



The Institute for the Study of War

An On-the-Record Conversation with

Major General Charges Gurganus

Commanding General of I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward),
Commanding General for Regional Command Southwest

British Brigadier Stuart Skeates

Deputy Commander of I Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward)

Moderated by Dr. Kimberly Kagan

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DR. KIMBERLY KAGAN: Hello and good afternoon. Thank you so much for joining us at the Institute for the Study of War today to talk about a topic that engages us as an organization and that ought to engage us as a nation, namely, the conflict in Afghanistan.

It is a great pleasure always to host these field reports with commanders who are returning from Afghanistan who bring such a rich and interesting perspective to the discussions here in Washington for those of us especially here today who have extraordinary professional and personal interest in what is transpiring in the field.

We at ISW feel that it is absolutely important for these voices actually to be heard in Washington and to communicate to all of you the sophistication and complexity of the operations ongoing in Afghanistan and how they nest within our overall strategy so that we can actually have better debates, discussions about the overall strategic issues here in Washington.

To that end, it's been a pleasure this year to host a variety of folks, including recently General John Allen, and we will have for you a set of invitations coming for an event next month with Lieutenant General Bob Caslen, who's returning from Iraq as the senior commander over there of OSC-I.

In addition, I have one other invitation, for those of you in the room. Since we at ISW do like to talk sometimes, we have a second event this week that you all are invited at the Reserve Officers Association up on Capitol Hill. Our analysts at ISW are doing a series on the threat environment in which we are operating, and if you'd like more information about that, please just email that to Lisa Prince or Maggie Rackl, and we'll make sure that you have an invitation on Thursday.

With that business out of the way and the promise of a discussion of al-Qaida in Iraq and Syria set up for Thursday and – what could be more joyful? – it is a great pleasure to welcome today the two truly distinguished combat veterans who I have here today.

On the one hand, Major General Mark (sic) Gurganus, and on the other Brigadier Stuart Skeates who have come back from being the commander and deputy commander, respectively, of our I MEF (Forward). It's been absolutely impressive to watch from a bit of a distance what has transpired in RC-Southwest, the area inside of Afghanistan that they have overseen, over the course of my various deployments to Afghanistan since 2009. I think we'd all agree that Helmand and even its surrounding provinces are transformed places. But understanding the nature of that transformation and the problems that actually do remain and the challenges for U.S. and Afghan going forward will be part of the subject of discussion today. So I hope you will all join me in welcoming very warmly General Gurganus and Brigadier Skeates. Thanks so much for joining us.

BRIGADIER STUART SKEATES: Thank you. Thank you.

(Applause.)

KAGAN: All right.

MAJOR GENERAL CHARLES GURGANUS: I'm ready.

KAGAN: Are you ready for questions?

GEN. GURGANUS: I am.

KAGAN: All right.

GEN. GURGANUS: Unfortunately, though, if you're expecting a repeat of John Allen's performance, you might as well get up and go ahead and leave now because I'm a product of North Carolina public school system. He was educated in Virginia, so he's got a leg up to start with. But I brought Stuart to balance that out for me.

BRIG. SKEATES: (Chuckles.)

KAGAN: (Laughs.) Well, I have a feeling that this will be a tour de force performance and really, really excited to start talking with you. And, of course, I'll ask a bunch of questions, and then we're going to open it up to questions from the floor. Really absolutely want to make sure that everyone engages.

So first of all, can you just begin by telling us what you expected to find when you deployed out to RC Southwest more than a year-plus ago and started to think about the problems that you had there? How were you defining the problems that – before you went? And did it change when you actually encountered the regional command?

GEN. GURGANUS: You know, I think from a – from a – from a tactical perspective, we clearly went into this in the – in the full mode of leading counterinsurgency operations, which is exactly what was going on. And you'll recall that II MEF (Forward) before us had really just – had real – still doing parts of it, had just cleared through Sangin and on the way up to Kajaki, which was opening up an area that we really hadn't spent a whole lot of time in as a coalition. The U.K. had been in there before and had then moved more to the center.

So one of the things that we went in expecting to do was spent our main effort in the north and accept a little more risk in the south. And when I talk about the south, quite frankly, you – we always had to be concerned about the center, being that that was the seat of government. But in the south, things were – things were looking much better. So we assumed a little more risk and put our main effort in the north.

Frankly, that part of it never changed. We never shifted main effort back out of the north again. And – in terms of not only – not only the military operations went on up here, but increasingly, it became more the focus of our governance in some – in trying to get some basis for development started. Development never got very far; governance got what we think – a tremendous amount of progress in there.

So the – so the expectations were to go and fight. But very quickly – and the expectations are we would also have to draw the force down as part of phase two, surge recovery. We still didn't know exactly how much at that point in time we were going to have to draw it down. But the good news is we knew that the U.K. was staying consistent, and the other coalition partners were not only staying consistent, we were getting an additional brigade from the Republic of Georgia, a battalion from the Republic of Georgia.

So, I mean, we kind of went in looking at that, knowing that down the road, it was going to evolve into a security force assistance mission. I think we probably underestimated how hard that was going to be to make the – to make as much the middle adjustment as it was to make any of the physical adjustments in the battle space. So, I mean, that's – we thought we understood the complexity of the problem; we didn't have a clue really how complex it was until we got there, and now you put – now you put the faces, and you put the personalities that change with each one of the different issues. And we found out that – in fact, Stuart and I tried to draw this out on a piece of paper, what the – what the complex nature of this is. And by the time we finished, we just had really a big ink blob in the middle of a piece of paper and a bunch of words scribbled around the outside you couldn't even discern what it was we were trying to draw.

When you – when you throw the Taliban piece of the insurgency, the criminal elements that go with the insurgency, the fact that we produce about 40 percent – we were the leaders in a couple things. One, we

produced 40 percent of the world's, you know, poppy, so we're very successful at that, it seems like. And then you talk about the patronage networks of all the different – all the different actors and the players that are in Kabul that are trying to have an influence, primarily to set up for not only continued – being able to milk money out of the – out of the province but also in case things go wrong later in life; the tribal – the tribal mix match of the – of the entire province itself, in some places, very, very separate and distinct, some places all mixed together, one part – it really did become pretty much of a Gordian knot. And when you – problem is, when you pulled on one strand to try to untangle it, you were tightening on two or three other ones at the same time.

