
Killing Snakes: Lessons Learned From the Fighting in Afghanistan

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"Sometimes when you are trying to kill snakes, you have to kick a few rocks." Old Texas proverb

Killing snakes is a mean business. Today, as in World War II, the United States is in a war for its survival. A vicious group of terrorists attacked us on September 11 and we have counterattacked, using most of the elements of national power at our disposal. The results of our efforts have changed the regime in Afghanistan and freed thousands of people from the tyrannical rule of the Taliban. But war is a multifaceted and frequently unpredictable contest that pits adversaries in cycles of action and counteraction. Right now the tide of battle against terrorism is flowing in our direction, and it seems that the terrorists are on the defensive. Yet the perpetrators of the attack on America, Osama bin Laden and many of his al Qaeda terrorist network operatives, remain elusive.

The war has entered a new stage and serious students of the art of war are trying to deduce the lessons learned. This kind of prognostication is always a precarious venture, as much vital information about the war remains classified and known only to a few. Nevertheless, in a world soaked in information, enough can be gathered from the open press to risk summarizing what the unclassified evidence suggests. Here are seven lessons that may bear the test of time:

Lesson 1: We must wage war against terrorism.

For decades the United States has treated terrorism as a criminal matter. Our unwillingness to consider terrorist attacks as acts of war produced a key asymmetry -- the terrorists waged war, but we treated these attacks as criminal acts and were constrained to wait for probable cause before taking action. We seldom went into terrorist sanctuaries to root out terrorists on their home turf. Treating terrorism as a criminal act, therefore, is a reactive and defensive strategy. In an age where the possibility of nuclear, chemical or biological terrorism is real, the consequences of remaining reactive and defensive are too dangerous to risk. Waging war against the terrorists breaks this asymmetry and is the correct response to defeat terror. We must preempt future terrorist attacks or hazard the possibility of greater destruction than that of September 11. Waging war against the terrorist network, wherever it hides, and against those nations who sustain and support the terrorists, enables the United States to seize the initiative, denies the enemy sanctuary and reduces the terrorists' ability to wage a one-sided war. This is what we did so successfully in Afghanistan.

Lesson 2: The side that gains information superiority holds an enormous advantage.

Information superiority has revolutionized how the United States fights wars and is as important today as air superiority has been in past wars. Furthermore, joint and interagency cooperation and information fusion in the intelligence arena has created a new set of dynamics on the battlefield. Information fusion is the process of using automated tools and aids augmenting specially trained human operators to achieve information superiority. Information fusion merges sensor and intelligence data with a large corpus of historical data to create actionable information for warfighters. Successful information fusion can create knowledge dominance in a given operation and is used to secure both tactical and strategic military advantages, save lives, reduce material losses and in turn dominate the battlefield by accelerating options faster than the enemy. As this knowledge dominance is fused by trained staffs and shared in real time with multiple

weapons platforms and fighting forces, the total combat effectiveness of the force becomes exponentially greater than the sum of its parts. Information fusion maximizes the potential of precision-guided munitions and dominant ground maneuver (with organic or proxy forces) and provides opportunity for the rapid disintegration and defeat of the enemy.

Lesson 3: Precision firepower freezes enemy maneuver.

During the Afghan campaign the U.S. military dropped more precision-guided missiles and bombs on enemy targets than in any previous conflict. The combination of satellites, missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and long-range manned bombers provided stand-off precision fires that froze enemy ground maneuver. To counter this accurate firepower, enemy forces dispersed, hid in caves, or concealed their equipment and troops near mosques or among the civilian population. Taliban and al Qaeda forces seldom came out into the open in significant numbers without being targeted by U.S. precision fires. Freezing enemy maneuver gave our proxy ground troops, the United Front in northern Afghanistan and opposition Pashtun forces in the south, the ability to mass and to defeat dispersed and dislocated Taliban forces. In essence the Taliban could either hide or fight. They could not do both. A more sophisticated enemy, with better defenses and precision weapons of its own, might pose a greater challenge. The impetus for the United States to maintain our current superiority in stand-off precision firepower increases in direct proportion to the proliferation of military technology around the world.

Lesson 4: Digitization is moving forces toward joint interdependence.

