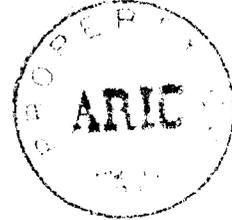


Strange Victory: A critical appraisal of Operation Enduring Freedom and the Afghanistan war

Carl Conetta

PDA Research Monograph #6
30 January 2002

The Project on Defense Alternatives



Appendix 3. The rise and fall of the Taliban: a note on their strategy and power

The Taliban military coalition comprised (i) Taliban members proper (including long-time veterans and new adherents), (ii) warlord (former mujahedin) and tribal contingents, (iii) seasonal village conscripts, (iv) foreign forces.

- The veteran core of the Taliban may have been no larger than 2,000-3,000 personnel; new (post 1995) adherents may have numbered another 6,000-8,000.
- Warlord, tribal, and conscripted indigenous troops probably comprised an additional 20,000-25,000 troops; these troops constituted the soft outer shell of the Taliban coalition, likely to defect or desert under pressure.
- Finally, foreign volunteers probably numbered 8-12,000. These included 5-7000 Pakistanis, 1,500-2,000 Chechens and members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and no more than 2-3,000 foreign fighters imported by the Al Qaeda network — mostly Arabs. Among the troops controlled by Al Qaeda only hundreds were likely core Al Qaeda members, distinguished by having signed a *bayat* or oath of allegiance to the jihad as defined by bin Laden.

Among the Taliban adherents, the most important were the veteran cadre from Kandahar and surrounding provinces: these were the glue or the "solder" that held the Taliban coalition together. But the "soldering agent" in their rise to power was momentum, which they gained through their early victories and the promise of a return to peace and order that the Taliban embodied. This mobilized former students of the madrassahs on a broader basis, brought in new recruits, and helped sway Pashtun warlords and tribal leaders to join the coalition. The support of commercial trading interests and Pakistan also was essential to building Taliban power. Reinforcing the power of the Taliban were the foreign volunteers, the largest group being Pakistanis, who served as cannon fodder. Of course, the most important group of foreign fighters were the Afghan Arabs (organized through the al-Qaeda network) who combined dedication, experience, and relative fighting prowess.

A3.1 The dilemma of Taliban success

The Taliban accomplished what none of their mujahedin predecessors could: the relatively rapid unification of most of Afghanistan. This they did through a combination of (i) religious discipline and fervor, (ii) mobilization of a grassroots constituency (ie. village religious leaders and students) that cut across many divisions of tribe and locality in the Pashtun belt, and (iii) one genuinely popular program plank: the restoration of law and order.

Many core Taliban leaders had been young members of the mujahedin militias during the time of the anti-Soviet war — especially the more traditionalist Islamic parties, Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami and Younis Khalis' faction of Hisb-e-Islami. Within these they were distinguished by their religious devotion and training. What gave the Taliban initial organizational and ideological coherence was their common training in a few of the Pakistani madrassas. What shaped their identity as a movement was the experience of the post-Soviet civil war, during which the militias

of the earlier period sank into political opportunism, banditry, and tribal strife. This motivated the Taliban founders to organize a campaign of unification and purification from below. And their role as local religious leaders, teachers, and students put them in a good position to mobilize support — at least in the Pashtun tribal areas of the south and southeast.

The qualities that made the Taliban a successful social-military movement in the Pashtun areas — their grassroots orientation and religious discipline — did not serve them as well when they moved farther north. Nor did it serve them (or anyone) well in the administration of government. For the Taliban the essence of government was the promulgation and enforcement of Sharia. And so nothing functioned nearly so well in the Taliban government as the Ministry for the Enforcement of Virtue and Suppression of Vice.