So I don't think we understood exactly how complex it was until you got in and you – and you started taking the personalities apart and understanding where the governor is trying to go with certain things and why he's doing things in the south differently than how he's doing things in north, find out where his influence is with the people in Kabul and just work through each one of those leaders. We had recently changed – the provincial chief of police had recently changed. The constant that we had was the core commander and – who turned out to be just a tremendous ally in every respect.

So we went in kind of with that – as our – as our site picture, but not full understanding what we were talking into. We didn't understand necessarily the impacts that our friends just to our – just to our east, Marty Schweitzer and Jim Huggins and that crew over there – we fought like – we went in looking specifically at our piece of the battlefield. And it didn't take long to figure out that everything they were doing impacted on us and a lot of what we were doing impacted on them and kind of the laydown of some of the facilitation routes that didn't know any boundaries. They knew exactly where our boundaries were, and I think we had a lot of trouble sometimes blurring our boundaries enough that where we understood theirs as well. So that's kind of what we went in from my perspective. And I'll let Stuart (inaudible).

BRIG. SKEATES: Yeah. I mean, I think there are people in this room who've been to Afghanistan frequently over the course of this campaign and even beforehand. And I think it's – it bears repeating that no matter how many times you've been there, the situation changes very quickly, and you get out of date very quickly. So regardless of how much experience we had within our headquarters and the force had a whole and regardless of how many tours we had done, it was a – almost a fresh set of problems that we were facing.

And a very real problem that we were confronting this time last year was, you know, what was – what was it going to look like, what was the campaign going to look like, what was RC Southwest going to look like after phase two surge recovery? And, you know, I'll be absolutely honest with you. We were – you know, there was concern because clearly, you're going – you're taking a step into the unknown. We're removing a significant proportion of Marine Corps forces and British forces to follow. And therefore, you are changing the dynamic considerably and then having to rely on Afghan national security forces to carry on the fight.

And I think at the early stage of our deployment, the Afghan national security forces were to us an unknown quantity. But very quickly, I think those of us who have been in and out of that place over the last couple of years were I think surprised and deeply impressed in equal measures as to quite how far the ANA, the Afghan National Army, in particular had come over the last few years and how quickly the Afghan National Police was also progressing. And I think that really formed the backdrop for our year.

KAGAN: So please tell me a little bit about the situation in the AOR when you arrived. If you could, just to expand on that, I think that I would love to hear a little bit more about your template of what the threat environment was and what the main challenges and drivers of instability were in Helmand at the moment in time that you arrived.

GEN. GURGANUS: Go ahead. You can start.

BRIG. SKEATES: OK. So I think the general sort of covered earlier on what the major challenges were. And I – you know, some of those do bear repeating. The situation that we found ourselves in – and if you'll allow just to sort – the map behind – the – just before we took over, the II MEF had conducted an operation pushing up the Upper Sangin Valley there and expanding the area of security up towards Kajaki in Operation Eastern Storm. Similarly, there was a push up towards Musa Qal'eh and the opening of the route between Gereshk here and Now Zad.

And that goes back to the point about the north and the north of Helmand, because really, many of the source of instability and the problems, which Helmand experiences now, will experience in the future and has experienced in the past, emanate from that area there. It falls in the area of Alizai tribal dominance. Shema Hamenei Konzabeh (ph) is the principle tribal elder for that tribe, but there are other players within that tribe as well. And in the past, elements of that tribe had taken particular sides, both within the insurgency and also within the more legitimate part of the government. But without any shed of doubt whatsoever, you are not going to be able to stabilize the province and the central part of the province without stabilizing the north. And that is something which any Afghan that you ask, any Helmandi you ask, will just understand – you know, it will be entirely intuitive.

And so the challenge that we really faced was having a governor based in Lashkar Gah, a provincial governor, Governor Mangal, who had at that particular stage very limited reach into the north of Helmand and into the Alizai tribe. And I would just say that probably, the game changer for us during our year was the replacement of Governor Mangal, for all the wonderful things that he did, all the great governance that he brought, which he undoubtedly did over the four years of his governorship, his replacement by Governor Naeem, because Governor Naeem is a very interesting character. He's a career NDS officer – very well-connected. He's ex-muj. He fought against the Soviets down here in Garmsir. He's an ethnic Baluch. He knows most people, the elders who live down here in the south. That's extremely important in terms of his ability to sort of reach down and influence what comes across the border and, indeed, what goes the other way. And he is very well-connected in Kabul. And that is extremely important for long-term sustainability of whatever governance mechanisms get put in place in Helmand, in Nimruz, because without that interest in Kabul, without the flow of resources down from Kabul, then it's going to be stillborn.

And what we've seen is significant interest. We've seen a procession of very high-profile ministers coming down from Kabul since Naeem assumed the governorship, and that has had a significant impact in the self-confidence of a lot of ministries within the provincial government and their ability to deliver down at district level. And it's that delivery down at district level which will underpin any future political settlement, but particularly up there in the north, so –

GEN. GURGANUS: One of – one of the things that we tried – that we tried to do early on as we set the force to put the main effort in the north was still recognize that we were stepping in right before the – right before the poppy harvest and then right before the beginning of the fighting season. And while we were still wrong – while we were still strong enough before we started actually retrograding and redeploying Marines to meet the phase two surge recovery numbers, we spent a lot of time concentrating on trying to make – trying to make the insurgents make a decision whether they were going to defend poppy or whether they were going to fight. So we used – we used the strength to our advantage, and we caused them to start fighting long before they wanted to fight, which also had an adverse impact on their ability to harvest and gain some of the benefits of the poppy harvest.

We were also very well blessed by the fact that they had a really poor growing season, down in – by many accounts as as much as 70 percent from what they usually drew – and you'll get as many numbers out of that as you ask different people, but that was kind of the consensus that – some of the experts said it could have been as low as 70 percent, which will – would prove to have a pretty detrimental effect on their ability to

provide lethal aid to pay fighters, to keep people in the battle space, and was really a source of a lot of friction between the insurgents themselves in many cases as they competed for resources.

