative with the appropriate cultural nuance and emotional tone and our ability to dominate the narrative with a coordinated message campaign supported by evidence based on our actions will position us to achieve narrative superiority.

Fortunately, we are not starting from a blank slate. Elements of the US Army have recognized the importance of the narrative and are successfully acting on their approach. The seeds are there. A narrative strategy is required to nurture these seeds.

“A decade of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq has forced battlefield commanders to accept that victory in today’s wars is less a matter of destroying enemies than of knowing how and when to make them allies. This new kind of war has compelled midlevel officers...to take on new roles: politician, diplomat and tribal anthropologist.”¹⁵

About the authors

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The Light Year Group combines decision strategists, confrontation managers, and futurists to create the next wave of thinking.

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¹⁵Greg Jaffe, “War of Persuasion”, *Washington Post* May 16, 2010, A1