



The Surge in Afghanistan: Command Voices

Part II

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11:30:20 KAGAN: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very, very much for joining us at the Institute for the Study of War today, for a discussion with our commanders from Afghanistan. It is a great pleasure to host you at the Army-Navy Club here in Washington, D.C. and it is a great pleasure to have with us today some of our real national treasures.

11:30:50 And certainly, Lieutenant Colonel, promotable, J.B. Vowell is among them. Lt. Colonel Vowell commanded a battalion up in Kunar Province, Task Force No Slack, which I think is really a phenomenal battalion name.

And I also think it was a phenomenal battalion doing a phenomenal job in really some of the most difficult terrain in one of the most difficult environments in Afghanistan.

11:31:20 Lt. Colonel Vowell, right now, is at Stanford University completing his War College fellowship year at CISAC, the Center for International Security and Arms Control, is that right?

11:31:33 VOWELL: And cooperation.

11:31:33 KAGAN: And cooperation. Alright, Center for International Security and Cooperation. Want to get your Stanford bosses who let you come out here today very, very happy with you. And he is actually working at a thesis right now Afghanistan after 2014. But of course, I got to know him while he was deployed in Afghanistan and got to visit his battalion.

11:32:05 First while he was out on leave, where I met the inimitable Joe Holliday, at that time, then No Slack Two, and now an analyst at the Institute for the Study of War. And then again in February of 2011 at a

commander's conference held by Colonel Drew Pappas, who was the commander of Task Force Bastogne, second brigade. Second?

11:32:35 VOWELL: First brigade.

11:32:35 KAGAN: First brigade, first brigade of the 101st, responsible for all of Kunar province. I'm never going to live that down, but we are absolutely thrilled to have you here to talk to us about not only a different train but a different echelon of command. So if you can all welcome for me, Lt. Colonel promotable J.B. Vowell, who will soon take command of Task Force - well of the Rakkasans...

11:33:14 VOWELL: Third brigade. 101st.

11:32:14 KAGAN: Third brigade of the 101st. And welcome, Colonel Vowell. Thank you so much for joining us.

11:33:22 VOWELL: Thank you, Dr. Kagan, thank you very much for the opportunity, thank you. It's good to be here today. I don't know if I'll do as well a job as

General Huggins did, but look forward to the opportunity for the discussion today.

11:33:33 KAGAN: Well, tell me...thank you so much for joining us and tell me a little bit before we get into the meat of things, about the area of operations that you were working in. And tell me also a little bit about Task Force No Slack.

11:33:52 VOWELL: Well, let's start with that first then. What is Task Force No Slack? What a great name, and one of the best call signs I've ever had, No Slack Six. I've been Eagle Three, the Divisions Operations Officer for the 101st, that's a really cool call sign too, Eagle Three. But No Slack just has that connotation, that ethos, just when you say it, when you hear it. Historically, going back to Vietnam, the longest serving infantry battalion in Vietnam.

11:34:21 And there's a couple different sources to the legend of the name, between Charlie Beckwith and Colonel Roscoe, previous commanders of the unit. But it really goes to never quitting. The men, the mission, or yourself. And that's what that really comes down

to. What is No Slack then and now? It's an infantry battalion. There's about six companies, give or take. They are currently deployed now and have been for about a month, so they're back at it again in Kunar Province.

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A little bit different mission set than what we're going to talk about this morning, and exactly what General Huggins was articulating very well, the security of force assistant mission and role that they're doing. But they are without a shadow of a doubt, phenomenal men and women who are at the front lines of the most difficult challenges I think we have ever - we have seen in probably our nation's history, militarily.

11:35:13

In dealing with not only tactical issues but operational and strategic issues. As a young Sergeant, or a young soldier has to deal with human beings, interacting with human beings from a different culture. So this infantry battalion, whose primary mission if you read the doctrine, is to close with, capture, and destroy the enemy and repel those counterattacks by fire. We kick doors in, we blow

stuff up for the military piece of national power. We are instruments of national power.

11:35:47 In this role, and counterinsurgency, the mission that we had for Afghanistan, much more broad than that. And thus, hard to train for. The spectrum just gets so much more wide when you talk about that mission set, because you're dealing with stability operations. You're dealing with development of governments, development projects themselves that extend government's reach to its people. And then the security framework between the Afghan people and their Afghan security forces.

11:36:15 And oh, by the way, in stride with all this there's a lot of people who are very contentious. Insurgent groups, what I call capital T Taliban, little t Taliban, and different insurgent groups. And transnational terrorist groups to include al-Qaeda. Just in this one area.

11:36:34 So this battalion task force, we're given this mission in about 2009, knowing that we're going to deploy in approximately May of 2010. So as I came on board, the

battalion and the brigade had been to Iraq three consecutive tours. And so the shift was intuitive and the ten ton elephant in the room. But there were some germane lessons to be learned and transferred to Afghanistan but not everything.

11:37:05

In Iraq, and having served in Iraq, you know it's different when you have an almost second world infrastructure. They had a technical class of people, educated class of people. Every September, books would be shipped out of Baghdad and shipped out to schools. There was a system in place for a lot of bureaucratic and governance means over there. And it had a history of performing as a government. You didn't have that in Afghanistan, you really didn't have that reach - national, provincial, to district, to the people.

11:37:33

You didn't have infrastructure. And you didn't have 32 years of war. You know, since Christmas of 1979 when the Soviets actually rolled into empower the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan, the nation Afghanistan has been at war- not conflict, not squabbles, war. So you're dealing with a human

terrain, and psychologically I would argue, just decimated, exhausted. If you're looking at the youth, even at the Taliban's days forward. We're dealing with the youth, the future and the hope of the country that they don't know what peace looks like.

11:38:11 They don't know what a normalcy looks like. Chaos is normal to them. And they don't have heroes, they don't have those people that we would normally look up to. They see the mujahedeen, the Taliban in the hills, fighting the Americans and that's power to them. It's not the baseball players, it's not the cricket players you look up to, but that's what you're competing with. Is that kind of idolatry to something strong, and that's a challenge to us.

11:38:36 So you take an infantry battalion who's got that really strong base mission set, and you try to tell them, hey, here's the context of the geopolitical history of Afghanistan. You need to understand your environment going in. And as General Huggins mentioned this morning, and kind of the takeaways of what would you want to keep going forward as we look to the future as an Army. One of those is just, we've

got such a super-educated, well trained junior leader echelon now that is capable of doing so much more with combined arms and interagency all the time. We can't lose that.

11:39:09 So you have to educate them on how to employ that and how to work with interagency folks, the provincial reconstruction team, USAID, NGOs, they're working in the same battle space or operational environment that we are with the Afghan security forces. So you have to train your task force to kind of shift its focus; one from Iraq and what we did in the surge over there to Afghanistan that is wholly different complex nature of human and physical geography. And all the baggage of history that comes with that.

11:39:43 And so that was a necessary step we had to take. And every battalion like mine, or brigade had to do kind of the same thing. There's a lot of differences between Iraq and Afghanistan. I was fortunate to have served in both countries before going back to Afghanistan again so I knew a little bit about how that needed to happen. And you asked the question,

what is No Slack, again that ethos describes who those soldiers are.

