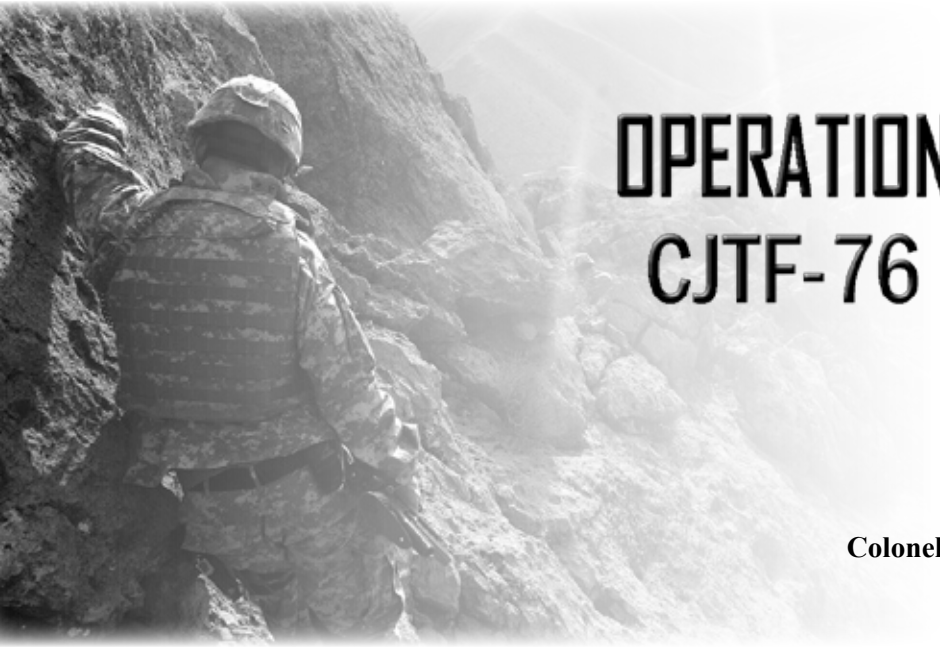

OPERATION MOUNTAIN LION: CJTF-76 in Afghanistan, Spring 2006

Colonel Michael A. Coss, U.S. Army

FOLLOWING THE COLLAPSE of the Taliban in Afghanistan and its escape into Pakistan in 2002, remnants of the group were forced to focus their efforts on mere survival. However, aided by funds from illicit opium growers and abetted by criminals and Al-Qaeda survivors, they began to infiltrate back into Afghanistan in an effort to re-engage the coalition and revive the conflict. By 2006, attacks were increasing against Afghan Government officials and security forces as the Taliban undertook a determined effort to regain influence and power.

This was the situation coalition forces faced in Afghanistan in February 2006 after 10th Mountain Division assumed command of Combined Joint Task Force 76 (CJTF-76). To thwart the Taliban and its allies and support Afghanistan's continued progress toward something resembling a democracy, the task force systematically and successfully undertook Operation Mountain Lion, a campaign built upon a "clear, hold, build, and engage" strategy. A brief survey of CJTF-76's development and employment of this model is offered here in the hope that it will aid others in designing campaign plans for similar circumstances.

Background

Combined Joint Task Force-76's mission was to support the conditions necessary for growing a moderate, stable Afghan Government capable of controlling its territory. To aid the task force in accomplishing its mission, planners analyzed Afghan political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and informational (PMESII) factors. Combined with predeployment training in religion, tribal influence, language, and other cultural concerns, this analysis increased the force's ability to comprehend the human terrain of Afghanistan and address the motivations behind friendly, enemy, and noncombatant behavior.

Having analyzed its mission and situation and developed its clear-hold-build-engage counterinsurgency model, CJTF-76 implemented three simultaneous, synchronized, synergistic lines of operation (LOOs): security, governance, and reconstruction and development (R&D). For security, CJTF-76 could quickly bring to bear a tremendous amount of firepower; intelligence,

Colonel Michael A. Coss, U.S. Army, commands the 192d Infantry Brigade at Fort Benning, Georgia. He is a graduate of Saint Johns College and holds a masters degree from Harvard. Previous assignments include CJ3 of Combined Joint Task Force-76; G-3, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry); and numerous command and staff positions at the joint, strategic and operational levels.

PHOTO: 10th Mountain Division Soldiers traverse a cliff on patrol in Parwan Province, Afghanistan, 23 December 2006. (U.S. Army, SPC Josh LeCappelain)

surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR); and maneuver capability. It could also employ healthy nonlethal capabilities in pursuit of governance and R&D.