We were fairly successful at doing that while we – while we still had the numbers and while we still had the forces spread throughout the battle space. We had six infantry battalions. We had an LAR battalion. That's – that was pretty good, and we still had an entire U.K. brigade in Nad Ali and in Lashkar Gah and in Nahr-e Saraj. So we had almost 18,000 – a little over 18,000 forces when we got there, and that's just U.S.-U.K. That didn't – that didn't talk about the Afghans, who by that time had grown from when Larry Nicholson was there in 2009, from really one brand-new brigade, had grown now to a full three-brigade corps with some of the specialty MOSs, some of the specialty skills starting to be – starting to be fielded as well – the artillery, some of their engineers, some of their signals guys, the ones that they would need, you know, to augment their ability to just fight. So, I mean, we had a total of about probably close to 40,000 forces at our disposal at that point in time, which is – which is not bad.

The – but the problem is you were still running the fight, while at the same time now, we were also having to start thinking about the retrograde and the redeployment. And the goal was – what General Allen initially wanted to do was keep people as long as he could keep them and then pull them out at the latest moment possible. We looked at that. It's a physics problem, and you can't do it, and TRANSCOM can't support that kind of movement of equipment. At the same time, when we got there, just on the U.S. side, we had 60 percent – no – yeah, 60 – 40 percent. We had 40 percent of the entire Marine Corps' equipment inventory in Afghanistan. I'm talking about everything, you know, I mean out of every base and station that we own.

And the commandant left some fairly clear guidance with me on the last day before I left, because he said, bring my stuff home. (Laughter.) Roger. He said, no I'm talking about – understand me, he said; I'm talking about every number 2 pencil, unless I tell you to leave it there. (Laughter.) And I said, OK.

Well, to start with, we had to figure out what we had. And because, you know, years of rotational forces and all, things move around the battlefield. And so the first thing was getting accountability of it. That just started – that just started some of the challenges that we had on the front end.

But we were very – we were very fortunate and created some of our luck, I think, with the work that the guys did on the front end in – on the front end in being able to take the fight to them before they were ready to fight and caused them to overwater their poppy, trying to – trying to push it out of the ground a little bit faster, which was only doing more damage to it. That would end up paying a lot of benefits to us all the way around.

And so as we started the withdrawal – we did – we withdrew – we left the LAR Battalion, but we started reducing in the south. We reduced from three full infantry battalions down there to one, plus we still had the LAR Battalion that we would be able to keep for a while, that we had actually run the screen and running operations down there south of Reg-e Khan Neshin, which for us, the entire time we were there, was the de facto border. It's 92 miles from Reg-e Khan Neshin here to Baram Shah.

Baram Shah – and this is probably one of Marty's favorite places in the world as well. It is absolutely the root of all my evil because probably 80 percent of the – of the lethal aid that affects that not only RC Southwest but also affected Marty and Jim Huggins over here and also led a lot of it up into Herat and to Farah province over there as well. Probably clearly 80 percent of everything that went bang or boom came through Baram Shah. That was also a major – that was a major place for training – for training fighters, foreign fighters, and training Afghan insurgents as well. Baram Shah was just one of the major places – it was a little out of touch, 92 miles with no infrastructure, none, nothing but a desert.

In fact, it's almost – it's all we can do to keep potable water to the – to the Afghan Border Police that are down here now because the water in the Helmand River reaches a salinity level of such intensity, you just can't drink it by the time it gets this far down, a whole separate problem we could talk about for two days. I learned a whole lot more about water than I have ever expected to, but I had a – we had a Ph.D. in our C-9 that she really liked to talk about water. And so I learned a lot about water. And Stuart and I – we know more now than we wanted to know.

But it's too far. It's just a bridge too far. We could go, but even we couldn't go and stay. You were outside of your medevac rings unless you set up – unless you set up a full resuscitating surgical suite somewhere in the desert – all doable, just not doable over a long period of time unless you're going to build and maintain some kind of infrastructure. For the Afghans, it is way a bridge too far. So eventually I think they'll be able to handle that.

But the other thing that – significance here in many respects is this is about where about 80 percent of the narcotics flow out of. So it is just – nothing good happens here. Even guys who are raising sheep down there are doing it for a bad reason, I'm sure, you know what I mean? (Laughter.) It's just – nothing good's happening down there.

We were able to stem a little bit of that through the front end of the fighting season, which helped us a lot. In the meantime, a lot of concentration going on with the central provincial government's piece by the PRT. We were fairly fortunate – had this discussion a little earlier. We were fortunate in that we had a U.K.-led PRT that was fairly substantial, fairly sizable, about 200 folks, as I recall. And we had about a 70-man regional platform that was led by – led by a State Department rep – not always a marriage made in heaven, but you know, it – as I said, you know, very smart people, sometimes round pegs in square holes.

But it's – Stuart spent a lot of time hammering those round pegs until they were square on the bottom, and by the time that we got part of the way through the campaign, we were getting pretty decent cooperation. They were sharing responsibilities inside of district centers. We had pretty good lanes for people to work. They got out of them frequently. We'd corral them back in them. And it really did become a three-legged stool, and one that became pretty strong. So it – that was – that was a successful – I think, a successful part of why were able to accomplish some of the things that we were able to accomplish.

I'm probably a long way from the question now. I'm on that ramble mode.

KAGAN: All incredibly important and good information. You've raised a lot of issues that I really want to talk about, one of which is the mission that you had. I think one question I have for both of you is what was your mission going in, and did your mission actually change as you really looked at retrograde?

BRIG. SKEATES: It did. It evolved. And I think "evolved" is a better word than change because, you know, what we can't forget is that this is a counterinsurgency fight, self-evidently, and I can think of very few, if any, counterinsurgency fights which have been won by a foreign force intervening on behalf of the host nation.

Indigenous forces have got to finish the fight. They have got to prevail. Because it is a struggle within the population, it's a struggle for the population. And if the legitimate government is going to prevail, then it needs to convince the population that it has the instruments of state, army, police, security and so on and so forth in order to present a better offer than what is being presented by the insurgents. So I mean, that's – you know, that is self-evident, but you know, I don't think we can repeat that enough because it is easily forgotten.

As far as our mission, our mission changed, actually, as we arrived. While we were conducting force preparation, it was, you know, protect the population of Helmand and – in order to assist. It then became assist

Afghan national forces in protecting the population. Now, that marks the step change, the inflection point, if you will, of the campaign as it evolves from the ISAF-led counterinsurgency fight to one which is principally aimed at building the capacity and capability of the Afghan national security forces. And really, that was the main effort.