11:40:09 And they embrace that mission set, understood what has to happen. And for each other, deployed in there, and knowing that they're going to try to do some good. I'm talking about a lot of Iraq, there's very few Afghan vets, but people who are working together to do better for the Afghan people.

11:40:26 KAGAN: Tell me about the human terrain in Kunar province. Tell me about Kunar which is the area that you ended up in. What's it like out there, what can you give us some of the first impressions that you had as a battalion commander on that terrain?

11:40:51 VOWELL: Sure, I'll start off by saying that, you know General Huggins talked about RC South (ph.) and the human and physical terrain down there. Afghanistan is not contiguous. It's not homogenous. Ethnically very diverse, culturally very diverse, religiously very diverse. You have Shia and Sunni and different sects of Sunni Muslims in the country.

In Kunar, you have a lot of different, obviously mostly Pashtun as a grand tribal dominated region.

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But every little valley is beholden unto itself. They don't homogenize or come together and Kunar is not one state, if you will, or province that way. Because everybody has a different way of doing things and they have for centuries in these valleys. Very remote area, and in context, when I was there in 2004 Kunar is one of those places that didn't have roads. And it took about eight hours to go from Asadabad, the provincial capital, to Jalalabad the provincial capital in Nangarhar to the South. You know, a distance of about sixty miles, it took you a day to travel.

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But you could do it freely. You could do it in non-tactical vehicles. You could do it, in that time there wasn't such an insurgent presence in that area. Now, stepping even further back, Kunar has a history- just in the 80's- with the project of the mujahedeen and their basis of support, training, supply lines. What we would call rat lines and their movement routes historically.

11:42:22 They would tell people in Peshawar go up this mountain, take a left at this mountain, and go down to the river, go up this ridge. And you know, 28 miles away they're in the Pech Valley or they're in the outskirts of the Chapa Dara district ready to go towards Kabul. Those were historic trade routes, and what you have in Kunar is the Afghans will tell you, this artificiality of the border. The border is the problem. And that border is the problem because of Pakistan.

11:42:50 The Durand Line, as everybody knows, in 1993 was kind of drawn by the Brits to kind of separate the British India from Russia. And to this day, many of the Afghans don't recognize it because their families live in Pakistan. They want freedom of movement, freedom of the ability to go and traverse that steep terrain if you can believe it. It's also historically just licit and illicit trade when you cross the mountains there.

11:43:16 Some of it, it just it is what it is. Some of it supports and funds insurgencies as well. I mentioned

the complex nature of just being at war that whole time. But you've also got a population that's about 7-10% literate. So a vast majority of the people it's this very remote subsistence, farming based province is illiterate. And their neighbors to the North, Nuristan, the last holdouts of the Muslim conquerors, were only you know, conquered through force and converted to Islam and then renamed the Children of the Light, the People of the Light. Nuristan, that's what it translates to.

11:43:56 So you're talking a whole region in Kunar and Nuristan which is geographically very, very complex. Mountain peaks 14,000 feet, the bases are down on the river valley, about 1,500 feet. So the just vertical geography of trying to do anything there on the ground as a soldier, as a citizen, is extremely difficult and challenging. And in the counterinsurgency role, you've got these villages that are so remote - we actually went into one with our Afghan partners and they thought we were the Russians.

11:44:26 They didn't realize that the Russians had left. It sounds like those apocryphal stories of the Japanese

fighters in the islands in World War II that were discovered 20 years later or whatever. But this is true, they thought we were Soviets. And we went, no, no, we're not. We're not here to do the bad things, your Afghan partners are here to help you. You see them? They're Afghans. So you're dealing with this kind of remoteness as well. That General Huggins had to, where the coalition there was many places on his watch that just hadn't reached that far.

11:44:55

But very remote. And because of that, you've got a compliant population that's very conservative. You have the terrain that supports sanctuary and movement because there's no security presence. And more importantly there's been no governance presence. And if there's no governance presence, you're going to get your grievances addressed by whoever's the strongest guy in the room or on the hectare of land.

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And so the Taliban has been pretty effective, local Taliban in settling disputes. You're not going to get judges from Islamabad to settle your land dispute or your family dispute. It's going to take months, maybe years. You're going to get something done really

quickly, there will be a decision, and everybody's going to abide by it. At 9,000 feet in this village that has 60 people in it. There's your challenge.

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So, I could go on for days about just how complex the nature of that area is, but the people are very conservative. Very much want to, and have a history of wanting to be left alone in Kunar. They're fundamental right, they're almost like libertarians in a way, they want to be left alone. So they appreciate what the Americans have done, they appreciate what the Afghan national security forces have done.

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And I have several vignettes that are true, you know I think Greg Mortenson titled the book Three Cups of Tea. I disagree with him, it's three gallons of tea. Okay, once you get through a lot of discussion, talky talky not...jaw jaw, not war war like Winston Churchill said. When you talk and get to understand what the root causes of their problems and grievances are. I'll tell you, they want livestock to be healthy, crops to be abundant, and they want their kids to go to school.

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You don't hear that too much. Yes, they want their children to go to school. So that's their definition of prosperity. And part of what we do in counterinsurgency operations is try to identify those things that will help prosperity develop and that really, fundamentally comes down to security first in the environment and the ability for the government to provide for its people. Now it's the same kind of government where you and I go to the municipality or the county for our driver's license and all those things that we take for granted each day.

11:47:00

But there are similar things that the government provides for them. And so that's where we focused our main effort of trying to expand the security bubble with our Afghan partners to help the district governors and district nascent governments expand their reach. Again, security first, the essential precondition for what you're doing over there in this kind of terrain or this kind of challenge, is creating the environment for a good security situation. And in stride with all this, we're helping our Afghan partners become better operationally and tactical capable units.

11:47:36 And General Huggins appropriately pointed out this morning, that is the main strategy, the way ahead. Is they stand up, we're going to stand down. But they've got to be operational and self-sustaining to do that. And oh, by the way, you're in the middle of all this complex fighting and people trying to shoot at you because you're there, because you represent a coalition that's different than them. Many of those challenges. So it's difficult for units to take this kind of a broad mission set and train for it and I'm just proud of this day of what the leaders and soldiers did in No Slack getting ready to do that. And of course, the missions that they accomplished in there.

11:48:10 KAGAN: Tell me about your mission.

11:48:14 VOWELL: Again, I think the main effort, if you look back at it - going in, I had that lens from 2005 of Kunar was contentious. Kunar was remote, rural, and it was hard to get into places. Well, I came in and I saw the new roads, the bridges that had been worked on. I mean, and there's kind of an Adam Smith rule

here where once they put the paved roads in, there came the gas stations and the used car lots and more farmer's markets.

11:48:44 So this microeconomic development was happening along the roadways and bridges that didn't exist before. Hey that's great, that's kind of local prosperity and that's awesome. Farmers now have closer markets to bring stuff to, there's more bartering and trade and that was helping everybody. I was pleasantly surprised. I was not pleasantly surprised with the amount of contact and incidents up there. And without going into great detail, that area had become kind of the safe haven ground, over time.

