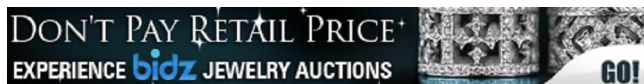




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The Dance Of Death

February 12, 2009: NATO and U.S. forces have developed a playbook for how new replacement and reinforcing units can best fight the pro-Taliban militias in southern Afghanistan. These tips and tricks will get a lot more use soon. By the end of the year, three additional U.S. brigades will enable a new strategy, going after the heroin trade, to be implemented.

The playbook, created using years of experience, exploits how the Afghans operate. For example, there are always opportunities to use tribal politics. So officers have to sit down and negotiate with likely tribal allies (usually long time foes of the drug gang leaders). This can lead to an intelligence bonanza, because lots of people know where the Taliban and drug gangs hide their assets (money, heroin and opium, safe houses). Make the right deal, and all (or at least lots) will be revealed. Without a local patron, most rural Afghans won't even be motivated by cash rewards to provide information. But if someone higher up the food chain says it's OK, you'll have more intel than you can act on at once.

The decision to go after the drug trade is a big deal, because it strikes at the heart of Taliban power, and is unpopular with many in the Afghan government and media. That's because the drug trade is a huge fraction (about a third) of the Afghan economy. It's concentrated in southern Afghanistan, especially in Helmand province. Drug money pays for most of the Taliban violence (even those Taliban fighters who volunteer to fight for

free, and few do, have to be fed, armed and otherwise supported via cash). Drug money pays Afghan officials (including president Karzai's brother, and other kin) and many local journalists, to safeguard drug gang operations (poppy crops, importation of chemicals to refine poppy sap into opium, morphine and heroin, and smuggling these products out of the country). Journalists are paid to keep drug gang stories out of the media, and criticize foreign troops.

Afghan officials cannot officially oppose anti-drug operations, so they must do it indirectly, by making a big deal about any Afghan civilian casualties (which are historically quite low, despite the regular Taliban use of civilians as human shields). The Taliban consider this a very effective tactic, because they can always get a local journalist, who is



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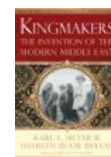
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on their payroll, to get the initial story out. Who's going to question a local reporter's accuracy. Well, actually, many in Afghanistan do, but the farther away from Afghanistan you get, the less people know about how drug money operates in a poor country.

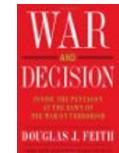
While the Afghan government will not be enthusiastic about the new war on the drug gangs, the governments of neighboring countries, especially Iran and Pakistan, are. Most of the drugs are smuggled out via Iran and Pakistan, and a lot of the cheaper stuff (opium) is sold off to the locals (to keep them happy, and raise some operating cash). This has created millions of addicts in Iran and Pakistan, and caused major social problems. The U.S. hopes to turn this cooperation opportunity into a relationship that will improve communications with Iran (which has been isolated for the last three decades, because Iran is run by a religious dictatorship dedicated to establishing Islamic domination of the entire planet). Iran has been fighting a low level war against drug smugglers, along its Afghan border, for over a decade. There are hundreds of casualties and thousands of arrests there each year. But the Afghan smugglers keep coming. The money's too good, and there are over two million addicts in Iran who are really eager to stay high. There are millions more addicts in the Persian Gulf, North America and Europe as well. The drugs must get through. But the U.S. makes the case that the heroin trade has been chased out of several regions in the past half century. It can be done again. All it requires is a little international cooperation and military muscle.

The Taliban are led by religious fanatics (many of the armed followers are in it mainly for the paycheck), and that continues to be a major liability for them. Once the Taliban have driven police out of an area, or become the largest armed group in an area where there are no police (very common in rural Afghanistan), they begin to impose lifestyle rules that most Afghans hate. In short; no music, no videos, no dancing (even traditional Afghan stuff), and no entertainment in general. This sort of behavior made the Taliban extremely unpopular in the 1990s, and that has not changed a decade later. Some of these Taliban religious fanatics sin on the side, but they are discrete about it. This belief in old-school religious practices is actually a new thing in this part of the world, imported by Saudi Arabian missionaries in the last three decades. There have always been Islamic conservatives among some of the Pushtun tribes, but not as hard core as the Wahhabi brand of Islam pushed by the Saudis. But it's basically a foreign import, and disliked by most of the locals. But if a bunch of heavily armed pro-Wahhabi guys come around, you are going to listen, and obey, at least until the bastards turn their backs. The larger number of U.S. troops will force many more Taliban enforcers to turn away from the Afghans they are tormenting, giving their victims an opportunity to fight back. This gives many Afghans a sense of déjà vu (been there before...). But that's the way it is in Afghanistan. The same thing over and over again.

Despite the change in strategy, many officials in Europe and America believe that more troops are not needed. The generals point out that all that drug money is buying a lot of armed men to help spread Taliban control, and eventually you have to deal with that. Negotiations will only get you so far in the face of armed and aggressive tribesmen. This dispute is being fought out in the media and Western capitals.

February 11, 2009: The Taliban carried out an elaborate suicide bomb attack in the capital, against three government ministries (Prisons, Justice and Education). Such attacks in the capital are mainly for the benefit of the media, particularly foreign media. This attacks involved at least eight suicide bombers and several dozen gunmen. At least 26 people were killed, including five suicide bombers who were shot before they could detonate their explosives. Another 55 people, mostly civilians and government employees, were wounded. Most of the dead were terrorists. Cell phones taken from dead and captured terrorists indicated that the attack had been planned in Pakistan. Most of the suicide bombing cells operating in and around Kabul have been destroyed in the last few months, forcing the Taliban to do all the preparations in Pakistan. The terrorist intelligence was apparently faulty, as the attacks were unable to get past security.

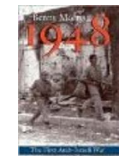
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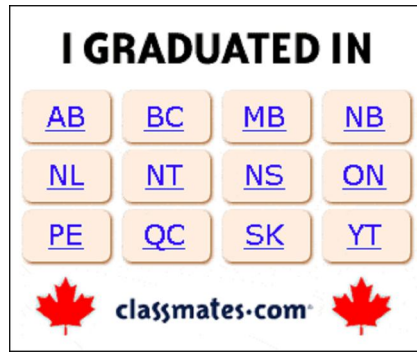
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