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Information Operations in Afghanistan from 2001-2012

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Information Operations in Afghanistan from 2001-2012

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Abstract

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Information Operations in Afghanistan from 2001-2012

This thesis describes and analyses Taliban and coalition information operations related to the Afghanistan war between the years 2001 and 2012. Academic literature is reviewed and analyzed, as well as coalition and Taliban information products.

The thesis examines the nature of counterinsurgency and information operations in an evolving media environment. The messages, mediums used to deliver information products, strategy, posture, organization, and media engagement of both combatants are analyzed to evaluate their contribution to the combatants' respective influence and political goals.

This thesis finds that the Taliban had a superior understanding of the target audiences, developed messages with greater resonance, and delivered them more effectively than the coalition was able to do. It also contends that the Taliban's strategy, organization and capacity for information operations allowed it to out maneuver the coalition on the information battleground. This thesis finds that the Taliban was able to conduct more effective and influential information operations than the coalition.

Acknowledgements

Dedication

For all those who served Canada in Afghanistan.

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List of Symbols, Abbreviations and Nomenclature

Symbol	Definition
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
CIVCAS	Civilian Casualties
CJTF	Combined Joint Task Force
COIN	Counterinsurgency
GBU-31	Guided Bomb Unit - A type of air to ground munition known colloquially as a "bunker buster"
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
HiG	Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
POTD	Propaganda of the Deed
Role 3	A type of military hospital normally found at the division level
SMS	Short Message Service, otherwise known as text messaging

Epigraph

We are in an information war.

Hillary Rodham Clinton[1]

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1. [1] Walter Pincus, "New and Old Information Operations in Afghanistan: What Works?," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2011, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-and-old-information-operations-in-afghanistan-what-works/2011/03/25/AFxNAeqB_story.html.

Chapter One: **Introduction: Definitions / Concepts**

1.1 Thesis Statement

This thesis will analyze Taliban and Coalition information operations in the Afghan

campaign. It will examine the messages used by the combatants to influence target audiences and

whether those messages resonated. It will also analyze the effectiveness of the mediums used to

deliver the messages. Finally, it will evaluate the combatants' ability to engage on the

information battlefield in terms of strategy, organization and capability. This thesis will argue

that the Taliban had a superior understanding of the target audiences, developed messages with

greater resonance, and delivered them more effectively than the coalition. It will also contend

that the Taliban's strategy, organization and capacity for information operations allowed it to out

manoeuvre the coalition on the information battleground. It will argue that the Taliban was able

to conduct more effective and influential information operations than the coalition.

1.2 Definitions and Terms

Key definitions are provided to clarify terms discussed in this thesis, and provide the

necessary limitations and clarity for meaningful analysis.

Combatants:

Two key combatants are the focus of this study: the Taliban and the coalition countries

fighting under the NATO banner, best known as the International Security Assistance Force

(ISAF).

The Taliban formed in the early 1990s, a product of former Mujahidin fighters backed by

the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence agency and the American Central Intelligence Agency.

This group began recruiting young Pashto men who were studying at religious schools known as Madrassas. These young students were known as *Talib,* the Pashto word for student. This emerging group began to refer to itself collectively as the Taliban, meaning students, or religious scholars. The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996, ruling until the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.[2]

The Taliban discussed in this thesis refers to the insurgent political movement active in Afghanistan from 2001 until 2012. It was a political movement that subscribes to an extremist and fundamentalist Sunni Islamic ideology.[3] The Taliban's explicit goals were to overthrow the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), expel coalition troops, and re-establish a radical Islamic government in the form of the "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" that it would rule with Sharia law.[4] The Taliban called upon Afghans to wage a jihad[5] against the government of Afghanistan and coalition troops. They directed operations in Afghanistan even though much of their senior leadership had taken sanctuary in Pakistan.[6]

The Taliban often worked with other radical Islamist groups who were separate, but were, at times allies or competitors including the Haqqani network and Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (known as the HiG). The focus of this analysis is information operations conducted by the main Taliban actors, but it will occasionally consider material from affiliated individuals and groups when they were cooperating to support Taliban information operations.

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[2] Gilles Dorronsoro, "Who Are The Taliban?," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2009, accessed July 18th, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/2009/10/22/who-are-taliban/161.

[3] Zachary Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed December 14th, http://www.cfr.org/Afghanistan/Taliban-afghanistan/p10551.

[4] Stanford University, "Mapping Militant Organizations: The Taliban," accessed December 14th 2013, http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/367.

[5] "A holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty" – Merriam-Webster.com, 2011, accessed November 16, 2014.

[6] Laub.

The other central combatant considered are the international coalition troops engaged in Afghanistan. For the purposes of this thesis, the international coalition is understood to be the countries of the NATO led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF); non-NATO troop contributing nations; and other states providing direct political or logistical support to participants in *Operation Enduring Freedom* or to the Government of Afghanistan (and the development of its governance capabilities). The coalition's mission was to conduct counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan in order to reduce the will and capacity of the Taliban to conduct operations; to train the Afghan National Security Forces; and to enhance the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan central government. All of these goals were pursed with the intent of supporting the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA), so that it would be positioned to govern Afghanistan independently, allowing the coalition to withdraw forces from Afghanistan and leave behind a stable state.[7]

Audience:

The primary audience for information operations by the Taliban and by the coalition was the Afghan population. Both sides in the conflict sought to influence the opinion of Afghan civilians, Afghans working for the government of Afghanistan, members of the Afghan National Security Forces (Army and Police), even Afghan insurgents. The opinion of Afghan civilians was the largest and most commonly targeted of these groups because of their importance in counterinsurgency. The Taliban also targeted international audiences, specifically the political will and domestic public opinion of troop-contributing nations, through contact with the Western

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[7] "ISAF Mission," NATO, accessed December 14th, 2013, http://www.isaf.nato.int/mission.html.

media. The majority of troop-contributing nations were democracies where political will and domestic support were particularly important and susceptible targets. The coalition however, rarely targeted the domestic audience in their own troop contributing nations.

Geographic and Temporal Definitions for Analysis:

This thesis considers information operations specific to the Afghanistan campaign. The broader information operations campaign by coalition countries (The Global War on Terror), or by Taliban sympathizers or allies (Al Qaida and other extremist Islamic terror groups) are therefore excluded, notwithstanding the overlap between information operations intended to influence the Afghan campaign and other conflicts such as those in Yemen and Iraq.

This thesis considers the period from late 2001 when coalition forces first entered the country after 9/11, to 2012 when a significant drawdown of forces occurred. Several key changes took place during this period: (1) the initial invasion; (2) the hunt for Osama bin Laden; (3) the constabulatory mission run primarily out of Kabul; (4) the shift to a counterinsurgency mission; and finally (5) the surge of forces in 2010 and significant coalition drawdown in 2012.

Defining Insurgency and Counterinsurgency:

According to the United States Counterinsurgency Guide,[8] an insurgency is "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region."[9] The Canadian Counter-Insurgency Operations doctrine further notes that it is "a political aim that distinguishes an insurgency from other forms of conflict or threats to security and stability."[10] The Taliban sought through violent means to expel coalition troops, overthrow the Afghan government, and replace it with an Islamic, theocratic state. Canadian doctrine applies NATO's definition of counterinsurgency, "those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken to defeat an insurgency."[11]

Defining Information Operations:

Information operations are generally accepted as one of the five key functions of counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare.[12] There is no single widely accepted definition of information operations in the literature. For the purposes of this thesis, the term "information operations" will combine traditional information operations, what used to be termed psychological operations, strategic communications, public diplomacy and public affairs (insofar as it responds with truthful information to western media accounts or Taliban propaganda). This definition incorporates definitions of scholars such as Foxley, Svet, and Nissen which broadly

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[8] U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, D.C., 2009), accessed November 22, 2014, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf.
[9] U.S. Department of State, 2.
[10] Canada Department of National Defence, *Counter-Insurgency Operations* (Ottawa, 2008), 1-1.
[11] Ibid., quoting NATO Allied Administrative Publication (AAP) 6 *NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions*.
[12] U.S. Department of State, 3.

concern information directed at influence. Foxley considers information operations in the Afghan campaign as "all communication activities in support of political or military goals in the context of Afghanistan."[13] Svet narrows his definition slightly to those information activities that are "efforts to shape the battle of the narrative," in the Afghan campaign.[14] Nissen considers information operations in the Afghan campaign as those which strive to influence the perception and opinion of the conflict among Afghans, as well as the global audience.[15]

Information operations are not necessarily kinetic or lethal, but they can be paired with lethal operations to achieve the desired battlefield effect. Info ops are distinguished by their primary purpose: to influencing perceptions and attitudes rather than destroying things or people, or seizing terrain.[16] Information operations can include kinetic elements, however they can be entirely non-kinetic and have purely influence activities aimed at political goals.[17]

The term information operations is applied to Taliban information activities not in order to provide credibility or legitimacy to the Taliban, but rather to ensure a single basis of comparison between information activities on both sides and to bring to light their relative effect on the outcome of the Afghan campaign.[18]

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[13] Tim Foxley, "Countering Taliban Information Operations in Afghanistan," *Prism: A Journal of the Center for Complex Operations* 1, no. 4 (2010), 80.

[14] Oleg Svet, *A campaign Assessment of the US-led Coalition's Psychological and Information Operations in Afghanistan* (E-International Relations: 2010), accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.e-ir.info/2010/09/01/fighting-for-a-narrative-a-campaign-assessment-of-the-us-led-coalition's-psychological-and-information-operations-in-afghanistan/, 1.

[15] Thomas Elkjer Nissen, *The Taliban's information warfare: A comparative analysis of NATO Information Operations (Info Ops) and Taliban Information Activities* (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2008), 4.

[16] Darley, 74.

[17] Ibid., 73.

[18] Some scholars do not believe the Taliban's information activities should be designated "information operations," because they are concerned that using the same terms as are used by Western militaries implies the same level of doctrinal development or ethical considerations. Nissen, 4.

1.3 Theoretical Underpinnings

The theoretical underpinnings for this thesis have been informed by the counterinsurgency models developed by two of the foremost scholars in the field John Nagl and David Kilcullen, as well as a literature review of the counterinsurgency doctrine of key coalition countries.[19] The assumptions used to evaluating information operations in a counterinsurgency environment are explained, as is their application to the Afghan war. This thesis treats Afghanistan as a counterinsurgency and as such the following lays out the assumptions regarding the nature and drivers of insurgency and counterinsurgency, the requirements for success (centre of gravity) and the relative importance of information and influence operations as a result.

1.4 Afghanistan From Counter-terrorism to Counterinsurgency

The goals of the initial intervention in Afghanistan were limited to destroying Al Qaida's training camps, to deny the terror group sanctuary, and to remove the Taliban from power. The Taliban had provided support and sanctuary for Al Qaida in the lead up to the 9/11 terror attacks on the U.S. Al Qaida was perceived as a physical and ideological threat to the U.S. and other Western countries. In 2003, a large number of troops were moved from Afghanistan to Iraq as the U.S. went to war against Saddam Hussein. This allowed many of the Taliban leaders who had been driven across the border into Pakistan to filter back into Afghanistan and gain strength. The resistance in Afghanistan began to transform into an insurgency. Over time, the mission evolved and by 2006 the coalition was fighting a growing insurgency. While coalition troops recognized a nascent insurgency in 2006, true counterinsurgency strategy was not applied in until

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[19] The U.S. and Canadian counterinsurgency doctrine documents have been consulted in so far as what is publicly available.

nearly five years later. Until the 2009-2010 time frame, the coalition lacked a counterinsurgency strategy (to guide operations), and the necessary resources to execute an effective counterinsurgency approach.

As violence increased and the insurgency grew, calls for a COIN strategy and the accompanying resources gained attention in military and political circles. In the 2008 Presidential election then Senator Barak Obama ran on a campaign promise to shift the U.S. focus from Iraq back to Afghanistan and increase the number of American troops in the country by one third (10,000 troops) in what became known as "the surge."[20] In 2009, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal was dispatched to Afghanistan with the mission of applying a counterinsurgency strategy.[21] John A. Nagl identified two potential approaches to fighting an insurgency in his book *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* ": annihilate the enemy, or turn the loyalty of the people."[22] The US and coalition countries opted for the second approach.[23] U.S. General Stanley A. McChrystal's COIN strategy required an increased military presence to protect the population in order to execute the "clear-hold-build" approach to counterinsurgency. Thirty three thousand U.S. troops were deployed to Afghanistan to push the Taliban back, protect the civilian population and build governance and civil society institutions. The focus was to be on winning the trust of the population, protecting them from Taliban reprisals and

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[20] Ewan MacAskill, "Obama promises 10,000 more troops for Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2008, accessed November 22, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/15/barackobama.usa1 and CNN, "Obama calls situation in Afghanistan 'urgent'," CNN.com, July 21, 2008, accessed November 22, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/07/20/obama.afghanistan/.

[21] *McChrystal, ISAF Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance (Kabul: International Security Assistance Force, 2009) accessed November 1, 2014:* http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/counterinsurgency_guidance.pdf.

[22] John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 26.

[23] This thesis will not attempt to evaluate the options for counterinsurgency, but will evaluate the information operations conducted against the requirements for the type of counterinsurgency undertaken.

executing force carefully in order to avoid civilian casualties[24]. The task was to offer a better and credible alternative to the Afghan people rather than simply destroying the Taliban. As the U.S. approach shifted under McChrystal, the U.S. implemented a strategy of "political, economic and information components that reinforced government legitimacy and effectiveness while reducing insurgent influence over the population," outlined in the U.S. government's *Counterinsurgency Guide.*[25] McChrystal served as the ISAF commander at the time the counterinsurgency strategy was imposed, and as such the coalition also adopted his COIN strategy.[26]

1.5 Insurgency: an "Armed Political Competition"

In the literature reviewed scholars and practitioners of counterinsurgency (COIN) consistently identified the political nature of insurgencies as an important factor to understand in what generates and sustains insurgent movements. A U.S. Army officer with significant COIN experience explained to Nagl "when there are no economic and political foundations for the guerrilla movement, there will be no guerrilla movement."[27] Insurgencies are political at their core, meaning counterinsurgents must consider the politics of the conflict they are engaged in to develop a successful strategy. The United States Counterinsurgency Guide recognized this and described COIN as a "…fundamentally *armed political competition* with insurgents."[28] Insurgents use physical violence and subversion with the intent of winning a war of ideas, rather than waging war purely for the purposes of taking territory or resources. David Kilcullen explained in his seminal guide to counterinsurgency theory, that politics of insurgency frequently

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[24] McChrystal.
[25] U.S. Department of State, 12.
[26] *"ISAF Commander Issues Counterinsurgency Guidance," NATO, accessed August 2nd, 2014, http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/pressreleases/2009/08/pr090827-643.html.*
[27] Nagl, 35.
[28] U.S. Department of State, 12.

are focused on governance. Kilcullen describes COIN as a scenario of "contested governance, albeit a hideously violent one," between combatants.[29] Extending this theoretical understanding of counterinsurgency, the war in Afghanistan was about violent political conflict over the right to govern between the Taliban and the GIRoA (backed by the coalition forces).

Afghanistan was a battle not only of contested governance, but also of contested ideologies, another common source of political conflict that feeds insurgencies.[30] The war in Afghanistan was fundamentally about ideas and politics: the politicized Islam of the Taliban versus the democratic secularism of the coalition and GIRoA, and not a competition for resources, or territory. George Packer supported this view, contending that Afghanistan was more an ideological fight with political goals than kinetic ones.[31] The U.S. Counterinsurgency guide adopted a similar position, stating that in insurgency political outcome was as important as the security outcome for success.[32]

The idea that politics are at least a part of what causes wars, or drives them, is not new, or exclusive to counterinsurgency theory. The father of modern warfare, Carl Von Clausewitz contended that war is a continuation of politics with the addition of other means. Clausewitz argued that war is dominated by two primary factors: the moral element (what modern scholars usually consider as psychological or information warfare) and the element of violence (kinetic operations).[33] Clausewitz established a spectrum of conflict, arguing the more ideological a conflict, the more important the moral elements become because of the importance of conflicting

[29] David Kilcullen, *Counterinsurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.
[30] William Darley, "Clausewitz's Theory of War and Information Operations," *Joint Forces Quarterly* issue 40 (1st quarter 2006), 76.
[31] George Packer, "Knowing the Enemy: Can Social Scientists Redefine the 'War on Terror'?," *New Yorker*, December 18, 2006, 64.
[32] U.S. Department of State, 18.
[33] Darley, 74.

political goals. Likewise, William Darley, who views insurgency through a Clausewitzian lens, writes that the more ideological a conflict the more important the moral element, defined as information and persuasion, become to winning the war, rather than physical violence.[34] The political nature of insurgency therefore means moral elements are key.[35]

1.6 People As the Centre of Gravity: "Hearts and Minds"

Accepting the theoretical premise that COIN is primarily political and politics concerns people, which according to COIN literature means the population the centre of gravity in an insurgency.[36] Kilcullen describes counterinsurgency as "…a competition with the insurgent for the right and ability to win hearts, minds and the acquiescence of the population."[37] Winning the "hearts and minds" of the population (and by extension their active support) is key because of the political goals of an insurgency. Because ideas and politics matter, people must be convinced. Insurgents and counterinsurgents both require the support of the population to operate freely and ultimately achieve their goals. Insurgents must interact with the population to facilitate resupply, shelter and movement. Counterinsurgents cannot identify and root out insurgents, or establish a government that will succeed without the support of the population. Svet argued that in an insurgency, "how the population perceives the struggle, ultimately determines who the victors are."[38] The battle for hearts and minds is critical in an insurgency because of the asymmetric nature of the conflict. Kilcullen explains:

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[34] Ibid., 74.
[35] Ibid., 77.
[36] Commander Larry LeGree U.S. Navy, "Thoughts on The Battle for the Minds: IO and COIN in the Pashtun Belt," *Military Review* (September-October 2010), 21.
[37] Kilcullen, 29.
[38] Svet, 5.

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even though insurgents have no permanent, physical, strong-points, no physical "decisive terrain" in military terms, they do have a fixed point they must defend: their need to maintain connectivity with the population. This is not a physical piece of real estate, but in function – or rather, political – terms, it fulfils the same purpose as decisive terrain…[39]

This was certainly true in Afghanistan. The Taliban had a "traditional" homeland in Kandahar, but they had no set bases to operate from, no permanent outposts to defend. They moved among the population, blending in and depending on Afghans for support.

The U.S. Counterinsurgency guide noted the critical link between insurgents and the population they operated among. Insurgents "only need the active support of a few enabling individuals, but the passive acquiescence of a large portion of the contested population will give a higher probability of success."[40] Without the support of the population – active or passive – an insurgency will fail.[41] Kilcullen argues:

> Insurgents need the people to act in certain ways (sympathy, acquiescence, silence, reaction provocation, or fully active support) in order to survive and further their strategy. Unless the population acts in these ways, insurgent networks tend to wither because they cannot move freely within the population, gather resources (money, recruits) or conduct their operations. Insurgents do not necessarily need the active support of the population: they can get by on intimidation and passive acquiescence for a long time, as long as they have external (perhaps global) source of support and as long as the government does not cut off their access to the population. But without access to a mass base, an insurgent movement suffocates, so cutting the insurgent off from the population is a critical task in counterinsurgency.[42]

In 2009, President Barack Obama announced the United States was switching to a population-centric strategy in which securing the population and thus winning their loyalty or at

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[39] Kilcullen, 10.
[40] U.S. Department of State, 2.
[41] Kilcullen, 8.
[42] Ibid.

least acquiescence would be key.[43] General McChrystal's counterinsurgency guide for ISAF troops made winning over the population the primary objective of U.S. strategy. "A population-centric strategy," he said, was "a precondition for victory."[44] Then Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael G. Mullen argued that in an asymmetric conflict such as Afghanistan, a significant portion of the battle is for ideas and beliefs *"…frankly the battlefield isn't necessarily a field anymore. It's in the minds of the people. It's what they believe to be true that matters. And when they believe that they are safer with Afghan and coalition troops in their midst and local governance at their service, they will resist the intimidation of the Taliban and refuse to permit their land from ever again becoming a safe haven for terror."*[45]

Each COIN campaign demands a population-centered approach, but the task of winning Afghan hearts and minds was viewed as particularly critical and challenging given the culture and history of the country. Afghanistan has a long history of suspicion of foreigners and of defeating foreign troops.[46] A major RAND study of U.S. information operations (info ops or IO) found that commanders were aware that the importance of convincing Afghans to support the coalition was key to winning the war.[47] Foxley wrote that "perception is everything in Afghanistan, and information activities are playing an increasingly important part in shaping perceptions and generating support for insurgents and counterinsurgents alike, both inside and outside the country."[48] It is the people of Afghanistan who must be convinced as to who should govern.

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[43] Christopher J. Lamb and Martin Cinnamond, "Unified Effort: Key to Special Operations in War," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 56 (1st Quarter, 2010), 40.
[44] *McChrystal.*
[45] Munoz, 3.
[46] Ibid., xiii.
[47] Ibid., xiii.
[48] Foxley, 79.

1.7 Information Operations: The Role of Influence

This thesis has established that counterinsurgencies are political battles in which the centre of gravity is the population. Understanding the means used to influence the population thus becomes critically important. Information operations are a key means of persuasion, because it is information (and how it is presented) that influences how the population views the battle narrative and by extension which combatant the population will consider supporting. The United States Counterinsurgency manual emphasized the importance of information operations, not simply as a support function to kinetic operations but as "the foundation for all other activities."[49] U.S. practitioners recognized that insurgents dealt largely in propaganda and persuasion to win over the population.[50] The U.S. Counterinsurgency Guide noted:

> Propaganda is a key element of persuasion and is used at the local, national and often international levels to influence perceptions of potential supporters, opinion leaders, and opponents in favour of the insurgents; promoting the insurgent cause and eliminating the government's resolve. More specifically, propaganda may be designed to control community action, discredit government action, provoke overreaction by security forces, or exacerbate sectarian tension.[51]

For counterinsurgents, the goal of information operations was to win legitimacy in the eyes of the population and in this way disrupt the insurgents' political strategy and popular support.[52] Information operations were held to be as important as kinetic operations in destroying

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[49] U.S. Department of State, 18.
[50] Ibid., 9.
[51] Ibid., 9.
[52] Greg Bruno, "Winning the Information War in Afghanistan and Pakistan," 11 May 2009 (Council on Foreign Relations). Accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.cfr.org/pakistan/winning-information-war-afghanistan-pakistan/p19330, 3.

the Taliban.[53] Darley argued that failing to integrate information operations "imperils the entire campaign plan."[54]

Information operations play a particularly important role in constabulatory, unconventional and asymmetric environments such as Afghanistan because ideas drive these wars and people win them. Information conveys the ideas, affects how the population (and even the enemy) perceives the battle narrative and whom they support. Ultimately it helps determine who wins. In COIN, information operations play a particularly critical role. Nissen writes that the outcome of the war is directly related to information operations, "If ISAF does not win the battle for the information environment, it will not prevail in Afghanistan."[55]

1.8 Battle Terrain: Understanding A Changed Information Battlefield

Influence operations are critical to any counterinsurgency, but changes on the information battlefield have magnified the importance and influence of information operations on the modern battlefield. These changes are a critical consideration in evaluating information operations in the Afghan campaign, particularly in terms of evaluate combatants' ability to engage in the media environment to influence target audiences. Communications scholars contend that a "communications revolution" has taken place in recent years insofar as new technologies allow significant changes in the speed, ease, and frequency of the transfer of information.[56] The communications revolution has increased the importance and value of information operations

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[53] Nissen, 9 and Darley, 78.
[54] Darley, 79.
[55] Nissen, 5.
[56] David Betz, "Communications Breakdown: Strategic Communications and Defeat in Afghanistan," *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* (fall 2011), 614, and Packer, 64.

and the influence of media war coverage.[57] The work of scholars and practitioners reviewed for

this thesis argued that victory in modern warfare is not possible without winning on the

information battlefield. Betz argued these changes have "mediatized" the battlefield, making the

perception of the battlefield (by the population) the centre of gravity, rather than the kinetic

reality of the battlefield.[58] The perception of wars, especially by the home front audience in troop

contributing countries, is more influential than the reality on the ground. Wars unfold on

television in real time. This alters the interaction between combatants, the press and the

perception of the war for both local and global populations. A July 2005 letter to Abu Musab al-

Zarqawi (at the time leader of Al Qaida operations in Iraq) from a senior Al Qaida leader,

Ayman al-Zawahiri, noted, "We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in

the battlefield of the media."[59] Retired U.S. Colonel, Steve Fondacaro, an expert in human

terrain mapping and counterinsurgency, emphasized that "[a] revolution happened without us

knowing or paying attention. Perception truly now is reality and our enemies know it. We have

to fight on the information battlefield."[60]

Significant technological changes have altered how insurgents operate on the information

battlefield, how the media reports those operations and the influence of that reporting.

