



## **The Old-New Lessons of Afghanistan**

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**March 04, 2002**

The scale and importance fighting in Gardez and the Shahikot mountain area should not be exaggerated. It is only a major battle by Afghan War standards. By the standards of other wars, it would be a clash. It involves several hundred Al Qaida fighters, and the scale of the US troop commitment is dictated more by Al Qaida's excellent position and the need to seal off Al Qaida fighters than by the size and military capability of the opposition. Nevertheless, the fighting does provide some important insights:

### **War still requires a presence on the ground and a willingness to take casualties**

This lesson should be obvious. Air power is incapable of holding territory, dealing with political issues, gathering human intelligence, and destroying dug-in enemy positions. It cannot seal off territory or deal with highly dispersed forces. In fact, the success of US air power earlier in the war was heavily dependent on both Afghan ground troops and Afghan political bargainers on the ground, who arranged for most potential battles to end in defections and retreats, rather than large-scale fighting.

The current fighting also reveals something that tended to be lost during coverage of the previous fighting. Reporting focused on the lack of US and British casualties, and paid little attention to the casualties of the Afghan forces opposing the Taliban and Al Qaida. Putting US forces on the ground has shown that war still means casualties -- this time US casualties. This does not mean that such casualties are not low by the standard of past wars, but the "Teflon-like" image of casualty free war was never real and the current fighting brings this fact home.

Dispersed warfare works, even in an age of satellites, UAVs, and modern technology. The fighting again demonstrated the limits of intelligence, targeting, and precision strikes in dealing with highly politicized battles and dispersed ground forces. Technology is a powerful tool, but it does not truly revolutionize warfare against an opponent who adapts to exploit its limits. We still cannot kill or suppress hard targets.

For all of our advances in targeting and our efforts to use hard-target bombs, daisy cutters, and thermobaric weapons, we still can't kill forces in caves, hard targets, and dug-in positions efficiently with air power.

### **The Taliban and Al Qaida were defeated but not destroyed and "nation-building" is the key to victory**

The Afghan War consisted largely of US airpower followed by clashes between Afghan ground forces followed by bargaining and the retreat or dispersal of Taliban and al Qaida forces. There were no major climactic battles. Virtually all of the enemy forces escaped.

Al Qaida and the foreign volunteers were so unpopular that they had to flee most areas and often the country. Internal divisions in Afghanistan did, however, leave them with substantial areas where they could disperse east of Kabul and these had many caves and areas where Al Qaida had operated before. Neither the Northern Alliance or Pakistan took massive numbers of prisoner, and Afghan fighters have so far done a very poor job of sealing off lines of retreat in any engagement, including Tora Bora.

The Taliban forces have largely melded back into the Afghan population. Many were in any case simply affiliated tribal and clan elements. Some are now part of the mix of warlords. Others are still well armed. If Afghanistan goes back to open warlordism, they are certain to emerge again.

Once again, the media tended to assume that tactical victory meant strategic victory. There was a great deal of comment about exaggerated fears that the fighting would rag on until spring, and that the Taliban and Al Qaida could disperse into the countryside. Well, it has and they have.

At the same time, the Bush Administration is now learning the same bitter lesson as the Clinton Administration. Victory means a stable and favorable political aftermath. No one likes "nation building" and the Clinton Administration did set absurd goals and timetables in the Dayton Accords and again in Kosovo. There is, however, no real victory without successful GÇ£nation buildingGÇ¥ in some form.

### **Allied forces are not a substitute for US military power**

Allied proxies are an uncertain answer to many tactical situations in this war and may well be of even more limited value in conflicts like Iraq. Those who have argued that Afghanistan provides broad lessons about the value of mixing US air power with friendly ground forces and forcing the rapid collapse of weak opposition forces should rethink their judgments.

The Afghan factions supporting us have different goals, and a different willingness to take casualties and persist in combat. They are not fighting a war on terrorism. They want to serve their own factional interests, and having the Taliban largely disperse and Al Qaida leave Afghanistan is perfectly acceptable. They are relatively weak, lack air mobility and modern equipment, and they need to be cautious and slow moving to win and survive. (They do not have US medical services, body armor, etc.)

While Afghanistan is not Iraq, this battle is an important lesson regarding the risks inherent in dreams about using air power to create sanctuaries and allow weak infantry forces like the INC take over a modern state with heavy divisions and 2,200 main battle tanks.

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