Afghanistan's Ghosts

by
Geoffrey Shaw

("Whatever else Happens — we have the Maxim gun and they do not!")

INTRODUCTION

Recently, in preparation for a book that I am writing on Afghanistan's military history, I came across some old British reports (ca. 1897) on how the Afghan warriors appeared and disappeared like 'ghosts;' it struck me that I had read this before when perusing former Soviet soldiers' comments on the *mujahideen* specter-like qualities and, now, I recall some Canadian soldiers had made the same comments to the press. Of course these similarities in reports spanning 100 years are worth taking a second look at because they denote a fundamental truth — i.e., that the Afghan fighter is superb at his ambush and withdrawal tactics. Moreover, these *mujahideen* will persist in such fighting even when all looks bleak for even the remotest possibility of victory. In his seminal work, *Among the Afghans*, Arthur Bonner noted that their fight against the constant raw firepower of the Soviets didn't seem to be going anywhere; we have all heard and read the reports of how NATO forces are decimating the Taliban in a similar manner and yet, and yet, they keep coming back. Perhaps it is time that we took a long hard look at the history of that land and its warrior traditions.

In 1909, Dr. Theodore Pennel, a missionary doctor at Bannu, wrote in his *Among the Wild Tribes of the Afghan Frontier*,

> 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah.' Such is the cry which electrifies 250 millions of the inhabitants of this globe. Such is the cry which thrills them so that they are ready to go forward and fight for their religion, and consider it a short road to Paradise to kill Christians and Hindus and unbelievers. It is the cry which the mullahs of Afghanistan are now carrying to mountain hamlets and to towns in Afghanistan in order to raise the people of that country to come forward and fight. That is the cry which has the power of joining together the members of Islam throughout the world, and preparing them for a conflict with all who are not ready to accept their religion . . .. And it is especially these Mohammedans on the North-West Frontier of India who have this intense religious

zeal — call it what we will, fanaticism or bigotry — but which, nevertheless, is a power within them overruling every passion.[1]

The uncanny similarity between the motivation and zealous interpretation of militant Islam, as gleaned from Dr. Pennell's notes, compared to the Wahhabi declarations of our day, should cause every thinking analyst and soldier to make their most disciplined attempt to come to grips with just what it is that has been engaged in so boldly in Afghanistan.

Counterinsurgency Warfare

This examination should begin with our own preconceptions about war and how we expect our foes to behave. For example, we think we have what Larry Cable would call "the credible capacity to coerce" the Taliban. But do we? Simply killing them is, evidently, not enough as they do not look at death the way we do. Yet, had we paid more attention to our own history (or if it had been taught properly in our schools instead of the politically correct nonsense that is shoveled out these days) we could have accessed the hard-earned wisdom that states:

Any consideration of warfare over the last 200 years, and particularly in the twentieth century, points to a societal capacity to endure that is not to be underestimated. Human resilience, and the capacity of people bound together by common identity, language, culture, and institutions to adapt and to continue to offer resistance even in the most appalling of circumstances, has been demonstrated not just in the two world wars of the twentieth century but also, and perhaps even more significantly, in other conflicts since 1945. This, and the ability of non-Western societies to survive conditions that would deeply divide democracies, represents a clear indication of the critical importance of moral as opposed to material factors in the conduct of war.

The author continues:

Any suggestion that the ability to destroy the capacity to resist on a scale and at a pace that are unprecedented will profoundly alter the will and ability to resist would seem to have little historical basis. At the same time the level of expectation and demand in terms of war being portrayed as clean, swift, minimal in its claim on life and, critically, carrying with it the certainty of victory may well present those who insist upon the efficacy of modern doctrine and weaponry with all but impossible problems of fulfilling wholly unrealistic public expectation.[2]

This is very sobering to consider because it suggests that our preconceptions about Afghanistan and the Taliban may well be held in error. In support of this recognition I would add my concern that, as with all the other experts on COIN and counter-terror that I have been looking at, our preconceptions are decidedly those of the Western modern. This is problematic because the modern analyst's mind, no matter how brilliant, consistently fails to sink deep enough to engage modern Jihadist terror at its core. What do I mean by this? Simply this: 99.999 percent of the Western analysts work from a basis wherein their minds are attuned to supposedly rational and secular philosophies, actions, reactions, and goals. This will never permit them to come to grips with the medieval mind of the Jihadist. We think in terms of pressure and coercion that will eventually bring about the semi-rational response we want from them and then we will have victory. "Whatever else Happens — we have the Maxim gun and they do not!" Or its modern equivalent "Whatever else Happens — we have Cruise Missiles and they do not" will continue to fail us.[3] Let me be clear: we will never have victory until we change ourselves. You simply cannot defeat that which is based on the hereinafter with prescriptions that would only have effect on those worried about the here and now. Hence the failure or weakness of the modern when he comes up against the medieval.