Technology has become portable, more available, more affordable, and easier to operate.

Insurgents are able to film and distribute events on an iPhone that would have once required

expensive, complicated equipment that needed a network television crew to operate. The ease of

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Catherine A. Theohary and John Rollins, *Terrorist Use of the Internet: Information Operations in Cyberspace*,
Congressional Research Service, March 8, 2011, accessed November 22, 2014, http://fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41674.pdf,
3.
[60] Packer, 66.

access to technology means insurgents no longer must rely on third-party media to transmit their messages. They are able to engage with populations directly and on their own terms.[61] A much lower level of investment and resources is required to communicate both locally and globally, and it is much more difficult for counterinsurgents to shut down this messaging. Blogs, YouTube videos, text messages, can be blocked temporarily but they will be resurrected on a new website or from a new server days or even hours later.

Insurgents in the Afghan war had more communications avenues available due to technological changes in communications field, as well as changes in social media. Compare the avenues of access the Viet Cong had to those of the Taliban. The average Viet Cong insurgent had access to face-to-face communications, radio, and perhaps some printed material. The average Talib had access to those plus email, satellite phones, text messaging, night letters, Facebook, twitter and YouTube.[62] The increase in modes available and accessibility allowed the Taliban to amplify their message through the global media. The Taliban was also effective in getting their messages are included in Western media reports – an issue discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Cassidy argued that the technological changes in media had not only provided a boost to insurgents, but had actually given them a military advantage over counterinsurgents. "Information technology empowers the insurgent more than the counterinsurgent in irregular war," Cassidy writes, because "it makes political violence more complex. It opens a broader range of militant and political action. The new information domain has enhanced armed conflict,

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[61] Bruno, 1-2.
[62] Packer, 64.

and irregular war, as a continuation of policy and political discourse."[63] Militaries and states no longer controlled the primary information distribution points or systems. As Kilcullen explained "… the armed forces no longer control information flow on the battlefield. Our hierarchical command-and-control system functioned well, but the network media reporting system has outpaced it dramatically." The changed role of information, how quickly, where and to whom it is transmitted have all changed the ways insurgents do business. Betz's argued this new "global mediascape" and technological changes have made mass media more influential than ever before in shaping the public's views of war.[64] Kilcullen wrote that insurgents have not been slow to realize the opportunities that globalized communications, including the new manoeuvre space of the Internet and satellite television, provide as a means to impose political and economic costs on governments undertaking counterinsurgency.[65] Insurgencies are asymmetric by nature. In a changed communications field, the Taliban was able to use these changes to leverage information as another asymmetric advantage on the battlefield. The Taliban exploited the changed environment for information operations focusing their technological and social media efforts on influencing Western audiences.

The changing nature of technology has not only changed the frequency and medium for media communication, it has changed the demands. While accuracy and objectivity are still critical, a constant pressure is exerted on journalists to feed the 24/7 media beast, to be the first with the story and to tell it in the most compelling way possible. This changes some fundamental calculations on the battlefield for both combatants – the speed at which information can be provided to the media, or events can be responded to, matters. In the 24/7 news cycle the

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[64] Betz, 614.
[65] Kilcullen, 103.

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party who can provide information to journalists first will often see it air first, setting the agenda. The ability to transmit instantly and the requirement for a constant new supply of information means reaction time matters. It can easily be transmitted live as events unfold, with no delay in real time. This can change how the story is told – instead of gathering all of the elements after the fact to construct a narrative, information is being transmitted piece by piece as it comes in. Access matters. Media are now able to travel to exceptionally remote locations, capturing images that are desirable and undesirable for warring parties, and transmit them immediately. This also means that the party that is willing to grant access will likely get more coverage, for better or worse. Finally, the medium of the content matters. Photos and videos are in high demand to feed television and Internet journalism. This kind of visual material can be particularly jarring in war and evoke an emotional response from the audience, as can emotive reporting on humanitarian crises.[66] It also provides an unparalleled opportunity to show the audience what is going on, or influence what appears to be going on.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a new theory emerged amongst communications scholars, that changes in the media's reach, immediacy, presence and pervasiveness, meant media was no longer only reporting events and policy, but influencing public opinion, policy out comes and even making policy. Communications scholars coined a term for the emerging increased media influence on government policy, especially foreign policy, "The CNN effect." The CNN effect is a communications theory that "…attempts to explain the role of media as an international actor and political catalyst."[67] The theory focuses primarily on the effect of 24/7

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[66] Robinson, pg 306
[67] David Fawcett, "Analyzing the CNN Effect," *Communications and International Relations*, Volume 4, Issue 2 http://www.com.washington.edu/commIR/vol4/issue2/reviewFawcett.html accessed on July 20th 2014.

television news networks like CNN and BBC World on policy (as implied by the name).[68] The CNN effect postulates that "media pervasiveness" has a direct effect on public opinion, pressure for a government to act and ultimately government decisions, noting television media have evolved into "decisive actors in determining policies and outcomes of significant events."[69] In his article, *The CNN effect: can the news media drive foreign policy*, Piers Robinson writes that by the late 1980s the effects of a technological changed media with greater reach and influence was already being felt, "The new technologies appeared to reduce the scope for calm deliberation over policy, forcing policy-makers to respond to whatever issues journalists focused on."[70] The increasing ability of the media to gain access to and broadcast events instantaneously, combined with increased access to media products (by the public) was termed "media pervasiveness" by communications scholar, James Hoge. Television is also a unique medium because of its emotive influence. Covering a humanitarian event, transmitting horrific, graphic images home causes an emotional response in the public. When those images are being transmitted literally 24 hours a day, the CNN theory postulates an increased demand for the government to act. Television news can leverage significant political pressure to take particular policy actions because images create emotional reactions and trigger a demand to respond immediately, rather than because their potential consequences of the actions the public is demanding are understood and accepted.[71] Pressure to respond quickly, even immediately with incomplete information and context is a strong determining factor in the response.[72] Robinson writes "The phrase 'CNN effect' encapsulated the idea that real-time communications technology could provoke major

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[68] Fawcett, pg 1
[69] Fawcett, pg 1
[70] Piers Robinson, pg 301
[71] Robinson, pg 302
[72] Robinson, pg 302

responses from domestic audiences and political elites to global events."[73] The assumption of

the CNN effect is that news media not only influences policy, but is powerful enough to create

it.[74]

In the paper *Propaganda of the Deed 2008* Neville Bolt (a former television producer),

David Betz and Jaz Azari examined the changing concept of "propaganda of the deed" against an

evolving technological environment that had affected the way news and media images were

captured, distributed and the environment in which they played. Bolt, Betz and Azari defined

Propaganda of the Deed (POTD) as "a term depicting an act of violence whose signal and/or

extreme nature is intended to create an ideological impact disproportionate to the act itself."[75]

POTD by definition is not a criminal act, or even a military one, but a political act intended to

influence. The authors argue that POTD in the modern environment is not simply a kinetic event,

but a violent incident intended to cause 'shock and awe' through the force multiplying effect of

fear."[76] Critical to this effect was distribution of the event through the media. Bolt, Betz and

Azari made the case that because of technological changes that had shortened timelines between

an incident and when it is broadcast, "thinking time" had been reduced for media, and that this

was to the advantage of the insurgents.[77] In this environment the authors stated there was a

shrinking timeline between when an event occurred and when networks had to get it to air. Acts

that constituted Propaganda of the Deed were common to insurgency, and typically summoned

or called upon deep rooted grievances insurgents were seeking to highlight in a highly publicized

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[73] Robinson, pg 301
[74] Robinson, pg 303
[75] Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jan Azari, *Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon*, The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, Whitehall Report 3-08, 2008, accessed November 24th, 2014, https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/Propaganda_of_the_Deed_2008_FINAL.pdf, 2.
[76] Ibid., 2.
[77] Ibid., 2.

manner designed to undermine legitimacy of government.[78] Changes in media and information technology had ceded a significant advantage to the insurgent in carrying out POTD that would in turn be shown on television, increasing the act's potency.

Bolt, Betz and Azari argued that in an environment where "political violence has reached its apogee in the explosion of liberalized media," a symbiotic relationship had developed between media and those carrying out spectacular violence, where both recognize that violence sells.[79] For insurgents it intimidated or converted target audiences, for network television it gained viewers. The authors argued "A new 'War of Ideas' plays itself out via images and words that are mediated, if not 'mediatised' (actively moulded by media) across global television, internet, and increasingly mobile telephony networks."[80] This drove an environment that sought to create and exploit highly visual images, such as spectacular attacks on high value or symbolic targets.

This same environment and technological changes that had created a symbiotic relationship between highly influential television networks and violent insurgent leaders also caused the media to lose control of the distribution of news. Bolt, Betz and Azari wrote that journalists were being squeezed by a number of factors including: the commoditisation of news, which drives a viewer appetite for infotainment; the tabloidization of information where "the most dramatic content rises to the top of the news running order. Providing a highly visual attack, or getting information out first meant setting the agenda. Insurgents could also drive their own news agendas using the increasingly cheap and accessible technology to self publish. TV

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[78] Ibid., pg 3
[79] Ibid., pg 5.
[80] Ibid., pg 6.

outlets pressed for time would then air these images. This new environment encouraged Propaganda of the Deed events that drew coverage, had a political effect and could be accomplished by self-contained insurgent media cells. Bolt, Betz and Azari's reinterpretation of POTD revealed a new political framework for insurgents approaching political violence and new challenges for media outlets that those insurgents were adept at taking advantage of to distribute propaganda. This is evident throughout the Afghan campaign where the Taliban was first to the media, developed their own recording and media cells and established a strategy based on information and spectacular attacks designed to influence, rather than achieve explicit kinetic goals.

1.9 Evaluating Information Operations: Message Delivery and Resonance

Information operations are a means to leverage the centre of gravity of an insurgency by persuading the population. Information in a vacuum is useless; it must be appropriately packaged and delivered to the right audience. Attempting to influence the wrong audience, or use themes and messages that do not resonate with a particular audience is a source of noise at best, and more problematically, could drive the population into sympathy or tacit support of the insurgents. Thus, knowing and understanding the target audience is essential to providing information they will find persuasive. The RAND study notes that "the honing of messages to sway the population is critical to the ongoing campaign to establish a permanent Government…" in Afghanistan.[81]

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[81] Munoz, xiii.

Emily Spencer argues in *Solving The People Puzzle: The Importance of Cultural Intelligence* that cultural intelligence was the successful identification of which audiences to interact with, when to interact with them, and how to shape the messages and themes chosen. Cultural intelligence meant understanding the values, beliefs, and attitudes that drive behaviours and decisions – key information to furthering a counterinsurgent's interests.[82] Spencer argued *"…cultural intelligence, or the ability to understand the beliefs, values and attitudes of a group of people and, most important, apply them toward a specific goal should be considered an essential tool in the twenty-first century arsenal of modern governments and militaries."*[83] Failing to understand culture can result in messages that are "lost in translation" or, worse, that translate into an insulting or culturally inappropriate message.[84] Messages that resonate, culturally and religiously, are critical to getting the intended message across and influencing the behaviour of the population.

This thesis will consider the resonance of messages as well as their delivery systems as a key mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of information operations conducted by the Taliban and the coalition.

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[82] Emily Spencer, *Solving The People Puzzle: The Importance of Cultural Intelligence*, The Mackenzie Institute, March 13, 2014, accessed November 22, 2014, http://www.mackenzieinstitute.com/solving-people-puzzle-importance-cultural-intelligence, 5.
[83] Ibid., 1-2.
[84] Ibid, 3.

Chapter Two: **Messaging**

This chapter analyzes the themes and messages used by the Taliban and the coalition to influence both the Afghan population and the domestic populations of coalition troop contributing countries. The resonance, credibility, and cultural or religious appropriateness of the respective key themes and messages are examined.

2.1 Overview

Taliban messages had greater resonance with the Afghan population than the coalition's themes and messages. The Taliban had a superior understanding of language, culture, history and religion and were thus able to tailor messages appropriate to their Afghan target audiences. The Taliban employed the population's actual grievances into their messages to increase their credibility and resonance. The Taliban's presence was their greatest message and they exploited this to intimidate the Afghan population and undermine the coalition and the GIRoA's promises of security and stability. The Taliban effectively targeted the coalition's domestic populations with messages that undermined the will of the coalition to fight and contribute resources. The Taliban's propaganda did not need to convince local Afghans to support the insurgency. It simply had to create sufficient doubt, frustration, and anger to stop the population from supporting the GIRoA and coalition.

Coalition messages lacked the history and the linguistic, cultural, and religious understanding of the Afghan audience to be tailored for the population, or to resonate to the degree Taliban messages did. They frequently were constructed from Western bias and failed to translate or meant something different to the Afghan population that what was intended. When

the coalition did create positive messages that resonated, they faced the challenge of larger failures of the counterinsurgency mission (a lack of development and security, corruption, and civilian casualties) that undermined central themes, reducing the credibility of the coalition's messages. The coalition was largely unable to refute the Taliban's messages to the Afghan audience, or to their domestic audiences at home.

2.2 Insurgent Themes and Messages

Insurgent messaging follows common themes designed to undermine the legitimacy of the government, gain the support of the population (often through intimidation), discredit counterinsurgents, and reduce their will to fight.[85] Messages centre around righteousness, hatred, the inevitable triumph of insurgent forces, allegiance, moral certainty, terror, martyrdom, praise of violence, justified reaction, long war, guilt, bad faith, security force incompetence and legitimacy.[86] These messages are all intended to influence behaviour so that the political goals of the insurgency can be achieved. All of these messages can be seen reflected in the Taliban's key themes and messages.

Propaganda by definition often includes rumours and exaggerated or false information. The themes and messages in insurgent propaganda typically capitalize on a specific triggering incident or the population's grievances, beliefs, biases, fears, or resentments.[87] *Counter-Insurgency Operations*, the counterinsurgency manual of the Canadian Forces, noted that "All propaganda contains some kernel of truth, however miniscule, which is distorted to play upon the preconceived notions, attitudes and perceptions of the target audience as well as socio-political

[85] Canada Department of National Defence. *Counter-Insurgency Operations*. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2008, 8-11.
[86] Ibid., 8-13.
[87] International Crisis Group, 17.

trends that have led to discontent."[88] While propaganda features disinformation, it does so in an attempt to influence the population by exploiting real fear and frustration. The authors of the Crisis Group report noted, "Within Afghanistan the Taliban are adept at exploiting local disenfranchisement and disillusionment."[89]

2.3 Introduction to Taliban Themes and Messages

Understanding what messages the Taliban used to influence their target audiences is critical for analyzing their information operations and the degree of success they enjoyed on the information battlefield. While the Taliban were expert at delivering messaging to the Afghan population, as to whether they would influence the intended audience the content of these messages mattered more than how they were delivered.[90] Taliban propaganda was designed to influence the beliefs and actions of local Afghans and public opinion in troop contributing nations. Its messages were intended to undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government and Afghan security forces, erode support for the presence of coalition troops among the local population of Afghanistan, and erode support for the mission among those troops' democratic masters at home. Taliban propaganda seized on Afghan history, grievances of the local population, religious and cultural themes, and fear (both among Afghans and foreign populations) to cultivate a sense of hopelessness, intimidation, frustration, and illegitimacy around the Afghan government and foreign troops. Two main themes dominated Taliban information operations: foreign presence, and legitimacy and power.[91] These themes were paired

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88 Canada Department of National Defence, 8-12.
89 International Crisis Group, ii.
90 Ibid., 17.
91 Ibid., 17-18.

with two common grievances, identified by Dorronsoro, perceived corruption in the Afghan government and a lack of basic services.[92] Wali Shaaker, the Pashtun Afghan who aided U.S. forces in understanding Taliban propaganda, noted that the Taliban "… repeatedly make specific arguments emphasizing certain issues that serve their interests and resonate among Afghans."[93] The Taliban thus achieved message resonance by emphasizing grievances that fed directly into their messages.

2.4 Religion and Culture: Essential Shaping Factors

Nissen wrote that the Taliban used rhetorical techniques to frame their messages in a way that resonated with the Afghan population.[94] Two of the most important rhetorical framing devices were religion and culture. The use of these powerful framing devices allowed the Taliban to craft messages that resonated with Afghans because of their shared history, religious beliefs, or way of life.[95] Effective themes and messages that motivated a population to act could not be identified without a thorough understanding of culture. Spencer highlights the importance of cultural understanding in message development and subsequent resonance, "It is about understanding the message that is being sent, making sure the intent of your message is being properly understood, and ultimately, influencing a target group of people to achieve your goal."[96]

Foxley identified one of the Taliban's greatest strengths as their ability to use their messaging to influence local tribes, in particular in the South and East of Afghanistan, two of the

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[92] Dorronsoro, 12.
[93] Munoz, 110.
[94] Nissen, 6.
[95] Spencer, 1-2.
[96] Ibid., 5.

regions that had shown the greatest amount of support for the Taliban.[97] As Foxley explained,

"In terms of strengths, they come from the same tribal, cultural and linguistic base as a key target

audience – the Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border."[98] The Taliban

were particularly adept at manipulating Pashtun cultural and religious traditions to their

advantage, a critical advantage considering the Pashto population made up the majority of

Taliban supporters.[99] This superior understanding of tribal dynamics, societal expectations,

shared history, and a common religion allowed the Taliban to frame messages in a way that

connected with a key audience. The Pashto were not the only target of the Taliban however and

the indigenous nature of the group meant it had a superior understanding of and ability to use the

appropriate languages in the appropriate regions to communicate be it Pashto, Urdu, or Farsi.

The Taliban drew on Afghan culture and history when selecting wording for its

messages. This wording was designed to use Afghan history and culture to shape perceived

identities of critical players in the conflict: the Taliban, the Afghan government, and coalition

forces. The Taliban referred to themselves as mujahidin, freedom fighters. Nissen argued that

this was a "simple and effective" technique that drew on memories of the Afghans who fought

and expelled Soviet forces.[100] It evoked memories of Soviet atrocities against civilians and was

intended to place the Taliban in the same category as those who drove out Soviet occupying

forces. The Taliban referred to themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, connecting

them to the Mujahidin's past in Afghanistan and to the global struggle by extremists to defend

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97 Foxley, 85.
98 Ibid., 86.
99 Munoz, 61.
100 Nissen, 6.

Islam.[101] Taliban rhetoric included the use of terms such as "crusader" and "infidel" for foreign

forces, implying that they were in Afghanistan to fight against Islam and destroy the Afghan

culture.[102] This wording used religion and shared Afghan history to pull the target audience

together, suggesting that the fight in Afghanistan was between Muslims and infidel invaders. The

Afghan government was frequently described as *ghulam* (a slave or servant), *ajir* (agent), or

gawdagi (a puppet).[103] These terms implied that Afghanistan was not being governed by Afghans

and that foreign forces were there to take away the country's autonomy, playing on longstanding

xenophobia rooted in the country's history. The Afghan National Police and Afghan National

Army were often referred to as *munafiq* (hypocrites), undermining their legitimacy and

honour.[104] These language choices communicated the message that the Taliban were the true

protectors of Afghanistan, fighting against a violent occupation. Culturally relevant messaging

appeared throughout the Taliban's themes.

Religion was another rhetorical device the Taliban used to construct messages that

resonated with the population. The Taliban was a deeply religious movement and was able to

draw on its extensive knowledge of the Koran and Islamic traditions to develop messages.

Religion was a powerful force in Afghanistan. In a country that was notoriously factionalized

and lacked a strong national identity, (let alone any history of a successful, powerful national

government) religion was a unifying force. Religion had been successfully used before to

mobilize Afghans against an external threat.[105] The Taliban used a variety of religious messages

for leverage. The threat of crusaders arriving to wipe out Islam or corrupt good Muslims was a

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101 International Crisis Group, 17.
102 Nissen, 6.
103 International Crisis Group, 17,
104 Ibid.
105 Svet, 3.

common theme.[106] Another common refrain was that the "entire Muslim world is behind us," binding the Taliban's agenda to a larger Muslim identity and struggle for survival and implying that failing to support the Taliban was a betrayal of Muslims worldwide.[107] This instilled a sense of religious obligation.[108] The Taliban were able to use Koranic references and arguments to persuade or intimidate Afghans. These messages often came in the form of religious edicts, taken from the Koran, and were particularly effective because the Afghan audience were intimately familiar with the original text.[109] As Muslims, the Taliban enjoyed credibility when they cited the Koran while counterinsurgents did not. Finally, the Taliban made use of the revered place that religious figures occupied in Afghan society, relying on travelling mullahs to spread Taliban propaganda under the guise of religious sermons. This placed religious and cultural pressure on Afghans to comply with the Taliban or risk being viewed as unfaithful and corrupt. Svet wrote that the Taliban's religious references created message resonance to such a degree that the Taliban had been able to "administer coercive powers in the absence of central power."[110]

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[106] International Crisis Group, 21.
[107] Nissen, 7.
[108] Svet, 2-3.
[109] Nissen, 6.
[110] Svet, 3.

2.5 Taliban Themes and Messages

2.5.1 Legitimacy and Corruption

Taliban messaging often focused on issues of legitimacy and corruption. The Taliban designed messages aimed at undermining the Afghan population's perception of their government's legitimacy and credibility as well as that of the coalition. The Taliban attacked the legitimacy of the GIRoA by highlighting corruption (moral, financial, and electoral) as well as its inability to deliver services. The government was typically framed as being a puppet of Western governments and incapable of governing. Allegations of corruption were commonly used as a means to attack the government's legitimacy. Coalition troops were attacked as Christian *kefir* who were occupying Afghanistan, contrasted against the Taliban, who were portrayed as devout Mujahidin defending their homeland and religion. Shaaker noted that the Taliban frequently appealed to religious sentiment in order to emphasize their legitimacy over that of the GIRoA and the coalition. Shaaker argues, "in their design of productions, generally they exaggerate or invent facts, refer to Koranic verses, as well as narratives of Prophet Muhammad's deeds and sayings, *ahadis* to appeal to religious sentiments of the public."[111]

Taliban information operations aimed at undermining the government's legitimacy were frequently accompanied by kinetic Taliban operations. During the 2009 election in Afghanistan, the Taliban executed information operations to shape the environment for the election, attacking the legitimacy of the government heading into the election and also attempting to influence the outcome. The Taliban hoped to prompt a low voter turnout to undermine the legitimacy of the

[111] Munoz, 110.

resulting government. The Taliban tried to disrupt the election through information operations that warned Afghans that anyone who was found with the identifying purple ink stain on their finger would have their finger cut off.[112] A Canadian information operations expert in Afghanistan believed that this information operation was highly effective.[113] While very few Afghans lost their fingers, many were afraid to vote. Turnout was a dismal 39% (compared with 70% in 2004).[114] It took exceptionally few resources on the part of the Taliban to contribute to low voter turnout. The Taliban was then able to use the low voter turnout as another means to attack the legitimacy of the elections, and the government.

Following the 2009 Presidential election, Mullah Omar released a statement attacking the legitimacy of the election process and the government. The statement highlighted the Taliban propaganda themes of corruption and illegitimacy. In the statement Omar railed against the rampant corruption in the "surrogate" Kabul administration, embezzlement, drug trafficking, the existence of mafia networks, and the tyranny and high-handedness of the warlords."[115] The election was fraught with allegations of cheating and concerns about legitimacy of the results. The Taliban were able to seize on these concerns in an attempt to convince the population not to support the government, their messages were made stronger by the fact that the GIRoA's international benefactors were also questioning its capabilities and legitimacy.[116]

Corruption in government at all levels (local, provincial, and national) was a significant source of grievances in Afghanistan and frequently used by the Taliban to attack the legitimacy

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[112] A mark all voters were given to prevent multiple ballots being cast by the same voter.
[113] Journalistic interview with a Canadian diplomat, conducted in 2013.
[114] Craig Whitlock, "Afghan Election Mess Aiding Taliban's Propaganda," *Washington Post*, September 21, 2009, accessed September 12, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/20/AR2009092000995.html.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Munoz, 90.

of the GIRoA and weaken support for it. In the wake of invading Afghanistan, the United States and the coalition were anxious to find partners who could help them track down and destroy Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaida. The early mission was focused primarily on counterterrorism rather than counterinsurgency. That meant frequently taking the most expedient path to get things done. In many cases, the U.S. and coalition appointed officials who were corrupt or at least perceived to be so by the local population.[117] Coalition troops similarly appointed or backed former warlords with reputations for brutality because they were members of the Northern Alliance or willing to cooperate with coalition forces. Often these men were the same corrupt officials and warlords who the Taliban had ousted when they came to power in the 1990s.[118] A Pentagon report found that the U.S. fostered corruption in Afghanistan.[119] The report state that "Corruption directly threatens the viability and legitimacy of the Afghan state," and argued that it eventually became so widespread and entrenched that trying to deal with it bluntly would have affected U.S. ability to operate in Afghanistan.[120] The Pentagon report also revealed that the companies hired by the coalition and Afghan government were frequently beholden to these same corrupt officials. This corruption became so ingrained that cutting off relationships with these companies would actually threaten the coalition war effort, the Pentagon experts argued. Instead of cleaning up the corruption, the coalition allowed it to fester to the point where it was irreversible without significant negative blowback[121].