Synchronizing "effects-based operations" to achieve desired PMESII results, the CJTF commander in effect assumed a role analogous to that of an orchestra conductor. Figuratively speaking, he was required to arrange a musical score and regulate an ensemble of instruments in nuanced ways to win over his concert audience. In reality, the commander had to decide which weapons and nation-building skills to employ; a coherent, detailed strategy was his metaphorical score; and the CJTF staff and subordinate units were his orchestra. The audience he played to, and whose response he constantly had to monitor and evaluate, consisted of friendly, neutral, and enemy forces in the CJTF-76 battlespace.

To achieve harmony among the task force players required a score with four essential parts. The first part, "clear," aimed to separate the insurgents from the population they depended on for support. The task force planned to clear by targeting and eliminating the enemy's key leaders and eradicating his weapons and ammunition caches. Also key was CJTF-76's goal of inserting the most competent Afghan Army or police forces between the enemy and the population as quickly as possible, to begin cultivating popular confidence and trust in the new Afghan Government. These initial tasks would prove particularly challenging in the rugged terrain and primitive infrastructure of eastern Afghanistan.

The second part of the CJTF-76 commander's score was "hold." During "hold" operations, coalition forces were to develop capacity to make the new indigenous security forces and government credible and permanent. To do this, CJTF-76 had to—

- Establish combat outposts to extend combat power throughout the area targeted for a holding operation.
- Deny the enemy sanctuary, bringing a measure of immediate security to the people.
- Oversee the development of relatively competent indigenous security forces capable of controlling battlespace and enforcing the law.
- Help stand up Afghan Government agencies that would respond to the needs of the population.

One particular impediment to implementing the "hold" portion of the strategy was funding; in fact, throughout the operation, money was a constant problem. It was costly to train and equip a competent Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and stand up effective government agencies where none had previously existed. Still, CJTF-76 made noteworthy progress in both these areas.

"Build," the third component of the commander's score, transforms the physical and human terrain. In the build phase, the CJTF planned to establish permanent security and assist the government with R&D projects to improve physical and human conditions. Such projects help to persuade the population—the center of gravity in any insurgency—that stability and prosperity advanced by the government exceed anything the insurgents have to offer.

These efforts connect the people to their government, but they must be tailored to local traditions, values, and norms or they will fail. Coalition provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), members of the Department of State (DOS), and other interagency partners sensitive to the cultural norms would be counted on to coordinate these efforts and transform Afghanistan.

The fourth and final component of the commander's score was "engage." The task force planned to meet with Afghan civil and military leaders and regular Afghan citizens to help them develop the sense of responsibility they would need to eliminate insurgent activity in sanctuaries, among the population, or in transit through the border region. CJTF leaders would also engage Pakistani leaders, in an effort to deny insurgents safe haven across Afghanistan's eastern and southern border.

Operation Mountain Lion

Operation Mountain Lion, conducted from 11 April to the end of June 2006, would show CJTF-76 synchronizing its three LOOs to clear-hold-build-engage in eastern Afghanistan. Mountain Lion pitted U.S. Army and Marine Corps infantry battalions and several Afghan National Army (ANA) brigades against insurgents accustomed to surviving in eastern Afghanistan's harsh environment. Coalition forces had entered the area the previous summer, losing 16 Navy special operators when insurgents downed their rescue helicopter, but they had not come to stay. This time it would be different.

CJTF-76 intended first to "clear" (or separate) the insurgents from the population. It would do this in part by aggressively attacking enemy forces in sanctuary and transit areas, where they enjoyed

