



The Surge in Afghanistan: Command Voices

Part I

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The Army and Navy Club

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Regional Command (South), Kandahar

09:58:50

DR. KAGAN: Ladies and gentlemen welcome this morning to the Army Navy Club and welcome to a discussion with two of our finest commanders who have come up through combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. We at the Institute for the Study of War serve as a bridge between the folks who wear uniforms and the folks here in Washington who formulate policy, strategy, and have to make some of the tough decisions about how we use the instruments of military power that make our country great.

09:59:36

One of the things that we do at the Institute for the Study of War is study the ongoing conflicts around the

world. We have focused in the past on Iraq. We focus heavily on Afghanistan. We focus likewise on the civil war in Syria and many other conflicts around the world. What we are here to do this morning is bring to Washington a little bit of the field, by which I mean the folks who - out in Afghanistan - have served as combat leaders in command of important areas of important units and who can bring a flavor of what is actually happening in Afghanistan,

10:00:30 What the operating environment is like. What the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan has meant and what they think the problems are that continue to face our forces out in Afghanistan. And we think that this is a very important time to be having this conversation of course, because there are so many decisions before our policy makers about what kind of force presence and what kind of mission we will have in Afghanistan - the U.S. will have in Afghanistan over the long term.

10:01:07 So welcome again and I want to welcome first of all our first discussant, a person whom I've really come to admire because of his extraordinary work in Afghanistan and that is General Jim Huggins. Now he

has a wonderful biography and of course you have it in your packets those of you who are here, those of you who are watching this from afar can look it up and find it on the web.

10:01:40

What you need to know most of all is that Major General Huggins most recently commanded the wonderful 82nd Airborne Division out in Afghanistan in the Regional Command South area, which consists of Kandahar province and its surrounding areas. And where, really the Taliban got its start. We might even say that it's the heart of the Taliban movement and the heart of the Pashtun areas.

10:02:15

I had the great privilege of visiting with General Huggins probably in about last August timeframe toward the end of his tour and having been to Kandahar numerous times, I was actually really quite surprised to see the level of security that he had established and some of the relationships he had established with the Afghan security forces there. So first and foremost please welcome our recent all American six Major General Jim Huggins promotable.

10:02:58 MG (P) Huggins: Thank you very much.

10:03:00 KAGAN: Thank you so much for joining us. What I want to do to begin is ask you please to tell me a little bit about RC South Kandahar and its surrounding provinces so those people who are not familiar with the area have a sense of the terrain and the particular challenges that you faced in your operating environment.

10:03:26 HUGGINS: Thank you very much and thank you very much for those kind words up front and it is great to be here today and I commented earlier we're in slightly different décor than we were last time we saw which is somewhat more uncomfortable for me, but nonetheless it's good to be back here after a tough mission. I'd like to first start off by saying there's lots of ex-friends not - well say former friends and associates that I've served with and many of you had visited us in Regional Command South and some of you even in places in Iraq and previous tours.

10:04:02 So, it again it is an honor to be here this morning and I'd have to be remiss if I didn't start by telling

you that any of the, any of the kind words that Dr. Kagan has passed on to Regional Command South really is due to the sacrifice and service of our great troopers. Got a former Battalion Commander here who knows that first hand - two former Battalion Commanders at least in that terrain.

10:04:28

And it's a tough mission, but one I believe we're making progress in. To start specifically with what Dr. Kagan asked, most of you are probably familiar but just a quick wave top, Regional Command South, four provinces, 2.9 million people roughly, of which almost a million are in Kandahar City. My lens on RC South began in 2002 when I was a Brigade Commander as we initially went in and started Operation Enduring Freedom then.

10:05:04

I was fortunate to maintain some of those relationships and then as I returned in 2011 was very fortunate to find some of the same Afghans in leadership positions and some in even more senior leadership positions in Kandahar and Regional Command South. And I think that was a bridge up for me because it really is all about the people.

10:05:28 To be able to begin those relationships, having taken over from an exceptionally strong platform in which General Terry had established as the first division in Regional Command South since President Obama made the decision in 2009 to begin the surge. I will tell you that we looked at Afghan capacity, developing that throughout our duration of the mission in the command and it was really our primary mission both in terms of security and governance.

10:06:03 It is based upon, you know, the directives we were given, based on the surge, that Secretary Panetta obviously reinforced this morning. That really it is about getting the Afghans capable to secure themselves and provide for their people. And that we don't have it become a safe haven for the export of terrorism and then we can be a good regional partner with its surrounding nations.

10:06:33 To do so it was really more about us not conducting the fight but getting the Afghans to conduct the fight. And as we looked at the strategy of what it would take to do so, I would tell that it is counter

intuitive to all of my commanders who are on the ground for me to look at them and go, "Hey I'm going to off ramp a Brigade Combat Team, 3,400 soldiers. I'm going to turn away a battlefield surveillance Brigade another 2,900 soldiers because we're going to let Afghans take the next step."

10:07:06

And in my case as the Kagans got to meet and some of you have met, I was blessed to have a tremendously strong Afghan corps commander counterpart, General Hamid and he is again - and he's Pashtun- we're in the south so it really does help and he was willing to take the initiative, demonstrate the competence that his security forces could do this. And I will tell you that was a huge measure of any success that we had.

10:07:39

Every deployment is not without challenges and I certainly had our fair share in southern Afghanistan, but when the times were very, very difficult and we could have reached exceptionally difficult times i.e. the Koran burning, i.e. a few cases that go on, it was my Afghan security force partners that really stepped

up and bridged to allow this not to become as tough a situation as it could.

10:08:07 So that gives me kind of hope to be able to look at the command and say, "Did we - are we moving in the right direction? Is it insufficient quantity? And then are we off azimuth anywhere?" And the real two areas we were looking at were obviously security capacity and governance capacity. And I would tell you to conclude that 2012 was what we called the first year that the ANSF was in the lead for security in the south.