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[117] International Crisis Group, 22.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Tony Capaccio, "Afghanistan Corruption Fostered by U.S., Pentagon Report Finds" *Bloomberg*, April 30th, 2014, accessed September 9th, 2014, http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-04-29/afghanistan-corruption-fostered-by-u-s-pentagon-found.html.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.

The willingness to co-opt powerful men who had previously abused their power or who continued to do so stoked resentment in the population and provided fodder for Taliban messaging.[122] The International Crisis Group wrote, "Growing popular discontent with the corruption of those in power only helps fuel grievances, even among those for whom the Taliban holds no natural appeal."[123] U.S. commanders interviewed in Kabul in 2010 expressed concern that perceived and actual corruption was one of the biggest challenges they faced, frustrating average Afghans and causing them to turn away from the government disappointed and disillusioned.[124]

Afghan grievances with the government extended beyond frustration with corruption, which some argued was endemic to Afghan society. Dorronsoro wrote that the Afghan state was weak and lacked neutrality, which meant that it could not effectively arbitrate or settle disputes.[125] This lack of ability to provide basic services such as courts and dispute settlement further fuelled the frustration of local Afghans. This frustration was further exacerbated when Afghans found promises of better lives, more schools, safety, and prosperity repeatedly broken, often while watching Western bases full of fresh running water, electricity and even fast food restaurants spring up around them.[126] Afghans working for the coalition on bases received significantly higher salaries than the average Afghan, creating resentment and anger, rather than convincing Afghans to work for coalition forces.[127]

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[122] International Crisis Group, 22.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Journalistic interviews with U.S. Commanders in Kabul, conducted in 2010.
[125] Dorronsoro, 14.
[126] Journalistic interview with Canadian officer in Kandahar, conducted in February 2010.
[127] International Crisis Group, 22.

Building on this general frustration, the Taliban presented the central government as corrupt and beholden to Western interests.[128] The Administration of then President Hamid Karzai was described as a puppet of Western powers, and all those who worked with the coalition were branded as slaves, corrupt, and traitors, motivated by "green dollars" and not by a legitimate desire for a different future in Afghanistan.[129] Crisis Group described former Mujahidin fighters cooperating with the coalition as a particularly popular target for Taliban propaganda. The Taliban claimed that these former fighters were no longer true Mujahidin regardless of their history fighting the Soviets and released public statements attempting to strip them of their Mujahidin titles.[130] Taliban information operations dealing with corruption were effective because they resonated with the experiences and frustrations of local Afghans. In, 2010, U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Richard C. Holbrooke, identified messages about corruption as a virulent and powerful form of propaganda, so much so that it comprised the Taliban's "number 1. recruiting tool."[131]

2.5.2 Xenophobic Messaging

The Taliban seized upon a climate of xenophobia as well as a history of ousting foreign invaders, including the British in the 1800s and the Soviets in the 1970s and 80s, when concocting their messaging to undermine support for coalition troops and the Afghan government.[132] The coalition was portrayed as the latest in a string of foreigners who had attempted to occupy Afghanistan, led in this case by the U.S. empire. The Taliban messaging

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[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Mark Landler "Envoy Says Corruption Helps Taliban Win Recruits," *The New York Times*, July 28th, 2010, accessed September 13th, 2014 http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/29/world/asia/29diplo.html?_r=0.
[132] Dorronsoro, 12-13 and Nissen, 7.

claimed that the coalition would meet the same fate as previous occupiers. This was designed to arouse Afghans' patriotic feelings and direct them against ISAF and the U.S.[133]

The glory of past battles was frequently recalled in Taliban songs that told the tales of heroes who resisted the British and the Soviets. For example the song *We are the Soldiers of Islam* published in *Al Emarah*, included the lyrics "We will remind them of [the battle of] Maiwand, and we will reach Washington / We are the soldiers of Isla, and we are happy to be martyred."[134] These efforts were aimed at creating reluctance among the Afghan population to support the coalition by convincing the Afghans that the coalition were primarily outsiders with negative intentions for Afghanistan. Afghan pride was a key point that the Taliban preyed on, demanding that Afghans rise up to claim their independence. Crisis Group highlighted an example of this in a poem published on the *El Emarah* website, titled "Death is a Gift." The poem reads:

> I will never accept a life where I must bow to others
> I will never back the illegitimate for any money…
> I will not swear on Washington as my *Qiblah* [direction to Mecca], nor will I bow to Bush…
> I will not kiss the hand of Laura Bush, nor will I bow to Rice…
> My beliefs and my Pashtun pride teach me this
> If I am chopped into pieces, I will not beg to others.[135]

Taliban information operations also focused on exploiting suspicions about the intentions of foreigners. Crisis Group cited a night letter the Taliban circulated claiming that coalition forces were there to exploit Afghanistan's mineral wealth, not to fight Al Qaida. The letter included the claim:

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[133] Shaaker cited in Munoz, 110.
[134] Crisis Group, 21.
[135] Crisis Group, 18, citing a poem "Death is a Gift" posted to El Emarah website on January 5th, 2007.

The colonial forces have once again attacked this country to loot the wealth and kill the people… Do you know why?... Afghanistan is full of valuable mines; if a true Islamic and independent Afghan administration is established and the rich mines are explored, Afghanistan will compete with the developed countries of the world.[136]

The Taliban aimed to create an "us versus them" mentality among Afghans, highlighting in particular that the coalition forces were non-Muslims and claiming that they were there to eliminate Islam. This messaging began almost immediately after U.S. troops entered Afghanistan. In a September 2001 interview with *Voice of America,* Mullah Omar claimed that the goal of the U.S. war was to torture and kill Muslims, rather than to pursue Al Qaida.[137] Omar stated, "It is an issue of Islam. Islam's prestige is at stake. So is Afghanistan's tradition."[138] In the hope of whipping up more xenophobic resistance to coalition forces, the Taliban frequently argued that Muslims worldwide backed the Taliban.[139] This messaging also targeted Western audiences, warning them they were not merely fighting in Afghanistan but were taking on the whole Muslim world. The underlying message was that this was not a war the West could win, because it would not be territorially limited to Afghanistan.

The Taliban also built up fear of foreign presence and xenophobic appeals by highlighting grievances over Guantanamo Bay and allegations of arbitrary detention in Afghanistan. Their messaging fed on the resentment and alienation that had been created by some coalition tactics (night raids and the detention of young Afghan men in particular).[140] Crisis

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136 International Crisis Group, 21, citing night letter by Tor Bora Nizami Mahaz in Nangahar Province, June 2007.
137 Bruno, 2.
138 International Crisis Group, 8.
139 Nissen, 7.
140 Spencer addresses culturally problematic tactics in Afghanistan including the detention of young Afghan men until well after midnight. In Afghan culture, this is unacceptable and young men who are out late must be accompanied by a family member or elder to ensure they are maintaining their purity. Returning home, alone, after midnight leaves a young man open to attacks on his character and infuriates his parents. Spencer writes that Afghan elders repeatedly asked coalition troops not to keep young men late, but because the coalition did not understand the cultural reasons behind this

Group noted that "While the vast majority of Afghans are still far more concerned at what would happen if foreign forces left Afghanistan, actions and insensitivities of international players have created rising resentment and alienation that the Taliban seeks to exploit."[141] Letters allegedly from detainees at Guantanamo Bay or Bagram Air Base alleging mistreatment were regularly published in Taliban propaganda. These allegations also surfaced in Taliban magazines and on widely distributed Taliban audio recordings.[142] Mullah Omar issued a statement highlighting the grievances against foreign troops and playing on xenophobic messaging, stating "The 88th anniversary of independence comes at a time when Afghanistan again has returned back to the colonization of those occupying forces, as a result of which our houses are destroyed, our children are orphaned, our brave and courageous combatants either are martyred very ruthlessly or are sent to jail."[143] The Taliban also mined foreign media for news of raids that had gone wrong or that were out of synch with Afghan culture. Footage from an Australian documentary was used to show the Governor of Uruzgan making sexual slurs against a young villager while US troops look on.[144] The Taliban used this to drive home negative messages about foreigners' behaviour and the message that the Afghan government was complicit is complicit in abuse of Afghans.[145]

The Taliban often linked messages of corruption with xenophobic appeals, alleging that foreign troops coming to Afghanistan would corrupt Muslim values and Afghan minds, inflating and exaggerating Western decadence and corruption, and distorting the intent of coalition

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request, they disregarded it, offering the boys a ride home. The ride home however did not negate the cultural assumptions about being out late without a trusted adult.
[141] International Crisis Group, 18.
[142] Ibid.
[143] International Crisis Group, 21, quoting *Message of Islamic Emirate in honour of the 88th Anniversary of Independence in Afghanistan*, published in El Emarah, 18th August 2007 translated by Afghan Wire.
[144] Ibid., 19.
[145] Ibid.

programs. *El Emarah* published claims that imports by foreigners included pornographic videos, and that drugs were exported on U.S. planes.[146] The Taliban accused coalition forces of importing Western values and ways, including alcohol, obscenities and bordellos.[147]

The Taliban also used messaging that combined xenophobic messaging with projection of power. The Taliban underscored its ability to outlast the foreign forces by turning to xenophobic narratives and noting past mujahedeen victories against empires. Foreigners were portrayed as weak and uncommitted to Afghanistan, a claim the Taliban reinforced with references to the coalition's stated timeline and intent to leave. The Taliban emphasised that they would outlast the coalition and punish anyone who had associated with foreigners or advanced their foreign ways in Afghanistan.[148]

2.5.3 Civilian Casualties

Messaging focused on coalition-caused civilian casualties was a common and powerful Taliban information operations theme. Taliban information operations alleged that the civilian casualties caused by the coalition were due to gross negligence and coalition troops being careless or using indiscriminate violence on combat operations. The Taliban's more frequent refrain was at the more sinister end of the spectrum, alleging that the coalition deliberately killed Afghan civilians. The Taliban narrative claimed that coalition troops caused civilian deaths because they did not care about Afghan lives, were there to act as occupiers, and their goal was not only to crush the Taliban but rather all Afghans and Muslims. Crisis Group cited a typical

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[146] Ironic considering that the Taliban fund much of their operations on money earned from opium sales. Crisis Group, 21, citing commentary section in *El Emarah* Jan 6th, 2008.
[147] International Crisis Group, 21.
[148] Ibid.

Taliban communication regarding civilian casualties. The statement read, "[Our] oppressed nation is still under the brutal occupation of aggressors, and their homes and harvest come under the crusader army's bombardment everyday and every minute. They kill children, old people and women and violate Islamic sanctities and national customs."[149]

Civilian casualties were a real and legitimate grievance among the Afghan population. Coalition operations killed thousands of civilians over the course of the Afghan war, often through airstrikes and close air support. For example, in 2008, 552 civilians were killed in coalition airstrikes, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan, accounting for 26% of civilian deaths in Afghanistan for that year.[150] The coalition recognized that the level of civilian casualties was problematic and was affecting the support of the Afghan population. The number of civilian casualties due to Afghan and coalition operations dropped from 828 civilian deaths in 2008 to 596 civilian deaths in 2009. The number of civilian deaths due to airstrikes and close air support dropped significantly, from 552 civilian casualties in 2008 to 359 deaths in 2009, accounting for 15% of the civilian deaths.[151] The Taliban's civilian casualties messaging was based on a genuine grievance among the population, the fear and frustration stemming from a belief that coalition forces were not taking due care and as a result were killing innocent Afghans. Munoz wrote that this caused intense resentment to build up against U.S. forces, especially when combined with culturally offensive practices such as searching homes,

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[149] Ibid., 19 ,citing Afghan Taliban Leader's Eid Message, October 12th, 2008, translated by the BBC monitoring service.
[150] United Nations Mission Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* 2009, accessed September 26th, 2014, http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/Protection%20of%20Civilian%202009%20report%20English.pdf, 17 and *Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* 2008, accessed September 26th, 2014 http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/UNAMA_09february-Annual%20Report_PoC%202008_FINAL_11Feb09.pdf, iii.
[151] United Nations Mission Afghanistan, *Afghanistan Annual Report on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict* 2009, accessed September 26th, 2014 http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/human%20rights/Protection%20of%20Civilian%202009%20report%20English.pdf, 17.

night raids, searching women in public places, arbitrary and indefinite detention of locals, and disarming villagers (which left them vulnerable to the Taliban).[152] In *Unified Effort: Key to Special Operations in War*, Lamb and Cinnamond argued that the Taliban seized upon a kernel of truth in their claims of civilian casualties and exploited the frustration and anger in the population over these deaths. The Taliban then worked to expand that grievance by exaggerating numbers and fictionalizing atrocities, working to turn the negative impression of airstrikes into a negative impression of the entire coalition and all of its operations.[153]

The issue of civilian casualties created a significant and embarrassing split between the coalition and the GIRoA that the Taliban exploited in their information operations. In May of 2011, Afghan President Hamid Karzai demanded that the coalition cease airstrikes in populated areas.[154] Karzai was frustrated by a recent U.S. airstrike that had killed civilians after Taliban fighters took shelter in a civilian compound and U.S. soldiers ordered it bombed to escape a Taliban ambush. Karzai publicly attacked the coalition, using Taliban terminology and historical references. Karzai accused coalition forces of "acting like an occupier" and said that Afghans "know how to deal with that," adding "History is a witness [to] how Afghanistan deals with occupiers."[155] Karzai's coalition allies were shocked and angered by his public display and the potential that his words had to strengthen insurgent propaganda and undermine public support for coalition operations, feeding Taliban information operations that the coalition were occupiers in Afghanistan with negative intentions and indiscriminately killing Afghans.

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[152] Munoz, 115.

[153] Christopher J. Lamb and Martin Cinnamond, "Unified Effort: Key to Special Operations in War," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 56 (1st Quarter, 2010), 44.

[154] Joshua Partlow & Craig Whitlock, "Karzai Demands NATO Stop Bombing Homes," Washington Post, May 31, 2011, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/karzai-orders-nato-to-stop-airstrikes-in-afghanistan/2011/05/31/AGFbeMFH_story.html.

[155] Ibid.

The Taliban's information operations were also applied against the coalition's domestic publics. Foxley wrote that the Taliban used powerful messaging about civilian casualties (false or real) to diminish support for the mission in troop contributing nations. Foxley stated, "the domestic audiences of troop-contributing nations are particularly susceptible and sensitive to reports of civilian deaths. The Taliban clearly recognizes the vulnerability…." Foxley went on to argue that information operations of this nature were as powerful as kinetic operations of the past. He argued, "Perhaps what the mujahedeen achieved against Soviet air power in the 1980s with guided missiles, the Taliban are achieving, 20 years later, through the power of guided information."[156]

Civilian casualties fed into the Taliban narrative that portrayed the coalition as occupiers and contributed to turning the population against the coalition.[157] The Taliban frequently exaggerated, and at times entirely fictionalized, civilian casualties as a part of their information operations. At other times the Taliban would blame the coalition for casualties caused by the Taliban themselves or caused by using civilians as human shields. The Taliban, according to a 2010 U.S. Department of Defense report, caused approximately 80% of civilian casualties in the Afghanistan war.[158] The report noted that, "insurgents can exploit and manipulate CIVCAS [civilian casualties] events to their advantage, while the U.S. and international forces are held accountable by the Afghan population for all incidents where there are CIVCAS."[159]

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[156] Foxley, 83.
[157] International Crisis Group, 20.
[158] The report, submitted to congress, was titled *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan,* and is cited in Munoz, 113-114.
[159] Ibid.

The Taliban recognized the value of civilian casualty messaging and began using it early on in the Afghan war,[160] to influence both Afghan audiences and domestic audiences in coalition countries.[161] Reports of civilian casualties undermined local support as civilians questioned the coalition's intentions and actions. They were also effective in eroding public confidence in the mission in troop contributing nations' capitals.

The Taliban frequently targeted international media with their propaganda about civilian casualties. A U.S. officer in Afghanistan noted that "The Taliban understand that the civilian media lean toward reporting on civilian casualties, and so they exploit that seam."[162] Cassidy noted that Taliban spokesmen contacted media in Kabul within minutes of NATO airstrike to get their message out,

> shaping the information environment to fit the insurgents' narrative. Regardless of whether the Taliban messages are inaccurate or exaggerated, the fact that the coalition has accidently hit civilian targets lends a degree of advanced credibility to the oppositions propaganda.[163]

The Taliban would often claim inflated or fictitious civilian casualties in inaccessible areas, where, for security reasons, international journalists could not travel to verify accounts.[164] The media had to report using Taliban or local sources, often coerced into backing the insurgent narrative. Any coalition clarification often came days after the story had gone to print or air.[165]

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[160] International Crisis Group, 7.
[161] Nissen, 7.
[162] Quoted in Sean D. Naylor, "Insurgents in Afghanistan Have Mastered Media Manipulation," *Armed Forces Journal* (April 2008), 2.
[163] Cassidy, 3.
[164] International Crisis Group, 19.
[165] Naylor, 10.

Naylor described how the insurgents' "strategy to capitalize on the media frenzy surrounding collateral damage" became more organized and focused over time.[166] Lessons identified by Bolt, Betz and Aziz over the appeal of Propaganda of the Deed, where feeding the media disinformation achieved disproportionate effects. The ultimate goal was to anger local Afghans and coalition public opinion, as well as to create friction between coalition partners and the GIRoA.[167] All of these objectives contributed to the Taliban's key goal: eroding support for coalition troops and the GIRoA and turning public support away from these partners. One senior officer who Naylor interviewed worried "It's eroding the will to sustain international support, and then it's eroding the [Afghan] government and the support of the [Afghan] people."[168] Foxley noted that the Taliban would specifically target those countries that appeared to be struggling with weak domestic will to fight, in the hope of further weakening their position by highlighting the coalition's failings.[169]

A key example of a successful Taliban information operation incorporating the elements of deception, media manipulation (speed and remote location) and the coercion of civilians to effectively communicate a message about civilian casualties took place in Baghni Valley, in Helmand province, in August 2007. U.S. intelligence had learned that a senior Taliban commander for Southern Afghanistan, Mullah Ihklas Ahkundaza, was meeting with 200 other Taliban commanders and fighters at a location in the Baghni Valley.[170] The group gathered to try three Taliban operatives who were suspected of spying for the coalition. On August 2, 2007, U.S.

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166 Naylor, 1.
167 Ibid.
168 Ibid., 2.
169 Foxley, 83.
170 Naylor, 3.

Special Operations Forces took advantage of this opportunity to attack many targets at once. A U.S. B-1 bomber dropped six precision-guided GBU-31s[171] on the Taliban compound.

The Special Operations Forces believed that 154 Taliban operators were killed in the bombing, including "six operational commanders and 29 tactical commanders."[172] The raid was considered largely successful, except that the main target, Ahkundzada, survived. The Special Operations Forces believed that Ahkundzada immediately reacted with a vengeful information operation, targeting the will of the coalition to fight and of Afghans to support them, rather than targeting the attacking soldiers with kinetic force. U.S. Special Operations Forces reported that one of Ahkundzada's first acts was to "issue orders to his subordinates the day after the strike on how to manipulate the media," to claim civilian casualties and delegitimize the U.S. actions.[173] Naylor wrote that Ahkundzada gathered 50-100 civilians and ordered them to approach media outlets claiming the area bombed was a "picnic area," not a Taliban compound. Al Jazeera published a report on August 5, claiming that the U.S. had bombed an Afghan market, a mosque and a picnic area, killing 350 civilians and wounding 200 more.[174] The location of the bombing was remote and dangerous, making it impossible for media to verify the claims independently. When reporters raised this issue, the Mullah arranged travel for the reporters to the valley to show the damaged areas, demonstrating his sophisticated understanding of media needs and a desire to further the story.

U.S. intelligence would later describe Ahkundzada's information operation as "the best manipulation of the international media using video of the 'locals' telling the prefabricated

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[171] Known as bunker busting bombs.
[172] Naylor, 3.
[173] Ibid., 4.
[174] Ibid.

Taliban story in a multimedia interview."[175] Naylor wrote that the Taliban regularly trained locals to lie about civilian casualties. Civilians added credibility when journalists were investigating an incident and their claims were often published because they were seen as non-partisan bystanders. In the case of the Baghni Valley, the Taliban managed to turn a successful U.S. operation against Taliban insurgents into a strategic success by attracting widespread media coverage for the Taliban that made the U.S. appear insensitive to civilian casualties, undermining their legitimacy and credibility with both the local Afghan audience and the international public.

Once the Taliban understood this strategic advantage, they regularly capitalized on civilian deaths caused by the coalition, but also deliberately put civilians in harm's way hoping for civilian casualties to further undermine the coalition.[176] They fictionalized or exaggerated civilian casualty numbers. From April 27 to 30, 2007, U.S. Special Operations Forces and the Afghan National Army sought to secure "a weapons cache of suspected Iranian origin."[177] The U.S. reported killing 136 Taliban fighters. The Taliban accused the U.S. and ANA of causing 100 civilian casualties. The result was that the Taliban accusations had a direct impact on operations as U.S. forces were ordered to "pause and disengage".[178] A subsequent investigation revealed no signs of collateral damage. "Battlefield and intelligence reports indicated that the insurgents had attacked coalition forces using prepared fighting positions, and pre-planned machine gun and mortar fire."[179] A U.S. military report listed the lack of evidence for civilian casualties including no "bloodied clothing, photographs, bodies or wounded," as well as the lack

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[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid., 2.
[178] By the ISAF chain of command, at the direction of President Hamid Karzai. Naylor, 2.
[179] Ibid.

of names of any civilians who had allegedly died in the fighting.[180] Regardless, the Afghan

government paid $224,000 for structural damage, money that according to multiple reports went

to support a Taliban-allied commander.[181] U.S. Special Operations Forces and Afghan National

Army units were also banned from entering the Zerkho Valley again.

According to Naylor, "… the Taliban's use of propaganda is eroding support for the

coalition in Afghanistan and abroad," and limited the coalition's ability to freely use airpower

and night raids, two of the most effective tactics against the Taliban.[182] Lieutenant Colonel Dave

Anders, a senior American office who served in Afghanistan, said, "It's eroding the will to

sustain international support, and it's eroding the [Afghan] government and the support of the

[Afghan] people."[183]

The Taliban's use of civilian casualties to force the coalition to halt operations or

abandon particularly effective tactics was so successful that the Taliban began manufacturing

"media events" where the Taliban deliberately placed civilians in the line of fire with the

intention of causing civilian casualties.[184] Citing senior U.S. officers, Naylor wrote that the U.S.

Special Operations Forces recorded events where the Taliban would enter a civilian compound

and draw fire after tying the hands of the occupants to prevent them from leaving. This went

beyond the human shield strategy of using civilians to deter military action, and specifically

aimed to cause coalition forces to unknowingly kill civilians. These same U.S. officers alleged

that the Taliban used women and children to resupply them with ammunition and food on the

battlefield. The Taliban also frequently blamed the coalition for civilian casualties caused by

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[180] Ibid.
[181] Cited by Naylor, Ibid.
[182] Ibid., 1.
[183] Ibid., 2.
[184] Ibid., 4.

Taliban operations in an attempt to undermine coalition legitimacy and support. A visiting

RAND analyst wrote the Taliban are:

> spreading disinformation or misinformation about the killing of civilians that actually may have been caused by local Taliban officials as opposed to either Afghan or NATO forces. And they have been successful.[185]

2.5.4 Power, Presence and Coercive Credibility

Power, presence and coercive credibility were key messages in the Taliban's information operations toolbox. Creating the perception that the Taliban was omnipresent across Afghanistan, willing to back threats and intimidation with violence, and capable of attacking any target (including hardened targets) undermined perceptions of government legitimacy and capability, as well as the messaging of the coalition regarding security and development. While the surveys cited by Munoz reveal that the Taliban was not liked, they also show that it was feared and this gave greater resonance to its messages.[186] While Afghans may not support the Taliban, they feared the Taliban enough to avoid providing the direct support necessary to the coalition and GIRoA for them to succeed.