11:49:11 So we wanted to go help the government. But at the same time, it's really hard when there's operational suicide bomber teams trying to go after the provincial governor in downtown Asadabad. One of the first crises we faced, we had to break up one of these cells and when that happened it was eye opening. They were going after the capital. And it goes without saying, that provincial capital is that center of gravity for

Kunar as far as what it's going to provide for everything. You can't lose that.

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And that was the first time I realized there was that much kind of red arrow pressure from the enemy that close to the provincial capital. Hang on a second, we can't help the district governors right now until we deal with this crisis in security, there was going to be a problem. So initially we shifted our focus of, okay let's work with the district governors to let's deal with this problem to secure Asadabad. And let's get that security bubble back. So now we can get off the main river valley into where districts need to go to.

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The challenge for us is with a thousand or so men and women, it sounds like a lot of people, but you share about 100 kilometers of border with Pakistan and all this vertical terrain and even though it's a sparse population, it's very remote. So you can't extend your physical presence everywhere. You can't be everywhere. And the fundamental axiom of counterinsurgency operations is being there to affect

change you're going to have to be there with something in some way, for some time.

11:50:35 That was difficult because we were fixed by being so far spread out in these combat operating posts already, it was very hard for us to generate more power to continue that. We were stretched. And so it was hard to surge internally for certain missions because we can only do it for periods of time because then we had to go back and deal with the areas we came from, the districts that we had come from.

11:50:57 So once we were able to do a series of operations early in 2010, Operation Strong Eagle, we named it. Battalion sized organizations. Something I did not plan on doing with the task force. Who's heard of picking up their battalion and going after 300 dug in fighters from Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan, al-Qaeda, and the Big T Taliban all working together in one area. I didn't think that was, this is 2001 again. We're bombing and fighting Taliban in dug in trenches and lines. I was shocked.

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But, you know as General Huggins talked about, the mujahedeen who were working for good of governance, we had some of those too in Kunar. Pacha Gul and some other governors who had fought there before, kind of said "hey, you want to take the high ground first, you want to own the mountains before they own you." And you talked about Joe Holliday. Joe pulled up some stuff the Soviets did in the area, and it was pretty insightful to see how tactically how Soviet battalions and units were defeated and decimated in detail by some pretty precise tactical maneuver by then the mujahedeen.

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That's exactly how they were posturing in 2010. That's exactly the terrain they were using in the approaches to the provincial capital. So we developed a series of operations to seize the high ground to allow maneuver in the valleys and the byproduct of that from a tactical perspective was something I did not anticipate either. They're coming to us in the mountains, just because we're there. So we took the fight away from the villages and the cities and brought them to the ridgelines and the mountaintops where we had seized the terrain, built crew-served

weapons around it and all the kind of tactical
firepower initiative that you would ever want to have.

11:52:45 And it goes without saying that the soldiers did
extremely valorous things. Out of one of those
missions, one of our soldiers, we've just been
notified he's earned the Distinguished Service Cross,
posthumously, Staff Sergeant Eric Shaw. But in that
fight, it was very much large human beings on human
being fighting and it took twelve hours to do this.
Five companies in contact at once. Very, very
difficult.

11:53:11 But, the end state of that was all the political
entities, the provincial council, the governor, the
district governors of the areas were ecstatic that
finally something had been done to this growing
insurgent problem that kept coming into the Kunar. It
was a festering cancer that had metastasized and it
was destabilizing everything. So that was the first
thing that we had to do in that first three months,
was push that bubble back. And then from then on we
did a series of operations like that to expand the
security bubbles elsewhere.

11:53:42 Ending with Strong Eagles three and four in April of 2011 before we left. Similar operations to prevent and preempt a spring offensive. You know, people have talked about the fighting seasons, well that's true in some sense because there's snows in the passes that prevent fighters from coalescing, moving, supporting, inside that area. And we're 1,000 to 4,000 meters off the Pakistan border, we're right there in most of our camps.

11:54:13 So, to go in early spring, and tactically interdict that movement so they can't present a problem later on, was essentially what we're trying to, buy that space. Because at the same time, we had such success in the valleys with a number of district governments that were actually holding good councils. Who were actually training some of the district councils on how to do budget execution - you know, here's your budget, you go in a room, work it out, what do you want to do with your council representatives from the villages in that area, you determine what you want.

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I personally was not a fan of projects and spending money for the sake of spending money. That quite frankly is dumb. But if there's something you're trained in the government to do, a budget execution which I think is what most of our governments are supposed to do, providing capabilities, they have to execute a budget, they got better at that. So we saw progress on that main effort of governance while we were there.

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And I became a believer in that local level of government and the efficacy of having that as a viable solution, quite frankly, rather than focusing on the national level. There's got to be connective tissue between. So we worked as best we could at our level, again, at the tactical and operational level, trying to push that up, you gotta put the ties in that bind national, provincial, and district. Somewhat successful, I couldn't affect that change higher of course, it's not my purview. But what we could do is get the government to be seen as providing, and listening to, and helping the people. And it didn't work everywhere. But in some districts it was working pretty effectively and pretty good.

11:55:50 KAGAN: Tell me a little bit about what good local government looked like in some of the districts that were in your area of responsibility.

11:56:03 VOWELL: First off, I think it takes a good leader, a good leadership. And that was part of the problem, you have what really wasn't talked about today so far was endemic corruption at all levels in Afghanistan. And you have some of the leadership that they're trying to survive. And this whole society is a survivorship society. So, you've got some leaders who are very personally involved in lucrative businesses or illicit deals that preclude them from being affective and fair governors of their districts.

11:56:37 I mean, just as a macro example. So the ones we saw a good success with, that they were providing for their people were the ones that they cared about their area. And in a couple of the cases I'm talking the guys who had fought there or were from there, from the province. We have district governors who are from Mazar-i-Sharif. Okay, we have a district governor in

the southern Khas Kunar, in the Kunar province, a little different, it caused some challenges for him.

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But that leadership perspective, it's amazing what a difference good leadership can make. And that was the essential precondition for good district governance. Now, what does it look like on the ground? Many times that I personally witnessed, it's just the day to day talking with a lot of people. It seems chaotic. You know, governors having the approachability of just people coming up to them. Scheduled meetings for development councils or the agricultural development meetings. Those things shuras inside of the building that they would have. That's Afghan governance at the local level.

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I mean when they're listening to the grievances and trying to do something about it and if they can't they're raising it higher to the provincial government and oh by the way, not relying upon the coalition to solve their problems. As we stand down, the governance has to stand up, not just security. Those are the vignettes that I saw were effective. Again,

fifteen districts in Kunar, not all of them so perfect that way. None of them are perfect. Trending in the right azimuth and direction as General Huggins was saying this morning.

11:58:10

But those things take time to learn and grow and develop. They haven't had that kind of level of governance there. And I know in other areas of Afghanistan have not had that governance capability that far forward, ever. So that's new and it's going to take a little time. But I saw a lot of hope of what those district governments could do for their people. The other thing I'll tell you is everybody gets included in the tent in these meetings, and that means the Taliban.