The general has gone over superbly well the challenges – the many challenges, the many dimensions of the problem that we faced, including retrograde and so on and so forth. But underpinning everything we do, it had to be about putting the ANSF in the lead.

And as I said in this sort of opening comment, we were surprised by the quality of what we found. And I think we very early on reached the conclusion that this was not going to be the problem that we had perhaps anticipated that it might be. Individually, as soldiers, they were of much higher quality than we were expecting. The police training was going – was progressing much better than it was, yet there was absolutely still a hell of a lot to do, particularly in terms of some of the key capabilities of the enablers, which we're still providing for them.

But in most cases, the mission that we were given, we – I don't think at any stage we had any doubt, despite our initial apprehensions, that it was going to work.

KAGAN: As you take a look at the end state that we as coalition and the Afghans need to achieve in Helmand province, could you actually describe the conditions that need to be met in order for the Afghan government to have the degree of stability and security overall and capacity to undertake operations that you've described? And I'm almost less interested in the abstraction of the end state as the conditions that need to be achieved to permit that end state.

GEN. GURGANUS: Yeah, I think – I think the first one you – the first condition you've got to have is you've got to have a secure enough environment to where their governance has an opportunity to develop itself, to build, to grow into – to grow into its role, because ultimately if the government has to be able to provide security for its people, it's got to be able to provide for rule of law, a justice system of some description, and it's got to be able to provide basic services. And it takes a relatively secure environment to do that, at least one secure enough where people will get out and will take the risk to perform those kinds of – those kinds of duties.

You've got to – we had to help – I think one of the things that we probably spent as much time doing as anything else in the governance role was trying to – working through the PRT, with the PRT and the DRP (ph), trying to – trying to connect Kabul, in a much tighter way, to the provincial headquarters. Southwest was a long ways from Kabul. And frankly, I've seen just about as much of Elvis Presley as I had most of the line ministries when we had – underneath the first governor.

That was one of the things I think where significant changes and some significant promises – progress was made, not by us but by having the new governor, who had the connections. We were seeing line ministers come in on a fairly routine and regular basis, sometimes multiple ones of them at a time. And that's how their money's disbursed, and that's so – that's pretty important. Money doesn't come centrally – as most of you know, centrally from Kabul to the province and then gets spread amongst the line ministries. It comes directly in each line minister to the province, those line minister directors.

And so it was very important to start tying the level of support from Kabul to the province and then also having the provincial level, from the district up, provide the documentation needed in terms of budgets and in terms of being able to identify requirements, realistic requirements up to Kabul in order to get any type of budget approved. That is one of the things, I think, that was a – was a – things were right by conditions that had been set long before us to where we saw a lot of progress in the – in the – (inaudible) – budget that was going on.

The other thing that you've got to have is you've got to have some kind of voice for the people. And that, for us, came in the form of the district councils, the district community councils that were local to each one of the districts. We have 14 districts in Helmand province, and you notice I'm not talking much about Nimroz. Nimroz is 150,000 people in this entire part over here. It wasn't our main effort. It really is a long ways away, and it's hard to – it's hard to be there and influence that with the number of forces we have, particularly in the way we were going down.

And I'm digressing here a little bit, but is Iran – (inaudible) – which is border crossing with Iran, is the place where we spent most of our time working, in and around Zaranj, because it is the major population center. It is the only – it's the only part of Nimroz that holds any importance except for Delaram, which is here. And that's really important because it sits astride the intersection of Highway 9 and Highway 1. And if we have any chance for development in the future, that's going to become absolutely critical infrastructure.

But very little time spent out here. The two – there's two districts here, Dishu and all the way up north in Baghran, we spent no time in. They're very, very small populations in there. The insurgents would use it no more than for a facilitation route. It wasn't – neither one of them were really safe havens. Dishu was – the population of sheep, much greater than the population of people in Dishu. And in Baghran, was troublesome because Baghran, A, number one, is – it lays right next to Uruzgan, which became – which became the RC South problem, and a lot of drug processing – a lot of just bad things going up there, but not so much out of the insurgency. So we really focused on the other – on the other 12 districts.

We had – three or four of them had elected district councils when we got there. Four more of them elected district councils while we were there, and we saw several of the districts go through their second iteration of election. They do that every three years. And to kind of give you an idea of some of the success that the Afghans made in governance across the board is when they elected the first city – the first district council three years ago in Nawa, somewhere between 3(00) and 400 people showed up to vote. And really, the members that were put forth for election were really third- and fourth-tier kind of guys because the key tribal leaders weren't committing – were not at the point of committing to the government at that point in time. That was a wait-and-see attitude, and let's see where it goes; we'll send you one of our – we'll send you one of our nieces or nephews to represent us for the time being till we figured this out. We still knew who was pulling the strings. When they did re-election about – September?

BRIG. SKEATES: It was beginning of – no, it was February.

GEN. GURGANUS: No, late – yeah, that's right, because this was not long before we left. Over 6,000 people showed up. That's a pretty big increase in the number of people and the commitment now and starts to show that they're putting some faith in the government, and now they at least feel like they're starting to get a say-so in their government. They've got someone they can hold accountable. That was – that was kind of a huge step forward, I think. And we saw the similar results in three or four other districts as they elected their own city council – district councils. We weren't providing security for any of them. We weren't organizing the elections. It was completely done by the Afghans. And by all – by all rights, it was – it was pretty successful in those regards.

BRIG. SKEATES: The other one that might be worth highlighting on that one is Sangin. I mean, if we had sat here a year ago, we'd have been having a very, very different conversation about Sangin. The Sangin DCC election – Sangin is just there – took place in October – sorry, September. And 3,500 people registered to vote in that election; about 3,000 voted. And of the 35 seats that were up for elections, two couldn't be held – sorry, two couldn't be elected because they were from areas where there wasn't somebody who, you know, was a permanent resident there, which is one of the conditions. Thirty-three of those 35 were elected, and one of

them was a woman. Now, only one, but if you'd have told me three years ago that a woman would have been elected by 3,000 people to a council in Sangin, I would have thought you were mad.