If any of what I have just stated is true, then we need to return to the drawing board and rethink what it is that we want to accomplish and if reality will permit such an accomplishment. I state this because all tactics that work must be founded in reality and they can only maintain this linkage to reality if the strategic thought that compels them is also wedded to reality.

Returning to my initial motif of things 'ghostly,' as a historian I too see many of the same ghosts that haunted the counter-insurgency operations in Vietnam renewing their practice in Afghanistan; the comparison of President Hamid Karzai with Ngo Dinh Diem I find ironic and compelling. Both are decent men in their own right yet they have to preside over governments that are deeply flawed with corruption from the outset. Indeed, Karzai more so than Diem as at least Diem was able to deal firmly with the lawless warlords such as Bay Vien and his river pirate private army, the Binh Xuyen, when he was in the process of taking and consolidating his political power; whereas Karzai was forced to take on board a monstrosity arguably worse than the Taliban, the redoubtable Rashid Dostum.[4] The similarities are so myriad as to make one wonder if we are not all caught up in the COIN version of *Groundhog Day*? i.e., we are going to keep repeating this process until we learn something and get it right.

If then things are not quite right where did we go off course and how do we correct? Let's begin with some basic questions:

1.   Was it necessary to oust the Taliban in order to get at *Al-Qaeda*?

2.   What was the true strength of the Taliban in the country? How

entrenched were they and how would this hold under the stress of being forced out of power?

3. Were they, the Taliban, politically legitimate (how we perceive them is not relevant) in the eyes of most Afghans or even a large minority of Afghans?[5]

4. Was it wise to make deals with the likes of Rashid Dostum (who switched sides more times than anyone could keep track of during the war with the Soviet Union and after)?

5. If our plans to remove the Taliban from power rested on making unscrupulous warlords our allies — how did we propose to have a truly legitimate Afghan government after the ousting of the Taliban?

6. Is it still necessary to keep the Taliban out of the Afghan political process and if so, why (that we don't like them is not an answer)?

7. How closely wed are the Taliban and *Al Qaeda*? Can they be 'divorced'?

8. What sorts of deals has Pakistan been making with the tribal leaders along her border with Afghanistan (i.e. Taliban)?

9. Why has Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf accused President Karzai of not telling the truth about the state of affairs in Afghanistan, particularly as they relate to the Pushtuns and the Taliban?

10. What is the state of the Afghan National Police?

11. What is the balance of forces: i.e., how many policemen for every soldier fighting the insurgency?

12. Is intelligence flowing from the police or to the army, to both, or mainly one as opposed to the other?

13. What is the state of the economy?

14. What is the state of security? Is any area conclusively 'white' after several years of conflict?

15. How many militias exist outside of central government control?

16. How long can the Taliban keep their fight going?

17. How long can we stay there fighting Taliban and possibly other groups — such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's?

Some of these questions cannot be answered at this time, for obvious reasons, yet we need to keep them in mind as we stay involved there.

If we can agree that the backbone to sound counterinsurgency policy is the political legitimacy of the incumbent government, in this case President Karzai's,

what must we do on the ground to ensure that possibility becomes an eventuality?

The rule-book, written many years ago by Sir Robert Thompson suggests that we look for the following to be in place. It is worth quoting from *Defeating Communist Insurgency* at length.

> First principle. The government must have a clear political aim: to establish and maintain a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable . . ..