10:08:38 I believe 2013 is the most critical year because of the conditions achieved and because I think that we potentially have to look - others may look at a different strategy in terms of the way ahead. But I think the azimuth is correct now. I think that, that most importantly what we look at has to be conditions based in terms of how we are going to go to the future - Afghan capability growing.

10:09:09 And I think in terms of the security forces and I have talked to a few friends across the water since I do

consider myself dated. I left on the 4th of September so I'm, you know, almost 80 days irrelevant. But I have talked to a few and they have shared the comments back with me that we are making progress. Would we all like it to be faster? Absolutely yes, but we must stay committed to the conditions based effects of growing Afghan capacity, because I saw it on the ground there and I think it still exists.

10:09:46

The biggest concern of my great Afghan security force partners is abandonment. We have invested a great deal, a lot of treasure for a long period of time. The Afghans have done so three times longer than us for over 32 years. And it was conveyed to me by the former Governor of Panjwai, District Governor of Panjwai, Fazluddin Agha, unfortunately he is no longer with us, he was killed on the 17th of January by an IED.

10:10:25

But he's an old muj fighter, been there for a long, long, long time and I learned some tremendous lessons from him. The first thing he told sitting down over chai one afternoon, he said, "General do you know why the muj defeated the Soviets?" And I said, "No, why?"

And he said, "Because we had Pakistan as a sanctuary."
And he said, "Now how do you expect me to defeat the Taliban when the Taliban have the Pakistan and Pakistan is a sanctuary."

10:10:54 My response was, I said, "You can defeat the Taliban today. The question is can beat them in the future?" I said, "You have sufficiently trained security forces and we are providing you enablers." He actually agreed and he said, "Do you know why the Taliban came into power?" And I said, "No, Agha why did they come into power?" Because I was going to get told anyway obviously and he actually brought a few VCR videos out to show me some of his heroic footage.

10:11:23 But he said, "Because you left us too quickly after the Soviets went through and that cost us - that caused the Taliban to gain a leg up." His biggest concern and his family's biggest concern is of abandonment, because that was what set the condition for the fight we have now.

10:11:54 KAGAN: General that was a terrific exposition and I really - what is of the sentiments that I too have

experienced when circulating with you and with other folks in Afghanistan, and I really want to talk a little bit more about the Afghans perception of the conflict and the fight. Before we do so I'd actually love it if you would take a moment to describe with a little bit of texture, flavor the security situation that you found on the ground in Kandahar when you arrived and then talk a little bit about the security situation that you found on the ground as you were saying good-bye to your Afghan partners.

10:12:51 HUGGINS: It's obviously the challenge. Many people come to visit and they get to see the region, Afghanistan in that point in time and without the context over time it is very hard to understand, you know, the achievements that have been there and we were fortunate enough to show the Kagans, as we call it the Lite-Brite show of effects since the President announced the surge in December of '09 as we moved through time.

10:13:23 And again lots of coalition partners help with this and lots of great organizations on the ground did so with great sacrifice. But I would tell you that

certain if I went all the back to 2002, okay, no central government, 39 million people, no provincial governors, no district governors, one road system in shambles and really probably the closest semblance to any law was really the former mujahideen who some transitioned over to the police and let's just face it the police were known as the gun lords back then. That was 2002.

10:14:11 Now, and again I know 10 years is a long time but it's not really that long and if you look at the changes, I came on the ground and now you see at least the outline of the good central government. Need to work to the connective tissue down to the provinces, absolutely do, but nonetheless there is representation.

10:14:33 In my area of 42 districts, I can't speak for all of the Afghanistan but 41 of those districts all had governors and police chiefs. So some progress down that way. About five major road systems in various states, I wish they were all better than I-95, but I mean it's some progress that's out there. You've got an Afghan Army that's the most respected institution

in Afghanistan and a police force that is starting to shed that image of gun lords as it moves forward.

10:15:11 Still some work to be done that, absolutely, but some progress along the way. So tremendous change from my perspective and then I would tell you that based on progress what we were trying to do through a thing we called the Active Layered Security Framework was expand the bubble which was created through a lot of hard work around Kandahar City and the environments; Kandahar, Arghandab Valley, Zhari and Panjwai Districts.

10:15:42 It didn't happen overnight but with the advent with the surge and the push of the additional Brigades in what we were able to see is security begin at the center and then begin to expand to the peripherals. The challenge is how do you sustain that and the right answer to me is the Afghans because that is the only sustainable way in the future.

10:16:06 You know, we saw a reduction in the time we were there of over 60 percent in terms of violence inside Kandahar City. Again the most populous area we had

almost a million people depending upon the season. The Mayor of Kandahar City will tell you it's over a million but we can discuss that - and to have that level of violence go down you have to ask yourself why.

10:16:33 And one I think there was more confidence in the security forces and, and the police chief who had come from different jobs but I think he brought a measure of security because his security forces believed in him, again we still have work to do to improve it. We saw some of that expansion most specifically in the Arghandab River Valley, which was probably the most violent fight, lethal fight we've seen, previous to my arrival.

10:17:06 You know, a couple of great Brigade Combat teams took some pretty heavy casualties in that region, but we had seen a reduction - the most dramatic reduction of violence in any area and I think again largely due to that an exceptionally strong district Governor named Shah Mohammed takes place there which again we got to introduce some of you to.

10:17:31 And where you have good governance and a strong military presence, Afghan military presence you start to see the positive effects but it took about two and a half years to get that. And then we tried to export that a little bit further to the west across a very, very tough district called Zhari, which continues to be a very, very lethal area and it is the home of Mullah Omar specifically a small area called Nalgham.

10:18:01 And we're starting to see a sea of change there but we are not cresting about two years of a very hard fight in there. It really started with a Task Force Strike and then followed on by Task Force Spartan and the 10th mountain and it continued with Task Force Fury, we were there when we took the Kagans out.

