

How Afghan Men Fight

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By Richard Kidd

I. Introduction

This essay is by Richard Kidd who served as a long-time emergency officer for the United Nations and currently works in Washington on landmine clearance and humanitarian-relief issues. Drawing on personal experience, Kidd offers a cultural explanation for the seeming "invincibility" of Afghan fighters. Consequently, if the US is to emerge victorious in its war against Afghanistan, it must strike quickly and ruthlessly, while simultaneously doing its utmost to provide humanitarian relief for Afghanistan's innocent civilians and victims.

This essay originally appeared in the October issue of the Christian Science Monitor.

II. Essay By Richard Kidd

"How Afghan Men Fight"

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As a cadet at West Point in the early 1980s, I deeply admired the martial prowess of the Afghan "freedom fighters" in their war against Soviet occupation. Yet from personal experience, I now know that the simplistic accounts of that struggle failed to reflect the complexities of Afghanistan. The Afghans, while never conquered as a nation, are not invincible in battle.

I first went to Central Asia in 1993 to provide food relief to refugees along the Afghan-Tajik border. I returned to the area in 1998 to serve in the United Nations' mine-clearance program for Afghanistan. I walked Afghan battlefields and spoke with the fighters. I wonder, as I think back, if the United States is prepared for conflict there.

The Afghans' strength in war has little to do with military proficiency, and everything to do with will and honor. I was once told that a "good" Afghan battle is one that makes a lot of noise and light-where all can display their bravery and contribution.

The ability of Afghans to conduct military operations beyond small-unit actions is limited, and individual conduct is often skewed by cultural constraints. Indeed, warriors would often tease their peers for being the first to seek cover in a fight or for choosing to fire from a prone position.

Afghanistan's tribal society makes it extremely difficult to form large, disciplined forces. Traditionally, the Afghan order of battle is feudal, with fighters owing allegiance to a "commander," and this person owing allegiance upward through various tribal and clan loyalties.

In many cases, commanders would bring their contingents to a battle in anticipation of either payment or war booty. Forces that were nominally on the same side would easily turn against each other, for material gain, to avenge a perceived slight, or to gain status.

At no time during the Afghan war was there ever a united front against the Soviets. There were seven groups of mujahideen, each representing a different tribal or religious association. These nominally allied groups fought each other to be the first to have US-supplied Stinger missiles.

Likewise, in many larger military operations, groups of fighters would abandon their assigned roles to seek glory in the final assault or to loot discarded equipment or abandoned buildings.

In short, these men are not good in a purely military sense. So why have they never been conquered?

It goes back to will and honor. Most Afghans live by a tribal "code of the hills," based on blood debts and death over dishonor. Violence and honor are inseparable concepts. To fight with honor is to fight without fear. Consequently, those who might resist us today in Afghanistan are not afraid of us and openly question our resolve for war.

Many of our recent military actions, such as the cruise-missile strikes into Afghanistan in 1998, were interpreted in the region as signs of both our weakness and our lack of "honor" - because no American lives were put at risk.

The Afghans are also able to endure hardships that would probably kill most Americans and sap the resolve of all but the most elite military units. The physical difficulties of fighting in Afghanistan - the tough terrain, the harsh weather - are also weapons that will be used against outsiders. (Around early November, most road movement becomes impossible.)

If the US is to be successful and effective, they will have to play to the weaknesses of the forces in Afghanistan today - notably, their propensity for internal struggles, the growing distrust between the Taliban government and much of the Afghan population, and a limited ability to fight coordinated battles.

At the same time, the US must not play to the Taliban's strengths by getting bogged down trying to hold terrain or fight battles of attrition.

Loss of innocent Afghan life, either in combat or through a humanitarian emergency, could feasibly unite all the groups of the region, including ethnic cousins in Pakistan, against all outsiders, creating enemies out of neutrals and turning potential allies into foes.

Finally, the West's resolve will have to be demonstrated to current and future enemies through close combat - on the ground and "man to man."

If this war is to be won, it will not be pretty. Our opponents will not abide by the Geneva Conventions. There will be no prisoners unless there is a chance that they can be ransomed or made

part of a local prisoner exchange. We may even see videos of American prisoners being killed.

It will be a war of wills and, conversely, of compassion and character. We must show our enemies a level of ruthlessness that has not been part of our military nature for a long time. We will have to kill our enemies - members of the Al Qaeda terrorist network, religious fanatics, and those who support them. We will have to bribe fighters away from the Taliban, and sow disinformation and dissent.

But to those who are not our enemies - the proud people of Afghanistan - we must show a level of compassion probably unheard of during war, by providing immediate humanitarian relief and making a long-term commitment to creating a stable Afghanistan. We should do this not only for humane reasons, but also as a matter of shrewd military logic - to keep people from turning against us.

Simplicity, of the kind provided by the cold war, is a luxury that this current conflict will not allow.

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