> Second principle. The government must function in accordance with the law. There is a strong temptation in dealing both with terrorism and with guerrilla actions for government forces to act outside the law, the excuses being that the processes of law are too cumbersome, that the normal safeguards in the law for the individual are not designed for an insurgency and that a terrorist deserves to be treated as an outlaw anyway. Not only is this morally wrong, but, over a period it will create more practical difficulties for a government than it solves. A government which does not act in accordance with the law forfeits the right to be called a government and cannot then expect its people to obey the law . . .. Detention is perhaps the most controversial powers which a government may exercise. If the power to arrest and detain is clearly laid down within certain limits and the individual is given a full opportunity to appear, represented by counsel, before a tribunal presided over by a judge which advises the government whether or not the case against the detainee is adequate, then there are sufficient safeguards to prevent the power being used for purely arbitrary arrests . . ..

> As a corollary to preventative detention, it should be the firm policy of the government to bring all persons who have committed an actual offence to public trial . . .. Trials in camera, martial law and military tribunals can never be satisfactorily justified. They are in themselves a tacit admission that responsible government has broken down. In the long term, adherence to the law is a great advantage to the government. It helps to make all officers and civilian officials responsible and accountable for their actions. It puts torture and the shooting of captured terrorists in their proper place: however great the provocation, both are crimes and the latter is murder. It puts the government in a position in which it is represented as a protector of those who are innocent, and it puts terrorists in the position of criminals. This creates the proper psychological attitude in the country as a whole, with the government as the 'cops' and the terrorists as the 'robbers'.

If the government does not adhere to the law, then it loses respect and fails to fulfill its contractual obligation to the people as a government. This leads to the situation in which officers and officials cease to be responsible for their actions, with the result that, instead of an insurgency, there is to all intents and purposes a civil war within the country in which neither side can claim to be the government. In such circumstances there is so little difference between the two sides that the people have no reason for choosing to support the government.

Third principle. The government must have an overall plan. This plan must cover not just the security measures and military operations. It must include all political, social, economic, administrative, police and other measures which have a bearing on the insurgency. Above all it must clearly define roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication of effort and to ensure that there are no gaps in the government's field of action.

It is essential, too, that there should be a proper balance between the military and the civil effort, with complete co-ordination in all fields. Otherwise a situation will arise in which military operations produce no lasting results because they were unsupported by civil follow-up action . . ..

Fourth principle. The government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerrillas. This is obviously the case in the build-up phase before the insurgency has started, but it holds equally good during the insurgency. Unless the communist subversive political organization in the towns and villages is broken and eliminated, the insurgent guerrilla units will not be defeated. If the guerrillas can be isolated from the population — then their eventual destruction becomes automatic . . .

Fifth principle. In the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, a government must secure its base area first. This principle should to a large extent be reversed in the build-up phase, before the open insurgency starts, when considerable attention should be paid to security and economic measures in the remoter rural areas. If, however, such preventative action fails, priority in respect of security measures should be given to the more highly developed areas of the country. These contain the greatest number of the population and are more vital to the government from the point of view of its communications and the economy of the country. This may mean accepting that the insurgent movement gains control over certain remoter areas and that there will be a degree of infiltration across inaccessible borders (which cannot be prevented anyway at this stage). Such infiltration will

initially be limited in any case by the absorptive capacity of the areas under insurgent control. But if the area under the insurgents' control expands and the base of their support broadens, the absorptive capacity will increase. It must therefore be one of the government's aims to limit that capacity by securing its own base areas and working methodically outwards from them.

There is a second advantage in this approach: the more highly developed areas of the country are easier to secure and control, and the government will therefore start the campaign with some successes. This instills confidence, which is quite the most important ingredient for further success. A thoroughly methodical approach to the problem, which may appear rather slow, encourages a steam-roller outlook which provides the people with faith in ultimate victory. By preparing for a long haul, the government may achieve victory quicker than expected. By seeking quick military victories in insurgent controlled areas, it will certainly get a long haul for which neither it nor the people may be prepared.[6]

Before moving on from Thompson, I want to consider one last critical area (quite apart from the important area of intelligence gathering services); indeed, one of the most crucial when it comes to fighting insurgents i.e., the police and the balance of forces related to this central issue. According to Thompson,