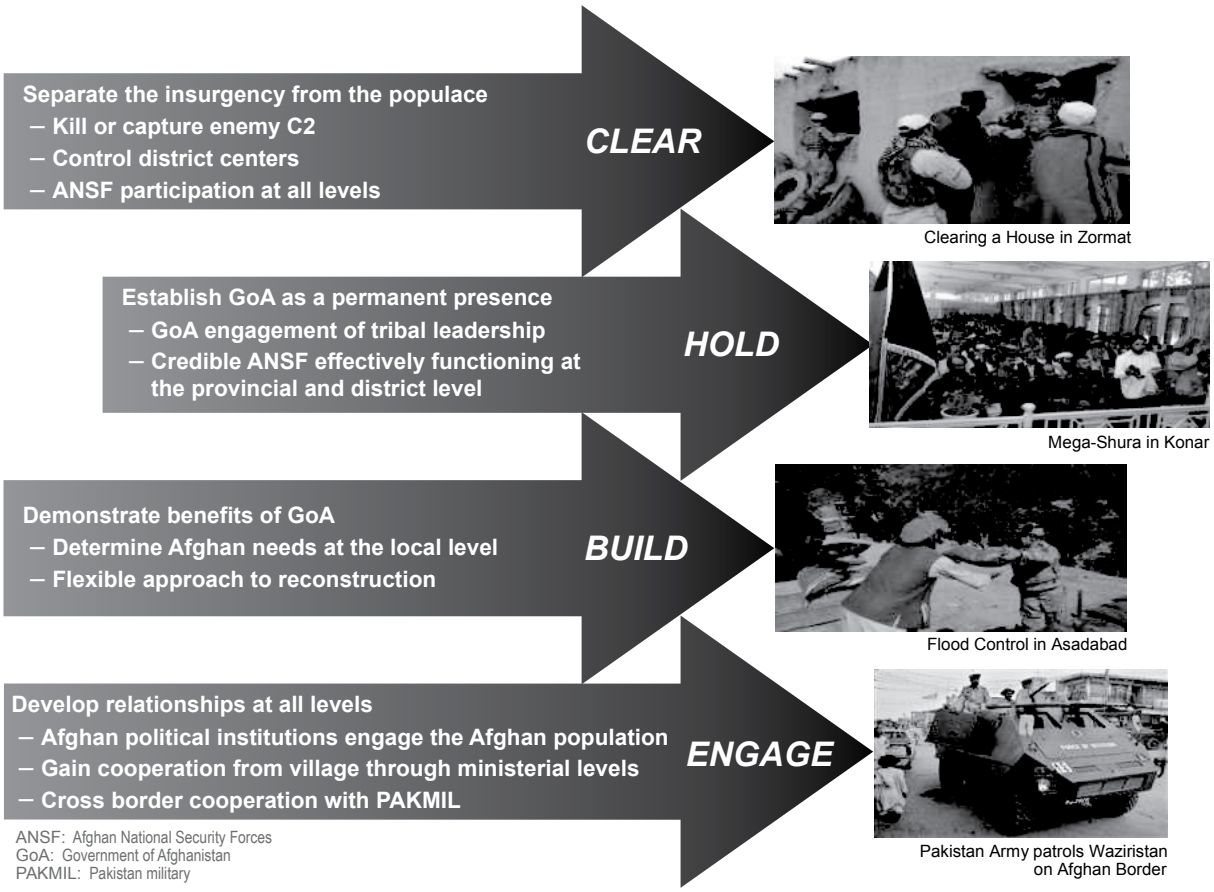

Figure 1. COIN model in Afghanistan.

freedom of movement. To initiate this plan and the "clear" stage of Operation Mountain Lion, coalition forces infiltrated to blocking positions while the main effort conducted a massive air assault against significant enemy sanctuaries in the Korengal and Shuryak valleys.

The scale of Mountain Lion was unprecedented in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), as was the unity of effort among all players. Joint, interagency, and coalition partners—equals all—worked seamlessly, maximizing their complementary capabilities. Despite the diversity of forces deployed, no intelligence was compromised. Nor did the service parochialism often associated with JTFs impede the mission; in fact, U.S. forces cooperated much more closely and effectively than they had earlier in OEF.

This new cohesion grew in part from plans that took advantage of lessons learned from the poorly coordinated use of airpower during early phases of OEF.[2] One of those lessons was that airpower was most effective when ground forces employed and then exploited it. Through careful coordination among command and control (C2) structures, joint air forces were able to support ground troops at the required times and locations and with the right mix of assets. A responsive coalition air operations center (CAOC) in Qatar made this possible. The CAOC coordinated air operations with direct representation inside the CJTF headquarters, where an air coordination control element (ACCE) responds to the commander's priorities. It integrated the ACCE directly into all operations to meet the commander's priorities for air power. From ships in the Arabian Sea and bases in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Qatar, Diego Garcia, and the continental United States, joint air assets provided close air support, electronic warfare, and ISR to Soldiers and Marines on the ground.