The Taliban's presence is one of the most powerful messages that they project, influencing both Afghan and coalition perceptions. Foxley writes "The biggest 'message' put out by the Taliban is their physical presence across the country manifested by insurgency on the ground and casualties, destruction, and uncertainty they can now inflict."[187] Foxley attributes this presence as one of the primary reasons why Afghans have disengaged from supporting the

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[185] Naylor,7.
[186] Munoz, 61.
[187] Foxley, 93.

coalition and as responsible for undermining the resolve of the coalition to remain.[188] In the absence of the coalition's ability to clear, hold, and build, the fear and intimidation created by a widespread Taliban presence created hesitancy for Afghans to support the coalition forces or the GIRoA who often were absent or infrequently present in the vast rural areas of Afghanistan.

The Taliban's presence and messages were backed up coercive credibility, the knowledge that the Taliban would follow through on threats of physical violence. Betz wrote that the Taliban had "high *coercive credibility,* there is a high fidelity between what they say and what they do."[189] The Taliban engaged in numerous assassinations and acts of corporal punishment and other physical violence to enforce compliance and intimidate the population. Those who cooperated with the coalition were frequently maimed and murdered publicly. Translators working for coalition forces were routinely identified and killed.[190] Betz wrote, "they don't need to kill 100 people to get their message across. They just have to kill one and the other ninety nine will go along."[191] While coercive credibility did not win the Taliban fans, nor even achieve the winning of hearts and minds that many counterinsurgent theories viewed as necessary to achieve victory, it still aided the Taliban by influencing behaviours and opinions. Foxley wrote that the Taliban message may not have won hearts over in the long term, but that in the short term negative messaging would win minds, if only for survival.[192] The coalition would not and could not threaten Afghan civilians with violence if they did not openly support the GIRoA or coalition troops.

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[188] Foxley, 93.
[189] Betz, 623.
[190] Hamida Ghafour, "Afghan Interpreter's Family Killed by Taliban Near Kandahar," *Toronto Star*, May 21, 2013, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/05/21/afghan_interpreters_family_killed_by_taliban_near_kandahar.html.
[191] Betz, 623.
[192] Foxley, 81.

The Taliban emphasized projecting power as a way to increase their message resonance, demonstrating not only that they were present throughout the country and willing to attack, but also that they were capable of engaging in high level attacks against hardened targets. Projecting power is a central tenet of insurgent information operations and one that the Taliban engaged in frequently to influence the behaviour of Afghans (to believe that violence was getting worse and the insurgency was gaining strength), and the coalition (to demoralize the public's in coalition countries about progress on the ground). While attacking high profile targets and striking secure areas did not provide significant physical gains for the Taliban, it sent a message about the Taliban's determination, strength and capabilities.[193] When the Taliban claimed an attempt to attack U.S. Vice President Joe Biden (which in fact was carried out by another group), Niessen wrote that they claimed responsibility with the purpose of "portraying the Taliban to local audiences, as more capable and dangerous than they really were."[194] Bolt, Betz and Azari highlight the Taliban strike on troops that were on parade for President Karzai in May 2008. The purpose of the attack, the authors argue, lay not in its kinetic value, but as a symbolic target, where the propaganda was in the deed itself. They note the point of the attack was to "demonstrate the inherent weakness of the Afghan government in its own capital, despite the armed presence of NATO troops."[195]

2.5.5 Time

Time was a critical message for the Taliban. The Taliban pointed to the eventual departure of coalition troops as proof of their lack of commitment, the hopelessness of avoiding

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[193] Nissen, 7.
[194] Ibid., 8.
[195] Bolt, Betz and Azari, 19.

future Taliban rule, and the danger of supporting the GIRoA or coalition. This messaging was aimed primarily at the local Afghan audience to undermine the legitimacy of the GIRoA and the will to support the coalition. It significantly undermined coalition messages about providing protection and security for civilians because the Taliban would argue that the increasingly powerful insurgency was there to stay and that they would simply outlast the international will to fight.

Western leaders unintentionally strengthened this messaging when they announced timelines to withdraw in the hope of pressuring the Afghan government into action. When U.S. President Barak Obama made one of his election planks withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, and provided a date on which the withdrawal would happen, he unintentionally gave this Taliban message even greater credibility. Niessen acknowledged the kernel of truth in this messaging, that coalition troops will eventually depart, writing "ISAF have an 'exit strategy' while the Taliban have a 'staying strategy'."[196] The Taliban also used this as a way to wear away at coalition will to fight, by highlighting its willingness to fight on endlessly while the coalition "runs out of political time."[197]

The Taliban combined messaging about time with xenophobic messaging and messaging about projection of power and coercive credibility. Information operations reminded the local population that the Afghan insurgents had outlasted two previous attempts to change the country and of the consequences for those who supported the foreigners. U.S. journalist Kimberly Dozier documented this Taliban messaging, noting that Mullah Omar's Taliban message posted to jihadi websites revolved around his claim that the U.S. and their allies would soon be leaving. Omar's

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[196] Ibid., 9.
[197] Ibid.

message read "The victory of our Islamic nation over the invading infidels is now imminent and the driving force behind this is the belief in the help of Allah and unity among ourselves."[198] This was typical of Taliban messaging designed to discourage Afghans from supporting the coalition or the GIRoA because their power would be short-lived and the Taliban had an unlimited time to wait.

2.5.6 Coalition Casualties and Intractable Violence

The Taliban directed information operations at the coalition troop contributing nations' publics focusing on intractable violence in Afghanistan and casualties as a way to undermine the coalition's will to fight. The Taliban highlighted they're willingness to fight a war of attrition and that they were willing to lose untold numbers of fighters, whereas the coalition was not willing to sustain endless casualties.[199] The Taliban used this as a way to grind away at the coalition's will to fight, especially in political capitals where politicians began questioning the value of the war effort, seeing little apparent progress and becoming increasingly concerned about casualties.[200] Foxley writes that the Taliban invested significant time and efforts into "highlighting ISAF failings." The Taliban's emphasis on the unending nature of the conflict, or intractable violence, was also evident in Taliban messages targeting coalition troop contributing nation's domestic audiences. The Taliban would attack the motives and successes of the coalition for being in Afghanistan. An example of this kind of messaging if found in Mullah Omar's 2009

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[198] Dozier, "Taliban leader tells Americans they're wasting money, lives," *The Toronto Star*, September 8, 2010, accessed November 23, 2014,
http://www.thestar.com/news/politics/2010/09/08/taliban_leader_tells_americans_theyre_wasting_money_lives.htm.
[199] Nissen, 9.
[200] See chapter four on manipulation of the media for more discussion of coalition casualties in the Canadian context.

address to "freedom loving peoples of the West," where he attempts to persuade Western publics

that the coalition's reasons for being in Afghanistan are not morally sound:

> Your colonialist rulers have invaded our country under the pretext of terrorism to augment the wealth of a few capitalists and spread the net of neo-colonialism over our country. Every day, our youths, old men, women and children are martyred by your bombs and rounds of mortars. The invaders raid houses of our people at night. They destroy our green gardens, public properties, educational and commercial centers.[201]

Mullah Omar then goes on to promise ongoing, ceaseless violence and casualties as a

consequence for this immoral foreign military adventure stating "Countering this atrocity and

aggression and the defense against it, is our legitimate and national right. We will use this right

of ours with all our resources and sacrifices."[202]

The Taliban's strategy evolved into targeting specific coalition nations where they

believed public will to fight was flagging in the hopes of further demoralizing public opinion

there.[203]

> The Taliban are increasingly aware of "weak links" in the multinational "chain" of nations that is ISAF and have focused messages intended to target the resolve of individual nations. Key themes are the inevitability of ISAF casualties, the unending nature of the conflict, and the differences between Europe and the United States.[204]

The Taliban also leveraged the issues of intractable violence and coalition casualties to

foment dissent between coalition members in the hopes of splitting the coalition politically and

undermining their resolve of the international community to remain in Afghanistan.[205] The

Taliban specifically targeted countries it believed were vulnerable to slipping public opinion at

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[201] Foxley, 87.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid., 83.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid, 83 and 87,

home. The Taliban addressed communications to Western audiences using language and terms that were culturally relevant, arguing that countries pulling out of Afghanistan were making the "rational" decision and that it was triggering a chain reaction. A March 2010 statement highlighting the decision of the Dutch to leave Afghanistan played on the splits in the coalition and the sense that the mission is hopeless and failing for those who remain, stating:

> After the dissolution of Dutch government following its parliament's hot discussion over the American war in Afghanistan, now Canada and Australia have decided to respect the views of their people for unconditional withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan… Observers believe that the Austrian [sic] and Canadian decisions to pull out of Afghanistan indicate the beginning of the fall of American empire and mastership.[206]

This demonstrated an evolution in Taliban strategy. The Taliban began reaching out to national media in countries where support for the Afghan mission was faltering. In these communiqués, the Taliban threatened further casualties and aimed to demoralize the public. In 2006, the Taliban claimed that all coalition casualties were equally desirable when a journalist asked if the Taliban targeted specific nationalities in attacks.[207] By 2008, the Taliban had learned and was conducting information operations against the German public, telling German news magazine *Der Speigel* that attacking and killing Germans was a specific goal.[208]

The Taliban also frequently invoked messages primarily designed for the Afghan audience against coalition publics as well: civilian casualties, questions about the legitimacy of the GIRoA, the message that the Taliban was strong but the coalition was weak (and thus the Taliban would outlast them), and reminders that Afghanistan is the graveyard of empires. All of these messages were aimed at undermining coalition will to fight and forcing a withdrawal.

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[206] Foxley, 84,
[207] Ibid., 87,
[208] Ibid.

These messages gained traction in the media of the respective coalition countries and by 2014 foreign troops would leave Afghanistan.

2.6 Coalition Messaging

Messages have to be tailored to the target audience they address in order to resonate.[209] Svet wrote that themes and messages used by the coalition in the Afghan campaign "frequently failed to resonate" with the target audience.[210] He attributed this shortcoming in part to a failure to use ethnographic data in theme selection and message design. The coalition did not understand the religious, cultural, and specific regional data that would have shaped their information operations in a way that resonated with the audience and was more likely to be persuasive than the often confusing, tone deaf, or non-credible messages and themes the coalition used. Major themes the coalition built its information war around did not resonate with Afghan audiences. The concept of freedom is one example of a theme that would resonate with Western audiences but had an entirely different meaning for the target audience in Afghanistan. Afghans interpreted freedom, according to Svet, as freedom from a central government. Messaging that linked freedom to support of a central government was confusing for Afghans who believed freedom meant freedom from government interference. Two of the other main themes used by the coalition also failed to resonate: creating a link between Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban; and presenting the "partnership of nations" as being there to help Afghans. Both showed a failure to understand Afghan audiences. Most Afghans had never seen Osama Bin Laden or an Al Qaida fighter. As a result, images depicting a dead Osama Bin Laden confused Afghans. They did not

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[209] Munoz, xiv.
[210] Svet, 1.

recognize the figure as Osama Bin Laden, but rather assumed he was an Afghan meant to represent Afghan civilians. The message was interpreted by many as the coalition threatening Afghans rather than as the intended message that the coalition was there because of evil acts by a terrorist. The second message failed to consider Afghan attitudes toward foreigners. An inherent mistrust of foreigners made a message that suggested a partnership of nations, filled with foreigners, could be trusted a message that simply would not be credible and would not resonate. The themes and messaging chosen by the coalition failed to achieve the most important thing in counterinsurgency, resonance with the population and success in altering their perceptions and, ultimately, behaviour. Svet argued that the coalition focused too much on the enemy and not enough on winning over the population both in kinetic and information operations.[211]

2.6.1 Lack of Religious and Cultural Understanding

The lack of cultural and religious understanding posed a significant challenge for the coalition in crafting messages and choosing themes that would resonate with the Afghan population. The coalition frequently selected messages that would resonate in Western societies but had little meaning, or a very different meaning, for the target audience.[212] LeGree noted that coalition forces were often playing Go Fish at the Black Jack table, a metaphor for playing with different rules and assumptions.[213] According to Foxley, the coalition had a poor understanding of Afghan culture, language, and customs and this impeded the effectiveness of coalition information operations.[214]

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[211] Svet, 2.
[212] Svet, 1.
[213] Pashtun Belt, pg 22
[214] Foxley, pg 86

Afghanistan has been dominated by tribal authorities rather than a central state for most of its history. The country has only experienced occasional periods of central state governance and these have generally been associated with foreign powers (the Soviets, the British and now the coalition) occupying Afghanistan. The only attempts at a central state had been perceived as attempts to control the Afghan population rather than to serve them.[215] The central state was perceived not as an entity that existed to provide protection and services to Afghans but as one that would attempt to control and manipulate citizens. Afghan civilians have historically been treated as subjects with duties instead of citizens with rights, both by centrally administered governments and in their tribal interactions.[216] Attempting to convince Afghans that the GIRoA existed to serve them and encouraging them to exercise rights (such as voting) required Afghans to accept new concepts without cultural or historic reference points, giving the ideas little resonance.

Tribes were the traditional point of security, safety and civil order in Afghanistan.[217] Svet wrote that in this tribal social order, "balanced opposition," or the idea that no single tribe was able to become dominant, was key to maintaining balance and order.[218] Competing tribes kept one another in balance, with no single dominant authority able to enforce its will on the others. Against this cultural backdrop, the idea of an all-powerful central state bred unease and concern rather than reassurance of protection and provision. The idea that any one tribe would acquiesce to an overarching structure such as a central government was anathema to Afghan experience and culture, posing serious problems for central messages about the legitimacy, credibility, and

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[215] Svet, 3.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.

capabilities of the GIRoA relied upon by the coalition. The target audience's cultural and historic experience suggested that allowing a single entity to dominate would risk their security, social order, and livelihood rather than protecting it. Svet wrote that opposition to central authority was ingrained into Afghan culture and history.[219] Messages that focused on reasons why the population should support a central state that was largely focused around concepts that did not translate into Afghan culture or had a very different meaning for locals (like freedom) and thus did not convince people to actively support the GIRoA or the coalition.[220]

The coalition had little knowledge of tribal and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, wrote Foxley, and as such it struggled to discern what kind of messages would resonate with particular tribes or ethnicities.[221] What appealed to Balochs did not necessarily appeal to Pashtos or Hazaras. Kilcullen described the information battlefield in Afghanistan as being intimately local in nature.[222] McFate argued that in this hyper-local environment, a would-be influencer required "granular" knowledge of social terrains, in order to compete for influence.[223] In order to influence an audience, messages had to be tailored to the specific ethnic or tribal group in that particular geographic area of Afghanistan. The coalition was unable to successfully tailor messages to specific areas of Afghanistan, because it lacked an understanding of the population (a failing compounded by a lack of consistent, local presence to learn about the target audience).[224] Afghanistan had such variation across geographic regions, tribes and ethnicities. Messages were often not specific enough to resonate or were used with the wrong audience.[225]

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[219] Ibid.
[220] Ibid., 4.
[221] Foxley, 79.
[222] Packer, 65.
[223] Ibid., 64.
[224] Foxley, 86.
[225] Munoz, xvii.

This was, in part, a product of the way the coalition was organized. Messages were often

developed at central headquarters and were standardized across the country rather than being

designed for local use. Coalition battle staffs at forward operating bases and on provincial

reconstruction teams were aware of planned or ongoing operations, as well as threats relevant to

their areas of operation that could be critically important to messaging. These staffs were rarely

consulted however on the messaging and the benefit of their local knowledge was not applied.[226]

Pashtuns were arguably the most important target audience for the coalition to influence.

Forty two percent of the Pashtun population was located in areas where Taliban influence is the

strongest.[227] The Pashtun population was also the historically dominant tribe politically. Both the

Taliban leadership and the primary leader of the GIRoA, Hamid Karzai, were ethnically Pashtun.

It was extraordinarily difficult to win Afghanistan without winning the support of the Pashtun.

The Taliban were far more successful at manipulating Pashtun religious and nationalistic

feelings. RAND researchers noted, "Failure to adequately incorporate Pashtun perceptions and

attitudes can negate the potential effectiveness…" of coalition messaging.[228]

The coalition also struggled to understand the role of religion in shaping how their target

audience would interpret various messages. The failure to understand Islam and the importance it

played in the average Afghan's life meant that the coalition failed to craft messages that

resonated with this core element of many Afghans' lives and identities. Well-intentioned

coalition messaging was at times religiously incorrect or even offensive and insulting. The

coalition tried to counter the Taliban's messaging that alleged the coalition wanted to destroy

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[226] Munoz, 123 – 124.

[227] Munoz, xvii,

[228] Ibid.

Islam. These messages tended to be written in the negative, which Svet argues was ineffective.[229] Phrasing that emphasized, "the coalition is not at war with Islam" failed to resonate because Afghans would forget the negation of not, and the Taliban's propaganda would therefore be reinforced. A more effective message would have been to emphasize that the coalition was a friend of Islam, framing the message in the positive. At other times, the coalition tried to use Islam as part of the appeal. This generally failed because Western information operations practitioners were not Muslim and therefore were not viewed as credible when interpreting the Koran to support their messages. At times, the poor understanding of Islam created information operations that offended Afghans. RAND documents two well-intentioned scenarios that turned out blasphemous. In the first, the coalition airdropped pamphlets quoting the Koran, allowing them to flutter to the ground.[230] Muslims believe that Koranic versus must not touch the ground, so it shocked and insulted Afghans that the coalition would do this. The second incident, the seemingly innocent distribution of soccer balls, was intended to spread good will by providing children with amusement. Each soccer ball had the flags of all coalition countries printed on it, including those of some Islamic countries -- containing Koranic verses.[231] Again, this was offensive, in particular because the verses were printed on a ball that had not only touched the ground but was intended to be kicked. Betz wrote that the coalition missed the opportunity to highlight certain Taliban atrocities as "un-Islamic" such as killing a woman who was holding a Koran.[232] However, when the coalition did attempt to use this tactic in their messaging they were

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[229] Svet, pg 4.
[230] Munoz, 22.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Betz, 621-622.

viewed as not credible due to a lack of knowledge, previous gaffes, and the widespread

knowledge that most coalition troops were not Muslims.[233]

2.6.2 Coalition Themes and Messages

The coalition focused on two key themes in Afghanistan: that the Taliban was dangerous

and evil, connected to international terrorism; and that the coalition and Afghan government

would improve the lives of Afghans and bring peace, prosperity, and progress.[234] The messaging

produced in support of these themes was problematic and failed to resonate with the target

audience.

The first message introduced by the coalition in the early days after 9/11 revolved around

the Global War on Terror. Munoz determined that this message was largely ineffective because it

focused on what Al Qaida did to the U.S., a message that was not well understood by and did not

resonate with Afghans.[235] The coalition messaging explained the U.S. presence in Afghanistan as

a result of the 9/11 terror attacks. Many Afghans did not believe that the Taliban was involved

with Al Qaida or responsible (directly or indirectly) for the 9/11 attacks.[236] Those who were

aware of an Al Qaida presence in the country believed that the fighters had fled to Pakistan in the

weeks following the attacks and therefore did not understand why the coalition was present or

believe their messaging that they were in Afghanistan to kill or capture Al Qaida fighters. A U.S.

video that was played on televisions at health clinics showed footage of the 9/11 attacks in an

attempt to demonstrate the horror of the attacks and to convince Afghans that the foreign

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[233] Ibid.
[234] Svet, 2.
[235] Munoz, 32.
[236] Ibid.

presence was a legitimate response and not an invasion. The video producers failed to take into

account that most Afghans had never seen a high-rise such as the World Trade Centre and could

not make sense of what they were seeing. Munoz argued that they did not sympathize with the

civilians fleeing in the video or connect them to the coalition presence in the country, instead

wondering why well-heeled Westerners were fleeing a large city. As a result, this attempted

explanation of the foreign presence failed to convince Afghans that it was justified or connected

to the Taliban.[237]

The positive presence and results that the coalition brought were key messages the

coalition focused on transmitting. These messages were aimed at encouraging Afghans to

actively support the coalition. Key messages included: the coalition brings peace and progress;

the coalition provides security; and, the coalition is here to help. These messages began as

effective,[238] but as the coalition's mission progressed they decreased in credibility and

effectiveness as a result of the disconnect between the messaging promises and the reality for

most Afghans. In particular, messages such as "the coalition brings peace and progress" lost

credibility with the key Pashtun demographic.[239] RAND authors argued that actions spoke louder

than words, and while the Taliban's actions were backing up their messaging and adding

credibility, the coalition's messages and promises often went unfulfilled and were thus less and

less credible from 2006 onwards. When Afghans were asked their perception of whether the

coalition was bringing peace and security, a significant change was visible over the years, with

fewer and fewer perceiving the coalition as a force capable of providing safety and security. In

2006, 67% of Afghans interviewed believed that the coalition would bring safety and security to

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[237] Munoz, 36.
[238] From 2001-2005 according to the RAND analysis, Munoz, 39.
[239] Munoz, 39.

their area, but by 2009 that number had dropped to 42%.[240] A minority of 31% did not believe

the coalition messaging in 2006, but a majority doubted it in 2009 with 55% expressing a lack of

confidence in the coalition's abilities.[241]

Another significant message that the coalition struggled with was the message that the

coalition was "here to help."[242] Afghans were initially hopeful that the coalition would improve

their lives, and this was reflected in polling in the first five years of the mission.[243] Polling

carried out by the International Council on Security and Development showed that suspicion of

the motivation of foreign forces was highest in key areas where the insurgency was strongest.

Results of Polling on Motivation of Foreign Forces, 2010

Response when Afghans were asked what they thought the intentions of the coalition were[244]			
Response	**Helmand %**	**Kandahar %**	**Overall %**
To occupy Afghanistan	24	10	18
For their own targets (al-Qai'da)	17	12	15
For violence and to destroy Afghanistan	20	6	14
For their own benefit	9	20	14
Don't know	10	18	13
Peace and security	5	21	12
To destroy Islam	12	4	9
No answer	**1**	**6**	**3**
Rebuilding Afghanistan	**2**	**0**	**1**
Other	**0**	**2**	**1**

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[240] Ibid., 43.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Ibid., 39.
[243] Ibid., 50.
[244] Ibid., 57.

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Civilian casualties and collateral damage caused by air strikes and night raids undermined the goodwill of Afghans and made the coalition's messaging ineffective.[245] The Taliban's negative messages about the coalition's questionable intentions increasingly resonated more powerfully than the coalition's promises to help. Afghans failed to see coalition promises reflected in their daily lives. Dorronsoro wrote that strongmen and warlords used the war to enrich themselves while average Afghans continued to suffer.[246] This undermined message credibility, particularly when the Afghan President publicly attacked the coalition for their actions and questioned particular operations as well as their motives for being in Afghanistan.[247] Polling suggested that air strikes were one of the most significant grievances for the Afghan population, with 77% of those polled believing that the risk to civilian life posed by airstrikes outweighed their value for fighting the Taliban.[248] The coalition lost this part of the information war when Afghan civilians began blaming the coalition and the U.S. specifically even when the Taliban was at fault for civilian casualties, such as when they deliberately used civilian human shields. Dorronsoro wrote that coalition-generated casualties and collateral damage created more resentment among the Afghan population than the often-extensive civilian casualties and collateral damage caused by the Taliban.[249] Afghans came to believe that the coalition did not care if it killed civilians or they were in fact knowingly killing civilians. When Afghans believed that, "coalition forces simply do not value Afghans' lives and prefer to drop bombs on innocent

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[245] Ibid., 40.
[246] Dorronsoro, 18.
[247] Munoz, 41.
[248] Laub and Cinnamond, 46.
[249] Dorronsoro, 17.

villagers rather than take casualties themselves," the credibility of U.S. messages alleging that

the Taliban was the enemy or that the coalition brought peace and progress lost credibility.[250]

The inability to counter Taliban propaganda had far-reaching consequences for the

political goals of the coalition.[251] During the early years of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan,

General David Barno took an integrated approach to COIN, but General Karl Eikenberry soon

redirected forces to capture/kill operations, increasing civilian casualties. Lamb and Cinnamond

wrote, "The result was an increasing number of incidents producing civilian casualties, which led

to a steep decline in popular support."[252] The Taliban focused on turning this negative opinion of

airstrikes into a negative opinion about the coalition writ large. The coalition was unable to

counter these information operations. Later in the campaign, commanders, including most

notably General Stanley McChrystal, attempted to put the focus back on COIN operations,

reducing air strikes and night raids as well as civilian casualties. By that point, however, trust in

foreign forces had been seriously damaged. RAND concluded, "Although there are notable

exceptions, the bulk of the evidence suggests that coalition information operations and

psychological operations have often failed to counter Taliban propaganda effectively,

particularly in the area of civilian casualties and disrespect for Islam."[253]

As the coalition campaign progressed, a key shift in their messaging was that the Afghan

government and national security forces, and not the coalition, would bring progress and

stability.[254] Crediting indigenous forces and the GIRoA for peace and progress was important to

shore up the legitimacy of the Afghan authorities in preparation for the ultimate departure of

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[250] Munoz, 112.
[251] Ibid.
[252] Lamb and Cinnamond, 44.
[253] Munoz, 109.
[254] Ibid., 82.

coalition forces. This message was effective from 2001 to 2005 but as with other coalition

messages began to lose credibility and effectiveness from 2006 to 2009.[255] Afghans did not see

these messages reflected in the reality of their daily lives and therefore increasingly doubted the

credibility of the messages. Particularly problematic were the Afghan National Police who were

notorious for being "corrupt, abusive and incompetent; they were also condemned for not being

good Muslims."[256] Corruption in the Afghan government also undermined this narrative.