In Malaya there were basically two government forces: the armed forces and the police. . . . [I]t should be noted that the strength of the police force was more than twice that of the armed forces, including the Commonwealth battalions. There was a third organization, the Home Guard, which operated under police control although it was separately recruited and administered. The original police strength at the outbreak of the Emergency was 11,285 all ranks. This was built up to nearly 30,000 regulars plus 30,000 special constables. The latter were used mainly in a defensive role in villages and on estates and mines. As part of the police force there was also established a field force composed of platoons and companies equivalent to very light infantry. The police were therefore able to carry out their normal functions, to provide protection and to undertake semi-military operations requiring units up to company strength. The armed forces acted in support of the civil power, and this, coupled with the dominance of the police force, resulted in political stability and the continuance of the rule of law throughout the insurgency.[7]

This golden rule of Thompson's has been taken far too lightly with regard to operations in Afghanistan (and in Iraq too) but we have seen it work out in reality and its casual dismissal gives any observer of these sorts of conflict cause for concern. In Kenya, the Home Guard (really, an auxiliary police force) along

with the Kikuyu Tribal Police accounted for 42 per cent of all Mau Mau killed during the Emergency there.[8] One cannot help but suspect that, where the US military gets involved, the very notion of working with police forces is swept out of the way or, at the very most, placed on a remote back-burner. We saw this pattern develop in Vietnam with both Diem and Thompson arguing for greater development of police forces and with MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) shooting back that Thompson should mind his own business while attempting to placate Diem with the notion that the size of Viet Cong operations were already well beyond the capacity of the police to contain.[9] Not realizing that by so stating such a development, they were tacitly admitting to effective COIN failure.[10] In other words, if the job cannot be done by police, supported by the military in occasional tough situations, then the very foundational structure of the COIN campaign is severely flawed.

One final important consideration, with regard to the successful Thompson prescription for COIN that has strangely been ignored in Afghanistan is physical protection of the people, around the clock, via the means of actual protected villages and hamlets. In talking to US Special Forces operating in and around the Kandahar area, they have admitted that this is something they have been arguing for but the funding has not been forthcoming. No one wants to talk about strategic hamlets or fortified villages as if some unspeakable terror from Vietnam will return to haunt their very best efforts. And yet, if you cannot provide basic security for the people you must lose in the end in this kind of war. A Canadian soldier told me how they protect and build Afghan villages during the day and the Taliban come in and 'own' the same places at night. Now, to those of us who are familiar with the history of the Vietnam War, particularly in the post-Diem/poststrategic hamlets era, this is a very haunting refrain indeed.

While Thompson was one of the first COIN experts to delineate the basic principles, anyone who studies this kind of conflict will come across them mentioned in various formats. As such, it is no surprise to note that Leroy Thompson (no relation to Sir Robert) created a short list in 2002:

The Civil power should remain paramount over the military power.

The minimum military force possible to accomplish the objective should be used.

Action must be taken in a firm and timely manner.

Civil and military authorities must co-operate.[11]

It is significant that one constantly comes across references for the need of the civil power to remain as the pre-eminent authority, even above the military; and, of course, this makes eminent sense because the rule of law must come from the civil authority; and it is this authority that wants political legitimacy to remain within its purview, and not transferred to the insurgents via reckless or invasive armed force action against civilians.

The Predecessors of the Taliban

The early origins of 'Taliban' types, i.e., militant Islamists, in the region of Afghanistan go back quite a long time and are linked directly to the very foundations of Wahhabi theological prescription. This puritanical sect of Islam was born in the Saudi desert during a period of Sunni revivalism in the 1730s. The name of the sect follows its founder, Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab of Nejd.[12] Facilitated by Indian Hindustani pilgrims making their way back from Mecca in 1824, the Wahhab prescriptions for militant Islam eventually lodged in the mountainous areas of the Northwest Frontier and, thus, were introduced to the Pushtuns.[13]

We need to be very clear about this genesis, i.e., the Wahhab sect was firmly established in the region long before Osama bin Laden gathered the fledgling *al-Qaed*a members around him in the war against the Soviets in the 1980s. In other words, the tendencies toward Wahhabi militancy or 'Talibanism' have found a natural lodgment in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan; as such, the Wahhab perspective is now organic to that region and our continued denial of this fact-on-the-ground will not serve us well.[14]

Taliban: Beginnings

The very word Taliban, Arabic in origin, is the plural form of 'Talib' and means 'the seekers.' Basically, they came into being out of Saudi funded religious schools (madresahs) set up along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. Different Islamic organizations ran the schools but the vast majority of Taliban leader came from those schools run by the JUIP (*Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islami Pakistan*). A particular leading hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism could be found emanating from *Jamiat-ul-Uloom-al-Islamiyyah* — led by Mullah Omar.[15]

Mullah Mohammed Omar Mujahed

Mullah Omar's background can be summarized as follows:

1.   He was (probably still is) the supreme leader of the Taliban.

2.   He is a Durani Pushton (either Popalzai [like Hamid Karzai] or Noorzai).

3.   He was a religious teacher at a *madresah* before the Soviet's invaded Afghanistan.

4.   During the war with the Soviets he commanded a group of local *mujahideen* who held control of an area north of the Kandahar-Chaman highway.