10:18:25 So it just doesn't happen, it doesn't turn overnight I will just tell you. But that expansion in Zhari is very, very critical as it for another area, Panjwai, and again you have to understand the history of some of these. Initially there was no Zhari District, it was all Panjwai, but because of the political alliances that were formed as they expanded area,

because of some key marriages that went across different tribes, Zhari District was created.

10:18:55 And these area they hold very, very true their lineage and the tribes that came to power in those areas, getting those key personnel to turn and support - not us, but our Afghan partners was the key measure. And again I wish I could tell it's all done but it's clearly not. But there is the beginning of a change in what I called the deceive area during my stay which was Zhari, Panjwai, and I was continuing to try and push towards Maiwand which is the border with Helmand province and our Marine brothers to the southwest.

10:19:40 And I didn't get as far as I wanted, as far as Maiwand goes during my stay but more important was, as I describe it, the wolf closest to the sled and that Zhari and Maiwand, or Zhari and Panjwai, I'm sorry. Because that impacted the population center and I needed to keep the people in Kandahar feeling confident that governance was developing.

10:20:06 That security was good enough they could go into the market places. And I, I, you know, again, I wish I

had - as we did when we took you out, I wish I had a few of our Afghan partners here to be able to comment on what they thought because they're the ones that really make a difference. At least in our interactions we felt like as we exited the azimuth was correct.

10:20:27 That there was progress, not as fast as we wanted to but we were really looking at, and I just told you upfront, we did off ramp a Brigade Combat team, 3,600 soldiers during my stay and then another three surge Battalions that had come in separately and then the Battlefield Surveillance Brigade. RC South had a high of 25,000 soldiers and sailors and Marines cause it really is theirs, everybody is represented there.

10:21:05 And then when I left it was at 13,800 and that was a number we moved to by 1 October '12. A little concerned with that especially with my Afghan security force partners. Six BCT's on the ground, two when I left. My Afghan security partners look at me like this is a pretty daunting task and I said, there was six and it went to two, ANA, ANP, ABP, National Police, there you have six. Okay.

10:21:45 So the difference is you're making the difference up and we have to stay engaged through partnership to continue to build their capability over time and again, and I don't want to - I was fortunate to follow James Terry as a 10th Mountain CG and in RC South and then fortunate to work for him on my way out as he is the Commander in IJC. I'm proud to call him a friend and we talk often as we try to look ahead. Because he often says, "I believe in this mission." And I think there is progress.

10:22:26 KAGAN: Tell me a little bit more how you actually accomplish the off ramp of so many forces from your area and how you took a look at your battle space and made that off ramp such that there was less concern among the Afghans than there might have been?

10:22:57 HUGGINS: Well, I mean there certainly was concern and I won't try and minimize that piece, but it is the way ahead. For them to take up the mantle in the fight for the security is the key. We need to do a little more in terms of governance in my personal opinion

because I think the security forces are stepping up
but -

10:23:16 KAGAN: Did you, did you just pull everything back or
- in a certain sense there's almost a prior question
here, which is can you describe, for example, in
Nalgham how the Afghan forces and the U.S. forces were
working together and then we can talk a little bit
about what it looked like after you took out the extra
forces.

10:23:41 HUGGINS: Well, I'll tell you the first basis is it
goes back to the comment I made about the Active
Layered Security Framework which is really based upon
a population density piece. So, you know, where are
you going to influence the population? You have to
know where the population is and then - you can't be
everywhere.

10:23:58 And I used to have very difficult discussions with
many of the governors because, I mean every citizen in
his province and his district is a person he is
charged to take care of. We simply couldn't go
everywhere even with the numbers we had at the peak

and security every door to every village in every city in every province. It's just not - so you have to make tough choices first and foremost.

10:24:21

So we based it off population density and then key influences. Some of that changes based on the Afghan vote because again it goes back to some of the tribal decisions that go along the way. So with that as the base template then what we try to do is again some Battalion Commanders, some U.S. Battalion Commanders probably more uncomfortable with this than me because I'm sitting there given broad guidance but it is really not looking at it from a paradigm of I'm losing a rifle company when I take that company and tell it now to embed and partner with four Afghan Battalions, you know, Platoon per.

10:25:09

But I'm - so I'm not losing that company but I'm gaining four times that capability, not immediately. It will have to develop but that is the initial step that has to be taken. So it really was about working these advisory teams, these assistance teams, embedding in with the Afghans, with the inherent risks that come with that and then having to stick by their

sides and they become the delta in the number out there.

10:25:37

If we were going to ask a rifle company to perform a dozen patrols in days prior to this, you know, now it is a matter of okay maybe it's four patrols a day but you were out there in smaller numbers with the Afghans conducting the other eight and because again if we - some of those Battalions, would let - Afghan Battalions would let us continue to lead and we have to stop and it's a paradigm shift of over 10 years that they have become dependent upon what we would do for them and now the question becomes what they will do for themselves.

10:26:14

And in large order, not 100 percent of the cases, I'm very pleased with the response. But that's sort of the simple way we tried to look at how we would get the Afghans to do more. You know, these security force advisory assistance teams and Brigades that we're putting together are key to that and they will own battle space but yet they will have the responsibility to continue to take that Afghan Brigade and empower them to really be not just the face of

security but really the instrument of security for the people.

10:26:50 You know, time and time again there are many in a room who can attest to this. The Afghans can see a problem much differently than we do and they can identify it very, very quickly. I could send a combat patrol into a city and we would walk out and think we're making the right progress by the same token, an Afghan patrol would come through and go we have a problem here, a problem here, and a problem here. Well, what we obviously need to do is bring that together.

10:27:17 KAGAN: Tell me a little bit more about what it is that the security force assistance teams actually bring. Could the Afghans in Kandahar at the time when you left perform their missions without any U.S. or NATO capabilities brought to them. What kinds of capabilities did we bring in addition to the partners that served on the ground?

10:27:57 HUGGINS: Okay. Great question. Well, first in one piece in Kandahar City we have reached what we call police primacy and again visitors see that first hand.