The expansion of Taliban territorial control and the need to balance the requirements of war and governance also posed a classical problem of over-extension for the regime. This was exacerbated by the regime's failure to open the ranks of leadership. Throughout the period of its rule, the Taliban regime remained overly dependent on a small core of Pashtun cadre, especially from the vicinity of Kandahar. These it circulated endlessly between two broad tasks or fronts: the military front in the north and the "internal front," which involved maintaining Sharia (and Taliban power) everywhere else. In this context, the Taliban embrace of bin Laden — and his resources — makes a modicum of sense. Al Qaeda may have brought as many 3,000 foreigners into Afghanistan and these the Taliban used everywhere: as shock troops, as military trainers, as "virtue police", and as leadership bodyguards.

A3.2 Air power and the disappearing Taliban

The US military campaign dramatically increased the dilemma of the Taliban leadership as it sought to maintain its military front in the north and control of the population elsewhere. Bombing disrupted leadership and social control functions in the cities and it attrited the Taliban's core, which included no more than 5,000 Taliban veteran and Al Qaeda cadre. Nonetheless, throughout October the Taliban seemed able to manage this challenge, with the aim of surviving until winter conditions would ease the pressure on the military front and impede the bombing campaign. The beginning of the end for the Taliban came in early November when the United States more fully synchronized its military efforts with those of the Northern Alliance. The resulting synergy was something the Taliban could not withstand — at least not in frontal battle.

The synergy of US air power and Northern Alliance ground troops (guided and assisted by US special operations forces) broke the Taliban defensive positions outside Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul in two steps:

- First, air power tore gaps in the Taliban defensive line, which were widened by group defections. The Taliban regularly rotated and redeployed troops at the front with the aim of filling gaps and maintaining morale. However, their capacity to reinforce diminished with time, while the pace and intensity of US aerial bombardment increased.
- Second, Northern Alliance troops exploited the growing gaps in the Taliban line to attack the flanks and rear of Taliban positions, which broke the morale of Taliban troops and induced panic, at least locally.

When these tactics are applied effectively, an opponent finds it difficult to withdraw in an orderly fashion. The goal for the attacking ground force is to maintain the engagement until the defending force disintegrates and flees, at which point it is easier to interdict it (from the air) or overtake and capture or destroy it on the ground. In the case of the battles of Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul, it seems the Taliban had enough presence of mind to foresee the inevitable and begin withdrawing select troops and cadre before their lines collapsed completely under pressure.

The dissolution of the Taliban involved:

- the defection or desertion of allied troops,
- the intentional withdrawal of Taliban cadre and high-value foreign troops,
- the release of local Taliban adherents and conscripts, and
- the abject abandonment of Pakistani seasonal volunteers.



Thus, when the Taliban forces finally and fully quit their positions, it gave the appearance of their having simply disappeared. The Northern Alliance forces were not perceptive, vigorous, or agile enough to overtake those Taliban units that departed in order. Nor was US air power able to detect and fully interdict their movement. There was only so much that 100 tactical fighters could do over a country the size of Texas, especially given that most were based 700+ miles from the battle areas.

This pattern was repeated throughout Pashtun areas that the Taliban had decided to surrender. But the disposition of the released and retreating Taliban troops was quite different in the north and the south of the country. In the south, those Taliban who did not retreat to Kandahar were able to melt into their surroundings. This process was evident in Jalalabad, for instance, where former mujahedin leader Younis Khalis negotiated the turnover of the city from the Taliban. The Taliban leadership fled the area, but lower-level Taliban fighters with local ties remained behind, many presumably joining Khalis' militia. Khalis' had headed one of the traditionalist parties during the anti-Soviet war — a faction of *Hisb-e-Islami* — with strong Pashtun tribal connections. Mullah Omar, among other Taliban leaders, had been a member of this faction. Khalis had allied himself at different points in the past with both the Taliban and the Rabbani government. Now he claims independence from both.

In the north, those Taliban coalition troops left behind could not easily re-integrate locally. This was especially true for Pakistanis and Arabs. Many were pursued into Mazar-i-Sharif, Konduz, Khanabad, and Taloqan, surrounded, pummeled by US power, and killed or captured. More than 800 Taliban coalition troops were killed in reprisals or after capture.

A3.3 What were the Taliban thinking?