But the – and that is just not a single isolated example of progress; there is, very good evidence which is seen in other DCC elections, as the general just explained, which demonstrate very clearly now that the population understand that to get things done in their community, they need to have a voice in the local government. And those local government mechanisms are now working.

GEN. GURGANUS: And don't let us mislead you by making you think that these are all very top-notch, straight-A, squared-away, 100 percent loyal and faithful citizens either. Some of them should have been in jail themselves, even though they were elected officials. Imagine that. But the – but at least they were elected by their people, so they had their voice in it, and that proved to be pretty doggone powerful in our terms.

When you go back to other conditions you had, you've got to create – you've got to create that white space for the governance to be able to develop. One of the jobs we had that we saw as ours was creating a white space for the Afghan national security forces to be able to grow, to develop the capabilities in order to be able to fill that role on behalf of the – of the government there. So I think we've hit most of the conditions we had to have, but –

KAGAN: I think that's an excellent description. I have one question for you. If you could – what does the 215th Corps need to do over the next few years to maintain the conditions that you have left behind with the incredible folks serving under your command and partnered with the Afghan security forces? What must be done to maintain those conditions?

BRIG. SKEATES: I think the most important part of making the 215th Corps sustainable, and in fact, any of the corps within Afghanistan sustainable, is by introducing an ops – operations deployment cycle. That sounds like a very small, minor sort of, you know, narrow-minded, in some respects, military answer, but it is absolutely essential to making any military organization, ours, Afghans', anybody's, work. If all you are doing is having – because I mean, it's a people business. And if all you've got are people in your organization who are fighting, going on leave, coming back and fighting again, number one, they're going to get pretty weary pretty quickly, and number two, they are not necessarily going to get better at their jobs.

And once you have introduced that mechanism – and sorry, I should have explained, an operations deployment cycle is a cycle whereby you get a unit which goes on an operation, fights for a while, then it goes on leave, then it comes back and trains before it goes back into the fight again, and you organize all of your units, all of your brigades in that fashion so that you don't have the whole train set being used at any one time. And, you know, we have, perforce, because we've had to get ourselves into a position of using every single soldier and patrolman at our disposal because that was the nature of the fight. We are now in a position where we can introduce that ops deployment cycle in a much more measured fashion, and then once you have training as part of your existence, part of your life, then you can start building up some of those institutional capabilities which they currently lack.

GEN. GURGANUS: And the other thing, I think, is we have to continue to work with the corps headquarters on being a corps headquarters. I mean, tactically fighting, when you get into a fight, they're very good. They're plenty good enough. It's now how do you get the corps commander and his staff focused out in the future; how do you get him to plan operations and then tie them together to an end state that doesn't mean just win today's fight. That requires the development of an intelligence capability that can lead you to drive your operations rather than sit around in a garrison, in a patrol base or anything else just waiting for the next sound of gunfire when you all load up in the back of your Ford Rangers and take off down the road to deal with that problem by problem by problem, and rather than attacking the enemy in a fashion in which you can break his – you can break his center of gravity.

And so that will continue. I mean, these guys are very skilled fighters. Our corps commander's been fighting for over 30 years. He's never known peace in his adult life, and very many of them – most of them are the same identical way. Getting them talking back and forth across to the corps commander next door to them was a huge breakthrough finally that we were starting to see them work together so that they're not doing the same thing that we were doing, in many cases, of fighting our own little piece of battle space, not worrying about the problem set as a whole. So there's still work to be done there.

There are enabler capabilities that we are providing today that they simply can't provide for themselves. They can't provide precision fires. Now, they can make a lot of noise on the battlefield, but some of it's not very precise. But they can – they are developing a fires capability in the form of artillery and form of mortars. Our artillery, quite frankly, we're not there yet. We have a lot of work to do with that. The mortars will be a very useful tool because, I think, it's much more manageable, much more easy to train them and it doesn't require as much of the deconfliction pieces. It would have been a nice weapon to have bought them years ago so that we'd have had proficiency in them by now.

Probably the biggest enabler that they can't provide themselves is they can't conduct any type of aerial medevac, at least out in RC Southwest at this point in time. The helicopters that they do have that are out there are based at Kandahar, there are only eight of them, and we got seven hours' worth of flight time out of them a month, is what was allocated, whether you were using them to move bodies or whether you were using them to move VIPs. And there was no real concept at that time, and still not yet, in order to tactically employ these. We've used them to insert forces before, but we have not had near the success, I don't think, as they had in RC South with that. I think they were further ahead than we were in many of those regards.

But the ability to conduct medevac is a key concern, I know, of Malook. Without that, many of their people – if it wasn't for our neighbors and our helicopters, there'd be a lot more – their casualty figures would be a lot higher.

The second thing that they can't really do is they can't treat the casualties beyond basic combat lifesaving steps. They're pretty doggone good at the point of entry. If you have a soldier lose a leg, they're just as competent now as our corpsmen and our medics, as we are, in many cases just because of the training that they've had over and over and over again in combat lifesaving. They can stop the bleeding on a guy, they can get him breathing again and they can get him ready to medevac, but then where does he go? They all came back to us. They all came back to the U.K.-led Role 3 hospital that we had in Bastion or to one of our Role 2 hospitals that we had throughout the battle space.

That's a capability that has to be developed, and it's one that's still going to take a while. As my C-9 wisely observed one day, it takes six years to make a sixth grader. Well, it takes longer than that to make a pilot. It takes longer than that to make a doctor. And Helmand province is not exactly the number-one draft – gets the number-one draft pick with doctors and all the pilots. So it's hard to get – it's hard to get the quality out there,

Plus you're not starting – you're not starting with a population that are budding Einsteins, either. And we had about a 10 to 15 percent literacy rate in the province. So that has an impact well beyond just your doctor ability. You know, you can't even write speeding tickets if you can't write. Now, education really, then, plays a key role. And that's certainly a generational problem. But every year that they can hold off the insurgents is another year that they get stronger and stronger even in the educational aspects, which is going to pay every piece of their society a great dividend.

And strangely enough, one of the other measures we had of progress was not only numbers of schools and kids that we had in school. As the governor has told us, you know, in 2002 they had, like, less than 800

children in school anywhere in the province. There's about 140,000 in school today, going to school on a regular basis, and about 28 percent of those were female. So I mean that's a huge – that's a huge step in the right direction. But even a greater measure of progress is many of the tribal elders, who are illiterate, put education as one of their key concerns, that they want to make sure that their children and their grandchildren get a chance to go to school. That's a pretty key indicator when you've got guys that didn't grow up with education that at least are recognizing the value of it and are willing to put the effort and the energy into ensuring that their people still have that opportunity.