5.   He lost an eye in his fight against the Soviets.

6. After the Soviets had departed and Najibullah's government fell he returned to the *madresah,* becoming the head.

7. He rapidly became disenchanted and disgusted with the murderous behavior of his *mujahideen* comrades of the war, as they squabbled for political power causing much suffering and casualties among ordinary Afghanis.[16]

8. He quickly built up a reputation as a modern-day 'Robin Hood,' assisting the poor and downtrodden, and dealing out swift justice to those *mujahideen* who had been behaving poorly in his area.[17]

The Taliban emerged out of the Kandahar area (being largely Durrani Pushtuns) around 1994. The reason for this was simple enough: they were 'the-last-man-standing' after months of brutal infighting between the Islamicists and traditionalists. The final result was the virtual elimination of the traditionalist leadership.[18]

In the immediate post-Soviet years, as it would happen (and often does with guerrilla armies that have military success) the *mujahideen* displayed a total lack of any reasonable ability to govern Afghanistan; one group after another would fight for power over Kabul and as such, the warlords and their associated factions, became detested by the Afghan people.[19]

As we now know, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and his armed faction *Hizbi-I-Islami* (Party of God), was not what one would call reasonable, and he managed to bring much more violent misery into the lives of Afghans during these years of post-Soviet chaos. But he was heavily backed by ISI (Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency) and had received considerable funding from the CIA during the era of the Soviets' direct incursion. Obviously, the Pakistanis wanted a certain degree of 'persuasion' over political events that went on in post-war Afghanistan; as their own strategic interests compelled them to work with a faction that they thought they could more easily control than the other *mujahideen* organizations. This made perfectly reasonable sense and it did so to the Americans too — who deferred to the Pakistanis over this issue. But Hekmatyar proved capable only of unleashing violent chaos and his inability to bring this violence under control lead directly to the birth and the rise of the Taliban.[20]

The Pakistanis, however, were not fools and they knew their neighbors very well indeed and, as such, they had also placed considerable support behind the Taliban. So, having arrived with a vengeance on the Afghan political scene in the late summer of 1994, the Taliban began their steady rise to 'national' power. (I use the word 'national' advisedly when referring to Afghanistan because I am not convinced that they, the various tribes of Afghanistan, truly grasp or even like the concept as we understand it to be in the West.)[21] Here are some notable events along the Taliban's rocky road to power:

1. The initial group of Taliban that congregated around Mullah Omar was fewer than 50 men.

2. The Taliban core group was formed from the Pushton *Mujahideen* war veterans of the Kandahar area (many had seen actual combat under the leadership of Nabi Mohammadi and his *Harakat-I Inqilab-I Islami.*

3. The Taliban's first operation of any size was conducted in October 1994 when they captured the southern border town of Spin Buldak.

4. They captured Kandahar in November 1994.

5. Herat was captured in September 1995.

6. They captured Mazar-i-Sharif and lost it in 1997; they recaptured it again in August 1998.

7. Bamiyan (famous for the Buddha that they blew up) was captured in September 1998.[22]

How is it possible that within five years of their inception, inaugurated with an original group of just under 50 men, that the Taliban were able to control Afghanistan? The short answer is that they had a commitment and substance, backed up by an absence of corruption, that caused all other squabbling factions in the country to look vain in comparison. They had garnered political, social, and religious legitimacy unto themselves in a timely fashion that all other groups had failed to. Here are five of the most critical factors in this remarkable political and military accomplishment:

1. They started out by controlling an area with which they shared the same ethnicity as the majority, i.e., they were Pushtun.