Planning for the operation had begun in late February after transfer of authority from the Southern European Task Force to 10th Mountain Division. Ground forces designated for involvement in the operation included elements of the 10th Mountain's 3d Brigade Combat Team, a USMC infantry battalion, brigades from the ANA's 201st and 203d Corps, multicomponent special operations forces (SOF), and various support elements. Also present were

joint PRTs to coordinate R&D activities, engineers to provide mobility and support R&D, and embedded training teams to train and mentor the ANSF. All combined to form CJTF-76.

The embedded teams operated directly with Afghan units, providing both tactical advice and access to coalition artillery and air. Their use enabled two ANA corps to fight effectively alongside U.S. forces while a Canadian-led multinational brigade secured terrain in southern Afghanistan. Pakistan, too, contributed forces, deploying 11 infantry battalions to disrupt insurgent cross-border movement and resupply efforts.

Shaping Operations

Shaping operations for CJTF-76's "clear" phase consisted of lethal and nonlethal actions, which continued as planning proceeded. Special operations forces neutralized several high-value targets, among them key leaders, enemy IED cells, and weapons caches. Eliminating these targets from the battlespace helped disrupt enemy operations prior to the assault. Intelligence collection also continued throughout this phase to pinpoint enemy defenses and strongholds. In the nonlethal realm, task force planners worked on humanitarian and medical assistance, R&D, and Afghan work programs to ensure coalition forces could immediately give the impression of a credible government response following seizure of initial assault objectives.

When D-day arrived and ground-force infiltration was complete, maneuver forces assaulted at H-hour using multiple medium- and heavy-lift helicopters whose powerful noise disturbed the frigid night. With artillery and air force fires suppressing the enemy, CJTF-76 laid a noose around the insurgent sanctuary that would gradually be tightened by ongoing operations.

By morning, task force units had achieved all their initial objectives, but they found most of the rural villages deserted by combatants. There were 72 compounds in Kandlay, yet only 7 adult males were detained among the population on the first day of the assault. Apparently, most of the insurgents had fled toward the surrounding mountains. The outer cordon, however, had already been set by units infiltrating prior to D-day. Finding their escape routes blocked, enemy fighters sought refuge in caves, mountainous terrain, or remote villages. They seemed to think the attack was another sweep-and-leave effort by the coalition. After several days, they adapted to CJTF-76's presence by camouflaging themselves as noncombatants. Making their way back into villages to acquire food and supplies, they appeared content to merely survive and wait out the coalition presence.

The vigorous presence of the ANA with CJTF-76 signaled the change in coalition strategy. Having participated in the initial assault and fighting, the ANA brigades had gained combat experience and, thus, credibility and legitimacy. To enhance the perception of government determination, at dawn on the first day the ANA brigade commander went down into Kandlay and prayed with the locals in the village mosque. His action underscored the ANA's religious and cultural ties to the village. It also initiated the overall effort to establish personal links with the local population.

Assembled for a *shura* that day, some villagers asked CJTF-76 leaders how long the forces would stay. They were worried. The last time coalition forces had entered this valley they had promptly left, and the Taliban insurgents had killed those who cooperated with the coalition. Task force leaders assured the people that they had come to stay and would protect them from the insurgents.

To back this up, when the ANA chief of staff visited the troops after the first week of fighting, CJTF-76 Soldiers worked with him to help establish a permanent ANA outpost in the heart of enemy territory. This commitment had a dramatic impact on the people in the surrounding valleys. They knew that with government forces present, insurgents could not easily return to terrorize and intimidate them.

After several weeks of fighting in which scores of insurgents either died or surrendered under the "Strengthening Peace" program (a national reconciliation program), the area of operations began to show signs of stability. These results validated CJTF-76's principle of establishing a permanent presence in disputed areas. They also underscored the value of partnering with local security forces, whose cooperation and credibility paid dividends.

Having cleared enemy forces from the area, CJTF-76 was ready to continue the operation by "holding." The "hold" part was comprised of two objectives.

First, the counterinsurgency effort had to dominate the physical terrain by creating permanent or semipermanent facilities. Therefore, CJTF-76 forces built a combat outpost on the dominating terrain in the middle of the Korengal Valley. The ANA chief of staff personally raised the Afghan national flag during the base opening ceremony. His intent was to demonstrate the establishment of Afghan sovereignty in the area. One could see the flag throughout the valley signaling both ANSF and government commitment.

U.S. Army, MSG Michael Pintagro

General Bismullah Khan, Chief of Staff of Afghanistan's Army, and his CSM raising the Afghan national flag at the grand opening of the Korengal outpost, 7 May 2006.