More than a tactical military retreat, the Taliban had executed a strategic withdrawal and reorientation during the second week of November, relinquishing any pretense to power in three-quarters of the area previously under their control. In essence, when they withdrew their core cadre, they removed the solder that held their political-military coalition together. Their apparent strategy was to reconstitute with their best fighters in and around their home areas in the south, where they might conduct a combination of positional defense and guerilla warfare. The Taliban also effected a separation from most of the Al Qaeda cadre, many of whom took refuge in the Tora Bora fortified base near Jalalabad, about 350 miles from Kandahar.

Retreating armies usually try to fall back on their lines of supply, if they can, and return to their base areas, where their control and support is (presumably) greatest. This is what the Taliban attempted, although in their case they sought principally to fall back on their lines of *political power*.

The Taliban's rapid divestiture of power also followed the logic of Afghan tribal warfare. The Taliban might have hoped that their surrender of the capital and retreat to their provincial base, together with their separation from Al Qaeda, would satisfy the war objectives of their opponents. In the Afghan way of war, such an accommodation might permit the re-integration of the Taliban as a provincial party.

But these stratagems were flawed for several reasons:

- First, the United States did not operate within the logic of tribal warfare; it sought the complete destruction of the Taliban as a force in Afghan society, including the southern provinces. Moreover, their separation from bin Laden did not matter: the Taliban had been virtually identified with Al Qaeda in the US war discourse since shortly after the war began. The US mission was no longer simply to pressure, split, or topple them, but to destroy them.

The "logic of tribal warfare" is not as alien to the West as it might first seem. Something like it prevailed in superpower military relations during the cold war, when the prospect of protracted, indecisive, and highly-destructive warfare between two blocs dictated limited means and objectives. Of course, the logic that might prevail between two superpowers or between two tribes does not apply in a contest between the world's sole superpower and one of the poorest states on earth — especially if the former is able to prosecute war from a fairly safe distance. The Taliban grossly underestimated the effective imbalance between their military capabilities and those of the United States. But this was not simply a matter of their having deficient powers

of calculation. As the leading faction of the Taliban leadership perceived the contest, it involved the core interests and values of their movement, which they could not surrender without a fight.

- Second, the Taliban's retreat to the south and their adoption of a positional defense made the job of US air power easier. Although retreat allowed the Taliban to concentrate its best assets in the defense of a much smaller area, it also allowed the United States to better concentrate its air power. Moreover, Kandahar is much closer than Kabul and Afghanistan's northern towns to the Arabian sea. This implies shorter flight times for America's carrier-based combat aircraft, which translates into more sorties, bigger weapon payloads, or more time (and flexibility) over target areas. Clearly, the Taliban's strategic retreat did not solve the problem posed by US air power.
- Finally, the Taliban underestimated the effect of their retreat on their political authority. The growth of Taliban power had been based on two things: a core of disciplined, dedicated cadre and forward momentum. But just as forward momentum had served as a "soldering agent" during their rise, defeat and retreat acted as a solvent during their decline. They could not reconstitute their power in the south, not even with their best cadre, because the fact of their having had to retreat transformed political conditions in the south: It robbed them of their charisma and authority.

Sources

Books and Journal Articles (alphabetical by author)

G.D. Bakshi, "Afghanistan as a Rentier State Model: Lessons from the Collapse," *Strategic Analysis* (August 1998);

Gilles Dorransoro, *Pakistan and the Taliban: State policy, religious networks and political connections* (Paris: Center for International Studies and Research, October 2000);

Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Taliban Movement in Afghanistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2001);

Ali Jalali, written presentation at a 26 April 2000 forum, "Can Anyone win in Afghanistan? A Military Analysis," sponsored by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Washington DC;

Jalali and Lester W. Grau, "Taliban - a Model for "Islamicising" Central Asia?," *Cyber-Caravan*, 6 March 1999;

Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, religion, and the New Order in Afghanistan* (London: Zed Press, 1998);

Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000);

Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism," *Foreign Affairs* (November 1999)

Barnett Rubin, "Situation in Afghanistan," testimony before the US Senate Committee on Foreign relations, 8 October 1998.

Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995)

Peter Tomsen, "Response: a Chance for Peace in Afghanistan - the Taliban's Days Are Numbered," *Foreign Affairs* (January 2000);

Newspaper Articles:

"Not by Faith Alone: Why the Taliban Capitulated Abjectly," *The Statesman* (India), 12 December 2001;

Jon Lee Anderson, "Double agents, defectors, disaffected Taliban, and a motley army battle for Konduz," *New Yorker*, 10 December 2001;

Stephen Budiansky, "The Sky Has Its Limits; Why Bombs Defeat Armies More Effectively Than Cities," *Washington Post*, 16 December 2001, p. B3;

John F. Burns and Steve Levine, "How Afghanistan's Stern Rulers Took Power," *New York Times*, 31 December 1996;

Edward Cody, "Taliban's 'Hide-and-Wait' Strategy Failed," *Washington Post*, 23 December 2001, p. 12;

Anthony Davis, "Foreign fighters step up activity in Afghan civil war;" *Jane's Intelligence Review* (August 2001);

Davis, "Afghanistan: prospects for war and peace in a shattered land," *JIR* (August 2001);

David Lamb, "Taliban tactics sped collapse, analysts say," *Toronto Star*, 27 December 2001, p. 8;

Lamb, "Missteps Toppled Taliban, Analysts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 December 2001, p. 3; Molly Moore and Susan B. Glasser, "Disappearing With Hardly a Fight; Taliban Cedes Large Swath of Territory Much the Way It Took Control," *Washington Post*, 14 November 2001, p. 20; and,

David Wastell and Robert Fox, "'Our morale was getting lower. We couldn't fight'," *Sunday Telegraph* (London), 18 November 2001, p. 20.

Appendix 4. The limits of the Bonn agreement and the challenges facing the interim government

Four groups of Afghan representatives attended the nine-day meeting Bonn, which began 27 November 2001. The Northern Alliance and the "Rome Group" (royalists) were allocated 11 delegates each. The Pakistan-supported "Peshawar Group" and the Iranian "Cyprus Group" were allowed five delegates each. The outcome was an interim government with the Northern Alliance holding 17 portfolios; the Rome group, nine; and the Peshawar group, three; and the Cyprus group, none. Ethnicity cuts across the groups so that ethnic Pashtuns hold eleven positions; ethnic Tajiks, eight; ethnic Hazaras, five; ethnic Uzbeks, three; and other smaller groups, three. The ethnic mix of the Afghan population is Pashtun 38%, Tajik 25%, Uzbek 6%, and Hazara 19%.

The distribution of portfolios somewhat under-represented Pashtuns and Hazaras, and over-represented Tajiks and Uzbeks. Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun, was chosen as Prime Minister. The next three most powerful portfolios — defense, foreign affairs, and the interior — went to Tajiks. On balance, this outcome tilts in favor of the Tajiks. But a more serious issue concerns the strength of connection between the representatives chosen in Bonn and the Afghan ethnic communities and organizations they supposedly represent. In this regard, several gaps are evident.

First, the interim government essentially represents a coalition between the Northern Alliance — especially its Tajik component — and Pashtun royalists (who command little in the way of organization on the ground inside Afghanistan). The Rome group does not exercise anywhere near the amount of influence among Afghans, their parties, militias, or tribal groups as it did in Bonn. Thus, the government will have to work hard to deepen its connection to Pashtun communities and organizations inside Afghanistan. A particular challenge will be to win over the many organizations and groups of Pashtun ex-Mujahedin, who are not well-represented in the government, and Taliban sympathizers, who are not represented at all. Although Karzai seems well-equipped for the position of Prime Minister, it is no secret that he was not the meeting's first choice. He was boosted by the United Nations and United States. Thus, the government will have to work hard to allay suspicions of US and Tajik domination.