Afghans did not buy into the message that the Afghan National Security Forces could keep them

safe or prevent the return of the Taliban. RAND cited polling showing that 71% of Afghans

surveyed in 2010 believed that the Taliban would return when the coalition left.[257] Corruption in

the central government also reduced the resonance of this message. Trying to build the

legitimacy of the central government also caused serious problems for this messaging. RAND

researchers argued that coalition, "message credibility can be undercut by concern among

Afghans in contested areas that their own government, widely perceived as weak and corrupt,

will not be able to protect them from vengeful Taliban once U.S. and NATO forces

withdraw."[258] Wali Shaaker, the Pashtun Afghan who aided U.S. forces in understanding Taliban

propaganda's view was that the coalition was simply unable to neutralize Taliban propaganda

through their messaging,

> When it comes to design and production of products [that] negate or neutralize the
> enemy's arguments and accusations, the coalition/U.S. reaction remains far from
> adequate. It seems that they have simply not been able to generate sufficient responses, in
> terms of both quality and quantity, to Taliban's intense antigovernment, anti-U.S. and
> anti-ISAF propaganda.[259]

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[255] Ibid.
[256] Ibid. 84.
[257] Ibid., 86-87.
[258] Ibid., xvi.
[259] Ibid., 110.

Munoz concluded, "If the overall mission is defined as convincing most residents of contested

areas to side exclusively with the Afghan government and its foreign allies against the Taliban

insurgency, this had not been achieved."[260]

Negative messaging was also a part of the coalition's key themes and messaging. The

argument that the Taliban and Al Qaeda were enemies of the Afghan people was a common

theme and driver of messaging. It was a theme that may have resonated at a conceptual level as

many Afghans disliked the Taliban. However, it highlighted the advantage the Taliban had due

to its coercive credibility. The message resonated due to Afghans' fear and distaste of brutal and

oppressive Taliban tactics but was unable to motivate Afghans to actively resist the Taliban. As

noted previously, the Taliban's greatest message was its presence and willingness to use

violence. The coalition was unable to match this in terms of the number of troops on the ground

and also because it was morally bound not to use threats to induce cooperation. While the

Taliban could threaten to kill those who did not comply, the coalition could not demand that

civilians support them or face corporal consequences. Kilcullen acknowledged this disadvantage

for coalition forces in Counterinsurgency,[261] while Packer wrote, "winning hearts and minds is

not a matter of making local people *like* you… but of getting them to accept that supporting your

side is in their interest, which requires an element of coercion."[262] Betz highlighted this problem

with messaging resulting in persuasive action against the Taliban, "The promise 'anyone who

cooperates with the infidels is dead' is ninety-nine times more effective than the promise

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[260] Ibid., xv-xvi.
[261] Kilcullen, 12.
[262] Packer, 63.

'everyone who cooperates with the government will be protected.'"[263] Even when the coalition did make progress that would convince the population that the Taliban was an enemy or that the coalition offered peace and prosperity, the physical threats of the Taliban were a powerful disincentive to active support of the coalition. Kilcullen explained that the "gratitude" effect was insufficient to motivate people.

> In a counterinsurgency, the gratitude effect will last until the sun goes down and the insurgents show up and say, 'You're on our side, aren't you? Otherwise, we're going to kill you.' If one side is willing to apply lethal force to bring the population to its side and the other side isn't, ultimately you're going to find yourself losing.[264]

2.6.3 Promises vs. Reality

The Credibility and resonance of the coalition's messages were undermined by the reality on the ground for most Afghans that contradicted those messages. Foxley notes that years into an active insurgency, the Taliban appeared to be gaining moment rather than losing it,

> Nine years of international involvement have seen an increasingly confident and capable insurgency, dwindling international resolve, lack of confidence in the Afghan government, and the impending unilateral disengagement of two key NATO members.[265]

The disconnect between promises and reality reduced the resonance of coalition messaging and the coalition's ability to counter the Taliban's negative messaging. Taliban messaging focused on themes of unending violence, insecurity, Taliban presence and coercive credibility, and the eventual departure of the coalition (rendering coalition supporters vulnerable) achieved steadily increased traction. Unable to fulfill their promises, the coalition struggled to convince Afghans to actively support them. RAND argued that the coalition's most effective

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[263] Betz, 623.
[264] Packer, 64.
[265] Foxley, pg 93

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messages tended to be positive ones about peace and progress.[266] However, in the absence of

substantial progress on the ground, while Afghans might have disliked the Taliban, their belief in

the coalition's capabilities declined, as did their willingness to risk actively supporting the

coalition. Then U.K. Chief of the Defence Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Graham "Jock" Stirrup

highlighted the Taliban's ability to capitalize on the coalition's lack of progress to undermine

their message,

> In one particular area [the Taliban have] had the better of 2008: information operations.
> They've beaten us to the punch on numerous occasions and by doing so they've
> magnified the sense of difficulty and diminished the sense of progress. This is in part due
> to their skill and our own failings.[267]

The coalition failed to tie the lack of progress in living standards to the Taliban's doctrine and

actions. Instead, the coalition was blamed.[268]

2.6.4 Deteriorating Relationship

Dorronsoro asserted that the relationship between local Afghans and the coalition

deteriorated from *Mehman* (guest) to *Dushman* (enemy) due to three central factors.[269] Each of

these factors was a result of coalition decisions that undermined the COIN activities the coalition

was conducting.

The first was the isolation of Western troops from Afghan civilians. The lack of exposure

and direct, regular, contact between local Afghans and coalition forces created barriers.[270] It was

difficult for the coalition to determine the needs of the local population. The result was difficulty

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[266] Munoz, xvii.
[267] Foxley, 79.
[268] Bruno, 3.
[269] Dorronsoro, 16.
[270] Ibid.

in determining not only appropriate civil affairs projects, such as wells and schools, but also in framing appropriate messaging for the population. Locally focused and relevant messaging was essential, but without contact with the population the coalition could not devise messages that would resonate. The lack of contact allowed Taliban information operations to flourish, especially the popular conspiracy theory that the coalition was in fact funding the Taliban.[271] Without regular contact to counteract negative perceptions and develop appropriate messaging, resentment developed.

The second factor Dorronsoro identified was civilian casualties and arbitrary violence.[272] Dorronsoro argued that this had perhaps done the most damage to popular support for the coalition. Corruption was also cited as an element that had undermined the population's support for the coalition and its presence in Afghanistan. The perception that the coalition was not increasing security, and was not treating Afghans fairly had generated intense resentment.

The final factor Dorronsoro identified was the lack of integrity in international aid.[273] Afghans had not seen their country developed in the way they were promised. Many still lived in poverty and the surveys Munoz cited suggested that a large number of Afghans believed that their lives had not improved, or at least as much as anticipated, in the presence of the coalition. This seriously undermined messaging about the coalition bringing peace, stability or development when Afghans' daily lives did not reflect those promises.[274]

While the coalition injected significant troops and funds into Afghanistan in an attempt to provide the kind of presence and funding required to fight a counterinsurgency, they had been

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[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid., 17.
[274] Munoz, 56.

unable to reverse these perceptions. Even when the coalition presence had convinced Afghans of their positive intentions and capabilities, the lack of a long term commitment and Taliban threats intimidated and discouraged most Afghans from supporting the coalition, because while their messages may resonate, negative Taliban messages had greater credibility and coercive credibility.

Svet argued that the failure to persuade Afghans came not only from counterinsurgency strategy and operations that were lacking, but also significantly from poor information operations choices by the coalition.[275] The information operations failure was more than a lack of resources to execute counter insurgency operations in a way that would allow the coalition to hold, clear and build. Svet cited the surge as evidence that the number of troops or amount of resources dedicated were not the primary barrier to successful information operations, noting "Despite increases in military and civilian personnel to Afghanistan, the United States is losing in a field crucial to the counterinsurgencies long-run success: the battle of perceptions."[276] The coalition chose messages that were not credible and did not resonate.

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[275] Svet, pg 1
[276] Svet, pg 1

Chapter Three: **Getting the Message Out**

The Taliban engaged target audiences by means of multiple platforms to disseminate information operations and influence opinion. The mediums were selected according to the target audience for a particular message. A full range of mediums were used by the Taliban from traditional, face to face communication aimed at illiterate, rural Afghans in remote areas, to high tech online propaganda videos targeting potential recruits and the international electronic and print media. The ability to match the medium successfully with the target audience contributed to the Taliban's success in effective messaging or effective message-delivery. Svet wrote that the Taliban's primary advantage on the information battleground was their ability to identify and use modes of communication that were accessible to Afghans.[277] Wali Shaaker, a Pashtun Afghan who helped coalition forces extensively with addressing Taliban propaganda states that it was the means used to deliver messages and not just their content that led to Taliban success.[278]

In the 1990s the Taliban launched a number of new print publications, as well as a radio station that broadcast around Afghanistan called Voice of Sharia.[279] The Taliban's efforts continued as they transformed into an insurgency. Greg Bruno noted that, "by early 2009 Afghan and Pakistani Taliban factions were operating hundreds of radio programs, distributing audio cassettes, and delivering night letters to instil fear and obedience among their target populations."[280]

The Taliban's strategic goal of expelling foreign troops from Afghanistan drove them to find a way to get their message across in foreign capitals and more importantly, to civilian

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[277] Svet, 2.
[278] Munoz, 110.
[279] Bruno, 2.
[280] Ibid., 2.

populations whose aggregate opinion influenced government decisions. The Taliban targeted

Western media reporting on the war, in order to get their message to far away legislatures and

influence the battle narrative and turn public opinion in troop-contributing nations against the

war, eventually leading to the withdrawal of troops. Retired Marine Colonel Thomas X. Hammes

wrote that the Taliban was willing to use "all available networks – political, social, economic,

and military – to convince the enemy's political decision-makers that their strategic goals are

either unachievable or too costly."[281]

The Taliban also communicated in multiple languages including Urdu, Pashto, Arabic,

and English, depending on the audience they were addressing. Print and online materials were

the most likely to be multi-lingual because they were aimed primarily at educated Afghans,

Western media, and potential Arab funders. The Taliban's early English language statements

were relatively crude and poorly translated.

Dorronsoro noted: "The Taliban build on growing discontent of Afghans through a

relatively sophisticated apparatus which now employs radio, video, and night letters to

devastating effect."[282] The following outlines the means of communication used by the Taliban

to spread their message, influence key audiences and ultimately the outcome of the war.

3.1 Radio

Radio was a primary medium for communicating with Afghans for the Taliban.[283] The

majority of Afghans lived in rural areas and were illiterate. Inexpensive crank radios requiring no

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[281] Ibid., 2-3.
[282] Dorronsoro, pg 11
[283] Nissen, 6.

electricity and able to receive signals over great distances were a key and often the only source of information on the war for Afghans.[284]

The Taliban used a variety of forms of radio broadcasts to deliver their messages including: talk shows, call-in shows, religious lectures, public messages, and public threats against individuals or particular actions. Taliban radio shows broadcasted mournful Taliban chants, poems about the heroism and victories of the Taliban, songs of martyrdom for fallen fighters, and Taliban Mullah sermons about morality.[285] All of these contained Taliban messages about the battle narrative. One of the most common uses of Taliban radio was delivering threats and intimidation, a tactic first developed when the Taliban was in government in the 1990s.[286] The Afghan Taliban leadership, (which had fled to Pakistan), also learned the value of radio's effectiveness from the Pakistani Taliban, which operated "Radio Mullah." Radio Mullah was used by the Pakistani Taliban to threaten those who cooperated with government or Westerners, publicly accusing individuals of "un-Islamic" activities. Maulana Qazi Fazlullah, the man behind much of Radio Mullah, had his program broadcast from dozens of radio stations throughout the SWAT valley. One Pakistani citizen speaking to researchers explained that the majority of people did not listen because they enjoyed the programming, but because they feared the consequences of ignoring it, lest they be targeted themselves for committing a newly designated "un-Islamic activity."[287]

The Afghan Taliban adopted a similar approach, using radio to get their messages out as well as to issue threats against communities or individuals who they believed were cooperating

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284 Svet, 2.
285 Dorronsoro, 11.
286 Bruno, 2.
287 Ibid.

with the Afghan government or helping Western militaries.[288] A senior Canadian who worked in an information operations capacity in Kabul and Kandahar argued that the Taliban used radio primarily to contact Afghans and intimidate them.[289] This Canadian diplomat stated that Afghans felt obliged to listen to the ranting Taliban messages because they would identify critical information, including areas that would be attacked at certain times, and towns and villages where the Taliban would be on the lookout to punish individuals for activities such as sending their girls to school. Listening was driven by a desire to be informed and survive, rather than because the programming was popular. The Canadian diplomat explained that the Taliban frequently used the radio to make outlandish claims about the number of coalition troops they had killed, or falsely blaming the coalition for civilian deaths caused by the Taliban.[290] Without a secondary way to verify this information, or a radio counter-broadcast, these claims were often left unchallenged, shaping Afghans' perception of the war.

3.2 Key Leader Engagement

Research conducted by Crisis Group and Betz found that one of the most powerful sources of influence in Afghanistan was key leaders.[291] Niessen wrote that the majority of Taliban information operations took place through "key leader engagement," with the Taliban meeting face to face with community leaders, elders, mullahs and local power brokers.[292]

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[288] Journalistic interview with Canadian diplomat conducted in 2013.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.
[291] International Crisis Group, *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2008), 1 and Betz, 625.
[292] Nissen, 6.

Key leaders frequently decided how the village, compound, or town would behave because of their important role in Afghan society and the respect that they were accorded as tribal elders, local power brokers or mullahs. Taliban commanders and operatives engaged key leaders with their battle narratives, versions of events, religious demands and messages with the intent of having the key leaders then used their influence and power to persuade and convince the local population to support the Taliban.[293] The Taliban had a superior understanding of Afghan society, culture and traditions, which allowed them successfully to exploit key leader engagement. The Taliban also had in-depth knowledge of who was influential in particular areas or towns because they frequently had operatives who either originated from there or from nearby. This allowed the Taliban quickly to identify and target key individuals.

Mullahs were a frequent target for Taliban key leader engagement and were particularly important in Afghan society. The Taliban approached Mullahs primarily on religious grounds, claiming moral and religious credibility in their messages and casting the coalition as infidels who did not understand Islam and hoped to undermine it. Mullahs played a prominent role in Afghanistan for a considerable period of time - the Encyclopedia Britannica first documented the importance of Afghan Mullahs in 1911.[294] Mullahs took on an increasingly important role in Afghan society as the Taliban systematically assassinated village elders and political leaders who did not support them, this created a power vacuum

[293] Ibid.
[294] Isobel Coleman and Masuda Sultan, "Afghan Mullahs are Key to American Success: Analysis," *The Huffington Post*, July 17, 2009, accessed November 30th, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/16/afghan-mullahs-key-to-ame_n_216303.html, 8.

that local Mullahs filled.[295] Mullahs functioned as religious leaders, social workers, counsellors and judges in their towns and villages.[296] When the Taliban was able to get Mullahs to adopt their position, they had a strong ally. Indeed, in some villages the Mullah's word was law.

Approaching key leaders succeeded in part because it was compatible with Afghan tradition and culture, and in particular with the tribal tradition of the loya jirga. A loya jirga was a meeting of Afghan elders that made decisions by consensus on community matters.[297] Approaches that were traditionally compatible with Afghan culture allowed for better transmission of message and the possibility that key leaders would accept the message being presented to them.

Even in areas that did not support the Taliban coercive credibility allowed the Taliban to compel large sections of the population to submit to their power or at least not to openly support the coalition. They did so by attempting to convince key leaders they should support the Taliban for religious, nationalistic or moral reasons. If those failed the Taliban attempted to coerce key leaders into passivity. The Taliban's presence across the country and in local communities meant they had a significant surveillance capability to determine whether key leaders were complying and to issue credible threats to those key leaders who did not.

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[295] Dion Nissenbaum, "From One Afghan Setback, US Strategy Finds Success," McClatchy DC, August 25, 2010, accessed December 19th, 2013, http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/08/25/99663/from-one-afghan-setback-us-strategy.html and Jason Mick, "Taliban Murders Afghan Elder, Thank Wikileaks for Revealing 'Spies'," Daily Tech, August 3, 2010, accessed December 19th 2013, http://www.dailytech.com/Taliban+Murders+Afghan+Elder+Thanks+Wikileaks+for_Revealing+Spies/article19250.htm.

[296] Isobel Coleman and Masuda Sultan, "Afghan Mullahs are Key to American Success: Analysis," *The Huffington Post*, July 17, 2009, accessed November 30th, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/16/afghan-mullahs-key-to-ame_n_216303.html.

[297] Jim Gant and William McCallister, "Tribal Engagement: the Jirga and the Shura," Small Wars Journal, June 6 2010, accessed November 1, 2014, http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/451-gant.pdf, 1.

3.3 Night Letters

Night letters, known as *Shabnamah* to locals, were a traditional form of communication in Afghanistan.[298] Night letters were used by Afghans to communicate with entire towns, regions or provinces.

The Taliban used night letters in three forms: to threaten those who were working for or with the Afghan government; to threaten those working for or with coalition forces (especially translators); to threaten those who accepted money, education, food or any kind of benefit from the Afghan government, coalition forces, or Western aid agencies. Night letters could be used to threaten individuals or groups identified in the letter, or make implied threats against unnamed individuals and groups who the Taliban suspected of cooperating with the coalition. Frequent targets were villagers, elders and those helping the coalition. Villagers or the intended target who would find the letter pinned to their door or posted in a public area. The letters would threaten the individual or group in question with injury or death if they did not comply with the Taliban's demands.[299] The International Crisis Group cited one such incident where the Taliban killed a religious scholar whom they accused of spying on behalf of the Afghan government. His body was left with a night letter on top of it warning those who cooperated with the government that they would suffer the same fate.[300]

A Taliban night letter left in Khost in May of 2008 provided a typical sample of what the Taliban used night letters for. The letter began by threatening tribal elders who ruled against the Taliban in legal questions warning them they would come to regret it. The letter also threatened those who "spy and work for the infidel government and military forces," demanding they quit

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[298] International Crisis group, 12.
[299] Svet, 2.
[300] International Crisis Group, 13.

their jobs by June 20, 2008 or face the consequences. The Taliban also warned Afghans not to get close to "infidel forces at any time or in any place." Should Afghans find themselves near a battle between the Taliban and coalition forces they were warned to avoid providing any help or information to the soldiers or "your death will be the same as the death of the U.S. and their puppets." There was even a separate section that specifically threatened Afghans who cooperate in identifying the location of IEDs to coalition soldiers. "Our mines are live; we do not allow the killing of civilians, but you should not show them to the infidels and their slaves. We will show our power to those who show our landmines to them or inform them about us." Finally the letter threatened mullahs who performed funerals for any Afghan working for the government swearing they will be "killed with torture," and "never forgiven." Another example of the Taliban communicating using this medium can be found in a 2007 night letter distributed in Khost. The night letter made a clear threat against a particular government program that offered development projects for Afghans. The communication demanded Afghan civilians "Reject all of the assistance coming from the National Solidarity Program and don't accept their solar panels because through this honey they will give you poison."[301] It also threatened "Those from your community who participate in this infidel solidarity" would faces consequences, equating it to speaking against Islam and warned that if anyone spoke out against the Taliban "Hell is in your place." [302]

Night letters were often used to target anyone believed to be engaging in what the Taliban deemed to be un-Islamic activities. The Taliban often targeted girls going to school and

[301] Ibid., 12.
[302] Ibid.

their families in night letters, warning them to keep their daughters at home. One letter, delivered

in 2008 and titled *Warning letter of the Maidan Shah [Wardak] Mujahidin*, threatened

> Non-Muslims and Westerners are implementing their own laws in order to spread
> immorality and corruption throughout Afghanistan and other Islamic countries. An
> example is schools constructed for females and using these to indoctrinate women with
> immorality and corruption. International NGOs are funding these schools, and all patriots
> are requested to [stop sending] their females… to these immoral centres; otherwise they
> will be dealt with under the Sharia.[303]

The lack of literacy among the Afghan population would typically have been a barrier for

written communications such as a night letters, however scholars and coalition information

operations practitioners in the field argued that night letters were so recognizable that it was not

necessary to have the intended recipient be able to read the words for it to be effective. Having a

night letter posted on one's door sent a clear message, and created social pressures in the village

where the recipient lived out of fear the whole community would be punished for one

individual's actions. Night letters in this way intimidated those who worked with the coalition or

who defied the Taliban's wishes and by ramping up social pressure for them to comply out of

fear of group punishment.

3.4 Traveling Poets and Preachers

The Taliban dispatched travelling poets and preachers (mullahs) in Afghanistan as

powerful agents of influence on the information battleground.[304] These wandering religious and

cultural figures travelled from town to town, spreading the Taliban's messages. Svet argued that

the Taliban's choice of the most traditional and accessible media for Afghans, namely the oral

tradition, was chiefly responsible for the success of their messages getting through to target

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[303] Ibid.
[304] Ibid., 1.

audiences.[305] Word of mouth, songs and poems were centuries-old traditional ways of spreading news and religious messages in Afghanistan. Frequently, travelling mullahs, poets and minstrels were the only way for remote communities to learn of news from afar. Wandering poets and preachers were welcomed into Afghan villages in accordance with the code of tribal hospitality of sheltering and protecting guests (especially in the Pashto South where the Pashtun code of hospitality, Pashtunwali, applies).[306]

The Taliban was able to exploit Afghan tradition by infusing their messages into the oldest means of communication in Afghanistan, oral communication. Munoz cites an Asia Foundation Survey that reveals where Afghans are most comfortable getting their information from. The survey found that in Kandahar, the heart of much of the insurgency, 35% of Afghans stated they would want to get information about important issues from a friend, while 26% said that they would want the information to come from a neighbour or villagers (the question excluded family as a possible source).[307] By sending traveling preachers and poets from village to village, spreading their message orally, they were able to approach Afghans in a comfortable and trusted way. Once the message was diffused through the village, Afghans would hear it from friends and neighbours they trust and be more likely to repeat it. The ability to create a self-perpetuating medium carrying a Taliban message was a powerful way to target Afghans in a society with a strong tradition of oral communication

Travelling poets and minstrels shared chants, poems and songs focusing on themes of Taliban victories, glorious martyrdom operations by suicide bombers, and major grievances including Guantanamo Bay and civilian casualties. Preachers travelled with religious messages,

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305 Svet, 2.
306 International Crisis Group, 1.
307 Munoz, 131-132.

edicts, as well as battle reports and other Taliban messages. [308] A common message they delivered was of Islam being under attack and the need to unite as Muslims against the foreign oppressors and "puppet" government. While Afghans rarely united under a single banner, including the concept of a single state which was foreign to many Afghans, the religious appeal was a strong uniting call. Mullahs had a position of respect in Afghan society and wandering Taliban preachers could leverage this to gain an audience, both of local villagers and village leaders.

