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The Nation

Blind in Afghanistan

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One of the paradoxes of America's bumbling intervention in Afghanistan is that the United States knows next to nothing about the country it is occupying. Not only that, but America's learning curve is so steep that it will be years, or decades, before our military and our intelligence services finally figure out which end is up -- if they ever do. Which raises the question: how does years-long counterinsurgency learning curve square with President Obama's pledge to start withdrawing troops by July, 2011?

I raise that question because that deadline will be long come and gone and US forces there still won't have any idea what they're doing.

Last October, in a [column here entitled "McChrystal Admits: We Don't Understand the Afghans."](#) I quoted fairly extensively from General Stanley McChrystal's leaked, 66-page report on the war, in which he acknowledged that the United States and its allies, under the umbrella of ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), are blind to Afghanistan's complexities. In the report, McChrystal wrote:

"ISAF has not sufficiently studied Afghanistan's peoples, whose needs, identities, and grievances vary from province to province and from valley to valley."

And:

"Afghan social, political, economic, and cultural affairs are complex and poorly understood. ISAF does not sufficiently appreciate the dynamics in local communities, nor how the

insurgency, corruption, incompetent officials, power-brokers, and criminality all combine to affect the Afghan population."

Now comes Major General Michael T. Flynn, the deputy chief of staff for intelligence in Afghanistan, who released a paper through the [Center for a New American Security](#) that sharply criticizes America's floundering intelligence effort in Afghanistan. (You can read the entire 28-page document [here](#).) In the executive summary, General Flynn writes:

"The paper argues that because the United States has focused the overwhelming majority of collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, our intelligence apparatus still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade."

Flynn brags about the recent creation of the "Information Dominance Center," whose Orwellian title suggests a comprehensive effort to figure out the country that we stumbled into nine years ago. The key quote from Flynn's report says otherwise:

"Ignorant of local economics and landowners, hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the levels of cooperation among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers – whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers – U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency."

Meanwhile, a [scathing piece in the New York Times](#) notes that the US military is pathetically deprived of the kind of people it needs before it has any idea about what to do in Afghanistan. The *Times* reports that Admiral Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is very concerned about the lack of Afghan experts inside the armed forces:

"In a memo sent last month to the chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, Admiral Mullen expressed concern that the services were not consistently providing the 'best and the brightest leaders' for the program's corps, whose members will work in the field and at headquarters.

"In many cases, the volunteers have been the right people for this very critical program,' Admiral Mullen said in the one-page memo, dated Dec. 14. 'However, I am concerned that this is not the case across the board.'"

To fix the problem, the military is stepping up training, recruiting, and language instruction, but on a timetable that suggests a years-long COIN effort, since the graduates of this effort won't even arrive in Afghanistan until mid-2011, exactly when the withdrawal of US forces is supposed to start:

"The program was conceived as a way to develop a pool of uniformed experts who would spend several years rotating between assignments in Afghanistan or Pakistan, and desk jobs in Washington or other headquarters working on the same regional issues. At the outset, volunteers

receive cultural training and 16 weeks of language instruction in Dari, Pashto or Urdu. In time, they are expected to provide a deep bench for assignments that could significantly alter the course of the war.

"The military expects to fill all of the positions by the summer of 2011. The first 304 positions -- including trainers, military planners and advisers to Afghan ministries -- will be assigned in Afghanistan and Pakistan by November 2010."

Chas Freeman, the former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, told me years ago, after the US blundered into Iraq, "We haven't invaded Iraq, we've invaded the Iraq of our dreams." What President Bush and his fellow bunglers did was to invade a country it knew virtually nothing about. The same can be said of Afghanistan. In both cases, the nations that America dreamed about have turned into nightmares.