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So you've got meetings where a coalition commander in his heavy army uniform sits down, breaks bread, talks with people, knowing that there is Taliban representatives in the room. And I'm two, three, five feet away from them. Knowing. If they're not active, they're reporting back. I think what we need to understand and I told my guys you need to understand that that's okay. That's okay. Because it

essentially feeds the approach that government from GIROA's perspective, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is trying to reach out to everybody and include everybody.

11:59:15 Having said that, you can't have the specter of the Taliban or using that to foment violence of problems. But if you look strategically, my opinion - every nation has had to come terms with some sort of reconciliation process and how does this end. It starts at the small levels too. It starts by including some of those entities that have a stake in the future.

11:59:41 And you have to include the possibility that either capital T or little t Taliban as we call them, the local Taliban, lower-case t, they're involved in the process. Or you risk excluding them when the music stops. And everybody knows that when you're in the room and the music's playing, when it stops you want the best chair in the room and you want the chair to be facing the way you want it.

12:00:05 The Taliban are no different. So, they want to be part of that political process and they're testing the waters, from what I saw in Kunar. I can't speak for the country. And I would tell my senior leaders that, there's hope here. Was it a dramatic reconciliation? No. But it's part of that whole process. So that is the inside baseball of what a district government meeting would look like, or what district governors are doing.

12:00:32 And I'll end with, they don't have money, yet. And that's the problem. They have authorities but they don't have money. They don't have the resources to go - you know what, we're going to provide so many seeds and agricultural training this year to this district. Come sign up for it. They don't have it, they have a largess or the gifts from the international community to do that. That's got to be part of the solution is how is that effective governance resourced to do its job.

12:00:59 KAGAN: Now, that governance obviously was challenged by enemy groups and you've mentioned them a little bit. And I'd actually like you to, if you can,

describe why you think that there were enemy groups operating in Kunar province. What, who are they, what were their objectives and how were they interacting with the situation in Pakistan, across the Durand Line that we recognize.

12:01:36 VOWELL: Great, great questions. It is a fact they are a problem in the sanctuaries, staging areas across the border. I had one reporter one time ask me, point blank, what is Pakistan's complicity in this? I said I can't know that, I don't see that. What I see is absolutely people coming across the border and people going back and forth. I see legitimate families moving all the time, but I know, because I see it, insurgent groups facilitating what they want to do through that area all the time.

12:02:07 Now, specific to your question - there's the historical reason. Kunar, the gateways from Peshawar and the Northwest Frontier province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, historically have been the basis of support, training, advising, arming, making them ideologues in the 80's in this case, sending them across the border in there. And Kunar was a place,

like, close in the South, well still parts of the East but still south of Kunar, a place where they could project more combat power from.

12:02:38

And they had a compliant population, very conservative society, very conservative. So, Kunar historically has meant a lot as a gateway to Kabul. As is Jalalabad further south, the words from Torkham-Khyber Pass, directly on the highway to Kabul. But what people don't realize until they're there is Kunar also has that history, it's the gateways. And way back in history, I guess apocryphally but I think it's true, Alexander, some of his forces came through there.

12:03:08

And he sent some through Kunar to the passes, like Nawa and into the Indus River Basin that way. So it has historically been a movement route, East and West. It serves that purpose to this day. Now what do these groups, well first off, who are they? We saw absolute al-Qaeda representation in the province while we were there. It wasn't thousands, it was there though. We saw groups that are primarily based, or were initially based in Pakistan. Now found a great purchase in Kunar because at the time we arrived, we and the

Afghan security forces had never been there, nor had government.

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So, that's by definition a non-governed space and provides great sanctuary. A great place to, and they would bring families over. Plant the flag if you will, hey look around, nobody's here. We've got a great place, the Pakistan military aren't harassing us, there's no Americans here to harass us. But we can go after the Americans on our terms because we see them driving on the roads. Let's do that. So you have those Pakistani based groups that found purchase. You also had Afghan local Taliban roped into that. There were several different groups I could name.

12:04:16

But more important what we saw, at least there, a lot of collusion and cooperation. By that, constructively, here's an example. There were several different fights we had, we know that fighters were shared from one group, sent to reinforce another group. Not holistically part of the same goals and ideals but they reinforce efforts that way. Without going into further details, that tells a lot that if insurgent groups are trying to stake their claim as

the legitimate rule or leader of their organization, why would they want to share resources and efforts? But they were doing it.

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So there was a collusion of fighting and goals, I think for the sake of greater goals. And Kunar is where they were doing it. You know, you go further south you talk Haqqani, very homogeneous. You talk about Kunar and Nuristan there's a bunch of different groups that were kind of working together. And I articulated, I think at the end, when that music stops and if you go back and look at our vital national security interests from the NSS of 2010, defeating, disrupting, dismantling al-Qaeda is numero uno, as stated.

12:05:26

That music stops, and security forces for Afghanistan and their government there are not sufficient to preclude reemergence of al-Qaeda, that's probably one of the best places they can. Between Kunar and Nuristan, you have what every military - insurgency or otherwise - needs, a logistics line back to the East to places like Peshawar. You can look at a map and see that. And they have those capabilities. When we

went in there, 2001, that's the reason you had a lot of camps on the Eastern part of Afghanistan, because they are very quickly logistically tied to the bases they need in the East.

12:06:03

I don't have a crystal ball, I just think that it's intuitive that if I'm a military force and there's not enough presence I can stay there. If the Americans leave, it's still ungoverned, I have the Khorasan that I want as al-Qaeda. The original Islamic caliphate right there. Or call it what you want, it's a base from which they can project their combat power transnationally. That's what Kunar potentially gives. Again, I think the glass is more than half full. I think Kunar will not elect, the people will not elect that kind of, those kind of transnational groups that will really infest and come back in, it would be really hard for them to do that.

12:06:42

KAGAN: Tell me, why you think that some of the local dynamics that you've seen that make you think that some of the local folks in Kunar perhaps accept these groups because they use force rather than because they share ideology.

12:07:05 VOWELL: No, absolutely, coercion is a big piece of this. There's night letters that go on, there's coercion. We had several groups go into villages and kidnap men and women and hold them hostage so the village would turn and support whatever element that weren't in there. That happened in Kunar. And that was one of the, actually quite, that was one of the guys we were chasing down pretty hard the entire time we were there. He was just an absolute sociopath.

12:07:30 But I think more it's, from what I saw, al-Qaeda or whomever comes in there and tries to take over the whole province is going to have to resort a spectrum of violence that is unbecoming a long term solution for the citizens of Kunar. They're not going to put up with that. I think there's a spectrum they're absorbing right now, personally. I don't see a path where they're going to be allowed to say, okay you guys come on in here, plant the black flags of al-Qaeda here and you're welcome.

12:08:01 There may be some bartering going on, I don't know. But it's still be a good place. They don't have to be

in Asadabad. Al-Qaeda could come in to the rural capillary valleys and still just not deal with that and still have what they want. And so I think Kunar could still be a viable place in governance area for the people there. But it's also easily used by transnational terrorist groups in the future if we're not careful.

12:08:27 KAGAN: Now one of the concepts that we talk about when we look at transnational terrorist groups is a counterterrorism option. The idea that there is a mechanism by which to target individual leaders and networks of fighters in order to reduce their presence in an area. Tell me what you think Task Force No Slack added to those capabilities.