Wandering preachers and poets frequently come with *taranas,* nationalistic songs that encouraged Afghans to rise up against foreign oppressors. These were often the same songs that could be found on the Taliban websites, audio cassettes and MP3s distributed to cell phones. Crisis Group explained the significance of *taranas* in the context of spreading Taliban messages and anti-coalition sentiment, as

> emotional, martial, nationalistic songs without musical accompaniment. These are tied closely to Afghan imagery and history, not necessarily produced by the Taliban but aimed at building wider sympathy for the insurgency within the population. While some songs refer directly to Taliban activities, they mainly aim to heighten resistance to foreigners and appeal to nationalism. They feed into a long cultural tradition of travelling minstrels carrying news and opinions; indeed, there are examples today of such songs being memorized and passed along. [309]

The Taliban was thus able to reach out and spread their message to remote locations, embedding messages in the religiously compelling and self-perpetuating media of religious lectures, songs and poems that could be passed from person to person, carrying Taliban propaganda.

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[308] Svet writes that wandering religious figures are one of the most effective ways the Taliban gets their message out. Svet, 2.
[309] International Crisis Group, 16.

3.5 Audio Cassettes

The Taliban frequently relied on audio cassettes as another way to exploit traditional means of communication in a country a largely illiterate country. These cassettes were one of the Taliban's most effective means of communication.[310] Cassettes were practical because they could be carried from village to village and played. The main goal of these tapes was to trigger feelings of nationalism among Afghans, to spread the Taliban message by accessing traditional media of communication, and to tell stories that encouraged Afghans to resist the coalition troops and the Afghan government.[311]

The Taliban produced audio cassettes that contained *tarnaras*; songs, poetry and chants that would typically have been performed by the traveling minstrels, poets and preachers discussed in the previous section. Songs dealt primarily with the themes of waging jihad, including songs such as: *Let me go to jihad* and *Convoys going to jihad, I am joining the martyrs*. The poetry dealt with themes of "pride, resistance and anger" according to Crisis Group.[312] Svet identified the chants as "mournful chants promoting Taliban heroes and martyrs."[313] The songs carrying the Taliban messages were popular even with Afghans who did not support the Taliban, but admitted to singing them because they enjoyed the song itself.[314] This created a self-perpetuating Taliban message, where even non-Taliban supporters learnt the song, sang it, and passed it on to friends, neighbours, and relatives who in turn taught it to others. The Taliban was able to capitalize on the Afghan tradition of history and stories through song and poetry, part of

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[310] Ibid., 9.
[311] Ibid., 16.
[312] Ibid.
[313] Svet, 2.
[314] International Crisis Group, 16.

"a long cultural tradition of travelling minstrels carrying news and opinions; indeed, there are examples today of such songs being memorized and passed along."[315] The effectiveness of auditory media is demonstrated by how these chants, songs and poetry was mimicked by the population at large, and not just Taliban operatives, as Afghan civilians started to create audio cassettes with chants, poetry and songs[316] these recordings were " . . . not necessarily produced by the Taliban but aimed at building wider sympathy for the insurgency within the population."[317] A key mark of a successful information operation is not only in its uptake by the population, but in whether the population begins to repeat the messaging on their own.[318] The Taliban's audio based mediums were successful in not only spreading their message, but making it easy and popular to repeat. Audio recordings also moved beyond cassettes as the war progressed and technology shifted, migrating to digital audio recordings that could be circulated and played on cell phones as ring tones and full messages.

Audio cassettes were particularly useful for the Taliban when the coalition began disrupting Taliban radio broadcasts by interfering with the signal as it allowed the Taliban a way to get around technological hurdles to the highly effective auditory means of communication.

3.6 Printed publications

The Taliban occasionally used printed publications to communicate with literate Afghans (generally those in positions of power or influence), potential international recruits, foreign funders of the Taliban's campaign and local and international media. The printed materials

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[315] Ibid.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Foxley, 84.

ranged from slim pamphlets, which could be handed out, to printed magazines. Short-lived printed magazines included *Azam* (Tenacity), *Awakkal* (Trust), *Basoun* (Revolution), and *Istiqamat* (Uprightness).

The longest running Taliban print publication was *Al Somood*, in Arabic. It targeted Taliban financial supporters in the Gulf States and potential foreign fighter recruits. *Al Somood* promises "A genuine image of Islamic jihad in Afghanistan. A thorough follow-up of events on the Afghan scene. A serious media step to help the Afghan question."[319] The magazine was available in hard copy and high quality PDFs on the Internet. The magazine featured articles about Taliban operations, organization, and interviews with high level commanders. It was published by the Taliban media unit and uses a nom-de-guerre to identify Nasiruddin "Herawi" as the publisher. Additional Taliban magazines also included *Srak* (Beam of Light), which published in a monthly format and primarily in Pashto, and *Murchal* (Trench), a quarterly publication on military affairs.

Al Samood noted a number of independent publications were available from Taliban sympathizers who espoused Taliban ideology and messages although they were not formally produced by the Taliban media unit. A prime example of this was the quarterly Pashto *Tora Bora*, a publication that supported but was not linked to the Taliban.

3.7 Spokesmen

In the early to mid-years of the conflict, the Taliban frequently used spokesmen to fulfill a number of functions including: providing military updates, making claims of casualty numbers

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[319] International Crisis Group, 13.

(both civilian casualties and coalition casualties), and battle reports as well as engaging in interviews with journalists.

The spokesmen dominated in the early to mid years of the conflict and focused on providing military updates, claims of casualty numbers, battle reports and statements. Early in the war these spokesmen were primarily identified as Latifullah Hakimi, Qari Mohammad Yousuf Ahmadi and Mohammad Hanif.[320] Later in the war two names came to the forefront: Qari Yousuf and Zabihullah Mujahid. Both were believed to be noms de guerre[321] but were so active they became the primary names associated with Taliban spokesmen providing credible (in the sense it was from the Taliban, but not in the sense it was truthful) and authentic Taliban communications. The need for identifiable Taliban spokesmen emerged after local Taliban commanders announced operations prematurely or erroneously in claims to the Western media. These incidents made the Taliban appear disorganized. A central point or points of contact allowed the Taliban to control their message more effectively. This was particularly important when taking credit for an attack or when announcing one. The strategy appeared to work. One Canadian who worked in information operations in Kandahar stated that the coalition knew a message was coming from the Taliban whenever it was attributed to Zabihullah Mujahid or Qari Yousuf.[322]

The primary purpose of spokesmen was to transmit Taliban messages to journalists, in particular to international reporters, in an effective, quick, efficient, and trusted manner. The role

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[320] Ibid., 10.
[321] Several NGOs, scholars, and coalition information operations officers believe that Yousuf and Zabihullah are noms de guerre. This belief stems from numerous arrests of Taliban spokesmen as the coalition attempted to silence them, only to have a statement released, or a call to a journalist made the very next day with the spokesman identifying himself as Yousuf or Zabihullah. Journalists have attested that they could identify different voices at different times, all allegedly belonging to Yousuf or Zabihullah.
[322] Journalistic interview with a Canadian diplomat.

of spokesman also offered a workaround for the inability to meet face to face with Western reporters. Establishing identifiable spokesmen allowed the Taliban to connect quickly to Western journalists and signal they were a legitimate source of Taliban information to the reporter by using one of the known spokesmen identities. Foxley wrote that the Taliban made frequent use of their spokesmen to promote or clarify their message.[323] Former U.S. Commander David Barno also emphasized the role of Taliban spokesmen in getting the Taliban message out, especially to Western television media, noting that the Taliban literally had CNN and BBC on their speed dial.[324] International Crisis Group observed that Taliban spokesmen "maintain regular contact with journalists through email, SMS [text messages] and telephone calls and provide online reports on incidents." Crisis Group also stated that journalists they interviewed "stressed that Taliban spokesmen responded to queries around the clock, in sharp contrast to government and international officials."[325] Niessen noted that Taliban spokesmen were notorious for being the first to get in contact with journalists, often before an operation or attack was complete, providing a statement and inflated casualty numbers, including false or exaggerated claims of civilian casualties in the hopes of having their version of events to air first, and thereby driving the media agenda.[326] Some of these false reports may have influenced public opinion of how well the war was going at home, creating a sense of indefensible targets, unacceptable levels of civilian deaths, collateral damage, and a sense of endless, unstoppable coalition casualties.

Taliban spokesmen continued to be a powerful force for getting the Taliban's message out. The Taliban's twitter account was allegedly run by Zabihullah Mujahid, and statements on

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[323] Foxley, 81.
[324] Naylor, 6.
[325] International Crisis Group, 11.
[326] Nissen, 6.

the main Taliban website were attributed in large part to him. It also provided a point of contact

for journalists to call, text or email for comment and tasked specific individuals with

coordinating media outreach.[327] The use of Taliban spokesmen was not without peril for the

Taliban. Foxley notes that the spokesmen did not "appear to have developed the media skills

necessary to debate or discuss fast-moving or strategic events – particularly when accusations of

any sort have been levelled at them."[328] However the Taliban primarily used the spokesmen to

set the agenda, and the coalition rarely forced them into situations where there weakness would

be exposed. Foxley argued the coalition did not take full advantage of this weakness.[329]

3.8 Online Communications

Online publications and communications were increasingly influential and important for

the Taliban to communicate with foreign media, foreign recruits and progressively more with

Afghans as the Internet spread throughout Afghanistan via mobile phones. The Taliban's main

website was *Al Emarah* (The Emirate), which coalition forces blocked several times only to have

it resurrected from another location on the Internet.[330] *Al Emarah* was available in five

languages: Dari, Pashto, Urdu, Arabic and English. The English was the smallest section,

suggesting that the website was primarily targeted at Afghans and a regional audience. The

website was often updated several times a day. It provided battle reports (usually inflated

significantly to favour the Taliban), Taliban reaction to events, and commentary. It also featured

a section with Taliban poetry and interviews. The Taliban frequently used the website to alter the

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[327] International Crisis Group, 11.
[328] Foxley, 89.
[329] Ibid.
[330] International Crisis group, 15.

battle narrative to their advantage. For example, at one point *Al Emarah* claimed, "In martyrdom operations 50 enemy officers were killed in Khost," attributing the statement to a Taliban spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahahid. On that date no coalition or Afghan officers were killed, however 19 Afghan civilians were killed and four Afghan National Police were injured.

The second iteration of the Taliban's website was *Voice of Jihad* available in English, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic and Pashto. The English version of the website identified itself as being run by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (the Taliban) and welcomed visitors pronouncing "Afghanistan is the shared home of all Afghans. They have right to serve this home. Islamic Emirate wants to establish a regime in which all ethnicities, tribes and. [sic] groups of the Afghan society will see themselves. None will feel being alien."[331] The website featured: news, weekly analysis, articles, interviews, statements, videos, and a page with information about how to contact the Taliban.[332] *Voice of Jihad* was updated multiple times a day, primarily with grossly inflated, altered, and sometimes entirely fictitious battle reports and casualty numbers. The website also used typical Taliban wording designed to influence perceptions and reinforce Taliban messages using charged terms to describe the combatants, the coalition forces were referred to as invaders, while the Afghan government and Afghan security forces were referred to as puppets and minions. A sample report headline was: "Martyr attack in Jalalabad kills 6 American invaders, 1 local interpreter," no collaborating reports or media stories indicated any successful attacks on that date, let alone the death of six American soldiers.[333] This is an

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[331] "Voice of Jihad," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, accessed August 16, 2014, http://shahamat-english.com/.
[332] Ibid.
[333] "Voice of Jihad," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, accessed August 16, 2014, http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/news/48361-martyr-attack-in-jalalabad-kills-6-american-invaders.-1-local-interpreter
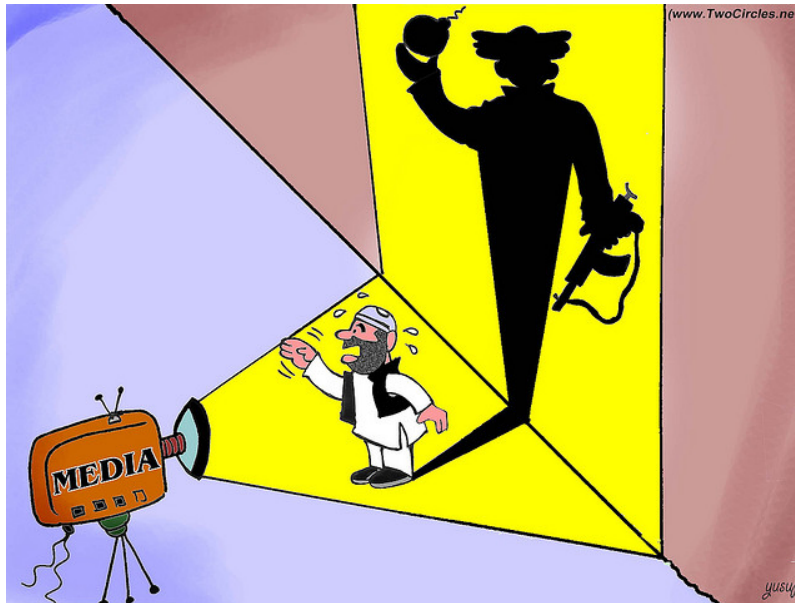
example of the Taliban using the website to distribute false information and using their terminology to influence the perception of the activity if quoted by a Western media outlet.

Unlike its predecessor *Al Emarah*, which featured a small section of poorly written English, *Voice of Jihad* made all sections of the website available in English. While parts of the website were in awkward, poorly translated English, other elements were written with a level of sophistication and fluency of a native English speaker, suggesting there were multiple contributors although all entries were attributed to the Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid. The effort to ensure the entire website was available in English spoke to the Taliban's desire to reach Western media and have their statements attributed or included in stories.

Additional sections of the website consistently delivered Taliban messages and appeared to be geared to a Western media audience, including the clearly labelled "statements" section that could easily be accessed by journalists. These statements contained common Taliban themes of occupation, greatly exaggerated military successes by the Taliban, threats to those who did not cooperate, and religious messages. These sections included political cartoons (see figure 1) and articles which criticized the media, cited the media, or appear to be addressing the media directly. Some statements even claimed to be from Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader whose fate was a source of great debate, even though for several years there had been no evidence he was alive.[334] The statements, comment and news story updates can all easily be accessed and cited by foreign media for their journalistic stories. By quoting these stories, Western publications would reprint Taliban propaganda.

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334 334"Voice of Jihad," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, accessed August 16, 2014, http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/paighamoona/47579-message-of-felicitation-of-amir-ul-momineen-may-allah-protect-him-on-the-auspicious-eve-of-eid-ul-fitr.

Figure 1: A Taliban editorial cartoon depicting a Muslim through the lens of the media[335]

Voice of Jihad also contained a link to a sister website with more Taliban propaganda videos. This website featured a number of videos with Taliban propaganda and Taliban sermons as well as statements, chants, and videos of Taliban operations including suicide bombings and IEDs exploding.[336] It also contained footage of what appeared to be dead Afghan or U.S. soldiers. These videos were used to appeal to foreign donors and would-be recruits, and to provide video clips for Western news organizations that the Taliban hoped would be used in Western broadcast news stories about the Taliban.

The Taliban operated social media accounts including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to communicate the Taliban message. The Taliban began tweeting in English on December 19,

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[335] "Voice of Jihad," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, accessed August 16, 2014, http://shahamat-english.com/index.php/articles/41389-spogmai-and-the-enemy-s-propaganda-machine.
[336] "Voice of Jihad," Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, accessed August 16, 2014, http://shahamat-movie.com/

2011 from the Twitter handle @alemarahweb.[337] The tweets focused on inflated battle reports. The Taliban operated various media accounts, one of the operational accounts was from the handle @zabihmujahid identifying the operator as Zabihullah Mujahid, a known nom de guerre for Taliban spokesmen.[338] The account provided a Gmail address to get in touch with the Taliban and a now defunct website for Taliban news. Some of these accounts operate in English, targeting the Western media with Taliban statements that can be attributed, and video that can be clipped and included in western newscasts.

The most recent (2014) official functioning Taliban twitter account is currently using the handle @ABalkhi under the name Abdulqahar Balkhi who tweeted in English.[339] The account was used primarily to tweet the same exaggerated battle reports found on *Voice of Jihad*, using similar language and inflated casualty numbers. The account was sometimes used to announce the commencement of Taliban military operations, or to tweet out articles of interest. The purpose of the account was apparent in who it followed: 20 of the 26 Twitter accounts followed by the Taliban account were English speaking print and television media.[340]

The English language Taliban Facebook account[341] Al Emara listed the Taliban as a political party in Afghanistan. The Facebook account contained the same inflated battle reports found on the Taliban's other media outlets. However the Facebook account had a unique feature, the extensive use of photographs including (unverified) images of U.S. caskets, the shells of what the Taliban claimed were coalition tanks, and graphic photos of dead and injured coalition

[337] Sarah Kessler, "Taliban's Twitter Account Starts Tweeting in English," *Mashable*, May 12, 2011, accessed November 23, 2014, http://mashable.com/2011/05/12/talibans-twitter-account-starts-tweeting-in-english/
[338] zabihullahmujahid, Twitter Account, accessed November 23, 2014, https://twitter.com/zabihmujahid>
[339] Abdulqahar Balkhi, Twitter Account, accessed November 23, 2014, https://twitter.com/ABalkhi>
[340] Ibid.
[341] Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Facebook page, accessed November 22, 2014, https://www.facebook.com/alemara.en1

and Afghan soldiers, spectacular attacks, and Afghan and coalition forces allegedly mistreating and killing Afghan civilians. The Taliban appeared to operate other Facebook pages in Urdu and Pashto. In a *Washington Times* article on Taliban use of social media, Bill Gertz noted that the Taliban used social media sites to recruit members and incite terror attacks. Facebook was used, for example, to post news of attacks for which the Taliban claimed responsibility and to spread disinformation targeting both Afghan and international audiences.[342] Western military officials expressed concern that the Taliban used the increasingly influential medium of online social media more quickly, frequently, and deftly than coalition militaries.[343]

Finally the Taliban used online communications to communicate directly with Western journalists, including English-language spokesmen available over Gmail to reply in a timely manner to journalists inquiries, which ensured that the Taliban message was included in Western media products, and to initiate contact with journalists in order to shape the battle narrative, forcing the coalition into a reactive position.

3.9 DVDs

DVDs were a popular choice for the Taliban to communicate with Afghans, potential recruits, and foreign backers as the war progressed.[344] DVDs were used to distribute footage of spectacular attacks, especially suicide bombings or "martyrdom operations." DVDs could also include full video productions by the Taliban's in-house media cell often featuring a combination of footage of violent attacks and religious speeches. The Taliban viewed DVDs as an

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[342] Bill Gertz, "Inside the Ring: Taliban Infiltrate Social Media" *Washington Times,* August 22nd, 2012, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/aug/22/inside-the-ring-taliban-inflate-social-media/?page=all
[343] Ibid.
[344] International Crisis Group, 14.

advantageous way to circumvent foreign media (if they refused to show Taliban imagery) and

provide footage of attacks directly to those who they wished to influence.[345] The powerful

images offered obvious advantages in a largely illiterate society. The DVDs were often sold at

local bazaars in the hopes of influencing the population in Afghanistan, or across the border in

Pakistan to increase support.[346]

At times the Taliban handed out DVDs and MP3s on CDs to foreign journalists.[347] The

hope was that journalists would then include some of the Taliban-provided footage in their

stories, especially for television. Many of the messages in these videos were targeted at foreign

audiences, including the sophistication of the Taliban, the inevitability of casualties, and the

dedication of Taliban fighters to win at all costs.

The DVDs often included footage of the Afghan mujahidin fighting Soviet troops,

presenting the Taliban as a modern day mujahidin. The DVDs often contained footage of

spectacular attacks by the Taliban on coalition or Afghan forces as well as clips of insurgent

training and threats against coalition forces. The Taliban would also film violent, graphic and

disturbing images of civilians being punished for their involvement with coalition forces. The

purpose of these messages was to intimidate those who cooperated with the coalition. Other

messages were religious in nature and aimed at convincing Afghans that their belief system was

under threat from the coalition or to demand that they fight as Muslims.

Footage, such as a popular video showing a Taliban ambush of French troops,[348] was

intended to undermine the credibility of the coalition among Afghans, and to demoralize ANSF

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[345] Ibid.
[346] Nissen, 6.
[347] International Crisis group, 14.
[348] Dorronsoro, 11.

troops.[349] This strategy was again employed through a 2008 Taliban DVD that showed interviews with a number of Taliban commanders proclaimed dead by the coalition. The footage included Jalaluddin Haqqani (leader of the Haqqani terror network) mocking the coalition announcement of his death. The message reached an even wider audience when Afghans who did not see the DVD would hear about the footage.

3.10 Coalition Message Delivery

Whereas the Taliban engaged in a wide variety of culturally appropriate and effective message delivery mediums, the coalition struggled to find mediums that were accessible, culturally relevant and effective. The coalition used fewer mediums to approach Afghans than the Taliban used. The coalition at times had messages that resonated, but was unable to deliver them to the target audience and thus lost the opportunity to influence them. Svet wrote that the methods of message delivery chosen by the coalition were ineffective.[350] Resources were expended by the coalition to get their messages out through a number of mediums ultimately did not reach the majority of Afghan citizens.[351]

Key leader engagement and radio were the two most important mediums of communication in Afghanistan, but the coalition did not begin seriously to concentrate on these methods early enough.[352] Betz wrote that the coalition did not consider the poverty and illiteracy of Afghans sufficiently (or Afghan traditions) when designing information operations product mediums. Svet highlighted examples of newspapers that were produced by the coalition, such as

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349 International Crisis group, 14.
350 Svet, 1.
351 Ibid.
352 Ibid.

Peace, as a questionable investment when the majority of Afghans were illiterate.[353] He also discussed the decision to buy television ads, when the majority of Afghans do not have electricity, let alone a television set.

Radio, a key method for communicating in Afghanistan was used by the coalition, but not with the same degree of success or frequency as the Taliban exploited this medium with their ability to target specific local audiences with both lectures and threats.[354] Whereas the Taliban had targeted programming, right down to the regional level, the coalition tended to buy time from Afghan radio stations for coalition messages that were viewed as propaganda by most Afghans.[355] RAND researchers however found that radio was highly successful in the later years for the coalition in particular provinces where it was used to refute false Taliban battle claims and claims about civilian casualties.[356] By the time the coalition started using radio extensively in 2011 (including building an FM radio tower at Kandahar Air Field) it was late in the Afghan war effort and much of the agenda had been set.[357]

The coalition did reach out to Afghan key leaders but not with the effectiveness, precisions or frequency of the Taliban. The efforts were hampered by a lack of cultural understanding and frequently by being unable to identify who the key leaders were to approach them successfully. Munoz cites LeGree's discussion of the problem coalition troops of assuming that influencers were whoever was willing to speak with the coalition, or who spoke some English instead of investigating who the tribal or religious influencers were in a particular region

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[353] Ibid.
[354] Journalistic interview with a Canadian Diplomat, conducted 2010.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Munoz, 95.
[357] Ibid. and Walter Pincus, "New and Old Information Operations in Afghanistan: What Works?," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2011, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/new-and-old-information-operations-in-afghanistan-what-works/2011/03/25/AFxNAeqB_story.html.

and attempting to engage with them directly.[358] Information in Afghanistan traveling by word of

mouth often travels by what RAND describes as "human chains." The coalition simply was not

able to understand who was in these chains, or feed information into them so that it could be

distributed into the population through effective, accessible, traditional means.[359] The way in

which the coalition traveled and engaged in the early days of the insurgency also undermined the

ability to engage with key leaders. Approaching a village in heavily armoured vehicles, armed,

wearing reflective sunglasses and helmets was not considered culturally acceptable.

A lack of cultural understanding sometimes created difficulties in communicating

messages when the coalition did engage with key leaders in Afghan communities. Coalition

military officers arriving to meet with key leaders and asking them openly if there were any

Taliban in the area risked the lives of these leaders and was a sign of disrespect.[360] This was a

particular problem in Pashtun areas. Meetings between villagers and guests under the code of

Pashtun hospitality required the villagers to provide protection to their guests. Coalition officers

understood that part of the equation, however there was little understanding of the guest's

obligations in Pashtun customs.[361] Lack of cultural awareness meant the troops were unaware

their well intentioned visits and direct questions were offending their hosts or even putting them

at mortal risk. As a result some of the coalition's key leader engagement exercises alienated key

influencers.

Academics and subject-matter experts including Svet called for greater key leader

engagement as the mission continued, identifying the lack of it as a significant problem for

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358 Munoz, 146.
359 Ibid., 121.
360 Ibid., 107.
361 Ibid., 106.

getting coalition messages out and finding resonance for those messages.[362] Nearing the end of the mission, the coalition became increasingly successful at key leader engagement. One successful example of U.S. key leader engagement was the intervention after the Taliban started the false rumour that the U.S. military was burning Korans. As violence began to spread across Afghanistan in reaction to the news, the U.S. military engaged key tribal leaders to explain the story was false, and generated by the Taliban. The Tribal leaders intervened and the violence was successfully quelled. The RAND study explained "Hearing from soldiers directly that they are in their villages to help and provide security and that their only military objective is to defeat terrorists has much more credibility than seeing the same message on a leaflet."[363] Coalition key leader engagement was not without its challenges.