Second, the government's composition seems generally to have disappointed a number of influential militia commanders or warlords inside Afghanistan, several of whom presently act as *de facto* provincial governors. To varying extents they feel that their interests, organizations, or ethnic groups are not sufficiently represented in the government. This problem involves leaders who as a group control at least 40 percent of Afghanistan's provinces and command a significant majority of the forces formerly at the disposal of the Northern Alliance. Indeed, among indigenous forces, only the Tajik militias of the northeast and Karzai's modest forces seem to be fully at the government's disposal. (Indigenous action against the Taliban in the Kandahar region depended mostly on the forces of the notorious warlord Gul Agha Shirzai, who now controls the area; His support of the Kabul government is contingent and unreliable.) This suggests an incipient "civil-military gap" like the one that capsized the 1992 effort to form a government of national unity.

The tension between the central government and the militia chiefs evinces a structural problem: military power in Afghanistan is relatively independent of civilian authority. The immediate practical problem is that the government presently has insufficient means to enforce its will against the militia chiefs or compel a transformation in the relationship between civilian authority and military power. The option of calling on US air power to do the job poses problems for government legitimacy. Further complicating the issue is the fact that Afghanistan is presently in a process of state formation and the existing interim government is in the process



of building legitimacy. It is not yet truly representative of the Afghan nation, as its "interim" nature and its principal mission — to build toward a national tribal assembly — attest. To build legitimacy Afghanistan's new government must stand above internecine conflict, act as a fair broker among competing interests, pursue a process of political inclusion, and facilitate programs of relief and reconstruction. Given sufficient resources, the new prime minister may be able to defuse conflict potentials and draw most dissenters into the political process. But the roster of complaint that faces the new government at its outset is daunting:

- Among those who are dissatisfied with the Bonn outcome are the Uzbek leader, General Abdul Rashid Dostum (based in Mazar-i-Sharif); the independent-minded Tajik warlord Ismail Khan (based in Herat); and Mohammad Karim Khalili, leader of the Shiite Hazara party coalition, Hizb-Wahdat-i-Islami-yi, who is based in Bamiyan province. These three firmly control 11 of Afghanistan's 32 provinces and command a significant majority of the Northern Alliance fighters.
- The former president and leader of the Northern Alliance, Burhanuddin Rabbani, also feels alienated from the interim government and is forming a new party to contest for power. Although he has few fighters at his command, he is allied with another dissident member of the Northern Alliance, Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf, a Pashtun leader of the Saudi-backed Ittihad-i-Islami party.
- As noted above, the outcome of the Bonn meeting was not very rewarding or satisfying for either the Pakistan-backed "Peshawar group" or the Iran-backed "Cyprus group". The Peshawar group, formed after the war began at a meeting of 1,000 exiled Pashtun leaders, is led by the Sufi religious leader and royalist Pir Syed Gailani, who in the past has served frequently as a unifying figure for disparate mujahedin groups. Gailani, says that the Cabinet does not fairly represent those who fought the Soviet occupation of the 1980s.
- Among the Iranian-backed Cyprus group is the Pashtun radical Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his faction of Hizb-i-Islami. Once the favorite of Pakistan and the CIA, Hekmatyar had been the chief opponent of Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masoud in the Afghan civil war, until he was driven out of the country by the Taliban. The Cyprus group won no positions in the new government, which Hekmatyar regards as a Tajik and US-dominated confection. His supporters currently control Logar province in Afghanistan.
- Haji Abdul Qadir, former Northern Alliance council member and present head of the Pashtun Eastern Council walked out of the Bonn meeting, claiming that Pashtun interests were under-represented. He is the brother of Abdul Haq, who had been slain by the Taliban on 26 October 2001 while trying to organize resistance inside Afghanistan. Before his assassination, Abdul Haq had been favored by the United States as a potential post-Taliban leader of the Afghani Pashtuns.