I will back up and say one thing. I've said they were illiterate. I didn't say a single thing about any of them being stupid. These are some of the smartest people I've ever dealt with in my life. They just haven't had the benefit of formal education, which presents another challenge, presented another challenge for us as we try to – as we worked with them in training and trying to develop them. As we start out with a manual, you know, that's this thick and hand it to them, well, we're just giving him something to use to start the next fire with.

But we did learn, as we changed some of our training methodology, changed some of our training techniques to a “show me” training style, it works very well. They're very quick.

The other thing that we tried to accomplish that we were successful at was transferring as much of the training requirements off of our backs onto theirs by training their trainers, then providing the over-watch for them as they went through the program, and now giving them the responsibility for conducting their own training. They can do it fine. And they were doing absolutely fine at that.

So with the support of the enablers that we're providing today until they can develop those, with us continuing now to evolve the mission from security force assistance – and by that, you know, the advising in combat units, which is getting less and less important – their units are just about as good as they're going to be until we get onto the operational deployment cycle that Stuart was talking about.

But now the key is to develop those institutions where, through that, they can now develop their leadership, they can develop their NCOs, their young officers, and continue to grow these guys at a steady pace, which is – our institutions and U.K. institutions are prime examples of turning out pretty decent products in most cases; we miss one or two of us once in a while, but most cases they do a pretty fair job. To be able to train people, to be able to take care of the millions and millions of dollars' worth of infrastructure that we have built them in terms of their garrisons, in terms of their headquarters and things, you know, now advising and mentoring really kind of takes a different track, so that you are developing the institution as a whole and not just worried about can this kandak get fire support when it needs it.

So that's where I think the future of our efforts is going to have to be, over the short haul, it's going to have to be providing some of those key enablers as they continue to develop them. But there's also a dual-edged sword there. The longer you provide it, the longer they'll let you and the more they'll expect you to do it. So having an end date to the campaign, having an end date for when you're going to provide a certain capability does provide an incentive for them to step up. Just recognize the ones that they will be able to do, the ones that they're not going to be able to do just because of the requirements to do it. And then to continue to work at the upper levels with your corps headquarters, the provincial police headquarters is key.

Who does the training is extremely important. Us choosing the right people to be mentors, to be advisers, is important as somebody with a skill set. The personality is absolutely just as important as the guy's innate ability to be an expert in an area. He's got to be able to do it in a way that's going to be acceptable to the Afghans.

One of the things – one of the big shifts we made in our mentoring program was bringing more – more of us silver-haired devils into the battle space to work with the police. Number one, that's a sign of respect over

there when you've got a little bit older guy. They don't listen well to 20-year-olds. And even if they're really good MPs or something like that, they don't listen real well. They just don't see them and respect their opinions and their authorities.

We brought a lot of retired police officers back, and we, like, quadrupled the number that we were using to be the true professional experts. The best that we can do, any one of our military services on any given day, the best we can do is make paramilitary forces out of them. We don't do policing very well. And so we brought a lot of the experts back in that know how to do that. We'll provide the security, we'll do some of the training with them, but under the direction of guys who have done this for a living at least through parts of their life. So there's just ways ahead, and I think those are things that will allow us to continue to maintain not only where we are but build an institution that lets them continue to do for themselves.

KAGAN: That is a magnificent overview of the situation that you face and the situation that you hope will be created. Let me turn over to the audience and make sure that we get some of their questions in, if we have questions.

Marty Sullivan, you get the first question. And the microphone is coming to you.

Q: Gentlemen, thank you for the time you've given us today. Given what you've talked about, and so much of it sounds like it is support to Afghan governmental institutions – and as you just said, General, this is – these are several things that United States military forces don't regularly do and probably don't do as well as some civilian institutions – if you had five minutes to sit down with Secretary Kerry as you're doing your outbriefs here, what would you tell him he'd need to do for his institution to make sure that we're successful in Afghanistan?

GEN. GURGANUS: I think the first thing I would tell him is, number one, listen to his regional platform leader. Don't try – don't try to decide what each one of them needs from Washington, D.C. The personalities and skill sets that they need are just as specific as the ones that they need as well. You know, if you've got a problem with rule of law, put someone out there who understands rule of law; don't just put somebody out there because he's got a Department of State badge. And we have seen that in some cases. That's not a comment of condemnation, because we do the same thing with our advisers in some cases. I think it's really personality and skill sets matched to the right province, to the right job, and actually the right, even, district.

And the second thing that I would tell him to do is stay the course. There's been – there were a lot of moves to pull both the PRT and the RP out in the early part of this coming – in the now time frame, the right now time frame. We were able to reverse that, but I'll tell you what, it took a lot of pressure from General Allen, took a lot of pressure from General Terry to help them reverse that decision, to stay at least through this – the end of this year. That's critical. I mean, right now that's the piece of the institution we need to build the most. And we've still got enough forces to provide protection for them, and we've positioned the forces to provide protection for them so that they can get out and do the things that they have to do. We offer the air support that they need to move around the battlefield when it's critical for them to get out to do their business. And so my other piece of advice would be to stay the course.

KAGAN: Questions. In the second-to-last row.

Q: Thanks very much for –

KAGAN: And if you don't mind just waiting for Liam, who's right behind you.

Q: I just said thank you very much.

KAGAN : OK.

Q: I'm Brian Murphy, recently back from Afghanistan, where I served as legal education adviser in a Department of State program that, unhappily, has been reorganized. But General, I just want to follow up and echo your sentiments about the importance of education.

I spent time this morning trying to arrange for Master of Laws programs in the USA – don't care where it would be – for Afghan lawyers. This is so fundamentally important. Once you and your colleagues leave, we need to build – have built for the future, and to my mind the best way is educating the best and brightest, and many of them are very bright.

So thank you for your comments.

KAGAN: Tom Vanden Brook. So Liam, just toward the front.

Q: Thanks, Kim. To both of you. Could you give a sense for how many coalition troops need to remain beyond 2014 in order to secure the gains that you've made? Do you have a sense of that?