The Afghans a long time ago came to me and said, "Hey look we want to be in charge." And largely in Kandahar City that is a police presence. There is a very, very minimal one ANA QRF Company, Quick Response Force Company in Kandahar City.

10:28:28 And then the national police have one emergency response unit that they can bring into the fight with some of our SoF advisory teams. But it really is about police primacy and we have literally taken a step back and given the PCoP [provincial chief of police] and the [unint.] inside of the Kandahar City the reigns for that.

10:28:54 When we do high profile events like the Loya Jirgas, like the elections we have all pushed that to Afghans and we'll be in the back. Now what we will obviously provide to those are enablers, but we don't want to be the first responders, and I heard that specifically in an engagement with Minister Asadullah Khalid.

10:29:25 He wants the Afghans to be, he wants the Afghan people to gain confidence in what their security forces are doing to respond. It often is harder to do that than

to do the job yourself. So it takes an adjustment especially for an American soldier, because you'd rather just go get the job done, so you actually take a step back.

10:29:47 But it's made great progress in Kandahar City and told you about the reduction of violence there. I think there is a normalcy in terms of what we - what the Afghans desire in Kandahar City, they're seeing that there is some movement and again it is a population center, it's not all of Afghanistan but for schools to move along, market places are becoming more prolific and electricity is dependable there. The question is is that electricity going to be sustainable.

10:30:22 I think that there is optimism for that piece but it is really as we move over into the more rural areas it is really about the enablers, I mean the biggest short coming I can tell you right now and today and when I left is aviation. As I sat there with my Afghan counterparts as we were doing clearance operations in some very remote areas and it was always about Medevac, Medevac and we have it on standby.

10:30:52 But as I reminded them, I said there have been - I'm the son of a soldier, a Sergeant Major who spent three tours in Vietnam and you wanted to always plan for that aviation there, but they've even taught us in my early stages, hey, if you're going to do an operation, you've got to depend - you got to have a plan that counts on limited air because of weather.

10:31:16 So what are you doing with your Advanced Trauma Lifesaving Teams, how are you escheloning them forward on the ground, what are you going to do for a ground evac? There are other ways to take care of this and they're not as good as an air Medevac and there's certainly other ways to take care of support to units in contact.

10:31:34 Yes, Army aviation is a great responder as well as our Air Force brothers, but you have other measures to do so with indirect fire. And it's really getting them to understand that and work through those. It's a challenge, but it's one that we have to continue to work for. I don't know what the aviation fix will be in the long term for them. And we have some nascent capability there but that's going to be the long pole

in the tent. And then intelligence, they're very fond of our platforms and the intelligence it comes from but I can tell you I'm very fond of their human intelligence that comes out of literally what they know that's going on in a village in a small collate.

10:32:16 KAGAN: Can you tell me do any of our enabler's the aviation and the intelligence that we provide are they sources of confidence for the Afghan security forces? Do you think that they really helped the Afghans take the lead as you described?

10:32:42 HUGGINS: Absolutely. I mean, it's just to be able to have platforms that can see and do what we have today, I mean it's certainly there. I mean even in our static ones the nation and, I remember it was the taskforce that then Dr. Ash Carter did - put together on ISR back in 2009-10 for the surge and I was the benefactor of an awful lot of that, especially in terms of aerostats and even other types of more static collection devices.

10:33:25 The balloons, as you saw, that exist that allow us, you know, almost permanent ISR without a platform that

has to do a turn it is incredible and the Afghans know it because the Taliban and the Insurgents and the Al-Qaida in the east know it. When the balloon is up it's not a good time to be real active. So they'll look for those opportunities. So there is Afghan security forces have seen the same thing and they want that technology but some of that is going to be pretty hard to deliver.

10:34:02 KAGAN: Tell me a little bit about the Afghan local police in your area, there are a lot of, a lot of folks who want to know whether the Afghan local police are, are a militia, are they?

10:34:23 HUGGINS: No. They're not a militia. I mean can see the correlation of what folks would be there, but we have very, very clear guidance in terms of our left and right limits. That said again, there are some people that we've brought in that we have to continually vet and work through the system and we've found some that have gone bad. So the system is not perfect but I will tell you in large order, if you would ask an Afghan specifically in Nalgham and unfortunately as Dr. Kagan knows the ALP Commander who

was making a huge difference for us in Zhari and in Nalgham area was killed two days after we took them out for a visit, because he was just trying to do the right thing.

10:35:13 So they are themselves at risk in this effort. But again, they know the people that don't belong in the village, in the qalats, in the cities. Trying to empower them to do the right thing has allowed - when I speak to my Battalion Commanders and Company Commanders that are out there on the ground, the greatest hope for progress.

10:35:32 It is just making sure that it doesn't turn into a militia, that it stays above it. I mean there are several of us that were in Iraq when the Sons of Iraq program - concerned local citizens came and they asked us, "Well, is this a corollary?" Yes and no, but I will tell in that in large order it is really about, you know, the Maliks, the village elders really saying I'm endorsing this man's son to protect this village.

10:36:06 What you don't want is to create these ALP where you import, export the security forces because I believe

then you risk the opportunity to turn it into a much more criminal basis. So stick with the strict guidance, it has to be internally policed, because again it can have issues, but I do believe, at least in my area it was one of the absolute keys to success in terms of making progress.

10:36:38 KAGAN: Why?

10:36:39 HUGGINS: Because we saw the violence indicators really, really turn away and everybody wants to talk about the seasonal piece of this thing, you know, we have a fighting season and we have the go to ground and refit to come back, those anomalies are pretty well understood, I don't think we discount them. I think some over emphasize them, but as long as the ALP are there living in the village, I mean they don't drive back to a FOB, they don't drive - go back into Kandahar City and then come back out to Zhari or Maiwand, or Panjwai, or Dand or Daman, but they have to live there on the farms, in the collates and they have to have an interest in it. And they have to be the sons of that, that small village. And then I think you have the balance to bring this in you know,

above the line as opposed to any corruption that would come.