Leaflets were a common means of communication between the coalition and Afghans; frequently they would be dropped from planes. These leaflets did take low literacy into account and were primarily pictorial. The coalition did not understand their target audience sufficiently to design effective leaflets. As a result, the images were sometimes confusing to Afghans, or culturally not appropriate.[364] One example was a pamphlet with messaging about the Taliban and Al Qaida as being enemies of the Afghan people, and intended to send the message that they were the military targets for the coalition and explained the coalition's presence in Afghanistan. Images of key Taliban leaders (Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil and Jalaludin Haqqani) and Osama Bin Laden were featured on the pamphlet in which these enemies of the coalition were transforming into skulls.[365] The coalition assumed most Afghans would recognize the key

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362 Svet, 4.
363 Munoz, 104.
364 Ibid., 99.
365 Ibid., 67-68.

figures, but most Afghans had never seen a photo and assumed they were regular Afghans. This led to Afghans interpreting the message of the pamphlet as being the coalition menacing the average Afghan and then being intimidated rather than understanding the coalition intentions of protection and security.[366]

Billboards were another way the coalition sometimes communicated but RAND researchers found them to be generally ineffective because they were perceived as overt coalition propaganda, and generally could only be established and maintained in areas where the government already had significant influence.[367]

Messages not only reached more people when they were delivered in the way the target audience is comfortable connecting, they also have greater resonance, authenticity and believability when they were delivered using traditional mediums.[368] The coalition did not take advantage of these traditional mediums to present their messages in a way that was accessible and comfortable for Afghans, or easily transferred among friends and villagers. Songs and poetry were almost never used by the coalition even though they were one of the most common forces of communication in Afghan culture, and could be passed along in the oral tradition. While the Taliban was exploiting communication avenues that were accessible and comfortable for Afghans, the coalition was under-resourcing and failing to engage sufficiently key mediums.

The Internet and online communications took on an increasingly important role for the coalition in terms of reaching out to international media and the domestic population of troop contributing countries, but had little influence with Afghans inside Afghanistan.[369] RAND

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[366] Ibid.
[367] Ibid., 103-104.
[368] Svet, 3-4.
[369] Munoz, 102.

estimated that only 4% of Afghans had Internet access. While the Taliban used the Internet extensively to address foreign audiences, the coalition was late in establishing a responsive and regular online presence. By the end of the war online communications had become one of the primary means of communication for the coalition, as they were able to refute Taliban propaganda in real time. However the constraints in regards to speed of response remained. The coalition also did not use the Internet with the explicit intent of targeting Western journalists. Coalition websites and online publications were directed at providing information for civilians within their domestic population, regarding whom they were forbidden by law from using information operations or influence operations. This put the coalition at an ethical advantage but an asymmetric disadvantage to how the Taliban operated. The coalition also rarely posted videos of firefights or engagements that Western media outlets could include in their coverage. The inability to get video in from the field was a great frustration to many public affairs and communications specialists working for the coalition trying to provide journalists with information, when those journalists were rarely able to leave the base.[370] When the coalition did engage in social media, it tended to be strictly regulated and heavily institutional and thus slow.

The coalition did use spokespersons, but in a different context than the Taliban. Coalition spokespersons rotated frequently (between every six and fifteen months) and were generally the assigned public affairs officer at the time. They were constrained by the institutional stove piping and structural bounds to be explored in chapter four which significantly slowed coalition response time and effectiveness. By 2010 the coalition was using spokespeople to refute Taliban

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[370] Journalistic interview with Canadian diplomat, conducted in 2013.

spokespersons directly in Western media stories. However, the effort came late, reluctantly and hesitantly.[371]

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[371] Ibid.

Chapter Four: **The Taliban as an Information Based Combatant vs. the Coalition as a Kinetic Combatant**

The Taliban operated as an information based combatant in the Afghan war, whereas the coalition operated as a kinetic combatant. The consequences of these two different postures provided an asymmetric advantage to the Taliban, who were able to exploit the information environment and media reporting to their advantage. The Taliban operated with a structure built to facilitate information operations and rapidly engage in the media environment. The coalition was built for a conventional conflict and failed to develop a sufficient information strategy and operated within a Balkanized organization that slowed engagement in the media environment ceding the narrative to the Taliban.

4.1 The Taliban as an Information Based Combatant

The Taliban used information operations throughout the Afghan war (both approaching news media and creating in-house media products) to promote themselves and their ideas.[372]

Influence operations were important for all insurgents in the war for "hearts and minds," but the Taliban treated information operations as a primary strategy rather than as a supporting tactic. Kilcullen also described the Taliban as primarily an informational enemy, "the Taliban seem to be waging a different war, driven entirely by information operations…. They're essentially armed propaganda organizations. . . . it's all about an information operation that

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[372] Bruno, 2.

generates the perception of an unstoppable, growing insurgency."[373] The Taliban worked to

generate the perception they were gaining military and political momentum, which they achieved

through dominating the news cycle.[374] Information operations also served as a tool to convince

the decision makers among their political adversaries that their strategic goals were

impossible.[375] Their success confirms the work of Bolt, Betz and Azari who emphasized that

insurgencies would increasingly rely on the propaganda power of attacks, or Propaganda of the

Deed, to achieve strategic political consequences. The fear, horror and media coverage that these

kinds of attacks could generate benefited the insurgency by ensuring media coverage and

disproportionate political influence thanks in part to media distribution.

David Galula, an early French counterinsurgent theorist and practitioner famously wrote

about the advantage insurgents enjoy on the information battlefield when it comes to Propaganda

of the Deed:

> The asymmetrical situation has important effects on propaganda. The insurgent, having
> no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He
> is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does.
> Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. With no positive policy but
> with good propaganda, the insurgent may still win.[376]

The Taliban functioned as an information enemy and to position itself for full

asymmetrical advantage.

The kinetic operations that the Taliban undertook for the period discussed in this thesis

(2001 – 2012) were executed with primarily an influence-based strategic purpose, rather than a

kinetic, tactical purpose. One ISAF officer noted that, for the Taliban, "informational objectives

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[373] Quoted in Packer, 63.
[374] Bolt, Betz and Azari, 16.
[375] International Crisis Group, 1.
[376] Cited in Bolt, Betz and Azari, 16.

tend to drive kinetic operations… virtually every kinetic operation they undertake is specifically designed to influence attitudes or perceptions."[377] This does not mean that the Taliban don't carry out physical attacks but rather that the goal of those physical attacks is strategic influence rather than a kinetic goal. Canadian commanders in Kandahar repeatedly asserted that they defeated the Taliban in every direct engagement.[378] The goal of the Taliban's spectacular attacks was to undermine Afghans' faith in the government and the coalition's willingness to continue fighting. Stephen Biddle, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, argued that the Taliban planned spectacular attacks with the explicit goal of gaining media coverage, "the whole purpose of the military activity is to create video."[379]

Spectacular attacks and combat actions likely to gain media attention revolved around attacking high security bases, high-level officials, and high profile targets such as the Serena Hotel in Kabul where many foreign dignitaries and journalists stayed.[380] International Crisis Group noted that the Taliban frequently tried to add legitimacy and a sense of high-level military strategy to their terror attacks by giving them operational labels as U.S. forces do, for example Operation Kamin for an ambush operation in 2007.[381] The value of spectacular attacks, or Propaganda of the Deed, lies in the propaganda influence, rather than the physical result. Bolt, Betz and Azari note "The more dramatic they [images of an attack] are, the more attention they attract , and the more long lasting is their impact."[382] They also noted that these spectacular attacks, by drawing media attention, also undermined the legitimacy of the government.

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[377] International Crisis Group, 1.
[378] Journalistic off the record interviews with three former Canadian commanders.
[379] Bruno, 3.
[380] International Crisis Group, 23.
[381] International Crisis Group, 23.
[382] Bolt, Betz and Azari, 7.

The Taliban "rely on the media as a powerful instrument in waging psychological warfare," argued Robert Cassidy.[383] A changed media environment allowed the Taliban to harness the power of information and influence to a degree unseen in previous insurgencies. Images of an attack traveled around the world instantly, sending a message of Taliban power and danger, intimidating local Afghans and shaking the confidence of foreign capitals.

The Taliban could attempt to kill a high-ranking government official with a suicide bombing, but instead kill a dozen Afghans. The original objective of the attack had failed and killing Afghan civilians would not usually be deemed a success. However, Taliban reporting of their actions through the media instilled fear in the population, creating the perception of instability and undermining the government's credibility. Attacks on civilians may not have generated support for the Taliban, but they created the perception that government security forces were not capable of protecting the population.[384] In an information environment, such an attack was a success, serving the Taliban's propaganda goals, namely using few resources to influence public opinion.[385] As predicted by Bolt, Betz and Aziz, the Taliban attacks undermined legitimacy of the government and the coalition and were transmitted around the world, their propaganda value far outweighing their kinetic value.

The Taliban engaged in a variety of other types of kinetic, combat attacks on coalition troops, foreign journalists, aid workers and Afghans primarily aimed at sending a message and influencing key audiences. While these attacks were not "spectacular," they were designed to shape the battlefield narrative. Attacks of this type included roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (in particular remote, command detonated, secondary devices), suicide bombings (of

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[383] Robert M. Cassidy, "War in the Information Age," *Parameters* (Winter 2009-10), 3.
[384] Cassidy, 2.
[385] International Crisis Group, 1.

non-high level targets such as Afghan citizens or coalition troops), and kidnappings of aid workers and journalists.

Using the example of Iraq, Kilcullen explained that the kind of daily, asymmetric attacks launched by counterinsurgents had the same goal as high-level spectacular attacks: "they're not doing it because they want to reduce the number of Humvees we have in Iraq by one. They're doing it because they want spectacular media footage of a burning Humvee."[386] Destroying vehicles and maiming soldiers day after day gained media attention and shaped the impression of the war by sending messages of instability and hopelessness to both Afghans and the political masters of coalition troops.

One Canadian Major described a typical example of a successful, low level, Taliban information operation, namely an IED attack on coalition troops. The Major noted that while he found Taliban tactics reprehensible, he was willing to "give them credit," noting he believed they were winning the war, not through their combat successes but through the messaging of their asymmetric attacks and manipulation of the battlefield narrative. The Major stated as he watched medics tend to his men, before they were medevaced back to the Role 3 Hospital on Kandahar Air Field, that he already knew what the headlines back home would say, blaring the news of yet more casualties, and without, he believed, any attention to context. He lamented the hopelessness he believed Canadians and Afghans would feel when they learned that yet again the massive military strength of the coalition had been breached by such basic, simple attacks. He argued troops already believed the war was lost because of media coverage.[387]

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[386] Packer, 64.
[387] Interview with Canadian Army Major, off the record for journalistic purposes, conducted January 2011.

4.2 The Coalition as a Kinetic Combatant

The coalition operated as a kinetic combatant and treated information operations as an afterthought rather than an essential strategy. Betz quotes Pogo that we (the coalition) "have met the enemy, and he is us."[388] Foxley writes that the coalition engaged in only three categories of information operations: pushing "good news" stories about progress, defending against mistakes the coalition had made (such as civilian casualties), and reacting to Taliban information operations (disinformation, primarily).[389] The coalition "seems to have difficulty conducting information operations," Foxley concludes.[390] Even in the face of slipping public opinion in Afghanistan and among home audiences, the coalition continued to attempt a primarily kinetic approach. The coalition could not grasp the value or importance of information operations, Svet writes. "Despite increases in military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan, the United States is losing in a field crucial to the counterinsurgency's long-run success: the battle of perceptions."[391] Svet argued this lack of influence meant the coalition was failing at its two most important goals: gaining substantial support for coalition efforts, and for the Afghan government.[392] There was little to no strategic oversight or coherence in the coalition's information operations approach, which undermined the coalition's ultimate goals in the counterinsurgency.[393] Betz summarized this by stating, "if you cannot explain, you lose."[394] While the Taliban relied on the media as a "powerful instrument in waging psychological warfare," the coalition failed to recognize it as a

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[388] Betz, 623
[389] Foxley, 86
[390] Foxley, 86
[391] Svet, 1
[392] Svet, 1
[393] Svet, 2
[394] Betz, 624

player on the battlefield.[395] When the media reports on conflict, it inherently changes the nature

of that conflict, a reality for which the coalition was unprepared while the Taliban seized the

asymmetric advantage.[396] The White House even publicly acknowledged this problem, noting a

new information strategy was required "to counter the propaganda that is key to the enemy's

terror campaign" in Afghanistan. It never succeeded in doing so.[397] Bruno argued that the West

required a fundamental change in thinking from focusing on dominating the physical battlefield

to winning hearts and minds.[398] In an era when "You don't win unless CNN says you win," the

media has the power to devastate a kinetic campaign through reporting alone, something the

coalition never managed fully to grasp or develop and effective strategy for.[399]

The lack of coalition strategy also undermined success on the information battlefield with

their own domestic populations. While the coalition was obligated to provide only truthful

information to domestic audiences, the lack of a strategy damaged the coalition's narrative and

ability to explain the mission and garner support for it at home .[400] Betz wrote, "The most

strategically debilitating aspect of the Afghan campaign has been the incoherence of the

mission's purpose."[401] The inability to explain this mission to the media and by extension to the

domestic publics of the troop contributing nations undermined the coalition's strategic

objectives. Journalists and citizens of troop contributing nations would frequently ask what was

the purpose of the mission, or simply "why are we there?" Betz argued this was never settled in

the public consciousness and attributes the lack of public support to the inability of the military

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[395] Cassidy, 3
[396] Betz, 624
[397] Bruno, 1
[398] Bruno, 5-6
[399] Bob, Shacochis. "Pens and Swords," *Harvard International Review* 22, no. 1 (2000): 1.
[400] Coalition troops can use persuasion and influence operations with foreign populations, but are obligated by law to provide only factual information to their own domestic populations.
[401] Betz, 615.

to provide and articulate that strategy. Betz connected a direct line between what he called the "dog's breakfast" of political guidance and the resulting surrender of the initiative in the strategic public narrative to the Taliban.[402] The lack of clear strategy and explanation to the public of the purpose of the mission allowed the debate and coverage to devolve "into endless obsessive debates over deaths and injuries," which undermined the argument for the campaign.[403] This also led to domestic publics seeing their soldiers as "dying for nothing" because the larger strategic picture had not been explained in a clear and convincing manner, again undermining the will to fight and the will to contribute resources.[404]

Betz argued that some politicians deliberately kept a clear strategic explanation out of the public debate, not because they lacked one or failed to realize it was missing, but rather because they didn't want to deal with the difficult and uncomfortable debates come election time when it could negatively impact their chances for re-election.[405] The debate, which became focused on casualties and cost instead of political goals, was exploited by the Taliban. The Taliban would target specific countries with threats of killing their soldiers, or celebrate the withdrawal of a country from the alliance in the hopes of further undermining coalition cohesion. The Taliban publicly celebrated the departure of both the Canadians and the Dutch. In both cases the Taliban attempted to cite the decision to halt combat operations as a success for the Taliban and as examples of the coalition falling apart (both in the international press and to Afghan

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[402] Betz, pg 619-620
[403] Betz, pg 620
[404] Betz, pg 617
[405] Betz, pg 616

audiences).[406] The coalition was unable to convince their domestic populations that they were capable of winning the war and they lost the domestic support critical for the mission.

The coalition struggled to conduct successful information operations. A low level of cultural and religious understanding complicated the shaping of messages as well as how they were presented to the population. They were frequently transmitted in ways with which the population did not connect. The coalition's own complicated operational and political structures slowed their ability to respond rapidly to media inquiries and Taliban disinformation, allowing the Taliban to take control of the news-cycle. The coalition was unable to explain the purpose of the mission to the media or to publics at home, causing a "superficial and skewed view of the campaign."[407] A failure to understand the needs of the Western media and successfully to execute media outreach was also a problem. The coalition failed to prioritize sufficient resources to information operations, which had become.[408]

4.3 Media and the Information Environment

In February of 2010, Canadian soldiers on the ground in Kandahar complained vehemently to visiting Canadian journalists about Canadian media coverage. The Canadian soldiers criticized the media's tone and coverage, arguing that media coverage would ultimately undermine support among the Canadian domestic population and thus would lead to the coalition losing the war. These soldiers believed the Canadian media was covering the conflict in a way that was monotonal. They called it "death-watch journalism" because it focussed almost solely on coalition casualties while ignoring positive stories from the Afghan people and military or

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[406] Foxley, 84.
[407] Betz, pg 616
[408] Niessen, pg 9

civil affairs successes. The soldiers were not alone in this belief. Senior Canadian officers and even Generals who had commanded in Afghanistan and monitored the war effort from Canada also expressed this view in not-for-attribution interviews[409].

It was a view shared by some serving on the diplomatic front in the Canadian embassy and by Canadian officials in Kandahar. Canada was not the entire coalition but it was an example of the challenges one coalition country faced when it came to media coverage of the war. One Canadian civilian active in information operations in Afghanistan noted that the Taliban's media presence was so strong, the diplomat saw his job as "shadow boxing" with the Taliban in the media[410].

A prime example can be seen in the comments of one senior non-commissioned officer who raised his frustrations during an early morning convoy from Kandahar Air Field to Camp Nathan Smith.[411] Sergeant M was an experienced Canadian soldier with multiple tours of Afghanistan who spent much of his time outside the wire on patrol. He demanded an explanation for the way the media covered the death of soldiers, arguing that journalists weren't telling the full story and were playing into the Taliban hands. Sergeant M argued that reporters only informed the public about how a soldier died while ignoring successes they had achieved. He believed this magnified the negative aspects of every casualty and gave the impression no progress was being made by coalition troops. He cited an example of a friend who had been killed a few weeks earlier, arguing that he had been involved in the building of several schools for Afghan girls that were active and filled with students. He stated that his friend had worked

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[409] Journalistic interviews with Canadian officers who served in Afghanistan, 2001 – 2012.
[410] Journalistic interview with a Canadian diplomat who had severed in Afghanistan, September 2012.
[411] Interview conducted for journalistic purposes in 2010. I will refer to him here as Sergeant M to respect the agreement that his comments were not for attribution.

hard to develop a rapport with local elders and was making progress undermining Taliban support in villages in the Panjwai region of Kandahar. Sergeant M claimed that the media had mentioned none of these achievements in their reports on his friend's death. "He was just a number to you guys. Well he was a hell of a lot more than a number. He did something here. He paid for it with his life." Sergeant M's frustration did not stem simply from the coverage of his friend's death, but from the belief that what he had done on the ground would be erased as political will at home increasingly turned against the mission as a consequence of a stream of bad news. He believed the impression the media was giving was that Afghanistan was a hopeless, non-stop, meaningless parade of casualties characterized chiefly by counting the dead.

One lesson of the Vietnam War was that body counts do not win counterinsurgencies. In the case of Afghanistan, coalition body counts, reported in the news, may have helped produce victory for the insurgents. One lesson from Afghanistan may be that, when modern democracies fight, the way body counts are reported on back home can help defeat counterinsurgents.

The clear belief of Sergeant M and other soldiers was that the Canadian media was being "info opsed" by the Taliban by absorbing and simply reprinting Taliban propaganda without seeing it for what it was. Many drew a contrast with the Second World War, noting that Canadian media then did not interview the Germans or print Nazi statements without using the term "enemy." The soldiers wanted to know what had changed. Numerous troops forcefully related their belief that the media's tone and coverage of the war was one of the greatest hurdles to defeating the Taliban. Some soldiers went so far as to state they believed media coverage of

the war was a bigger obstacle to progress and long-term victory than ill will from Afghans or physical operations by the Taliban.[412]

The security environment in Afghanistan shaped by Taliban info ops created an environment conducive to this "death-watch journalism."[413] The Taliban at times promised to keep journalists safe, but at other times kidnapped and killed reporters in the country.[414] These security risks limited the kind of journalism it was possible to conduct. A reporter could remain on the base to cover whatever news happened there (usually only casualties), travel to Forward Operation Bases to tell the same stories that had already been told (especially later in the war), or go "outside the wire" with a military convoy and in so doing, be limited to reporting whatever the convoy saw and did.

The biggest stories from Afghanistan were not told from the front lines, but rather from the open mouth of military transports being loaded with the latest casualties. The focus on coalition casualties at the lack of reporting on demonstrable progress fed Taliban messaging about the hopelessness of the mission and the promise of endless casualties. Sean Maloney also discussed the "death-watch" journalism attributing a negative narrative to the journalists who worked in Afghanistan, almost alleging an explicit agenda. Maloney argued that the media deliberately perpetuated messages and reports that were damaging to the mission, focussing on the casualties and so undermining support at home. In a reflective 2013 article in *Canadian Military Journal*, Maloney wrote: "Throughout the conflict, Canadian media continuously

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[412] Journalistic interviews conducted with Canadian soldiers in Kandahar, 2010.
[413] Bill Roggio, "Media Death Watch in Action on Purported Kidnapped Canadian Soldier," *The Long War Journal*, June 7, 2006, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2006/06/media_death_watch_in.php, and Glen Reynolds, June 5, 2006 (1:59 p.m.), blog post, *Instapundit*, accessed November 1, 2014, http://pjmedia.com/instapundit/archive/archives/030743.php
[414] Mitch Potter, "Afghanistan: A Brutal War for Journalists," *Toronto Star*, April 7, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2014/04/07/afghanistan_a_brutal_war_for_journalists.html.

focused upon ramp ceremonies and Canadian deaths and woundings to the near-exclusion of any other Afghanistan topic."[415] Maloney went on to argue that the casualty-based reporting influenced politicians' decisions at home to support the mission because of public opinion. "The coverage of Canadian deaths," he said, "had a direct effect on the Opposition leader and his demands for Canadian withdrawal in 2006, and again in 2007."[416] Maloney wrote that the then leader of the NDP Jack Layton, cited casualties as a central motivator in his political campaign to end the Afghan mission. "Mr. Layton expressly referred to Canadian casualties as a prime motivator for his opposition to continued combat operations. It was not surprising that the media, and critics of Canadian involvement, wish to use their measurement of effectiveness with analyzing 'worth.'"[417] Maloney was not clear on why he believed the Canadian media pursued this approach, but he noted that questions about the value of Canada's mission first appeared in the fall of 2006 and were asked by critics of the mission and those "sensitized to casualties."[418] Maloney wrote that the questions of worth that surfaced in 2011 were "essentially a creation of the media and their fellow travellers, the pollsters, and argued that when the media questioned the worth of the mission they were referring to the number of Canadians killed, using casualties "as a measurement of effectiveness."[419] Maloney argued that media emphasis on questions about the worth of the mission, based on the number of casualties, polarized the response of most Canadians, even those with knowledge of sensitive foreign policy issues.[420]

[415] Sean Maloney, "'Was It Worth It?' Canada's Intervention in Afghanistan and Perceptions of Success and Failure," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol 14, No1, Winter 2013, 21.
[416] Maloney, 21.
[417] Maloney, 21.
[418] Maloney, 20.
[419] Maloney, 20.
[420] Maloney, 21.

The Taliban were able to capitalize further on this focus on casualties in their tactical attacks. IEDs provided highly visual, sensationalistic images and descriptions. Understanding the maxim "if it bleeds, it leads,[421]" the Taliban IED campaign against coalition troops aimed to create media events rather than coalition troop attrition. The graphic images of coalition vehicles as mangled steel and of flag-draped coffins led the news and drove the agenda, achieving the insurgents means by taking advantage in particular of the needs of broadcast media, as Bolt, Betz and Azari predict in their study.[422] The Taliban began using secondary command detonated IEDs later in the insurgency. A convoy would be hit by a primary device, sometimes command detonated, at other times pressure detonated. When soldiers dismounted to assist their wounded colleagues, a secondary device would be detonated injuring and killing more soldiers. Secondary devices could be particularly devastating because soldiers were outside the protective shell of their armoured transport vehicles. The one-two punch of IEDs led to multiple casualty events and even more media coverage driving home the message of hopelessness, that for all of the coalitions' armour they were still vulnerable to ever-evolving Taliban tactics.

