

How military leaders have let us down

By LT. COL. DANIEL L. DAVIS

I spent last year in Afghanistan, visiting and talking with U.S. troops and their Afghan partners. My duties with the Army's Rapid Equipping Force took me into every significant area where our soldiers engage the enemy. Over the course of 12 months, I covered more than 9,000 miles and talked, traveled and patrolled with troops in Kandahar, Kunar, Ghazni, Khost, Paktika, Kunduz, Balkh, Nangarhar and other provinces.

What I saw bore no resemblance to rosy official statements by U.S. military leaders about conditions on the ground.

Entering this deployment, I was sincerely hoping to learn that the claims were true: that conditions in Afghanistan were improving, that the local government and military were progressing toward self-sufficiency. I did not need to witness dramatic improvements to be reassured, but merely hoped to see evidence of positive trends, to see companies or battalions produce even minimal but sustainable progress.

Instead, I witnessed the absence of success on virtually every level.

My arrival in country in late 2010 marked the start of my fourth combat deployment, and my second in Afghanistan. A Regular Army officer in the Armor Branch, I served in Operation Desert Storm, in Afghanistan in 2005-06 and in Iraq in 2008-09. In the middle of my career, I spent eight years in the U.S. Army Reserve and held a number of civilian jobs — among them, legislative correspondent for defense and foreign affairs for Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas.

As a representative for the Rapid Equipping Force, I set out to talk to our troops about their needs and their circumstances. Along the way, I conducted mounted and dismounted combat patrols, spending time with conventional and Special Forces troops. I interviewed or had conversations with more than 250 soldiers in the field, from the lowest-ranking 19-year-old private to division commanders and staff members at every echelon. I spoke at length with Afghan security officials, Afghan civilians and a few village elders.

I saw the incredible difficulties any military force would have to pacify even a single area of any of those provinces; I heard many stories of how insurgents controlled virtually every piece of land beyond eyeshot of a U.S. or International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base.

I saw little to no evidence the local governments were able to provide for the basic needs of the people. Some of the Afghan civilians I talked with said the people didn't want to be connected to

a predatory or incapable local government.

From time to time, I observed Afghan Security forces collude with the insurgency.

From bad to abysmal

Much of what I saw during my deployment, let alone read or wrote in official reports, I can't talk about; the information remains classified. But I can say that such reports — mine and others' — serve to illuminate the gulf between conditions on the ground and official statements of progress.

And I can relate a few representative experiences, of the kind that I observed all over the country.

In January 2011, I made my first trip into the mountains of Kunar province near the Pakistan border to visit the troops of 1st Squadron, 32nd Cavalry. On a patrol to the northernmost U.S. position in eastern Afghanistan, we arrived at an Afghan National Police (ANP) station that had reported being attacked by the Taliban 2½ hours earlier.

Through the interpreter, I asked the police captain where the attack had originated, and he pointed to the side of a nearby mountain.

"What are your normal procedures in situations like these?" I asked. "Do you form up a squad and go after them? Do you periodically send out harassing patrols? What do you do?"

As the interpreter conveyed my questions, the captain's head wheeled around, looking first at the interpreter and turning to me with an incredulous expression. Then he laughed.

"No! We don't go after them," he said. "That would be dangerous!"

According to the cavalry troopers, the Afghan policemen rarely leave the cover of the checkpoints. In that part of the province, the Taliban literally run free.

In June, I was in the Zharay district of Kandahar province, returning to a base from a dismounted patrol. Gunshots were audible as the Taliban attacked a U.S. checkpoint about one mile away.

As I entered the unit's command post, the commander and his staff were watching a live video feed of the battle. Two ANP vehicles were blocking the main road leading to the site of the attack. The fire was coming from behind a haystack. We watched as two Afghan men emerged, mounted a motorcycle and began moving toward the Afghan policemen in their vehicles.

The U.S. commander turned around and told the Afghan radio operator to make sure the policemen halted the men. The radio operator shouted into the radio repeatedly, but got no answer.

On the screen, we watched as the two men slowly motored past the ANP vehicles. The policemen neither got out to stop the two men nor answered the radio — until the motorcycle was out of sight.

To a man, the U.S. officers in that unit told me they had nothing but contempt for the Afghan troops in their area — and that was before the above incident occurred.

In August, I went on a dismounted patrol with troops in the Panjwai district of Kandahar province. Several troops from the unit had recently been killed in action, one of whom was a very popular and experienced soldier. One of the unit's senior officers rhetorically asked me, "How do I look these men in the eye and ask them to go out day after day on these missions? What's harder: How do I look [my soldier's] wife in the eye when I get back and tell her that her husband died for something meaningful? How do I do that?"

One of the senior enlisted leaders added, "Guys are saying, 'I hope I live so I can at least get home to R&R leave before I get it,' or 'I hope I only lose a foot.' Sometimes they even say which limb it might be: 'Maybe it'll only be my left foot.' They don't have a lot of confidence that the leadership two levels up really understands what they're living here, what the situation really is."

On Sept. 11, the 10th anniversary of the infamous attack on the U.S., I visited another unit in Kunar province, this one near the town of Asmar. I talked with the local official who served as the cultural adviser to the U.S. commander. Here's how the conversation went:

Davis: "Here you have many units of the Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF]. Will they be able to hold out against the Taliban when U.S. troops leave this area?"

Adviser: "No. They are definitely not capable. Already all across this region [many elements of] the security forces have made deals with the Taliban. [The ANSF] won't shoot at the Taliban, and the Taliban won't shoot them.