10:37:45 KAGAN: We talked a little bit about the ALP leadership in Nalgham village and indeed if I recall correctly since I have been in Nalgham a year prior to our visit so in September of 2012, the individual who was standing up the ALP at that time is also no longer with us and there were several leaders between him and the successor that we met in September.

10:38:21 HUGGINS: Two of them brothers.

10:38:22 KAGAN: Two of them brothers.

10:38:22 HUGGINS: Yes.

10:38:23 KAGAN: So tell me why is it that the Afghans are taking such risks and standing up to take these leadership positions?

10:38:34 HUGGINS: I think - I honestly believe the Afghans want a better way of life. I don't think they have, you know, a huge unrealistic perception of where they

want to go. I mean, from again I, I've spent an awful lot of time with, with, you know, the Afghan Patriots is what I call them, who had stayed there and fought there for 30 years and have not left and come back, but really, really sacrificed for the country.

10:39:08

They want to be able to send their kids to school. They want a better life for their children. They want to be able to subsist, and in large order, as you know, in the south that's farming. You know, I had a visitor come through once and ask Governor Shah Mohammad out in Arghandab... Again, that fertile crescent of any area there, I mean it is amazing what they can grow in that area.

10:39:38

And the visitor asked Shah Mohammad, he said, "How much electricity do you have here?" And there we go, we've got a lens on a previous fight and we're asking that question in a different region. And Shah Muhammad said, "electricity? We don't need electricity. We just need water and we need security and we can farm and we can send our children to school." I mean that was his base need. That's what he as the governor of Arghandab wanted to provide.

10:40:11 Not a chicken in every pot. Not, you know, so many hours of electricity every day. It is really just to be able to exist and do so in many of their cases and again, Shah Mohammad, if I didn't mention before, is another former Muj fighter, which you have to be careful of, I'll be honest with you, because I mean there is a concern about the the possibility of another militia forming out of the Muj fighters because they do hold so much reverence in the country.

10:40:41 But the ones I can tell you about because we were either - we were hunting the bad form of Mujahideen and we were trying to help the guys who were really trying to make a difference for the country. Guys like Shah Muhammad are heroes and I just believe that they want to provide for their people. In his case, which is beautiful, is he's Alikozai, but he doesn't see it from an Alikozai lens.

10:41:12 And that is when you have really achieved some significant progress. So it's just not about your tribal affiliation. That is not easy to do and he is a - he's a little bit different and I think you have

to have some power to be able to do that and he certainly has some from his previous reputation. But we need more men like Shah Mohammad.

10:41:37 KAGAN: Is Kandahar important to Kabul first of all? And second of all, if there - if the United States and NATO pulled all of their forces out of Kandahar would that have a significant impact on national as well as local sentiment?

10:42:08 HUGGINS: That's getting a little bit close. I can't speculate for the future, but I can tell you I'm hoping it's pretty obvious to almost everybody outside of the casual observer that there is an amazing symbiotic relationship between Kabul and Kandahar. And we often say if it happens in Kandahar, it's going to happen in Kabul shortly thereafter and vice versa. It just seems that statistics will bear that fact out over time and time again.

10:42:45 The Pashtun south is slightly broken and they will say as so goes Kandahar, so goes Afghanistan. And it certainly offers in my mind an area which could provide a tremendous amount of stability and revenue

for the entire country. It would just have to more or less kind of spread in domino effect out.

10:43:15 And I do believe that the Taliban is a different threat than the Haqqani and the al-Qaeda. And I think that we can make - we are making progress and I think that that is why it's vital that there be some shining light that says we can do better for the rest of the Afghan people. I'll tell you that personally I'll sit with Afghans and they say, "We are so close. We just need a little more help from Kabul to really get the governance moving in southern Afghanistan. And why don't we get the help?"

10:43:53 And we have to continue to work with them too... And that's why I believe straightforwardly that we have more work to do along the governance line than we do the security line.

10:44:04 KAGAN: Let me turn over to some audience questions and, Fred, please introduce yourself and please state your affiliation.

10:44:20

FREDERICK KAGAN: Thanks. I'm Fred Kagan, Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute. General, it's wonderful to see you again. Congratulations on your tour and thank you for your service. There is a discussion in town and in the country generally about whether we need to be concerned with the south at all really fundamentally and there's a - some people will say fundamentally what we need to do is make a - come to some kind of reconciliation agreement with the Taliban senior leadership.

10:44:48

They've broken with al-Qaeda. And if we can come to the table and sort of bring them back to power in some way in the south, that we won't have to worry about the south and it will be stable. And related to that is the question does the south have anything to do with the al-Qaeda problem? We've talked about Kandahar. We haven't talked about the other provinces, Zabul, Uruzgan, and so-forth. And I'd also like your thoughts on the extent to which you see either in the past or in the future the risk of these areas becoming potential safe havens for terrorist organizations.

10:45:39 HUGGINS: Kandahar in the south and what it represents overall share about 590 kilometers of border with Pakistan. And I would argue that the Afghan border police are doing a better job of working malign influences coming from the south into the country.

10:46:07 I've had several discussions with a few of my bosses about what that looks like, trying to differentiate that between corruption, between criminal patronage, or between, you know, an absolute accelerant that some force would use against us. And they all look the same to be honest with you. So it's very hard to discriminate. But it is certainly as you either look at the seam in the southwest of Bahram Chah and Girdi Jangal whereas you come during the primary route of working from Pakistan in on Highway 4 working through Spin Boldak and working our way in.

10:46:51 I mean that represents a significant issue 'cause it is literally an hour and a half ride, about 95 kilometers from Spin Boldak to Kandahar City. So there could be some influence that would go. And obviously they work it left and right. There's also

the issue of what comes out of southern Afghanistan into other places. And mainly there I'm talking about poppy. So is it important? It is.