12:09:10 That's a great question. Again, I'll refer to what General Huggins mentioned this morning earlier, and that was one of the great things we've developed over the years because of necessity is the interoperability between special operations forces. Counterterrorism is linked to counterinsurgency. CT missions general, the special operations forces conducting those

missions generally infantry task forces like ours doing the counter insurgency mission.

12:09:37

I think CT in isolation is a very finite set and it accomplishes a certain goal. Currently it's a component of counterinsurgency. The targeting of key leaders of groups or mid-level leaders of groups, the people who are actually building the stuff, moving the stuff, using the stuff, IEDs or fighters. You take those networks down through the leadership it has an operational effect over time.

12:10:07

But you have to keep at it or it will rebuild. Simultaneously, No Slack, going out there, working with the government, working with the Afghan security forces to continue the security presence is a complimentary approach. And in the future if we resort to CT alone, I would think that it would be a very narrow target set. Much higher levels of targeting. But you won't necessarily have in the future, and one of the reasons I'm here in the capital region this week to do this research.

12:10:37 After 2014 if you don't have a residual force like ours, you won't have complimentary effects. You won't have the ability to clear the terrain that the targeting was happening in. And you won't know the effect sometimes. And more importantly, Afghan security forces aren't there, and the governance and its continued development may be at risk.

12:11:00 KAGAN: Tell me a little bit more about your research on what the U.S. force presence and the Coalition Force presence might need to be after 2014 and what other, in addition to forces, what other resources do you think the Afghan state will require. Tell us about your paper.

12:11:28 VOWELL: Oh, sure, for my paper. As a War College student, I've got to produce some sort of research project. So, they're actually going to hold me accountable for enjoying a year at Stanford, California. So my penance is to do some sort of survey and research project. And it can be a lot of key strategic issues. And what I came to six months ago driving across country with two dogs, two kids, cars and U-Haul trying to find a place to live was you

know what, I'm really passionate about the future of Afghanistan, Pakistan. It matters.

12:11:56 So, let me do some research on that. And it's a very broad, obviously, lots of issues involved with that. But specifically, what are some of the courses of action if you will, for force structure and mission sets in Afghanistan after the combat mission with NATO and ISAF ends in 2014. And by a strange coincidence our Secretary this morning, Secretary Panetta put out some, I think three tiers of missions for Afghanistan.

12:12:24 Some of those are from the NATO conferences in Chicago in May, primarily talked about counterterrorism and a training mission. The two things we're going to, I guess, change to. Those are security force assistance mission. Right now we're doing a broad counterinsurgency piece where we're focusing on securing the population. That's going to shift. It's shifting now, this transition to security to a military primal competent of going after bad guys, put it that way. And making sure the security forces has the enablers and capabilities.

12:13:00 And that's that third tier that Secretary Panetta, if I'm not mistaken, mentioned this morning. And as General Huggins mentioned, that's the one thing they're concerned about, the Afghan security forces, is those capabilities they don't have with medevac and air and intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, fires. Things that Army and Marine units at brigade and higher do extremely well. They're concerned about that, they don't have all of those capabilities.

12:13:25 And in my research, you know, a couple historical lens, Vietnam in '75 - how we economically supported the regime and then hey, Soviet experience and withdrawal in the late 80's, early 90's and leaving Najibullah holding the bag with a couple billion a year. He managed for three years after that because the Soviets were paying his security forces and when the Soviet Union collapsed, the money collapsed with it, Najibullah was killed in Kabul very shortly after.

12:13:54 So, some lessons to be learned there. That CT and security force assistance are as important but what I'm researching and finding and talking to a bunch of much more intelligent people that can articulate this

better than myself is that there's got to be obviously an economic and diplomatic effort in the region. If you go back, again, just draw from the National Security Strategy documents and what our vital National Security interest is, essentially disrupting, defeating, dismantling al-Qaeda is extremely important but there's also a component in the region of non-proliferation.

12:14:22

So, the presence with that national security interest is germane to when you're talking about now, what's it going to take mathematically to have troops in those areas. I don't know. I think there's a good number, you've articulated a good case, reading your article about having 30,000-ish. And that's based on really good math of where brigades and counterterrorism forces would be in security state, consulate efforts as well.

12:14:51

You just can't mass everybody in one area for economy of force. They're going to be dispersed to be effective. And that's requires a lot more presence. It depends on how scoped our national command authority says this is exactly what I want you to do

with the mission set. That'll probably drive, okay, it won't be guys like me. It'll be joint staffers who are doing the real science and math on this and exactly what formations, what capabilities and therefore how many civilians and military need to remain.

12:15:20

I think that if you go to one end of the spectrum and you go with just a few thousand soldiers that's not enough to really secure yourself and do either security force assistance or counterterrorism too well. I think that's what my own research is showing, talking to a lot of smarter people this week here in the capital region. If you go very large, you could run the risk of having the security forces from Afghanistan become too reliant in those areas because we're there taking care of them. I think that can be mitigated, I really do.

12:15:52

There's got to be a really good, I think, science to exactly how you approach troops to task based upon the missions that we're given. That really is what needs to happen, militarily. Economically, we've got to stay invested in the region. You've got to support

the security forces. You've got to have a sustainable force that works for Afghans in the out years. At the same time, diplomatically you've got to continue things like reconciliation, continue the presidential election support in 2014 and beyond.

12:16:21 The government can't collapse on itself either. So there's probably, in my opinion, economic aid packages that continue. Much like we do with other countries to this day.

12:16:34 KAGAN: I'm going to turn to the audience for some questions. Do we have any questions from the audience? Please. Go right ahead.

12:16:45 MS: I wanted to ask you about [inaudible] media coverage. Local, regional types, Afghan, Pakistan. Do they embed with you, and what was the coverage like and how did you, if you did at all, change your operations knowing that they were in your presence?

12:17:05 VOWELL: It's good. One of the things talking about one of the original questions you asked me, you know, how did you get ready to deploy. Well, understanding

your environment, being aware of your situation is absolutely critical. And you have to take into account that fourth estate of Afghan media. That was kind of surprising to me, I didn't realize the TV presence, the print media presence had proliferated in the years I had left.

12:17:29

So I grabbed onto a bunch of them. Basically, they hang around provincial capital at Asadabad and hang around the governor's compound looking for stories. So to answer your first question, none of them wanted to embed with me. Not because they didn't like us, but because they just, eh, I don't want to do that, it's safer here. So there's some pretty good, I mean smart as a whip doing that for Tolo TV and some other agencies. Local or regional. Didn't have Pakistan press where I was. That would probably not have gone over too well with the local population, but.

12:17:58

What I did do was include them. For example, we would participate in the governor's weekly security conference, all this. And I would make myself available and so would the Afghan commanders to Q&A's in the hallway. We did a couple press conferences in

Pashto with them. And you have to, as a commander on the ground you have to embrace that. That's, I think maybe directly answering that part of the question.

12:18:25 Secondly, my personal opinion on media overall is that I embrace it. Not for reasons you might think, it's not so oh, I'll get on C-Span tonight. It's particularly United States Citizens have a right to know what their soldiers, sons and daughters, are doing over there. And they need to see what's happening. I think that's sacrosanct, I do. There are limits to operational security, as you know in your field, I'm sure. But that's number one.