"Also, when a Taliban member is arrested, he is soon released with no action taken against him. So when the Taliban returns [when the Americans leave after 2014], so too go the jobs, especially for everyone like me who has worked with the coalition.

"Recently, I got a cellphone call from a Talib who had captured a friend of mine. While I could hear, he began to beat him, telling me I'd better quit working for the Americans. I could hear my friend crying out in pain. [The Talib] said the next time they would kidnap my sons and do the same to them. Because of the direct threats, I've had to take my children out of school just to keep them safe.

"And last night, right on that mountain there [he pointed to a ridge overlooking the U.S. base, about 700 meters distant], a member of the ANP was murdered. The Taliban came and called him out, kidnapped him in front of his parents, and took him away and murdered him. He was a member of the ANP from another province and had come back to visit his parents. He was only 27 years old. The people are not safe anywhere."

That murder took place within view of the U.S. base, a post nominally responsible for the security of an area of hundreds of square kilometers. Imagine how insecure the population is beyond visual range. And yet that conversation was representative of what I saw in many regions of Afghanistan.

In all of the places I visited, the tactical situation was bad to abysmal. If the events I have described — and many, many more I could mention — had been in the first year of war, or even the third or fourth, one might be willing to believe that Afghanistan was just a hard fight, and we should stick it out. Yet these incidents all happened in the 10th year of war.

As the numbers depicting casualties and enemy violence indicate the absence of progress, so too did my observations of the tactical situation all over Afghanistan.

Credibility gap

I'm hardly the only one who has noted the discrepancy between official statements and the truth on the ground.

A January 2011 report by the Afghan NGO Security Office noted that public statements made by U.S. and ISAF leaders at the end of 2010 were "sharply divergent from IMF, [international military forces, NGO-speak for ISAF] 'strategic communication' messages suggesting improvements. We encourage [nongovernment organization personnel] to recognize that no matter how authoritative the source of any such claim, messages of the nature are solely intended to influence American and European public opinion ahead of the withdrawal, and are not intended to offer an accurate portrayal of the situation for those who live and work here."

The following month, Anthony Cordesman, on behalf of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote that ISAF and the U.S. leadership failed to report accurately on the reality of the situation in Afghanistan.

"Since June 2010, the unclassified reporting the U.S. does provide has steadily shrunk in content, effectively 'spinning' the road to victory by eliminating content that illustrates the full scale of the challenges ahead," Cordesman wrote. "They also, however, were driven by political decisions to ignore or understate Taliban and insurgent gains from 2002 to 2009, to ignore the problems caused by weak and corrupt Afghan governance, to understate the risks posed by sanctuaries in Pakistan, and to 'spin' the value of tactical ISAF victories while ignoring the steady growth of Taliban influence and control."

How many more men must die in support of a mission that is not succeeding and behind an array of more than seven years of optimistic statements by U.S. senior leaders in Afghanistan? No one expects our leaders to always have a successful plan. But we do expect — and the men who do the living, fighting and dying deserve — to have our leaders tell us the truth about what's going on.

I first encountered senior-level equivocation during a 1997 division-level "experiment" that turned out to be far more setpiece than experiment. Over dinner at Fort Hood, Texas, Training

and Doctrine Command leaders told me that the Advanced Warfighter Experiment (AWE) had shown that a "digital division" with fewer troops and more gear could be far more effective than current divisions. The next day, our congressional staff delegation observed the demonstration firsthand, and it didn't take long to realize there was little substance to the claims. Virtually no legitimate experimentation was actually conducted. All parameters were carefully scripted. All events had a preordained sequence and outcome. The AWE was simply an expensive show, couched in the language of scientific experimentation and presented in glowing press releases and public statements, intended to persuade Congress to fund the Army's preference. Citing the AWE's "results," Army leaders proceeded to eliminate one maneuver company per combat battalion. But the loss of fighting systems was never offset by a commensurate rise in killing capability.

A decade later, in the summer of 2007, I was assigned to the Future Combat Systems (FCS) organization at Fort Bliss, Texas. It didn't take long to discover that the same thing the Army had done with a single division at Fort Hood in 1997 was now being done on a significantly larger scale with FCS. Year after year, the congressionally mandated reports from the Government Accountability Office revealed significant problems and warned that the system was in danger of failing. Each year, the Army's senior leaders told members of Congress at hearings that GAO didn't really understand the full picture and that to the contrary, the program was on schedule, on budget, and headed for success. Ultimately, of course, the program was canceled, with little but spinoffs to show for \$18 billion spent.

If Americans were able to compare the public statements many of our leaders have made with classified data, this credibility gulf would be immediately observable. Naturally, I am not authorized to divulge classified material to the public. But I am legally able to share it with members of Congress. I have accordingly provided a much fuller accounting in a classified report to several members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, senators and House members.

When it comes to deciding what matters are worth plunging our nation into war and which are not, our senior leaders owe it to the nation and to the uniformed members to be candid — graphically, if necessary — in telling them what's at stake and how expensive potential success is likely to be. U.S. citizens and their elected representatives can decide if the risk to blood and treasure is worth it.

Likewise when having to decide whether to continue a war, alter its aims or to close off a campaign that cannot be won at an acceptable price, our senior leaders have an obligation to tell Congress and American people the unvarnished truth and let the people decide what course of action to choose. That is the very essence of civilian control of the military. The American people deserve better than what they've gotten from their senior uniformed leaders over the last number of years. Simply telling the truth would be a good start.

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