10:47:19

And President Karzai's own edict is we've got to do away with the poppy cultivation. A tall order. Made a little progress this year from previous years, but a little progress. And I always have said in the case, you know, careful we don't add all of the drug issue to this and make the Taliban eight feet tall because it existed before and it will probably in some form do so. But my gosh, the Afghans have been given their charter by President Karzai and they tried to make an improvement this year on it.

10:47:50

So I think those are two reasons why the southern area's important and I would tell you that - and again I mention the agricultural value of what's there I think is important to the rest of the country. You know, unfortunately every province or district I go to in there, they tell me they have the best pomegranates, the best grapes or the best almonds, and they are pretty good, but they do... We were arguing

about having a taste test with the Kagans one day, but it was...

10:48:22 KAGAN: But it was Ramadan.

10:48:23 HUGGINS: It was. It was that time. Then I would tell you that it is ability of the threat to be able to move about because of the south. Highway 4 as it comes up from there and then Highway 1 in terms of the Ring Road as it moves both from Helmand through Kandahar City and then into Zabul and then obviously into RC-East and Ghazni and up. With that we have insurgent movement and we have drug trafficking and illicit goods moving.

10:48:54 And then there additionally is what we call another jetstream that exists a little bit farther north than that. And most of that allows us to go - if we were to call Pakistan a strategic sanctuary for the insurgency, what we would call perhaps the winter bed-down sites, the operational bed-down sites for the insurgency into the largely almost inaccessible areas during the winter months of Khaki Afghan, Khas

Uruzgan, and some of the mountain ranges in the east.

10:49:28 And they can be exceptionally cold places, inhospitable cold places and one that the insurgents gain tremendous early warning because of the nature of the terrain if we tried to interdict. So that operational sanctuary I think is important and we have to try and get the Afghans to reduce as much of it as we can to ensure that we meet the end state of, you know, not becoming a safe haven for the export of terrorism.

10:50:00 And in terms of specific risk, I would tell you the area we look mostly at where I did not have the troop to task to be able to focus on, but I depended upon the Afghans was Zabul. Zabul Province borders Ghazni, which is in RC-East. Zabul is different than any of the other provinces that existed in Regional Command South. If you look at the way the Afghans were educated, in my other three provinces the Afghans were largely basic school.

10:50:33 In Zabul it was almost all madrasa, which is a fundamental difference in terms of the ethos that they

will come up with. And then, you know, this is where the people have sent their children. So ergo the people are voting along this. And you can obviously understand the difference in which you would get from a much more religious focus that could be in some cases lean towards more of a fundamentalist approach.

10:51:02

But yet I had the lowest rates of violence in Zabul Province. Now, you can ask yourself why and we often did. We're just - we're doing such a great job there, there's no enemy. Or the fact that there is some level of sanctuary because it is such a large area that the insurgency is abiding and getting along and co-opting to be able to work.

10:51:31

The best way to counter that for us was use our Afghans and their human sources to try and push. We did have a fairly strong governor there who's still there, Governor Naseri, who is a big educator by the way. And we - but we are trying to use him and his governance mechanisms to determine if there are indicators that we are missing something in Zabul. We have gone through and had many high-value targets captured in there with indicators that it is used as

one of the ways to bypass Spin Boldak and make its way up into Highway 1 and then around the Ring Road.

10:52:14 It is just a challenge of even with the troop to task we had at the peak, how can you be everywhere. And you have one Afghan brigade, Army brigade in Zabul Province, which because there is less violence my Afghan counterparts often will take combat power from them and surge where we need to, which I am not second guessing, but it always leads us to believe in RC-South, am I missing something in regional command - or in Zabul Province. But that's the risk, the most risk I think I saw.

10:52:52 KAGAN: General Fast in the front row.

10:52:58 MAJOR GENERAL BARBARA FAST (Ret.): I'd like to just shift gears just a little bit. You've had a tremendous opportunity over the last decade or so both in Afghanistan and in Iraq to see slightly dissimilar or tremendously dissimilar activities in nations. So as you look to the future as our soldiers have developed all of these tactics, techniques, and procedures, these skills and capabilities that we

brought in, what do you think the strands are for the future as we pivot a little bit more and shift our focus away into new problems which surely will exist?

10:53:33 HUGGINS: Thank you, ma'am.

10:53:34 GENERAL FAST: I knew you'd like that.

10:53:37 HUGGINS: I would tell you that the Army has gone through some transformation and will continue to do so. I believe, you know, as just a simple soldier that this is the best army the United States of America has ever had and it's because, you know, we've taken the nation's treasure and been able to adapt and been able to meet the challenges of an operating environment that I don't know we predicted would exist 15 years ago.

10:54:09 So it's a tribute to, you know, our agility, but what we've got to do now is to take that and push it towards the next fight and not fight the last fight but use those as some of the inherent strengths that we've moved towards. You know, the future's a little uncertain in terms of what's going to happen in the

coming year of size and focus, but what we have to do is stay adaptable, stay agile. And we've really got to, as the chief talks about often, we've got to be exceptionally well-grounded in the fundamentals.

10:54:44

And those are from the basics of leadership and accountability to not forgetting that we have a tremendous obligation to continue to take care of our soldiers on the way forward. Specifically, since General Fast asked it, I would tell you that we've made huge gains in the intel arena, which obviously she knows very well. I would tell you that what I think is powerful is getting access to that individual down to the lowest - that intelligence down to the lowest level possible as quickly as we can.

10:55:18

Too often in the past we kind of compartmentalized, hid behind the green door as we had said before, but it is amazing what is accomplished in a very quick turn with access to some of what was unachievable because of some things like connectivity pipes and others down to the company battery and troop level. And then continuing to reinforce... And there's some danger that comes with that obviously, but continue to

reinforce the policies and practices we have to do to be accountable for that.

10:55:51 But the intel piece is that one of the strengths, I will tell you, I've been at this a long time and I think our interoperability with our special operations forces is absolutely key and the interagency process. I would tell you there are several agencies we had in Kandahar and without what they did for us and what we collaborated on - every week twice a week we met with them and we had LNOs exchanged - I think we would have missed opportunities and we would have not had the gains we could have - we achieved.