12:18:54 And number two, I had a particular awakening when I had an embedded national media reporter from ABC News who went with us on several missions. And in one of these missions, we're at a place about 9,000 feet up in a place no one had ever been. It was on an al-Qaeda rat line, and we surprised a bunch of people and killed them onto the way in the door. Well, the village elder comes and finds us the next morning and says you killed two school children, we're really upset with you.

12:19:19

Okay, I'll call your bluff. I'm from Alabama, but I can play Texas Hold 'Em. Show me those children that we killed. Oh, well, we'll find them. No, no, no, I'll stop what I'm doing. Let's, we were there for three days. On day two they finally discovered the four mid-30's al-Qaeda slash Taliban fighters who had beards with two fists, chest racks, weapons, that were killed. And so when we had our shura upon this discovery of enlightenment of what really happened, there's this national media reporter who is with us walking through the mountains and has seen the entire story develop.

12:19:56

So as I gently approached the village elder trying to give him a golden bridge of escape himself from this prison he's drawn for himself, I said, quite honestly I don't see a problem here. Do you have a problem with why these men died? And he confessed, no I don't. I said, do you have problem with what we're doing here? No. And the Afghans are doing here? No. Okay, well we're here to help you. Now, let's get that out of the way, let's talk. And I'm telling you

the power of having a news camera [gestures behind his shoulder].

12:20:28 It doesn't matter if it was from ABC news or if from an Afghan. I guarantee if it was an Afghan journalist the same effect would have been there. They know, they know. And so I, as an Army officer you kind of are reared to understand that you have to be very careful with media aware. And I agree with that, but at the same time I think our soldiers have the best stories to tell and in many cases, unanticipated, the media can be an enabler to what you're trying to accomplish. It was inadvertent but I was darn glad it happened, so.

12:21:02 KAGAN: Please.

12:21:07 SHENOA HERLINGER: Hi, Shenoa Herlinger from Data Tactics. I had the privilege of working with the Kagans very briefly at Afghanistan Summer, excuse me, Summer 2011. Sir, I would like to know - my interest was very much piqued when you said that you saw direct collusion and cooperation between the various insurgent groups which are myriad in Kunar. What do

you feel the implications are for Kunar or possibly the entirety of Afghanistan, particularly with the recent al-Qaeda push to go into Kunar? Or more of an al-Qaeda push?

12:21:42 VOWELL: Yeah, and again, I am dated. This is a year and a half ago, when I left. I don't know exactly what's happening today, I don't have those kind of insights. And again, we have fought this war over twelve years, one year at a time. So, I can't speak specifically to the intelligence of what's happening. I think a lot of the same is still happening with the different groups there. I know that is true. What does it all mean? Well, you could look at it as why are they having to cooperate together, it sounds like they're panicking.

12:22:12 I don't buy that line of logic. I think there's a deliberate reason they're trying to master abilities of what they have on coalition forces, in this case in Kunar. I think it is simply they're caught between a good news story of what the Pakistan military actually did in Bajaur, and Dir and Mohmand 2008, 2009 when they started pushing in. They pushed those miscreants

back into Afghanistan. Well those miscreants, you know, again they found that place, hey, there's nobody here.

12:22:46 I think that has more to do with why they're there now. And again, Kunar just has been contentious. There's just so many places in Afghanistan you could have a good sanctuary. But to have a future place where you have permanent presence. Those part of the extremist spectrum - and the arguments made, the Taliban is really focused on Afghanistan, they don't want to do anything else but own that country.

12:23:13 Whereas al-Qaeda obviously a transnational terrorist group that wants the destruction of the West as the precursor to an Islamic caliphate. That area could give that to them, and that may be the reason there's just such contentious fights all the time for that area. And a lot of it, quite frankly, from what I saw then, was just who's the top dog in this fight? And so somebody's trying to, I can fight this and show myself to my masters. And no, I'm going to do better. So there's a competition that was going on when I saw, when I was there. Does that answer your question, or?

12:23:46 FS: Yeah, thank you.

12:23:49 KAGAN: Please.

12:23:51 SYDNEY FREEDBERG, AOL DEFENSE: ...Afghanistan is no longer this all-consuming conflict, I don't know, I mean, are your Rakkasans going to be preparing to deploy to Afghanistan or are they going to be going to a different mission? How is the Army as a whole, you know in your view as an up and coming O6, going to...How is the Army as a whole going to have to institutionalize some of the things it's learned over the last decade plus and in other areas change and move on a different set of missions?

12:24:43 VOWELL: I'll give you my opinion on this, this is my personal opinion. You can draw some parallels and lessons learned from our experience in Southeast Asia in the 70's and what we did as a military to focus on the greater threat at the time, the Soviet Union and the German defense plan. It gave us tremendous institutional focus. We also rebuilt ourselves as an institution, professionally, with the volunteer force.

instituting that, getting rid of the draft, all of the military did.

12:25:12 Doctrinally this whole air/land battle concept to support what we were doing on the planes of Europe. Building the systems and platforms, the M1 Abrams Tank, the Bradley, the Apache, the MLRS. Those systems that would fight that big fight. So we kind of rebuilt ourselves as a professional force coming out of Southeast Asia. And quite frankly, I would argue we couldn't run out Southeast Asia fast enough, mentally.

12:25:37 Because we took that whole counterinsurgency guerilla, irregular warfare, lessons learned, and I think as a young man growing up in the Army in the late 80's, early 90's we tossed that aside. It was revisited only in the discussion of developing light infantry divisions in the 80's for the expressed purpose of operations in Latin America. So, as a culture we've got to be careful that we don't jettison those hard won lessons and capabilities we have in our professional force now as I would argue we did to an

extent rebuilding ourselves in the 1970's and 80's as an institution.

12:26:16 And that is my opinion. I think we're at that inflection point, now, where you've heard the President say it, you've heard the Secretary say it, that are rebalancing towards the Asia-Pacific region has a bunch of logical lines and thought process to that. It serves as kind of that focus, I think, quite frankly on the Army. I think in the road ahead you've gotta keep the foundation of what we do as brigades, infantry forces, intact.

12:26:48 Do those lessons learned that I think the emphasis on mission command is probably the most important thing we've won out of Iraq and Afghanistan as an Army. And that is the ability of trust to be decentralized in its planning and preparation and execution to very low levels. When I came in, first unit with the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, there was only a very few amount of senior people in the unit that could talk to helicopters and employ rockets over the shoulder.

12:27:25 Our specialists are doing that. They're first term enlistees that they know how to do that. We've got NCOs that know how to talk to joint aircraft. We have such capabilities with biometrics and forensics and quite frankly the police work of detection, situational awareness and drawing conclusions and analysis that has been institutionalized. That didn't, from my perspective as a young platoon leader in 1992, that didn't exist.

12:27:51 We were going to fight a big airborne fight, seize an airfield and blow a lot of stuff up. We could still do that, I argue we're still going to do that pretty well if somebody calls upon us to do that. But we're much more savvy. We're much more capable as a future. So the third part of your question there, for the Rakkasans, I don't know that future. That could be a potential security force mission force, or any brigade in the Army in Afghanistan.