The Eastern Council (or *shura*) controls the city of Jalalabad and the surrounding province of Nangarhar. Besides Abdul Qadir, it incorporates three important warlords: Mohammad Zaman, Hazarat Ali, and Younis Khalis. Khalis, who once headed a faction of Hizb-i-Islami, maintained good relations with the Taliban and Pashtun tribal leaders throughout the Taliban period. Thus, the Eastern Council has the distinction of combining elements close to the Northern Alliance, the Taliban, Pashtun tribal leaders, and pre-Taliban Pashtun Islamists.

A party with ten former Taliban ministers, deputy ministers, and high officials is also contending for influence outside the present government. Most members of the group come from Logar, Paktia, Nangarhar, and Paktika provinces in eastern Afghanistan. Having been the object of Pakistani efforts during the war to foment a coup by "moderate" Taliban — which were ended abruptly when hardliners murdered Abdul Haq — the group defected to Pakistan in early December. They have revived an old Islamist party, Khuddamul Furqan, with the aim, they say, of countering northern domination of the new Afghanistan. Most of the defectors had been members of the mujahedin party Harakat-i-Inqilab-i-Islami during the anti-Soviet war. As their leader they have chosen a widely respected Afghan religious leader, Pir Ahmad Amin Mojaddedi, who has lived in exile in Pakistan since the 1980s.

Sources on Bonn Agreement:

"Afghanistan: Peace Elusive for New Government," *Stratfor*, 19 December 2001, <<http://www.stratfor.com>>;

"Agreement under fire by leaders; Afghan warlords argue over seats," *Houston Chronicle*, 7 December 2001, p. 32;

"New Afghan Accord Already Looking Shaky," *Stratfor*, 6 December 2001, <<http://www.stratfor.com>>;

"Afghan Conference Won't Bring Unity," *Stratfor*, 26 November 2001, <<http://www.stratfor.com>>;

"Conflict Will Follow Taliban's Fall," *Stratfor*, 9 October 2001, <<http://www.stratfor.com>>;

Peter Baker, "Afghan Factions Criticize Accord; Some Leaders Vow to Boycott Regime," *Washington Post*, 7 December 2001, p. 32;

Mohamad Bazzi, "The Taliban's Envoy; He says top leaders axed his efforts at compromise," *Newsday*, 4 January 2002, p. 2;

Richard Boudreaux and Tyler Marshall, "Great Game II' Has a Wealth of Players," *LA Times*, 2 November 2001;

Justin Colledge-Wiggins, "Can Old Tensions Be Buried in Kabul?," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 2001;

Mary Dejevsky, "The Warring Factions Searching for Peace," *The Independent (London)*, 28 November 2001, p. 3;

Kathy Gannon, "New Afghan interim administration clearly favors the northern alliance," *AP Worldstream*, 6 December 2001;

Michael Griffin, "Taliban's Grim Legacy: More Strife," *LA Times*, 23 December 2001;

Justin Huggler, "Taliban Defectors Seek Power-share in New Afghanistan," *The Independent (London)*, 11 December 2001, p. 12;

Zahid Hussain, "Top Taliban defectors set up splinter group," *The Gazette (Montreal)*, 4 December 2001, p. B12;

Anton La Guardia, "Bonn agreement stirs dissent," *The Age (Australia)*, 7 December 2001;

Peter Maass, "Gul Agha Gets His Province Back," *New York Times Magazine*, 6 January 2002, p. 34;

Mark Oliver, "The New Administration," *Guardian Unlimited*, 5 December 2001;

David Rohde, "When the Combat Ends, Another Struggle Looms," *New York Times*, 16 December 2001, p. B3;

Elizabeth Rubin, "Kandahar Dispatch; Going South," *New Republic*, 24 December 2001;

Paul Watson and Maura Reynolds, "For Some in Northern Alliance, Pact for New Government Falls Far Short; Accord: Dissenters say Cabinet appointments fail to reflect their efforts in war to topple Taliban," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 2001 p. 28; and

Tim Weiner, "One Corner of Afghanistan Peacefully Selects a Governor," *New York Times*, 19 November 2001, p. B5.

[Previous](#) / [Table of Contents](#) / [Next](#)