10:56:31 And those are things we just continue to improve upon from Iraq and continue to build on that in Afghanistan.

10:56:37 KAGAN: Can I just flip that around and ask you whether other agencies, whether it's a state department or whether it's our special forces, also relied on you and your ownership of the battle space.

10:56:57 HUGGINS: Absolutely they did. Interagency, interdependent I'd call it, we have to work together on this certainly from, you know, the provincial response teams in terms of the PRTs, the state platform we had. I had a wonderful state department partner, Andrew Haviland in Regional Command South who, you know, was a career state officer and had also worked in Nangarhar Province before that with a very mild-mannered personality in that area who I had worked with before in Gul Agha Sherzai.

10:57:35 But they're - they surged. It took a little bit longer than it took for us to surge and the surge is not going to be in the same numbers. There are some folks that would throw - some throw stones at it because they had the contract in some cases to do so. Much like I would look at my coalition partners, I would look at these other capabilities, I would prefer to focus on what they can do versus what they can't do.

10:58:05 And I think we got every measure of that. We actually brought the State Department platform inside our wire, inside our headquarters. We took some of our school

of advanced military strategies and planning - planners, our SAMS guys, we put them into the platform. So we had some interdependency there. And then in terms of other government agencies - again I think we were the benefactor of some tremendous capability and that it really wasn't in [unint.] also.

10:58:40 It really wasn't about did we have to support them. It was absolutely mutual. And whether it was just by good fortune of having the right personalities on the ground at the right time with the right leaders in Kabul or whether it was whatever it was, I would just tell you that it is amazing what you can get done if nobody cares who gets the credit. And there's some selfless individuals that I owe a tremendous debt to that were in the south while I was fortunate to be there.

10:59:15 KAGAN: We have many other - many other questions. Julie, if you could go into the back.

10:59:28 TOM BOWMAN: General, Tom Bowman with NPR. You talked a little bit about Kandahar and said you were a little concerned about the U.S. troop cutbacks in

Kandahar. And as you probably know, what everyone's talking about here in Washington now are deeper cuts perhaps next year across the board in Afghanistan. And I just want your assessment since, you know, you were there fairly recently, do you think Kandahar can absorb any more cuts in U.S. troops next year?

11:00:00

HUGGINS: My baseline is I have to say as a mission, is the mission still what we talked about or what Secretary Panetta talked about this morning? If that mission still remains the same, in other words, you know, continue to grow the Afghan capability, secure the population safely, and then defend its borders, that's still a pretty tough order in terms of developing the Afghan security forces.

11:00:24

Progress, as I've said, but they're not there yet and, you know, so we're not conducting the mission but our primary mission and my mission statement changed during my watch where I started out saying CJTF-82 conducts counterinsurgency operations to defeat, you know, the insurgency and support GIRoA and then as we changed strategies, I changed it to CJTF-82 enables

Afghan security forces and GIROA to defeat the insurgency and provide for the people.

11:00:58 TOM BOWMAN: You said tough order meaning no?

11:00:59 HUGGINS: Well, if - with that set there, I will tell you, I went on the record several different times as we went and tried to downsize. Again, 25,000 at its peak there off-ramped to what I told you before, a brigade combat team and a few surge battalions and the battlefield surveillance brigade and I basically really stuck to the number of about 13,800 approximately in RC-South, which was not based upon troop to task for us to go find, capture, or kill the insurgents but was based upon a ratio where we could take these advisory teams and embed them within my Afghan security force partners.

11:01:41 That was the math, the calculus that we used. What I was unwilling to do and resisted the urge several times, was to create forward operating bases and COPs that basically were only self-sustaining. And I have shut down at least three during the time we were there

even before the mission changed because really not achieving any effect. It just sits out there.

11:02:11 And so you say I have a presence in [unint.], but you really aren't achieving any effect because it's isolated and I have to fly 2,000 aviation hours a month to resupply it. I can't do any combat patrols because it's very difficult terrain and medevac is strange. So I based all that on troop to task and I would tell you that I told them that as we downsize to two striker brigade combat teams when I left, I told them that was the bare minimum I think we could use and still conduct the mission as it is prescribed today.

11:02:47 Now if the mission changes, sir, then that would drive a different outcome from us in uniform to do the math. But as it exists today, as you stated, I don't know how you could accomplish the mission and go down more.

11:03:05 KAGAN: Can you talk to me a little bit about troop to task? It's a technical term that you've brought up and obviously we're glad to have such an expert here, someone who has been nominated to be the Army G-3 and,

therefore, to do some of our plans. Tell me what do you mean by troop to task? How do you determine what kinds of forces are needed in a particular area?

11:03:35 HUGGINS: I'm smiling a little bit because those of you that read the Kagans' article this past weekend in the post, they've got troop to task down.

11:03:46 Well, first off, it would - certainly in my current role, which is waiting and my future role as the G-3 I wouldn't be doing this troop to task for this scenario. I mean this is really going to come from the combatant commander and the folks in theater to work that. But really what it is is a calculus to look at tasks given and then how much combat power do I need to apply to accomplish that task.

11:04:14 And again, as was very eloquently described, it is not just about those of us wearing cross rifles and infantrymen that would go out and do those tasks is the supporting pieces, as you all highlighted in terms of how much aviation does it take to support, how much logistics does it take to enable, how much SoF does it take to work the other aspects of it, how much ISR is

required for collection, and then now you're going to do the collection. Well, where are the exploitation teams that have to do the analysis? And how much can you do that?

11:04:44 Now, we are getting good at doing some of that over the horizon, but I would argue that some of that is impossible to do over the horizon based on loiter time, station time you can get from certain platforms. So there's - there'd have to be a presence there to conduct it. And then you add all that up and you try and figure out formations. Formations, key. Not individuals. Not small units you break apart but formations that you would apply to accomplish that.