Second, CJTF-76 had to dominate the human terrain. This kind of dominance required capable internal security forces and reasonably effective government agencies. Achieving it required substantial investments in money ($5 billion) and effort. CJTF-76 established a partnership program to accelerate Afghan security-force development. Similar U.S. and ANSF units were paired together during mission, training, and refit cycles to expedite the transfer of U.S. methods and leadership techniques to the Afghan forces.

Coalition engineer units worked alongside ANSF engineer units constructing bridges, de-mining areas, and clearing routes of IEDs. The coalition engineers helped the ANSF units develop key skills for later autonomous actions. American aviation and medical units partnered with the ANSF to support coalition operations and build capacity among those Afghan units. Afghan Mi-17 and Mi-35 helicopters began flying support missions for CJTF-76 operations, while Afghan military and civilian doctors treated casualties. These efforts created a base-line capability to meet future Afghan needs.

U.S. maneuver forces and headquarters paired with their ANSF counterparts at every level to develop Afghan technical and staff skills. The U.S. units provided a link to joint fires and additional equipment to ANSF units, while the Afghans reciprocated with knowledge of the local cultural terrain. The added equipment, in particular, dramatically increased the ANSF's ability to "hold" and helped pave the way for the eventual departure of coalition forces.

Concurrently, coalition partners facilitated the establishment of provincial coordination councils and provincial development councils, which coordinated security and R&D throughout the provinces and enabled Afghan leaders to coordinate with development agencies to meet the population's needs.

Whenever possible, CJTF-76 conducted operations at the behest of provincial governors, whose capability improved to the point where they led development and security planning sessions. The people's confidence increased in their own government officials. This trend, if it continues, will eventually lead to the insurgents' defeat.[3]

To guarantee a government victory, the "build" stage of operations must transform the physical and human terrain by showing the tangible benefits that come from supporting government operations. Accordingly, CJTF-76 leveraged Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) funds to improve the infrastructure and economic environment. CJTF-76 obligated $82 million in CERP money in 2006 and an additional $160 million in 2007. Construction and rehabilitation of the economy improved living conditions and bolstered the government's credibility.

During Operation Mountain Lion, CJTF-76 obligated money to projects at locations that promised immediate impact. The task force built 9 bridges and 13 new district centers, built or refurbished 7 schools, and constructed or paved nearly 400 kilometers of road. These projects put over 1,800 potential insurgents to work and infused millions of dollars into the local economy. In this way, CJTF-76 immediately connected the people to their government. Opportunities were seized to cement these ties. For example, at the ribbon-cutting for the Pech River Bridge, which opened up the entire Korengal Valley to economic activity, selected families were asked to participate with CJTF-76 representatives by speaking about the benefits the bridge would provide to the area.

In addition to these projects, CJTF-76 dropped humanitarian aid packages from USAF aircraft as ground forces cleared valley towns. This assistance enabled villagers to return to their homes and—again—it reinforced the perception that their government was interested in their welfare.

Such demonstrations of constructive intent were critical for counterinsurgency operations. Thus, the CJTF-76 staff carefully planned and coordinated R&D as the nonlethal "exploitation force" that one hoped would ultimately undermine potential support for enemy insurgents.

Within CJTF-76's "build" element, and closely related to efforts at promoting economic development, was the simple responsibility for ensuring responsible governance wherever possible. On occasion, it proved necessary to intervene to ensure that the government was being led by responsible and reasonably uncorrupted leaders. In one instance, CJTF-76 successfully lobbied the government to replace a provincial governor widely suspected of corruption. The new governor was far more trustworthy, and the impact of his leadership was immediately evident. When insurgent activity unexpectedly spiked

U.S. Army, SGM James Gambel

A CJTF-76 command element from TF Chosin (1-32d Infantry) pauses to coordinate operations during its ascent of Ahbas Ghar, a 7,800-foot peak, in the opening stages of Operation Mountain Lion, 11 April 2006.

(in the form of increased sniper attacks and a rise in IED ambushes of CJTF-76 patrols), he ordered his security forces to establish an economic blockade of the Korengal. This angered the local elders, but he held firm, telling them they would have to stop harboring terrorists before he would lift the blockade. They soon yielded. The governor's deft handling of the crisis validated CJTF-76's course in helping to build a determined, competent government backed by a reliable security force.

The last element of the strategy for defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan was "engagement." Because the people are the center of gravity in an insurgency, CJTF-76 planners assessed person-to-person contact as the best means of achieving good outcomes. This strategy applied especially to the fence-sitters. The task force operated under the assumption that such contact should take place at all levels and in all possible forums. Consistent with this principle, it engaged with the people in every available venue throughout all phases of Operation Mountain Lion.