2. They placed an emphasis on religious piety that appealed to the war-weary Afghan civilian population. They have always presented themselves in fundamentalist religious terms and many Afghans, especially in the countryside, found this attractive. In their early advances, they often were able to avoid combat by carrying the Koran in front of their advancing troops. This was not an act, they kept to their word as their first order of business was always religious when they came into a newly acquired area: men were forced to attend prayers in mosques, women had to veil themselves, and popular music was banned as un-Islamic.

3. The Taliban, unlike the other *mujahideen* groups, also kept to their word in that they remained uncorrupted by power. This piety appealed to the war-weary in both Kandahar and Kabul.

4.   Flush with money from Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states, the Taliban were able to buy off opposing commanders as they came into a new area.

5.   The deep and multifaceted levels of support coming from Pakistan were also critical to Taliban success. Some have called the Taliban Pakistan's proxy army in Afghanistan.[23]

Afghanistan's Taliban political forces are comprised of three major categories. First, are talibs and mullahs who graduated from religious schools and seminaries in rural Afghanistan. Second, are the mullahs and talibs who took refuge in neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, and attended school there as well. Finally, are the Pakistani students and JUIP (*Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan*) activists.[24]

The politics of the Taliban's military forces gets a little more intricate but, basically, can be noted as follows:

> The Taliban military forces formed another group that was divided into two sections. In 1990 to 1992, when the influence of the non-Pushton factions of the ex-PDPA members and the northern militia dominated De Hezb-e-Watan led by Najibullah, many of the Pushton officers of the army, particularly the ex-Khalqis, feared losing their position in the power game in the country. The military coup led by Shahnwaz Tanai against Dr. Najibullah in 1990 was rooted in this power game among the political forces in Afghanistan. Even though Tanai's coup failed, a large number of the army officers defected to Hekmatyar forces, these officers, including Tanai and his group, were recruited into the Taliban army units. According to an Afghan source, there are over 1,600 ex-Khalqis working with the Taliban. The Taliban also attempted to recruit ex-army officers who were refugees in Pakistan, in particular those who had ethnic Pushton backgrounds. These officers, like Molla Bore Jan, an ex-PDPA officer, became the core of the Taliban army and were familiar with the use of advanced military air and ground machines.

This source continues:

> The second part of the Taliban armed forces was comprised of the ex-Mujahideen commanders and personnel who fought the PDPA and the Soviets in Afghanistan. This group had battle experience, but in small scale military operations; therefore they operated under the leadership and guidance of the Pakistani army officers. The ex-Mujahideen groups and commanders became a significant source of local support for the Taliban in the areas under their control. The majority of this group had neither any source of income nor professional skills other than fighting. In the past, these groups

enjoyed the U.S./Saudi financial support. But with the Soviet withdrawal and collapse of the Najibullah regime, the Mujahideen parties lost this international financial support. Now, working for the Taliban provided them with privileges, especially for those commanders who worked for the Taliban opposition and switched sides, receiving a large amount of cash.[25]

So, it would seem that along with deep tribal roots amongst the Pushtun, the Taliban were also able to garner a certain respectability amongst many other Afghans — primarily because they were not corrupt as their rivals, including Rashid Dostum, who most certainly were.

Moving one step further we can take a brief look at what lies at the heart of their conflict with the West, even in defending Muslims such as *al-Qaeda*, who have turned the Koran on its head by making the "little *jihad*" (the fight against physical enemies of this world) the "big *jihad*" and the "great *jihad*" (the fight to overcome one's own inner corruption) into the "little *jihad*." In taking this further step we add into the fundamentals two views of the world that can not be reconciled, i.e., the modern Western secular materialistic view versus the medieval God-centered view of the Taliban leadership (and many Muslims). Here's the problem as put most succinctly by the British philosopher Roger Scruton:

> What exactly is Western civilization, and what holds it together? Politicians, asked to define what we are fighting for in the "war against terrorism," will always say freedom. But, taken by itself, freedom means the emancipation from constraints, including those constraints which might be needed if a civilization is to endure. If all that Western civilization offers is freedom, then it is a civilization bent on its own destruction. Moreover freedom flaunted in the face of religious prohibitions is an act of aggression, inviting retribution from those whose piety it offends.
>
> Islamic civilization involves a common religious belief, based on a sacred text whose law may be misapplied but never altered. It defines itself in terms not of freedom but of submission. Islam, *salm*, and salaam — "submission," "peace," and "safety" — all derive from the verb *salima*, whose primary meaning is "to be secure," "unharmed," or "blameless," but which has a derived form meaning "to surrender." The Muslim is the one who has surrendered, submitted, and so obtained security. In that complex etymological knot is tied a vision of society and its rewards far different from anything that has prevailed in modern Europe and America.