11:05:15 And again, not my - surely not my role within any capacity I have today but what you would expect out of the combatant commanders in the theater.

11:05:24 KAGAN: I think we have time for one more question. We might even have time for two more questions. The...

11:06:00 PATRICK SWAN: Can you describe a little bit about how you not only protected your own forces but also encouraged them to continue with the advising mission without it being impacted?

11:06:13 HUGGINS: And a tremendously important question. As I said, that was what I was alluding to with some of the risks I said about working this partnership at that level. But the attacks first and foremost are focused to drive a wedge between us and our Afghan partners. There is clearly no doubt about that, very deliberate. And it is both the Afghan security forces requirements and our requirements to work the mitigation matters in that in the places we choose and every engagement that we conduct.

11:06:51 And it's a very, very difficult task. The Afghans in my opinion are the most capable to prevent these. In every case that we've had and this is not that new. I mean they have had an increase in the attacks as we've come to recent times, but I mean they've - I mean the first one I saw was the first month I was in Afghanistan this last tour and then we had a few also in Zabul and other places. Very, very tragic.

11:07:22

But again, a very specific focus, one that I don't think is coincidental in large order. There may be some that are random acts of violence just because of perhaps a cultural issue that came up that offended our Afghan partners, but that's not the norm. And especially as of late they are really focused on driving that wedge. The mitigation, the theaters got it right. It's just the vigilant execution of it every day.

11:07:51

Their efforts in terms of, you know, and some people misstate guardian angels as the person that is on over-watch watching over everybody during the engagement or on the base, but that is not really what the guardian angel is. I mean that is just a normal security person you'd have on a tower or over-watching. I mean you now tried to work inside the formation someone who looks, acts just like the people in the KLE, the Key Leader Engagement, whose job is not really describe or to listen but to look and to try and understand where a threat might be.

11:08:28 Now, we've got those, but the best resource out there is having an Afghan security first person that you have trusted and trained and your Afghan partners trust and train to do that because they will pick up on the subtle differences so much quicker than we will. That said, it's hard and we certainly ask a lot of our heroes every day in there and I really, you know, the comments that were passed a few months ago in terms of, you know, these are desperate times that they're trying to take, they realize they've got to put a - stop some of the progress we're making.

11:09:09 And they love to do it over this winter lull period to bolster the confidence, you know. And I firmly believe the insurgency has had a very, very tough few years and they're looking for any win they can get. And this is a very costly one, but if we break from it, the very mechanism we're hoping for the future, an Afghan security force that can provide that stability and security is at risk if we separate.

11:09:42 KAGAN: We have just under five minutes left and so I'd like to ask you whether you have any closing remarks that you'd like to make either to the folks

here at the Army Navy Club or the folks watching this from afar?

11:10:12 HUGGINS: Thanks for that opportunity. I'll just close by saying the message that I'd close with is one that there is a chance for more optimism in Afghanistan. I believe it. It is not going to look like what most folks would draw that picture to be. It is not sealed and ready to deliver yet.

11:10:42 But a comment I made earlier, I firmly believe that the Afghan security forces are on the right path, on the right azimuth. I believe that the strategy we're executing in accordance with the surge plan from '09 is achieving the effects that we wanted it to. It's just that we have adjusted troop strengths, we have adjusted timelines, and we are moving as fast as we can and our soldiers are doing incredible work there.

11:11:12 We face some tough decisions in what's going to happen in the future, but I would reiterate as long as we can continue to work off of conditions that we are achieving with our Afghan security partners, to continue to cement the hard-fought gains and the

sacrifices we'll be in pretty good shape. I know that's a hard thing to do, especially for those that are in the fight out there today, but those conditions are pretty close in terms of security.

11:11:41

I would be as transparent as I could be and tell you that, you know, over the year there I was largely disappointed in the governance development and trying to make the moves forward. I - and that's through no fault of Mr. Haviland, who is my State Department partner. It is really just trying to release those authorities from Kabul down to Kandahar. And when you look at a government that's really trying to get up to speed that quickly, I can't say it's all unexpected, but what I can do is say that the biggest thing I think was necessary was more accountability in that process of governance, more accountability.

11:12:24

But perhaps I'm looking at it through too much of a U.S. Army lens and I'm certainly not that attuned to the State Department side of that. But they did everything I could ask them to do and more, it's just there's the tough, tough fight. And I'd just close with what I started with, I just happened to be in the

right place at the right time, working with an awful lot of great folks, coalition, and I just cannot tell you how much our Australian counterparts have done for us and the Romanians in the south, Singapore.

11:13:01 Really, numbers aren't the measure. It is what they do that is the measure. And then our civilians that are forward, they have transformed anything that we thought right looked like in 2002 when I was first there. You know, and for us as General Fast asked, the key is to continue to hold onto that and weave that into the fabric that we're trying to build for the future and not lose touch with it because I do believe we've made some tremendous gains in that thanks to the sacrifice of our soldiers and our families. Thank you very much.

11:13:40 KAGAN: Well, thank you very much. We are absolutely delighted to have had you here and I know that you represent still the soldiers of the 82nd Airborne and we really, of course, want to thank them as well as you for the extraordinary sacrifices that you've all made in order to help keep Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven again for terrorists.

11:14:12 And, of course, we have a military tradition of exchanging coins and since you were so kind to give me one, I wanted to make sure you had the ISW coin to thank you so much for your service and for everything that you've done. What we're going to do now is break for about 15 minutes, those who are here, and we can get some more coffee.

11:14:40 And then when we return, we are going to talk to Lieutenant Colonel Promotable J. B. Vowell, who commanded Task Force No Slack in a very different environment from Kandahar up in Kunar where the terrain and the challenges and the enemy and the government are actually quite different. So for those of you here, enjoy your break.

11:15:09 For those of you in the out-stations, please don't hesitate to come to our website at www.understandingwar.org if you want more information on the ongoing fight in Afghanistan and the political developments there. All right. I'll see everybody back here seated at 10:30. [applause]