During "clear" operations, the task force reached out by holding *shuras* from the first day on, introducing the ANA to communities and leveraging the cultural ties Afghan soldiers had with their own people. During the course of follow-on "hold" operations, CJTF-76 expanded its networks of personal contacts and associations through the many opportunities for daily personal contact. During establishment of combat outposts, and as ANA security forces were introduced, opportunities for personal contact became ingredients of effective governance. In the "build" phase, CJTF-76 continued its networking by linking R&D projects to local leaders and government officials. This had the added effect of building government credibility. To bolster the prestige of local officials, CJTF-76 also took every opportunity to conduct combat operations under their direction. In effect, every Soldier and leader became an ambassador, and their collective efforts produced cumulative effects. The combination of securing areas with sufficient forces while simultaneously encouraging local support through personal contacts and public projects dramatically limited insurgent operations.

Dealing with Pakistan

In addition to efforts aimed directly at engaging the Afghan populace, CJTF-76 also initiated talks with Pakistani leaders. This was a must, since Pakistan had the ability to reduce regional support for insurgent sanctuaries and limit their impact on stability operations.

At the strategic level, CJTF-76 participated in quarterly talks with Afghan and Pakistani military headquarters. The talks helped build trust among the three military forces. They also provided forums that allowed the participants to confront major issues such as interdicting high-value targets and exploiting sanctuaries in Pakistan. During monthly border-security subcommittee meetings, task force officers addressed specific border and sovereignty issues facing forces operating along the Afghanistan-Pakistan divide. Both the monthly and quarterly forums offered opportunities to resolve issues at the tactical level. The task force leveraged these forums for exchanges such as "border flag" meetings that enabled small-unit commanders to meet their counterparts and establish relationships. Although yielding mixed success in terms of influencing operations on each side of the border, the meetings did much to defuse tensions.

Another benefit of CJTF-76 engagement with Pakistani leaders was that it set the conditions for combined operations, mainly patrols to police the border region. These patrols blocked many of the infiltration routes used by terrorists to enter Afghanistan. The meetings also produced a combined exercise that included U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani forces. Operation Inspired Gambit exercised CJTF-76 forces in a scenario that included an air-assault operation to seize key terrain and secure a notional terrorist compound followed by patrols on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border to interdict terrorists and deny them key transiting areas. This combined exercise not only helped suppress the Taliban, but also improved relations with Pakistan.

Conclusions

The "clear, hold, build, and engage" model employed by CJTF-76 had a dramatic impact in eastern Afghanistan. This model was subsequently applied, again with significant success, in southern Afghanistan in the late spring, during Operation Mountain Thrust. In that operation, coalition forces disrupted enemy units operating in key population centers and then cleared north to defeat insurgents

U.S. Army

Winter campaign in eastern Afghanistan, 4 December 2006.

operating in sanctuary in Uruzgan province. Key R&D projects valued at over $31 million extended roads, power, and water into this remote region, and improved governance. Coalition forces also continued to employ the "clear, hold, build, and engage" model in fall and winter campaigns in eastern Afghanistan during operations Mountain Fury and Eagle, the final components of CJTF-76's campaign plan during 2006.

In these final operations, coalition forces cleared over 2,500 enemy combatants from the battlefield and, by establishing 12 new ANSF combat outposts and expanding 8 others, took up permanent presence on key terrain. Futhermore, effective governance was extended into new areas via construction of approximately 1,500 kilometers of new roads and 53 new district centers, the opening of 18 schools, and obligation of over $500 million to new R&D projects across Afghanistan.

The ANSF achieved new levels of proficiency and competence as they worked with coalition forces. Indigenous Afghan units now patrol many locations under the independent direction of their provincial governors.

At this writing, stability and prosperity are emerging in eastern Afghanistan. The effectiveness of CJTF-76's "clear, hold, build, and engage" model has been confirmed.

If coalition forces follow the model and give it enough time to work throughout Afghanistan (and elsewhere), we will win this "long war" with Islamic extremists. Conversely, turning away will likely mean failure. We should choose wisely when the stakes are as high as they are, and especially when we have a ready template for success. ***MR***

NOTES

1. *Army Campaign Plan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004).
2. Rebecca Grant, "Bombs on Target," *Air Force Magazine* 88, no. 8 (August 2005).
3. David Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND).