

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytimes.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

December 31, 2009

Army History Finds Early Missteps in Afghanistan

By [JAMES DAO](#)

In the fall of 2003, the new commander of American forces in [Afghanistan](#), Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, decided on a new strategy. Known as counterinsurgency, the approach required coalition forces to work closely with Afghan leaders to stabilize entire regions, rather than simply attacking insurgent cells.

But there was a major drawback, [a new unpublished Army history of the war](#) concludes. Because the Pentagon insisted on maintaining a "small footprint" in Afghanistan and because Iraq was drawing away resources, General Barno commanded fewer than 20,000 troops.

As a result, battalions with 800 soldiers were trying to secure provinces the size of Vermont. "Coalition forces remained thinly spread across Afghanistan," [the historians write](#). "Much of the country remained vulnerable to enemy forces increasingly willing to reassert their power."

That early and undermanned effort to use counterinsurgency is one of several examples of how American forces, hamstrung by inadequate resources, missed opportunities to stabilize Afghanistan during the early years of the war, according to the history, "A Different Kind of War."

This year, a resurgent [Taliban](#) prompted the current American commander, Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), to warn that the war would be lost without an infusion of additional troops and a more aggressive approach to counterinsurgency. [President Obama](#) agreed, ordering the deployment of 30,000 more troops, which will bring the total American force to 100,000.

But as early as late 2003, [the Army historians assert](#), "it should have become increasingly clear to officials at Centcom and D.O.D. that the coalition presence in Afghanistan did not provide enough resources" for proper counterinsurgency, the historians write, referring to the United States Central Command and the Department of Defense.

"A Different Kind of War," which covers the period from October 2001 until September 2005, represents the first installment of the Army's official history of the conflict. Written by a team of seven historians at the Army's [Combat Studies Institute](#) at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and based on open source material, it is scheduled to be published by spring.

The New York Times obtained a copy of the manuscript, which is still under review by current and former military officials.

Though other histories, including "In the Graveyard of Empires" by [Seth G. Jones](#) and "Descent Into Chaos" by [Ahmed Rashid](#), cover similar territory, the manuscript of "A Different Kind of War" offers new details and

is notable for carrying the imprimatur of the Army itself, which will use the history to train a new generation of officers.

The history, which has more than 400 pages, praises several innovations by the Pentagon, particularly the pairing of small Special Operations Forces teams with Afghan militias, which, backed by laser-guided weapons, drove the Taliban from power.

But, once the Taliban fell, the Pentagon often seemed ill-prepared and slow-footed in shifting from a purely military mission to a largely peacekeeping and nation-building one, fresh details in the history indicate.

“Even after the capture of Kabul and Kandahar,” [the historians write](#), “there was no major planning initiated to create long-term political, social and economic stability in Afghanistan. In fact, the message from senior D.O.D officials in Washington was for the U.S. military to avoid such efforts.”

In one telling anecdote from 2004, [the history describes](#) how soldiers under General Barno had so little experience in counterinsurgency that one lieutenant colonel bought books about the strategy over the Internet and distributed them to his company commanders and platoon leaders.

In another case, a civil affairs commander in charge of small-scale reconstruction projects [told the historians](#) that he had been given \$1 million in cash to house and equip his soldiers but that bureaucratic obstacles prevented him from spending a penny on projects. It took months to reduce the red tape, the historians say.

The historians also say that such anecdotes underscore the resourcefulness of commanders faced with unclear guidance and inadequate resources. But limited manpower still had an impact on operations, the history indicates.

When the Taliban was on the run in the spring of 2002, Lt. Gen. Dan K. McNeill, the incoming commander of American forces, traveled to Washington seeking guidance. The message conveyed by the Army’s vice chief of staff, Gen. Jack Keane, was, “Don’t you do anything that looks like permanence,” [General McNeill recalled](#). “We are in and out of there in a hurry.”

Largely as a result of that mandate, General McNeill took only half of his headquarters command from the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, N.C. But [as the conflict became more complicated](#), requiring diplomatic and political operations as well as military ones, General McNeill lacked enough planning personnel, the history suggests. He was replaced in 2003 by an even smaller headquarters unit, [the history says](#).

The lack of resources was also apparent in the training of Afghan security forces, the history shows.

Early in the war, the training program was hampered by poor equipment, low pay, high attrition and not enough trainers. Living conditions for the Afghan army were so poor that Maj. Gen. [Karl W. Eikenberry](#) likened them to Valley Forge when he took command of the training operation in October 2002.

“The mandate was clear and it was a central task, but it is also fair to say that up until that time there had been few resources committed,” Mr. Eikenberry, now the ambassador to Afghanistan, [told the historians](#), referring to the army training program.

The historians say resistance to providing more robust resources to Afghanistan had three sources in the

White House and the Pentagon.

First, President [George W. Bush](#) and Defense Secretary [Donald H. Rumsfeld](#) had criticized using the military for peacekeeping and reconstruction in the Balkans during the 1990s. As a result, “nation building” [carried a derogatory connotation](#) for many senior military officials, even though American forces were being asked to fill gaping voids in the Afghan government after the Taliban’s fall.

Second, military planners were concerned about Afghanistan’s long history of resisting foreign invaders and wanted to avoid the appearance of being occupiers. But [the historians argue](#) that this concern was based partly on an “incomplete” understanding of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

Third, the invasion of Iraq was siphoning away resources. After the invasion started in March 2003, [the history says](#), the United States clearly “had a very limited ability to increase its forces” in Afghanistan.

The history provides a detailed retelling of the battle of Tora Bora, the cave-riddled insurgent redoubt on the Pakistan border where American forces thought they had trapped [Osama bin Laden](#) in December 2001. But Mr. bin Laden apparently escaped into Pakistan along with hundreds of Qaeda fighters.

The historians call Tora Bora “a lost opportunity” to capture or kill Mr. bin Laden. But [they concluded](#) that even with more troops, the American and Afghan forces probably could not have sealed the rugged border. And they deemed the battle a partial success because it “dealt a severe blow to those Taliban and [Al Qaeda](#) elements that remained active in Afghanistan.”

The history also [recounts well-known battles like Operation Anaconda](#), in eastern Afghanistan in spring 2002. The history ends in the fall of 2005, when many American officials still felt optimistic about Afghanistan’s future. Postponed parliamentary elections were held that fall, but Taliban attacks were also on the rise.

“It was clear that the struggle to secure a stable and prosperous future for Afghanistan was not yet won,” the history concludes.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)