After the 1991 Gulf War the military services of the United States embarked on an extensive effort to modernize existing forces by adopting digital information systems. Many of these new digital systems can now talk across service boundaries. Although much more work is required to allow our joint forces to communicate seamlessly, these systems have enabled joint military forces to cooperate and create very lethal, focused combat power. This joint digital capability allows small forces to do extraordinary things, relying upon digitized communications to rapidly synchronize and integrate their actions. It is not perfect, and probably never will be, but it is powerful when it works. As Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles F. Wald, recent commander of the air war in Afghanistan said, "When history is written, it will show that three or four guys up there [in the north] made the difference in this conflict. When Mazar-e Sharif started falling, it was basically because of them." Digitization, especially across service boundaries, was an important step to make this accomplishment a reality. With the success of joint air-ground actions in Afghanistan behind us, it is difficult to imagine future air operations without the use of digitally linked troops on the ground. We should expect the services to become more interdependent in the future as digitization proliferates, thereby sharpening the requirement for joint warfare.

Lesson 5: Proxy War is good when it works.

The United States relied on proxy forces to win the campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Friendly Afghans, enabled by U.S. airpower, did most of the fighting. This allowed the United States to fight a high-tech war with very few boots on the ground. In 21st century warfare, uncontested air power will be the predominant means of firepower. When this precision firepower is combined with ground forces, it places the enemy on the horns of a dilemma. In Afghanistan we saw the power of a truly joint air-ground attack. A single form of attack (air only, for example) would not have been as effective. Without proxy forces on the ground it is very likely that the United States would still be bombing Afghanistan and the Taliban would still be in control. As the war moves to other locations, the United States may not be able to find willing proxy forces to do our fighting. A vital corollary to this finding is that the key to proxy warfare rests in the ability to find ways to ensure the proxy forces adhere more closely to your agenda than their own.

Lesson 6: Asymmetric enemy forces will avoid decisive combat.

It is clear that the Taliban were defeated in Afghanistan, but the Taliban's defeat was not the only objective. To win the war decisively, the United States must destroy al Qaeda. Was al Qaeda crushed in Afghanistan or did many key al Qaeda cells escape? This is the billion dollar question. One thing is certain: Enemies like al Qaeda will always avoid decisive battle. They will not fight by our rules. They will run from every fight, unless cornered, and escape to wage a hit and run war

against undefended civilians -- as they did on September 11 -- with the growing possibility of employing weapons of mass destruction. To force asymmetric enemies like al Qaeda into decisive battle we must surround them, cut them off from escape and kill or capture them. Our proxy forces on the ground in Afghanistan did not do this. Airpower alone cannot do this. To decisively defeat terrorism the nation must be prepared to employ a balanced, full dimensional arsenal that can present the enemy with as many dilemmas from as many different dimensions as possible.

Lesson 7: Joint strategic maneuver is critical.

As everyone who has ever tried to kill a snake knows, time is of the essence. If you don't move fast, the snake will slither away. We did not destroy al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the fighting there may have been their Dunkirk rather than their Waterloo. To prevent them from escaping in the next campaign, relevant ground, air and sea-based forces must be able to move directly from the continental United States and then deploy straight into the combat zone ready to fight. Strategically deployable joint forces must also have the ability to conduct operational and tactical maneuver on the land where the enemy will hide. When opposed by determined foes, this ground component must be equipped and trained to fight a combined arms tactical fight and move against enemy fire across the deadly ground -- that space on the battlefield swept by artillery, antitank and machine-gun fire where close combat occurs -- to decisively destroy or capture the enemy. The time it takes to muster, deploy, prepare a lodgment, build up ground combat forces and then fight as we did in Desert Storm is a luxury we can no longer afford. The only answer is to repackage the forces we currently have into a joint force that is capable of strategic maneuver, engaging the enemy from land, air and sea, and closing with and destroying him. We cannot afford to leave any enemy capability intact. If we do, the members of this evil web of terror will attack us again, possibly with greater effect. In short, if you want to force a decision on asymmetric enemies, if you want to kill snakes, you cannot give the snakes a means of escape.

These seven short lessons may be premature, but they seem relevant to the wide-ranging discussion buzzing in the op-ed columns of the newspapers that champion one silver bullet solution after another. The Afghanistan campaign was brilliantly executed and fairly won, but our next campaign will not have the same set of parameters. It is clear that this war is far from over, and the United States has many challenges ahead. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, the fighting in Afghanistan is not the end of this war. It is not even the beginning of the end, but it may be the end of the beginning. History reminds us that wars have an ugly habit of cascading into sequels that are impossible to see at the beginning. The lessons of the Afghanistan campaign, therefore, indicate that we will need a balanced, full dimensional arsenal to decisively defeat terrorism. Our military is ready and eager to bring justice to the enemy. In short, we must be prepared and willing to employ a joint ground-air-sea team to kick a few rocks and find, fix and kill these snakes.

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