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In the fog, remember: victory is impossible in Afghanistan

By Matthew Parris
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It's easy to be blinded by the valiant effort, as well as the acronyms and euphemisms. But the harsh truth does not change

It's important not to understand. It's important not to learn. In the total buggeration into which the world's help for Afghanistan has now descended, it's important not to know too much. Accept that somebody some day may understand, but it isn't going to be you. Somebody some day may grab the Gordian knot and cut it, but it isn't going to be us. Know only that. To know more is to know less.

It so happens that my week as Nato/Isaf's guest here in Afghanistan has coincided with some big stories coming out of the country. There are battles; there are kidnappings; there came sad news of the deaths of Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Thorneloe and Trooper Joshua Hammond. There's a presidential election campaign under way. But my argument is that news like this is a distraction from the underlying story. The battle will ebb and flow. But victory is impossible.

I'm here as the guest of the International Security Assistance Force, which sort-of is Nato and sort-of isn't — and, no, don't try to resolve this: it can't. My Isaf/ Nato hosts are welcoming and helpful; so I've been taking a courteous record of the many briefings by the clever chiefs they've been kind enough to arrange, though the swarms of acronyms began to defeat me. And yesterday I forgot my glasses. As I stared unfocused at my notes the acronyms swam forward, their small-print meanings swam away, and I saw only acronyms.

And in the meaninglessness I suddenly saw meaning. It is this. The entire operation is up its own bottom, lost in committees, strategies and initiatives. Forget what these monstrous letters stand

for. Grasp, instead, the essential incoherence.

AFFAK, ANCOP, ANDS, ANP, ANSF, APPS, ASNF, AAQ/FF, APP, CARD, CDC, CISCA, CISTICA, CJTF, CN, CNPA (ANP), COMISAF, CPCC, CSOFC, CSTC, ECC, EUPOL, FDD, FTD, GPI, HIG, HIGHK, ICPT, IDLG, IGLC, INFO-OPS, IRCTA, ISAF, IU, MCN, NDCS, NDS, OCCC, OEF, OMLET, OPDIESEL, PC, PRT, SITC, UNODC, UNPOL, TB . . .

You'll see lots of As there, sometimes standing for Afghanistan, but usually Assistance. The Fs are usually Force. Any contradiction between assistance and force is helpfully blurred by the reduction to acronyms. The infestation of Cs generally denotes Committee, Control or Command. The many Ds and Ns often stand for Drugs, National or Narcotics. Take the CJTF, which is the Criminal Justice Task Force, to be distinguished from the ANP (the Afghan National Police), partially overseen but not exactly trained by EUPOL (European Union Police something-or-other), who are not the same thing as bilateral police assistance, and who are assisted by the ASNF (the Afghan Special Narcotics Force), probably answerable to the MCN (Ministry of Counter-Narcotics) with help from the IU (Intelligence Unit), to be distinguished from SITC (the Special Intelligence and Counter Terrorism body) and operating according to the NDCS (National Drugs Control Strategy), a subset of the ANDS (Afghan National Development Strategy). If it weren't so tragic, this would be a comic novel by Evelyn Waugh.

Acronyms are not the only refuge. Others lullaby their brains to sleep swathed in the acrylic blankets of a new language now suffocating the ministries, missions and shirt-sleeved development-wallahs in shiny white Toyota 4x4s: a hideous hybrid of NGO-speak, Whitehall-chic, political pap and military jargon . . .

“Across the piece”, “agent for change”, “alternative livelihoods”, “asymmetric means of operation”, “capability milestones”, “civilian surge”, “conditionality”, “demand- reduction”, “drivers of radicalisation”, “fixed-wing assets”, “fledgeling capabilities”, “injectors of risk”, “kinetic situation”, “licit livelihoods”, “light footprint”, “lily pads”, “messaging campaign”, “partnering- and-mentoring”, “capacity-building”, “strategic review”, “reconciliation and reintegration”, “rolling out a top-down approach”, “shake — clear — hold — build”, “upskilling”.

It's so, so important not to understand the meaning but to hear the noise. For the curious, however, “reconciliation and reintegration” means talking to the Taleban, “lily pads” means teaching by example, and an “injector of risk” is a penalty. A “kinetic situation” is a fight.

Language says so much. The acronyms and the buzz-phrases tell you of a crazy-paving of assistance and command, with aid money leaking through the cracks in billions. It tells of baffled expatriates and aid workers — well-meaning, clever men and women — in flight from reality. It tells of an international effort chasing its own tail.

The “news” from Afghanistan this month will be of the new US commander, General Stanley McChrystal, and the surge of dollars and enthusiasm he brings. We're meeting him soon and have been told to expect infectious optimism and crisp command. Perhaps he will persuade me that the security situation here can be stabilised. Surprising if with more than 80,000 troops it

couldn't be.

But put your eye to the other end of the telescope, step 40 paces back from the kinetic situation, and ask what it's for. It's to support the building of a secure, freestanding state in Afghanistan. This is not happening. The elections this summer cannot but return President Karzai, an arch survivor focused only on survival, in whom the world has already lost confidence and can have little reason for future hope. Mr Karzai's paralysing chess game of alliances, stand-offs, jobs and favours does not represent a regrettable failure to do anything with the power he has won. It is the way he won it and the only way he can keep it.

Meanwhile, brute force can almost always hold its ground, and an American surge should bring a little more security. But for what? The ground may be cleared by guns, but there is no viable politics here waiting to occupy it. And until what? Until the Americans try to leave.

So the fortunes of war are irrelevant. To save your sanity, your solvency and perhaps your life, it's important not to grasp the detail, or it will bankrupt you, kill your sons and break your heart. Don't hunt for truth. Don't dissect. Don't delve. Don't help. Don't peer at the demented jigsaw puzzle of dollars, capital letters and committees, or shuffle the pieces around: they don't add up to a country. Push aside your microscope, fetch your telescope and put your eye to the wrong end. The devil is not in the detail. The devil is in the whole damn thing.

So take a look at the whole damn thing; see that occupying Afghanistan was a mistake; then close your mind to further argument or entreaty; because of argument and entreaty there will be no lack, but it will never be conclusive; and in the end we will have to decide. We must harden our hearts against this beautiful country and these handsome, noble, crazy people; and all the rest is noise.