Scruton continues:

Western civilization also grew from a common religious belief and a sacred text, and, like Islam, originated in a religious movement among Semitic people — albeit people living under an imperial yoke, for whom submission was already a day-to-day reality. Western civilization has left behind its religious belief and its sacred text, to place its trust not in religious certainties but in open discussion, trial and error, and the ubiquitousness of doubt. But the odd thing is that, while Islamic civilization is riven by conflict, Western civilization seems to have a built-in tendency to equilibrium. Freedoms that Western citizens take for granted are all but unheard of in Islamic countries, and while no Western citizens are fleeing from the West, 70 percent of the world's refugees are Muslims fleeing from places where their religion is the official doctrine. Moreover, those refugees are all fleeing to the West, recognizing no other place as able to grant the opportunities, freedoms, and personal safety that they despair of finding at home.

Equally odd, however, is the fact that, having arrived in the West, many of these Muslim refugees begin to conceive a hatred of the society by which they find themselves surrounded, and aspire to take revenge against it for some fault so heinous that they can conceive of nothing less than final destruction as the fitting punishment. Odder still is the fact that those Muslims who settle down, integrate, and acquire some kind of loyalty to Western institutions and customs often produce children who, despite being brought up in the West, identify themselves in opposition to it — an opposition so fierce as again to verge on the desire of annihilation.

He concludes:

A superficial response to these disturbing facts is to put the blame on Islam — to argue, with an undeniable degree of plausibility, that Islam is a medieval fossil, maladapted to modern conditions, and unable to adjust to the enormous social, economic, and demographic changes that have shaken our planet. But then "modern conditions" are precisely those conditions which result from the global outreach of Western technology, Western institutions, and Western conceptions of political freedom. Why blame Islam for rejecting them, when they, in their turn, involve a rejection of the idea on which Islam is founded — the idea of God's immutable will, revealed once and for all to his Prophet, in the form of an unbreachable and unchangeable code of law?[26]

Scruton is basically stating that Western intrusion, not *al-Qaeda* and their vicious terror crimes, is primarily responsible for making the "little *jihad*" the "great *jihad*."

Mullah Omar, when confronted with the choice of turning over *al-Qaeda* or being thrown out of power, made a startling and most illuminating statement to the effect that "even if all of Afghanistan were destroyed — he would not turn over fellow Muslims to the infidel — as this was impermissible under Islam." This was almost verbatim the description that Toynbee gave as to the difference between the modern man and medieval man, i.e., that medieval man would destroy an entire city on principle whereas modern man would compromise his principles without thinking twice about it (as we witness nearly everyday in Washington, DC, and Ottawa). The very idea that the intrusion of Western democracy will change the Islamic world seems, to many observers who have looked at this issue, problematic at best as you simply cannot reconcile that which will not be reconciled.

What do we do in Afghanistan then? In brief, we go back to the drawing board. Hamid Karzai has much fence-mending to do with the devout Islamic community in both Pakistan and Afghanistan (and denying the influence of Pakistan on events in Afghanistan is almost exactly the same error that the United States made when it denied the influence of Laos on South Vietnam's guerrilla war — by insisting on making it a 'neutral' country [on paper] — something it never was).

Truly Afghan/Islamic institutions must be permitted to be brought to the fore by Afghans (not by us) — and this means an ANP (Afghan National Police) that is respected and believed in by the Afghans. The Taliban must be studied for fissures and potential factions, with leaders who can be weaned away from the hardliners who are hard-over with *al-Qaeda*. To shut the Taliban out of the process may make us feel good but it will have little lasting effect other than to guarantee more strife. If we do not remove our own hubris-driven preconceptions of what Afghanistan should look like, politically, socially, culturally, we too must eventually join the long and dismal train of the ghosts that litter and haunt that baleful land.

Geoffrey Shaw teaches Political Science at the American Public University.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), p.vi.

2. H.P. Willmott, *When Men Lost Faith In Reason: Reflections on War and Society in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), pp. 251-52.