12:28:21 But I know that when I go there, and other brigades will have to do the same thing they always have to do. Focus on their mission essential task lists, those four or five things that they are told they've got to

be good at in case the balloon goes up again so they can do it. And that means fighting as a brigade combat team in direction of our national command authority when called. Does that answer your question? Okay.

12:28:50 KAGAN: Please.

12:28:56 JONATHAN SCHRODEN: Sir, John Schrodin with CNA's Center for Stability and Development. We heard your opinions, or sort of your academic thoughts if you will earlier about the number of troubles that we might need in Afghanistan come 2015. And obviously there's a lot of discussion on that particular topic these days. But there's a question that goes along with that, which people don't seem to be as addressing at least as straightforwardly which is - how long do you think we will need to have a force presence in Afghanistan to accomplish what it is that we want to accomplish there.

12:29:26 VOWELL: Great question. I will tell you up front, I'm not qualified to answer that, I really am not. What I've done in my, and I told Dr. Kagan I'm

perpetrating an intellectual fraud in the first place by being a fellow at Stanford, but if they're going to make me do research and have me come out here - what I have concluded looking at NATO documents and others is NATO leadership is already talking about a transition decade. I'm not quite sure what that means either. I don't know if that means ten years, I don't know if that means 2014 to 2017, I've seen that number.

12:30:55

I personally think the time is less important than the conditions, as a military guy, the conditions on the ground and what that means. I think there's a really good thought process that you can't always be there. You may not want to turn this into like a Korea defense, that's a different paradigm anyway, where we're always there. I'm not sure that's relevant. I think the conditions of whether the Afghan security forces are capable of providing their own security on their own means, with their own means. Continuing economic and diplomatic support is probably about that time frame.

12:30:34

That could be two years after, that could be December 2014, I don't know. If things accelerate and they get

that good. I don't know, probably not. It could be five years back. I do not know the answer to your question in that way. I think whatever the national command authority decides to do has got to be based upon, you know, what are those conditions politically for Afghanistan and therefore military for Afghanistan in the enduring state there.

12:31:05 KAGAN: Catherine Dale

12:31:09 CATHERINE DALE: As Dr. Kagan says, my name is indeed Catherine Dale, my home institution is the Congressional Research Service, Colonel Vowell, thanks so much for being with us today and for all of your service. And congratulations on your upcoming gig with the Rakkasans. Questions basically about the ANSF. Right now on the ground in Afghanistan we're in the middle of what is actually a very uncomfortable shift from partnering to advising. 101st is a great example, the Rakkasans were there as a BCT but both Strike and Bastogne are doing this experimental how do we advise thing.

12:31:42 Now part of what's happening right now on the ground is a really curious merging narrative that not only is it time to move on from partnering, but that partnering was a bad idea in the first place because we did it for them, we raised expectations, all kinds of stuff. I wonder if you could say a few words about your own experiences partnering with ANSF and whether and how those actually paid off in constructive ways. Thank you.

12:32:08 VOWELL: Sure, that's a great question. Previous life here, a few months back I was the G3 Operations Officer for the 101st so when my commanding general, trying to develop what those brigades were going to do and we were faced with a unique challenge that everybody was going to deploy but as different structures. Some brigades, like Strike sent about 300 plus folks, just the leadership to try and advise. Everybody else stayed back. Bastogne was kind of the halfway, you know, a couple thousands.

12:32:39 And third brigade, Rakkasans, currently are a brigade combat team based upon troop numbers. So without boring you to death with details, those are the facts.

So just a year ago we didn't know what that's going to look like and trying to do those missions. From my perspective, your question about partnership. It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway, that you can't want it more than they do.

12:33:07

And unfortunately, we learned that through some hard lessons, you can't want it more than they do. So, in the partnership paradigm where you're, what the Pashtu phrase is the shohna ba shohna, the shoulder to shoulder. I'm with you, I'm with you brother, we're going to go together up this hill and into this village and on our FOB we're going to live side by side. There's a trust and a comradery alone that is worth the effort, there is. From an institutions perspective, that training and enabling and advising only comes by being there with them, so that...

12:33:43

I can't give you the full definition of partnership but being there with them, talking with them, help training them, listen to what they can and can't do and helping them through that process is probably around the definition of partnership. Those were the things we focused on. And it also meant giving them

the opportunity to take leads and advances. We would sit weekly and do a security intel meeting, alone, just the military entities. Afghan Border Police, Police, Army, and ourselves.

12:34:11 Well we got some great assets to determine where bad guys are and things are happening. They don't have a paired capability like that but they've got great HUMINT as General Huggins mentioned this morning. They know what's going on. And they have good SIGINT they can listen to the open mike communications pretty easily when Taliban and others are using unsecured radio communications and they have instant translations. So they have little SIGINT kind of capability too, at the tactical level.

12:34:38 But we would share that information, let them go first. What do you see? What do you see? What do you see, kind of stuff. And they were on it. And so we didn't have to train them to do a lot of those things, that partnership was just kind of a shared understanding of the problems and the battle space and the situation. That to me was valuable. Their corollary is absolutely you can have a dependency

developed with some security forces, and I think fuel was probably the biggest one.

12:35:09

I think everybody in this room is shaking their head if you wore a uniform and were over there, it's fuel, It's fuel. There are other things too, ammunition becomes a problem. Pay for soldiers becomes a problem. I think that's been largely moving actually better, the way they're doing the money issues now. But that could have produced a dependency and I could tell you many stories of our own commanders, platoon leaders trying to, no lock up the fuel pumps and you're not going to get our fuel.

12:35:35

And that kind of is a shock to some of them, like, hey, we're supposed to partner, right? That doesn't mean you get to have all of my stuff. You've got your own system, and that's the problem. Their systems aren't, they're so nascent, they're not developed, they're not operational, they don't flow like ours do. The tactics are one thing, but the logistics of being operational and self-sustaining are themselves limiting the security forces in Afghanistan.

12:36:00 And it is what it is, so that did cause some consternation for us a couple times. I think in the aggregate though, my opinion, dealing with one and up to five battalions by the time I left, that partnering, we couldn't get enough of it. I didn't have enough forces to partner with everybody. But I can see the point that's been raised, I think rightly so, that it creates a dependency. And that's gotta be broken in this transition.

12:36:27 KAGAN: Other questions? Please.

12:36:34 MARK KUSTRA: My name is Mark Kustra, I'm a AfPak hand, I'm actually in a theater billet right now. I spent a year in Helmand and I was just curious, embedded with the district governor working governance issues and tribal issues, like you said it's very different in Kunar. Knowing that I might end up going there next, what were the main grievances that they brought to GIROA looking for a government in Afghanistan support for. For us it was like, water and land rights drove everything and major source of grievance. Just curious what you saw in Kunar.

12:37:05 VOWELL: Corruption.

12:37:07 MARK KUSTRA: Corruption. Well, obviously [laugh].

12:37:10 VOWELL: That was the major grievance, was nothing could get done because there was a quid pro quo or you had to pay for something, you had to get something to get your wheat bushels and you had...that was that was generally the biggest problem and challenge was that. At every level. Water can become an issue, not as much as you would think up there because the snow melts in the springs are actually, and they've done some amazing, amazing terraced architecture with their agricultural designs from the capillary valleys down the main valley.