GEN. GURGANUS: Well, being as I was the guy in charge, I'll jump on that grenade. No. (Chuckles.) (Laughter.)

I got to tell you what. There are so many aspects of that, and I'm going to show you how to effectively dodge that question, because you won't get an answer out of me, and I'm not getting in front of the guys that run that program. General Dunford and I are good friends, and I intend to remain that way.

But there are so many variables, I think, that are still in the air. But I think it's so important, that decision's got to be reached here pretty quickly. And the reason it has is because a lot depends on that decision. A lot of that depends on where we're going to leave bases and exactly determining what the role and what the mission for those forces that we leave behind are. That's the first piece that's got to be determined, what are we going to do, what do we expect to do, first as a nation and then, equally as important, as a coalition. That's what's going to drive the number. You know, it can range from a lot of things. It can range from the trainers, it can range to still having – building pieces and parts of the institution. It can be part of the education system inside of the military that was talked about before.

So I mean before you can sit down and put a number, I think the first decision that's got to be made is exactly what do you expect. That's part of the equation.

The second part of the equation, in my opinion, is what will the Afghan load bear. I mean, you know, what is going to be the agreement? Where do their political leaders want the help, want the assistance, and what are their expectations? A lot of that decision's going to be made there, and I don't think that's been made yet, as well.

So – and I'll give Stuart a whack at this because you get another side of the Atlantic view of this. But – so no, I don't think any one of us could look at you and say we need exactly this number here.

BRIG. SKEATES: Yeah. I mean, as the general says, it depends. We have a fairly – in the U.K. a fairly well-accepted way of working these things out, which is bilateral negotiations between the government of Afghanistan and our own government. Obviously, there's a NATO context and a U.S. coalition context of that in RC Southwest. We as military folk will provide our military advice as to where we think the – (inaudible) – are at a given point in time and what may or may not be required, and they'll make the decisions. It entirely

depends on what the Afghans want and what we assess we can contribute towards – towards satisfying our national objectives.

KAGAN: Can I actually follow up and ask you, have you done yourselves a troop-to-task on what the requirements are for maintaining enabler support and some security force assistance support in RC Southwest, whatever becomes of that area over the long term?

GEN. GURGANUS: No, we have not. That's work in progress and that's work that, again, it's kind of like trying to hit a 90-mile-an-hour fast ball in the dark right now, until you see what the tasks are going to be. So that really becomes part of the challenge. And it becomes how much of it is going to be tooth and how much of it is going to be tail. It takes a lot of forces to keep a base the size of Camp Leatherneck and Bastion open, just to provide the day-to-day running of the camp itself. It takes a lot of forces to protect that type of – that type of a base, inside of it and outside of it. It takes a lot of truck drivers. It takes helicopter pilots. It takes all these guys to move it even if you've got a very small force. So that's why determining what these tasks are and determining exactly what we're going to try to move forward with is what's going to be so critical to getting this done.

KAGAN: Have the Afghans done a troop-to-task?

GEN. GURGANUS: No.

KAGAN: OK. Other questions? Please. Mike.

Q: Thank you. Mike Morningstar from DRS. We provide much of your Internet – MWR Internet café capability throughout the country and the wireless capabilities to Leatherneck that you just mentioned.

My question is more – you've talked much about the internal groups of people – the government, the tribes. You didn't talk too much about the external influence, some of the terrorist groups, the Haqqanis, for instance, and others. And I'm wondering what difference you're seeing from the beginning to the end of your deployment in that influence and how you see that influence changing as we pull back.

KAGAN: Great question. Who wants it?

GEN. GURGANUS: Either one of us could probably give pretty close to the same answer on this.

You're talking about – with the Haqqani Network is not an issue we've dealt with. I didn't have that problem. RC South was probably seeing it on the edges of theirs, but that really was an RC East and – an RC East issue, which, again, as I told the group this morning, we might as well have been in different countries in – sometimes in the way that the battle space looked and the different things we were facing.

No doubt there are a lot of external factors. I mean, Iran's got an interest. In our area alone, Iran has an interest, and they – and they certainly – they certainly keep trying to influence things that go on there.

Pakistan certainly has an interest, and I'm not talking about in the big political realm of things. But from our perspective, this right here lies about 4 kilometers from the border with Pakistan. That's got a significant impact on us.

So yeah, there are a fair amount of facilitation pieces that are allowed to go through at least this part of Pakistan. I'm not saying supported, I'm not saying not supported by anybody in authority, anybody in power there, but it's still – nonetheless, all of our lethal aid's coming through the – a majority of it's coming through that area.

You know, Afghanistan's kind of like one of those places that God didn't quite finish, and he gave them all bad neighbors. There are no good solutions there, and I think that that's probably one of the biggest challenges – and this is the only kind of political strategic statement I'll make – that's one of the things I think, if I were sitting in President Karzai's shoes, it would bother me daily, is just – is just my neighborhood and how do I balance that in such a manner that I also balance the internal requirements and the internal support of his own country – no small task here.

But yeah, external factors are and will continue to be a problem, and it's going to – that's an interesting solution. It hasn't played itself all the way out yet either.

KAGAN: We have time for one more question. And how easy was that?

Q: Kurt Mueller, Department – or Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations at the State Department. I'll give a – I think I'll give a question to each of you, if you've got the time for it.

KAGAN: Yeah.

Q: General Gurganus just mentioned the silver-haired devils that you brought in as police advisers by using retired police and the like. There's kind of technical question as to whether you did this through defense channels, as of part of security force assistance, or did it through INL, with State Department, or if there was another approach to that.

And then the question for Brigadier Skeates: I appreciate very much your comment about having recognized that the mission evolved rather than changed, but the question is, how did you recognize the evolution? Were there things that you saw along the way, or did it sneak up on you and suddenly it struck you as, wow, this is different?

GEN. GURGANUS: I'd – I'll take a whack at the first one. Did you ask how did we do that or what – how should we do that, in terms of bringing the police mentors in?

Q: I'll give you either choice.

GEN. GURGANUS: I can – I can give you both. From my perspective, I don't care where we get them from. What I'm after is – you know, is just after their professional skills and their willingness to go in and be part of – be part of that kind of team.

We even had contractors – I mean, we – a lot of ours were provided by contractors. We had – we had NATO policemen from UPOL (ph). We had – we had –

BRIG. SKEATES: Danes.