The Taliban also had practical reasons for choosing an information-based strategy of attacks for propaganda value. Because the Taliban did not have control over state or territorial institutions, they relied on violence and media coverage. The Taliban could not openly call meetings to address Afghans without risking a coalition strike, so they found other means to communicate.[423] Even meeting with journalists in person became difficult after the Taliban targeted, kidnapped, and killed some journalists. Journalists no longer trusted the Taliban's motives, so the Taliban had to find other ways to communicate and get their messages out to the

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421 Bolt, Betz and Azari, 5.
422 Bolt Betz and Azari, 5.
423 International Crisis Group, 8.

media, forcing them to find information and propaganda routes to try to influence journalists' stories.[424]

During the course of the conflict the Taliban became increasingly sophisticated in their ability to produce and distribute their own media.[425] Early DVDs contained footage of spectacular attacks and Taliban messages, but were often so shaky, grainy and of poor quality to make their use by major media outlets unlikely. In 2008, the Taliban's media arm produced an edited propaganda film of a suicide truck bomb attack that had killed two coalition soldiers and two Afghan civilians. The video commenced by introducing the Taliban fighters, showing how happy they are to be able to give their lives for their beliefs and indicated their sophistication and prowess including showing the leader of the group cartoonishly firing two machine guns at the same time. Later in the video the driver of the Vehicle-Borne IED was interviewed before he carried out his attack, calling upon others to join him in jihad. The Taliban videographer then videoed the truck's slow drive towards its target and the subsequent explosion followed by victorious cries of Allahu Akbar (God is Great) by the Taliban spectators.

This video demonstrated that the Taliban had the sophistication to put together a fully produced and edited video, with a storyline carrying Taliban messaging. The video worked as a recruitment and propaganda distribution device to intimidate the population, and to undermine coalition and Afghan will - the message being that the Taliban were willing to die for their cause and were capable of carrying out spectacular attacks that were more sophisticated than expected.

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[424] International Crisis Group, 8.
[425] Foxley, 81.

This video was typical of the type produced by the Taliban's media arm. The video featured the Taliban production company's logo throughout[426] and showcased an increased level of sophistication of Taliban media production. The Taliban had been able to access and learn how to use tools previously restricted to media professionals including editing software and high-resolution cameras mounted on a tripod for a steady shot. The improved DVD productions were evidence of increasing sophistication on the part of the Taliban as well as simply a reflection of the increasing access to video production capabilities that the communications revolution facilitated. These developments reflected Bolt, Betz and Azari's thesis that insurgents would not only execute events with the intent of generating television coverage, but find ways directly to deliver violent content to television networks to ensure their message was distributed. If necessary they would circumvent media channels wholly by self-publishing.

The Taliban was responsive to public opinion tailoring their videos to their audience. Their willingness to alter content demonstrated that these messages were designed to influence, not just to broadcast propaganda. The Taliban ultimately stopped including footage of beheadings when there were objections that the images were too graphic. Desiring to keep the message focussed on fear and intimidation rather than triggering disgust, the Taliban leadership ordered the media organization to show only shootings and no more beheadings.[427] In addition, the images from the DVDs frequently found their way onto the Internet (as with the 2008 Khost video) as well as mobile phones where they could be viewed in remote areas.

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426 Crisis Group,15.
427 Ibid., 14.

4.4 Structure

The Taliban was an information-based enemy that had become increasingly knowledgeable about information warfare, and increasingly organized in how it behaved on the information battlefield. As a part of this development, the Taliban established a dedicated cell that worked on propaganda and media relations. The Taliban developed a media organization responsible for creating, editing and distributing propaganda, monitoring media reports, and maintaining contact with journalists to get the Taliban message out.[428]

The Taliban first publicly confirmed the existence of a dedicated media cell in the Taliban Magazine *Al Somood* in March 2008. International Crisis Group wrote that the Taliban outlined the leadership structure of their "cultural commission." The commission was allegedly headed up by Amir Khan Muttaqi, a former Cabinet Minister, for Culture and Information, from the 1990s Taliban government. The tasks of this cultural commission were to:

a. Establish relations with media channels and agencies to notify them on important military events.
b. Issue jihadi magazines and newspapers
c. Oversee the Internet website related to the movement
d. Issue and publish jihadi books
e. Prepare jihadi films and publish them on jihadi websites.[429]

This showed a significant degree of organization by the Taliban. Crisis Group suggested not all of these elements may have been operational in 2008. However they showed clear Taliban attempts to organize in a professional manner.

A July 2008 *Al Somood* article by Ahmead Mukhtar described a media cell run by Nasiruddin "Herawi," but did not link it to the cultural commission discussed in the March 2008

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[428] Dorronsoro, 11.
[429] Crisis Group, pg 11 citing Ahmead Mukhtar's article "Administrative Structure of the Taliban Islamic Movement," *Al Somood*, March 2008, 17.

issue of the magazine.[430] The July edition of *Al Somood* described the tasks assigned to Nasiruddin "Herawi" in this role, stating that he was responsible for: "the production and publication of jihadi films; their transmission on jihadi websites; putting in order and publishing the archives of important issues related to the Afghan cause; the gathering of photos, videos and military reports from within the front by *Al Somood* correspondents; the setting up of explanatory media sessions on important subjects from reporters and journalists from within the military frontlines…" and goes on to list what regions he was responsible for.[431]

Even though the media products had Afghan addresses, the geographical location of the media cell was unclear. Technology allowed the video editing to be done on laptops from multiple locations. The majority of Taliban print publications were likely produced in Pakistan, probably in Quetta. The Afghan Taliban's leadership was believed to be in Pakistan so it is likely that the media cell may have been operating from there, particularly given the level of importance assigned to messaging and information operations by the Taliban leadership.

Centralizing media outreach and manipulation, as well as production requirements allowed the Taliban to coordinate their messages, ensure pairing between messaging and events (calling a journalist before an attack), and produce higher quality propaganda.

The organization of the media operation by the Taliban was unclear but evidently information operations were a priority. The Taliban operated what amounted to a public affairs and propaganda distribution cell and was aware of how important it was to use this strategically to influence the local population and the international media.

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[430] Crisis Group, 11, citing *Al Somood*, July 2008, 1-3.
[431] Ibid., quoting July 2008 Al Samood

4.5 Taliban Structure Provided a Speed and Agility Advantage

The Taliban were able to coordinate rapid communication before and during attacks, including using their "faster, more agile communications system to get the message out,"[432] to dominate the news cycle and drive their agenda. This rapid response and initialization capability allowed the Taliban to drive the news cycle. The recognized the pressure of "reporting stories in real-time through twenty-four hour television news stations," for Western media outlets and ensured they provided the first story line, first images to meet their visual needs, and images that appealed to the requirements of network TV and thus drove the narrative.[433]

On average, the Taliban were able to react to an event in well under an hour.[434] In 2008, Michael Doran, then U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Public Diplomacy called this the "26 minute problem." Doran said the Taliban's rapid response was a key advantage in the information environment, "We carry out an operation in Afghanistan, and within 26 minutes - we've timed it - the Taliban comes out with its version of what took place in the operation, which immediately finds its way on the tickers in the BBC at the bottom of the screen. That then leads to questions about what happened in this operation, and we don't know the answer to this."[435]

The Taliban prided themselves on their speed of response to major operations, or journalist's requests. Quadratullah Jama, a former Information Minister for the Taliban government and later, a Taliban spokesman announced: "The most prominent Afghan specialists admit in their interviews that the Taliban media activities are very quick and reactive when

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432 Unified Effort: Key to Special Operations in War, 44.
433 Bolt, Betz and Azari, 12.
434 Michael Doran speech cited in Bruno, 5, and Niessen, 8.
435 Edward J. Feulner et al., "Public Diplomacy: Reinvigorating America's Strategic Communications Policy." Discussion hosted by The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., March 14, 2008), transcript accessed November 1, 2014, http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/public-diplomacy-reinvigorating-americas-strategic-communications-policy.

journalists ask us for information… Journalists confirm that when they ask the ministry of defence to give information about a particular event, it takes 24 hours to get the answer, while we can give information through satellite phones in record time."[436] Crisis Group noted that in particular local Afghan media were likely to accept Taliban statements at face value because the Taliban would meet their journalistic deadlines. In addition, the lack of sophistication among Afghan journalists meant that requirements for verification were not as strong as in the Western press.[437] The Western press however included Taliban statements and claims, often received well before those from the coalition. The coalition was left to respond to the Taliban statements and versions of events, rather than setting the agenda.

U.S. Navy Commander Larry LeGree wrote "People often see the first message they receive as the truth. Controlling the content and pace of the information cycle is critical for both sides in an insurgency. Typically, control is harder for the counterinsurgent because insurgents create newsworthy events."[438] The Taliban exploited their ability to move more quickly than the coalition to establish the narrative, which reinforced their messages that were then amplified in the local and international media.[439] Foxley criticized the international media, accusing them of accepting the Taliban's claims and taking them to air or print without verifying them. He argued that the Taliban had "support gained from the (often uncritical) amplification of its claims and messages by the international media."[440] Naylor wrote that the speed of the Taliban's communication allowed them to manipulate the media and to get their message out. Moments

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[436] Interview with Quadratullah Jama reported in *Al Samood* article by Ahmad Mukhtar cited in International Crisis Group, 15.
[437] International Crisis Group, 15.
[438] Commander Larry LeGree U.S. Navy, "Thoughts on The Battle for the Minds: IO and COIN in the Pashtun Belt," *Military Review* (September-October 2010), 24.
[439] Foxley, 83.
[440] Ibid.

after a Taliban attack or coalition strike the Taliban were on cell and satellite phones providing disinformation including "unsupported, unvalidated claims of disproportionate collateral damage" which then caused the coalition to invest "inordinate amounts of time, energy and resources to disprove it."[441] The Taliban's speed was a combination of planning in advance of operations to reach out to journalists to get their message out first, a concerted effort to drive the information agenda, and an ability to make unverified, inaccurate and often deliberately inflated claims not being subject to the same professional ethical requirements of coalition militaries. Understanding the pressure on journalists to file quickly, the Taliban exploited their ability to move quickly and meet the tight deadlines of journalists to provide a story line that held the key elements of appeal for a broadcast story: dramatic pictures and violence. The Taliban was able to take control of the news cycle, which Bolt, Betz and Aziz identify as key to winning the information war. The Taliban were furthermore able to take advantage of the pressure of the 24/7 news cycle to reduce time for editorial verification of facts and "thinking time" for media about how to cover an event without indulging the insurgent agenda.

A key example is a Taliban information operation targeting CNN, executed May 19th 2010. A Taliban spokesman called a CNN reporter, Atia Abawi, to inform her of an attack being carried out on Bagram Airfield, one of the most secure locations in Afghanistan. Abawi reported word for word what the Taliban spokesman had told her, including that there were twenty Taliban attackers wearing suicide vests, four of which he said had detonated. Abwai implied the gunmen had been able to fight their way onto the base. The transcript from Abwai's report reads:

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[441] Naylor, 6.

Ati Abawi: "Twenty gunmen wearing suicide vests were able to make it to Bagram Air Field, four of them detonating their vests at one of the entrances, to clear a path for the other gunman to get into the base. That's where a firefight ensued."
"A NATO spokesperson actually said that it did last three hours, that they were able to kill seven insurgents. The others may be in the hospital or may be detained. Five NATO forces injured as well. This comes a day after another brazen attack here in the capital of Kabul including 5 US service members."

Anchor (only identified as Jim): "It's pretty incredible how you heard about today's attack."

Abawi: "It is, it is. But it goes to show you just how… progressive the Taliban are. The Taliban have been able to make their way into the heart of the capital here in Kabul, one of the largest US bases today at Bagram.
And they are reaching out to the media, they are trying to fight this media war when it comes to the Afghan people and when it comes to the Western community. The Taliban's spokesperson actually said when he woke me up, he said 'I'm sorry to wake you, but its very important that CNN and other media outlets know what we're doing. And I gotta point out Jim, that in the past the Taliban have exaggerated on their numbers, exaggerated on their attacks. But in the last two days they've been spot on. They've had informants who have been able to look at the attack here in Kabul, tell us how many US vehicles they were able to target. And they didn't lie today either when they said twenty insurgents were able to make it onto base, actually NATO says that it could have been a couple dozen, even more than the twenty that the spokesperson said."[442]

Security video from the base disproves the Taliban account, demonstrating the insurgents never made it past the main gates of the base and that only four were wearing suicide vests.[443]

4.6 Coalition Structure Caused Challenges

The coalition's inability to respond quickly to developing events and Taliban disinformation significantly hampered coalition information operations throughout the Afghan conflict. The coalition was bound by legal and ethical requirements the Taliban did not face. The coalition's often slower response to media inquiries and Taliban information operations, allowed

[442] Ati Abawi, *Insurgents Attack Bagram Air Base*, CNN http://afghanistan.blogs.cnn.com/2010/05/19/insurgents-attack-bagram-air-base/, accessed December 12, 2013.
[443] LiveLeak, *Taliban attack Bagram U.S. Air Base Part ONE* LiveLeak.com, http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bf3_1370431983 , accessed December 12, 2013

the Taliban to seize the initiative and drive the narrative in media stories in Afghanistan and with international media outlets. The U.S. was unable to drive the information operations cycle because of obligations to verify information but also due to the bureaucratic structure and organizational hurdles that it created for itself. A U.S. Army officer Lieutenant Colonel Shawn Stroud, Director of Strategic Communication for the U.S. Army Combined Arms Centre argued the need to verify information and provide truth may have slowed the cycle down but failed to fully explain how slow coalition operations were. "It's almost like we've surrendered the information battlefield, and said, 'Well, we don't play by the same rules as them because we have to tell the truth.'"[444] In "Speed Versus Accuracy: A Zero Sum Game," Colonel Jeffrey Scott considers the importance of speed versus accuracy in driving the agenda and maintaining credibility noted "Speed is important when reporting unfavourable news resulting from the actions of friendly forces. Releasing factual information related to negative events prevents the negative credibility [that] results from allowing the enemy to release the information first. Failure to apply speed in releasing news of negative action gives the appearance of a cover up, a lack of transparency. It enhances the effectiveness of enemy propaganda by allowing [the enemy] to release the information first. The delayed release by friendly forces either becomes an endorsement, or confirms the accuracy of the enemy's information thereby increasing [its] credibility."[445]

The structure of the coalition was problematic from an organizational standpoint. There were multiple nationalities with distinct approaches to information operations campaigns inside the coalition, and multiple competing organizations within each of those national structures. Svet

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[444] International Crisis Group, 2.
[445] Cited in Munoz, 125.

argued that these multiple, diffuse authorities made it difficult to respond quickly to the

Taliban's propaganda and proactively shape the information agenda.[446] Betz described ISAF as

operating like a Frankenstein monster, jolted to life by 9/11 that lumbers around slowly and is

disjointed, rather than being able to move nimbly and with the coordination required to dominate

the information environment.[447] Information operators were often separated from those planning

kinetic operations. As noted above, ISAF focused on kinetic operations that were supported by

info ops, whereas the Taliban focused on information operations that drove kinetic operations.[448]

Information operations had to be included at the earliest stages of battle planning in order for

them to be effective.[449] The coalition tended to tack them on as an afterthought or in reaction to

an event or disinformation. Packer added that even in support for military actions, coalition

information operations were often ineffective.[450] Moreover, there was little integration between

coalition information operations and psychological operations, which meant the coalition was

sometimes working at cross-purposes or duplicating efforts.[451] Commanders failed to consider

media as an actor on the battlefield when they planned operations, when in fact the media was

frequently one of the key actors with more influence than those playing a tactical role.[452] The

problems were compounded when the coalition had to respond quickly to breaking news or an

ongoing operation.

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[446] Svet, 2.
[447] Betz, 618.
[448] International Crisis Group, 1.
[449] Carmine Cicalese, "Redefining Information Operations." *Joint Force Quarterly* 69 (2013): 110 - 111.
[450] Packer, 64.
[451] Munoz, 120.
[452] Ibid.

Coalition information operations were more often conducted centrally and tailored for the Kabul-based media rather than local audiences.[453] Release authority for requests from international media had to come from a high level of command, with approval processes slowing the response time, rather than having immediate response capability on the ground.[454] Betz argued that this built in inefficiency resulted in one-off projects even when projects were successful they were not followed up in a coordinated or strategic manner, further undermining their information value and driving frustration of unfulfilled promises among Afghans.[455]

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[453] Munoz, 123.
[454] Naylor, 7.
[455] Betz, 616-617.

Chapter Five: **Conclusion**

In counterinsurgency, information operations are critical for persuading the population. They are the centre of gravity, a position supported by the major theorists in the field: Kilcullen, Nagl and Galula. Without the support of the population, there can be no victory. This is particularly true in counterinsurgencies where the active support of the population is required to win. Significant changes in technology, the media and the nature of the news cycle have further increased the importance and influence of information in counterinsurgency wars. Svet argued that in modern counterinsurgencies such as Afghanistan, "how the population perceives the struggle ultimately determines who the victor(s) are."[456]

In Afghanistan the ability to persuade both the Afghan population, as well as the population of troop contributing countries was critical for winning the war. The Taliban succeeded in dominating the information battlefield. Taliban information operations proved more influential among the local Afghan population, as well as among the domestic public of troop contributing nations. Throughout the conflict, the Taliban operated primarily as an information based combatant. The coalition however, operated as a kinetic combatant and struggled to conduct successful information operations, or effectively to counter Taliban propaganda.

There were several reasons for the Taliban's superior influence. The Taliban was able to craft messages that had greater resonance with the Afghan population, than did those of the coalition. The Taliban understood and drew from the religion and culture that played an important role in the beliefs and perceptions of Afghans. The themes and messages employed by the Taliban were culturally appropriate and resonated with Afghans and they understood and

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[456] Svet, 5

exploited Afghans' perception of foreigners, the central state and security. In contrast, the coalition approached messaging through a Western lens. The coalition lacked the appropriate cultural context to choose themes or craft messages in a way that resonated.

Coalition messages were frequently seen as lacking credibility because they did not reflect the situation on the ground. While this was in large part a failure of larger counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy (failing to provide sufficient troops and resources), it also affected the credibility and resonance of coalition messages, and by extension it reduced their influence. The coalition failed to adjust these non-credible messages, particularly during the second half of the campaign when dissatisfaction and resentment was rising among the Afghan population, and when the insurgency seemed to be gathering steam. The themes and messages the coalition selected were often shaped using Western terms of reference and as a result did not translate well with the Afghan population. The campaigns positioning the West as bringing freedom, and the promotion of the security provided by the central state are both examples of messages that did not resonate with the local population given the history and culture of Afghanistan.

Taliban messages were often based on legitimate grievances and therefore had at their core a kernel of truth. This increased the resonance of the messages with Afghan civilians. The issue of civilian causalities was the most significant example of this. While there was legitimate frustration over civilian casualties, the Taliban managed to frame the deaths as more than carelessness or unfortunate accidents, and instead reinterpreted them as deliberate, aggressive acts by a foreign occupying power, which both undermined support for the coalition among Afghans and limited effective coalition military operations. This same issue was mined to create friction between coalition allies and the GIRoA. Even when civilian casualties dropped, the

Taliban had already set the narrative of civilian casualties and continued effectively to use this narrative to undermine the perception of peace, progress and good intentions by the coalition in Afghanistan and to create doubt about the progress and moral compass of the mission at home with coalition publics.

The Taliban deliberately and successfully targeted domestic audiences of troop contributing nations, in addition to Afghans. The Taliban understood that the centre of gravity for coalition countries, which were mostly democracies, was then public will to expend resources and sacrifice the lives of their troops in Afghanistan. The Taliban framed the message to undermine perceptions of progress and create a narrative of intractable violence, tragic civilian casualties and constant coalition casualties. Betz argued that the Taliban understood a key point, big nations lose small wars not due to defeat in battle, but because their will becomes exhausted. The Taliban focused on exhausting this will through exploiting asymmetric tactics at the kinetic level as well as in the information battleground, where many of their kinetic operations were designed to play out.[457]

Themes and messages established by the Taliban were important in influencing the target audiences, but so too was the way those messages were delivered. The Taliban consistently employed traditional and thus more accessible methods of communication from key leader engagement to radio.

The coalition struggled to get its message out, often relying on ineffective methods that were unfamiliar or inaccessible to Afghan civilians, including television ads and printed material targeting a largely illiterate society. Over time the coalition learned and began to amend the

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[457] Betz, 613.

mediums through which it presented messages, however by that point the insurgency had already gained the momentum. The Taliban succeeded in delivering its message to the domestic audiences of troop contributing nations more frequently than did the counterinsurgents. The Taliban chose spectacular attacks and provided footage which met the needs of broadcast news. Coupled with an ability to act first, this allowed the Taliban to drive the narrative and the news cycle, forcing the coalition to be reactive. When the coalition did attempt to counter Taliban claims, it was frequently slow in responding. The clumsy and bureaucratic style meant that the coalition forces had lost the momentum of the news cycle or story by the time their headquarters generated a message that could be released to the media. This aided the Taliban in creating narratives in Afghanistan and coalition countries that they were winning the war, raising questions about the legitimacy of the GIRoA and undermining the coalition will to fight.

Physical presence across the country was perhaps the Taliban's most effective message. The Taliban enforced their coercive credibility and Afghans listened to the messages. This does not imply Afghans liked, or wanted the Taliban in power. However the fear and intimidation was sufficient that it prevented the majority of Afghans from actively supporting the coalition. Such active support would have been required for victory in a counterinsurgency. In contrast, the coalition could not, did not, and should not have attempted to leverage Afghans with these same kinds of threats because of ethical and legal restrictions on use of force.

The Taliban operated as an information-based enemy and understood the nature of the war, and how to achieve their political aims better than the coalition. Bolt, Betz and Azari attributed the struggle the coalition was facing in part to dated thinking and denial "that Western states find

themselves engaged in a battle of ideas not weapons, is still, for many, surprising."[458] As a result, Naylor postulated that the Taliban were able "routinely [to] outperform the coalition in the contest to dominate public perceptions of the war in Afghanistan," a critical factor for both target audiences in Afghanistan and in coalition troop contributing nations.[459] The Taliban executed attacks that focused around Propaganda of the Deed, which provided a disproportionate political effect in undermining the legitimacy and capability of the Afghan government and coalition with every strike, even though many of the attacks were relatively minor in terms of kinetic damage. Crisis Group argued that these asymmetric attacks were undertaken because " The Taliban seeks to create the illusion of inevitability and invincibility, while trying to defend the legitimacy of its actions. It has succeeded in conveying an impression of coherence and momentum far greater than reality, both within Afghanistan, among a population that is weary of war, and outside, with those in Western capitals also weary of commitments to a far- distant conflict."[460]

While the Taliban understood Afghanistan as an information war in which perceptions mattered more than reality, the coalition attempted to apply a conventional warfare model that placed information after instead of before kinetic operations. Kilcullen argued when dealing with these "armed propaganda" organizations, information operations are critical: "the enemy gets that and yet we don't get that, and I think that's why we're losing."[461] The inability to conceive the battlefield in information terms also meant that the coalition failed to take the media into account as a serious actor on the battlefield capable of influencing the outcome of the war. The 24/7 news cycle and tabloidization and consumerization of news put the emphasis on speed of

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[458] Bolt, Betz and Azari, 6.
[459] Naylor, 1
[460] Crisis Group, 33
[461] Cited in Packer, 64.

reporting and graphic images, two elements the Taliban emphasized but the coalition failed to understand. While the Taliban would announce an attack or provide immediate disinformation, it would take the coalition hours or days to respond. The average Taliban response time was 26 minutes. Bolt, Betz and Azari noted that the insurgents managed to gain sufficient momentum to dominate the news cycle and created a symbiotic relationship with broadcast media that also drove the news agenda at home in troop contributing countries. This in part helped contribute to reporting that highlighted the insecurity in Afghanistan and to the development of what Maloney termed "Death watch journalism." The evolution in technology also allowed the Taliban to create their own dedicated media production company, not only providing visuals to the media of attacks, but also circumventing the media completely and producing their own stories because of the cheaper, more accessible and easy to operate communications technology on the market.

The Taliban's messages were stronger, resonated better, and were delivered more effectively than the coalition's. Beyond that the Taliban operated as an information combatant focusing on influence operations rather than kinetic ones. Without the legal, ethical or moral bonds the coalition faced, the Taliban was able to drive the Western media news cycle frequently with disinformation, undermining the will to fight in coalition capitals. With no clear information strategy, the coalition found itself struggling. The Taliban succeeded in convincing the majority of Afghans to be fence sitters. Even if one day they face the problem of having to build a state, for the time being the Taliban managed to sway the population away from active support of the coalition, undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the GIRoA and ANSF and undermined the will to fight in coalition capitals.

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