12:37:46 Water was a problem only when it flooded. And that happened pretty bad when we were there, they had a historic flood that wiped out, two, three of our bridges, I think? And a lot of land, just wiped it out. Access to water wasn't so much the issue. I have to think a minute what other grievances were. Jobs, just a paycheck. I need to work, the farming's

not enough. So being able to support themselves, and I think that's true just about anywhere.

12:38:17

Once you take the illiterate males off the street by giving them jobs, man security kind of helps. But they have a legitimate right or reason, I shouldn't say right, reason to want to be employed somewhere. They've got families, they have responsibilities. You'll see that if you got to Kunar, I think. Again, I'm dated, that may have been solved. But that is, the economy up there, the local economy is probably the big thing. What people need are more than just scratching the earth and growing some corn and supporting themselves.

12:38:47

I mean, they're growing their corn to feed their livestock. You know if you read Matt Ridley or somebody else who's smarter than me about this, that's biblical stuff. They've got to get beyond that subsistence where they're feeding their own animals their crops because they don't have large hectares; they have small rooms this size full of corn, that's it. So they have an employment problem and an economy that's not there, so.

12:39:10 KAGAN: Before we go to closing remarks, I have one last question for you. And it's actually a basic question, I mean you've ranged really into some phenomenal strategic issues. But, for those of folks who have not actually had the extraordinary privilege of traveling to Kunar province or indeed Afghanistan at all. Could you talk a little bit about the tyranny of that terrain?

12:39:40 VOWELL: It is biblical. The terrain dictates everything. The terrain has dictated the ethnic divisions in the country, the terrain has dictated the trade routes. And I disagree, some scholars call it the graveyard of empires. I think it's the crossroads of conquest, more accurately. Everybody's been through there at some point. It's happened. It hasn't necessarily cost the empire their lives, but the terrain dictates that.

12:40:06 From the Silk Road routes to security. Everything, every movement as an infantryman there is extremely excruciatingly difficult. That first fight I mentioned, the battalion fight that we did, Strong

Eagle One was in June of 2010. By mid-day it was 120 degrees in the valley. And the guys were getting shot at, I mean just constant barrages of firefights, you move, you get out in the open exposed again and then here comes the enemy again. Just appalling conditions with all the stuff you're wearing, in the mountains.

12:40:38

And we weren't really climbing too many of the mountains, we came in via helicopter, in the middle night, boop, spread out. Drug in some cruise served weapons and said come on. But fighting in those conditions is extremely, I can't relate it to anything else. It's like running a marathon, you're just going to lose...the most important thing to me that day was ammunition and IVs. Everybody got IVs, intravenous fluids. That's what the terrain does to you.

12:41:07

In the wintertime, we did a couple of air assaults high in the mountains, right where we had two, three foot snow drifts. Not bad, but I had one company that was just totally immobilized by trying to move up that terrain. As you can imagine, trying to move in some ski resort, with all your crew-served weapons on an unapproved black diamond trail, because it's like

this. Imagine that, oh by the way, a lot of people are watching what you're doing, and/or shooting at you or you might be shot at at any moment or ambushed.

12:41:36 It just, it's very, very challenging. Just simple movements and logistics drive everything. Basing support, you've got to secure your lines or you're everywhere, everything can be attacked. And there's not a well-developed infrastructure as you might take for granted here in the United States, everybody knows that. But it's very, very difficult. And when some roads go out, it really causes, you know, problems to get resupplied.

12:42:03 The reason General Huggins mentioned, you need a lot of aviation over there is because that is the decisive element of combat power in that theater. To project forces, to move forces, to maneuver. Gaining a positional advantage against the enemy is done vertically. It's done by moving through the air because the terrain is that horrendous. I know of some units that in the early days would walk everywhere and it took them 40 days to go 40 miles.

12:42:32 I could see that. Because you're just going up these unbelievable Hindu Kush mountains in Kunar. And that is a fact bearing a problem. So, you have cold, cold winters. You have hot, hot summers. Just the climate there is in physical geography accommodation in concert is the challenge you're going up against, it's hard to use it to your advantage.

12:43:00 KAGAN: What, as we come to closing remarks, is there anything else that you would like to say?

12:43:13 VOWELL: Yeah, first I haven't had a chance to thank the soldiers, the men and women who were with us in Kunar, 2010, 2011. They absolutely were very, very heroic. But I would also say I'm not so prideful as to not acknowledge that that's not an isolated event. The sister units that I know of, and other units in Afghanistan and Marines: heroes. The stuff that they're trying to go up against these days it sounds, it sounds easy to do a large battalion or brigade fight against tanks and stuff nowadays when that's what we used to train to.

12:43:50

Is we're going to go up against big formations and destroy it, and man that's a science, how do we destroy these things and engage them in time before they destroy us. It sounds real, that I think is easy. That is easy now, compared to what you have to do on the ground in an environment such as Afghanistan, and Iraq at certain times too, very similar in some cases. Where your next step could be your last. So what they did in succeeding that mission there with the Afghan people, that reputation is a result of their efforts.

12:44:23

And I want to formally thank them in this forum, the soldiers and leaders of the battalion. And they're there now, a lot of new faces. But the same ethos, you know, they're not going to quit. No breather from work, no request for respite, no relief for combat. These guys and gals are continuing the fight in Kunar. Their mission is a little bit different now, and rightfully so. But I sleep soundly knowing that those rough men are ready to visit violence on those who would do us harm, a la George Orwell.

12:44:58 But they're also helping the Afghan forces in the government continue to progress and they're not the only ones. I would also say that I think maybe General Petraeus or somebody has said that before, you know, how does this end, that whole apocryphal question, you know how does this end? I don't know if it does. There's an argument that there is no end state to problems like this, you just have to deal with these phases, over time.

12:45:26 So I think for Pakistan, Afghanistan and the region, I think continued engagement from a military mind here, continued political engagement, is the long term solution. And we probably have to have that strategic vision long term to deal with that. I have no doubt, tactically, you ask the armed forces to do whatever you want them to do, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and civilians, it's going to get done. It's just, throw us a problem, we're going to figure out how to do it. And we're going to hurt some people doing it, but we'll get it done.

12:45:57 But, I'm very happy with the mission that No Slack did, and I think there's, again, a rational optimist,

I think there's hope for the future in Afghanistan but I'm cautious as well that it could be reversed and we could lose what we've gained so far if we withdraw from our gains too precipitously and we don't continue to support the Afghan government and the region in the roads ahead.

12:46:23 And lastly, thank you all for the opportunity to speak. If there's anything you need, I'll leave my business card and I would love for future engagements as well, thanks.

12:46:32 KAGAN: Thank you so much, I really, thank you so much for what you have done and also the amazing men and women who joined you in Task Force No Slack and also out in the entire Bastogne AO and Afghan wide. Really, tremendous service, tremendous dedication to the United States of America and thank you for everything that you've done.

12:47:06 VOWELL: Thanks, Dr. Kagan. Thank you very much.

12:47:12 KAGAN: Thank you all.