3. One of my graduate students, 'Bob' (US Special Forces in Afghanistan — who for obvious security reasons must remain nameless), described with a sense of awe the disdain the Taliban held for our most sophisticated and murderous support weapons and how they operated in such a way as to obviate the most sanguineous effects of such space-aged weaponry.

    Structurally speaking, Panjwayee is amazing. It is almost entirely covered with interlocking villages. Thousands of mud walls surround countless courtyards, fields, irrigation ditches.

Acres upon acres of grapes, marijuana, corn, and pomegranates cover the valley. The grape vineyards area a maze of mud rows that allow the vines to grow down these piled walls. Each vineyard has its won rectangular blockhouse of three-foot thick walls with slots in them, called grape-huts. This extraordinary array of construction has taken place over centuries of hand labor. Most roads are pathways that severely limit vehicle traffic and canalize movement to only the path's direction. The military term for small features such as these is micro-terrain and, to state it plainly, this micro-terrain is advantageous to the insurgency. The micro-terrain is the finest guerrilla environment imaginable. The grape-huts become bunkers that can withstand even anti-tank rounds; the mud walls reduce artillery shell burst effectiveness down to a few feet. Ingress and egress are fully facilitated by the endless 'ratlines' of walled irrigation trenches and paths. Mounted movement is virtually impossible save for motorcycle, bicycle, camel, or donkey.

'Bob' . . . "*PANJWAYEE: The Taliban's Pathway to Power*," pp. 4-6.

4. General Abdul Rashid Dostum was very much like Bay Vien in that he switched sides, along with his militia, whenever it has appeared most profitable to do so. Neamatollah Nojumi was one of many authors who noted this in his book, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 18.

5. We have all been told how bad the Taliban are but is this reality or just our own wishful thinking that permits us to have a clear conscience in the desire for vengeance to be meted out on *al-Qaeda*? I suggest this because the Taliban actually did something that no Western political party or politician has done in a long time, i.e., they lived up to their promises and actually made life better for the Afghans when they took power. After all, they even pealed-back the trafficking of opium and banned such hideous blood-sports as wolf-dog fighting that had been so popular throughout the entire region (to name but two decent accomplishments among many). "Wherever we went it was clear that the Taliban were the heroes of the day: they had brought peace to the land and restored the rule of law — and indeed there was a great deal to admire in them." Charles Allen, *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), p. 4.

6. Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences From Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966), pp. 50-58.

7. Ibid., p. 103.

8. Leroy Thompson, *The Counter-Insurgency Manual* (London: Greenhill Books, 2002), p. 72.

9. For anyone interested in pursuing a study of the history of this debate, "Soldiers vs. Policemen," I can provide considerable documentation gleaned from declassified State Department documents. See "Policemen Versus Soldiers: The Debate Leading to MAAG Objections and Washington Rejections of the Core of the British Counter-Insurgency Advice," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 12, no. 2 (Summer 2001), pp. 51-78.

10. I have had students in Iraq telling me that the same skewed logic is hard at work, yet again, all these years later. US policemen have been training Iraqis, and have been impressed with their courage and the inroads they were making with their fellow countrymen, but that the resources simply were not there to expand these police-building programs to anywhere near the balance of forces that Thompson had demonstrated would work best.

11. Leroy Thompson, *The Counter-Insurgency Manual* p. 17.

12. Allen, *God's Terrorists*, p. 49.

13. Ibid. For in-depth detail on this transference of Wahhabism from the Saudi desert to the mountain fastness of the Hindu Kush see, pp. 47-91.

14. How many times I have heard that the Afghans are not given to such 'extremist' views of Islam I can't count but what I can say is that wishful thinking is a palace built for fools. 'Talibanism'/Wahhabism are deeply entrenched in the region and is most certainly a part of Pushtun culture.

15.   Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, pp. 119-20.

16.   Ibid., pp. 120-21.

17.   Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 25.

18.   Ibid., p. 19.

19.   Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers Of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 2001), p. xvii.

20.   Ibid., pp. xviii — xix.

21.   Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 108.

22.   Ibid., p. 108.

23.   Ibid., pp. 109-10.

24.   Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan*, pp. 125-26.

25.   Ibid., p. 127.

26.   Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), pp. viii-x.