GEN. GURGANUS: Who?

BRIG. SKEATES: Danes.

GEN. GURGANUS: Yeah, the Danes brought in police forces and all.

The challenge you've got kind of, as the guy in charge of it, and something that you have to do very early on is put the – you have to put them in one room and kind of explain the ground rules, because if you don't, if you've got 25 former police or retired police officers, they have 25 ways to train people.

And there are also – they're not always one-size-fits-all, either. There are special skill sets. You know, it takes as much to get a guy who was a motorcycle cop proficient in that part of his business as it does the guy who orders the logistical support for police and what does it take to run a police station, what does it take to run a police force – some different skill sets in that regard.

But to get everybody – and what we finally did was take the leadership that we had within – within our police mentor organizations, the UPOL (ph) guys, the Danes – it was a combination – said, do not come out of this room till we have one way of training things and then everybody gets in – everybody gets on board and this is going to be the standard to which we train, not only in Reg-e-Khan Neshin but all the way up in Now Zad. We don't need 25 ways of doing it, or we – or we just make it untenable for the provincial chief of police to have any type of expectations of standardization across his – across his force.

The next thing that we found very important is with that kind of approach the provincial chief of police took a much greater interest in his own training of his people and started making available his midlevel leadership even in the police force and started doing much more merit-based hiring and merit-based promoting than it was the old patronage network. It wasn't – he wasn't a hundred percent successful with that, because there was a lot of people fiddling in that. But your best chance to be able to recognize how to do that is bring in the right professionals and pay them the money.

BRIG. SKEATES: Yeah, in terms of the symptoms of evolution of the campaign, I suppose there's a number of sort of – you know, a whole number of different areas where it became manifest. I'll give you sort of three of the principal examples.

The first one really was a growing sort of confidence in the leadership, the ANSF leadership, to follow their own plan and to conduct operations and to just go and do their routine business without us – without even telling us, in some cases, and quite often the first thing we'd hear about an operation was when they were on the way back in, having done it, that principally happening at the sort of battalion/kandak level, but was increasingly, as we left, beginning to happen at the brigade level.

I think the second symptom is the many sort of security meetings, shuras, that we had. I used to hold a weekly meeting with all of the deputies from the various membership of the ANSF, and frankly I didn't chair it. It was chaired by the governor's security representative, and then I was there to give, you know, the ISAF view, if required. There are a few meetings where I said nothing at all throughout the entire meeting. And you know, they – if there was a problem, whatever that problem was, they would discuss it. There was sometimes a heated debate, but they would generally get into the right place. If they couldn't, then they would just kick it upstairs to the principals' security shura.

And I think the third way in which it's becoming evident is the way in which they are now really starting to sort of push forward – and I'm really talking about the army as much as the police – push forward in planning for their own operations and then just coming to us when they require support.

There are a whole number of kandak advisory teams which I spoke to. The vast majority, in fact – these are the adviser teams down at battalion level, infantry battalion level – who were probably spending no more than one day a week or one engagement a week with their kandak commander and the kandak itself. And they would be asked to provide medical training courses, train a – do a bit more sort of counter-IED training and so on and so forth, you know, but Monday through to Saturday, they were, you know, playing potted sports in the – in the FOB, which is a great sign of success. And that, frankly, is what success is going to increasingly look like. It's ISAF soldiers doing less and less.

KAGAN: Thank you both for this phenomenal overview. Let me ask you whether you have any last remarks that you'd like to share with the audience.

GEN. GURGANUS: I think I would probably just wrap up by saying that, you know, first off, there's nothing that the – that the Gurganus-Skeates team did that was brilliant, that turned and changed anything. It's taken everybody that's ever been in – and I think you'd probably hear this from any one of other RC commanders – I mean, we were reaping the benefit of the success of our predecessors. They laid the groundwork to do this. It was not – it wasn't anything that we particularly did that moved the ball greatly forward. A lot of the conditions that had been set for us – it was just time for some of these to happen. We happened to be there when some very key things manifested themselves, I think, that were – that made it look like we did a really good job. I mean, I won't – I'm not taking anything away from the soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines that work for us. They work very, very hard every day now to continue that, whether we saw the benefit or whether it's seen even long after we're gone.

So I think that we were able to see a lot of changes over the course of the year, and I think the progress over the course of the year is pretty – makes me pretty optimistic. And I think managing expectations and managing perceptions is probably as much of what a commander does as he does leading forces, and that's trying to – trying to keep people within the – within the realm of what's possible, what can and can't be done. And I think to make people understand that we can't win this for them, as Stuart said earlier, is a key piece to understand, but it's also a key piece to understanding what we'll need in the future, so that we don't prevent their development and their ability to build that capability as well. To continue to give them the tools, to continue to give them the assistance that they will need, knowing when enough is enough and when to back off is what will create the opportunity for them to decide their future.

And that's what really success looks like for us. It's not – it's not the signing of a – it's not the signing of a formal end to the war or anybody holding up a white flag. Our job, I think, very quickly, to kind of give you my expectation, was for us to create opportunities for them to be successful and for them to determine what their future will be.

What they do with it at the end of the day and the end of 2014 or in the end of 2020 or whenever is going to be their decision. It's going to be their choice. Are they willing to continue to make the stand for it? And we have to be willing, I think, to accept the way that they go or at least to be able to be prepared for which way they may be able to go – they may go.

KAGAN: Well, thank you both. Thank you also to the tremendous folks who were out in the field with you, who returned with I MEF and with its associated coalition brethren. I really, really appreciate the dedication and the service that you and those who have served with you have shown at a period where policy uncertainty can really have an impact on the ground but where, when you're actually on the ground, you can actually watch the mission really take over that uncertainty and prevent it from becoming a matter of doubt. That's certainly something I admire greatly. Thank you for your candor and for your forthrightness.

And here at ISW we have a wonderful tradition, adopted from all of you, to say thank you. So –

GEN. GURGANUS: Thank you. I appreciate it.

KAGAN: – really appreciate your coming today.

GEN. GURGANUS: And thanks for the opportunity.

BRIG. SKEATES: Thank you, ma'am. Thanks very much indeed.

KAGAN: Thank you very much. Thanks to all. (Applause.)

(END)