Enhanced Village Stability Operations

by

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Abstract

How can Village Stability Operations enhance the tie between Afghanistan’s rural populations to its centralized government? In the late 19th century, Afghanistan’s monarchy instituted a “system of domination” where urban leaders ruled over the rural, agricultural populations (Giustozzi & Ibrahimi, 2012). External state actors have only exacerbated the rift between rural and urban centers. In every case of foreign occupation, the occupying government has exploited tribal divisions to gain a foothold in the country (Katzman, 2013). Although the tribal differences and disconnect between the rural and urban populations benefits an occupying force in the beginning, these same factors also send those armies home in defeat. Village Stability Operations are a bottom-up approach that is filled with sound counterinsurgency doctrine. With a mixed bag of results, many policy makers are wondering if this is a solid way forward. Successful operations seem to be tied to who is executing the operations and what support they are receiving. Done correctly, village stability operations will not only establish a formidable force to keep out terrorists, but will also pave the way for U.S. economic interests. Successful VSO teams had four major commonalities: they established warrior credentials, formed strong Afghan Local Police programs, selected appropriate sites, and had the right team make-up. In order to improve the speed of these operations, three strategic recommendations should be considered. Teams should deploy to the same area at least twice, training and doctrine needs to incorporate applicable counterinsurgency doctrine, and mentors should be embedded at the district level.
Dedication

To Mr. Conway, my high school math teacher, who saw competence in me that I couldn’t see myself.
Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the outstanding support of so many of the Henley-Putnam faculty, knowledgeable friends, and a supportive spouse.
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List of Terms, Abbreviations, or Symbols

ALP: Afghan Local Police
ANPA: Afghan National Police Auxiliary
ANP: Afghan National Police
ANSF: Afghanistan National Security Forces
AP3: Afghan Public Protection Program
COIN: Counterinsurgency
CJSOTF: Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force
ISAF: International Security Assistance Force
ODA: Operational Detachment A (a special forces team alpha)
SOF: Special Operations Forces
VSO: Village Stability Operations
Introduction

Afghanistan’s tribal society has never been strongly linked to a central government. Over Afghanistan’s history many conquerors have attempted to rule, but with each attempt the occupying nation has failed to pacify Afghanistan’s rural majority. Coalition Forces have tried multiple strategies to first bring security to rural Afghanistan, and second, bring rural Afghanistan onto the side of the central government. Each attempt has failed. One attempt resulted in creating roving bands of armed militia, while others simply never got the support they needed to have a chance at sustainability. Village Stability Operations are some of the first to emphasize a “bottom-up” approach. The goal is to separate the insurgent from the population at the village level.

Late in the fall of 1986, the Soviet Politburo debated over the Afghan problem. With the unpopular war nearing its seven-year mark, many Soviet politicians were growing weary of the war’s substantial drain on the nation’s resources. Summing up the real issue, the deputy Minister of Defense and member of the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1986), Sergei Akhrome’ev made this statement:

Military actions in Afghanistan will soon be seven years old. There is no single piece of land in this country which has not been occupied by a Soviet soldier. Nevertheless, the majority of the territory remains in the hands of the rebels….There is no single military problem that has arisen and that has not been solved, and yet there is still no result. The whole problem is in the fact that military results are not followed up by political [actions]. We control Kabul and the provincial centers, but on occupied territory we cannot establish authority. We have lost the battle for the Afghan people (p. 180).
Almost prophetically, Akhrome’ev described the problem that coalition forces would face two decades later. Yuli Vornontsov, deputy foreign minister of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (1986), punctuated Achrome’ev’s assessment by pointing out that Afghanistan’s population is primarily rural. He went on to make the important distinction, “But it is exactly they who have least benefitted from the revolution” (p. 180). Almost all foreign occupiers of Afghanistan have found their way into this same quagmire. The urban centers of Afghanistan roll over when the occupier’s armies show up, but widely dispersed Afghan villages present a counterinsurgency nightmare. The Soviet military struggled to connect these rural Afghans to their established central government through a top-down approach. Coalition forces have also fallen into this ‘bear trap.’ Village stability operations (VSO) are an attempt to remedy this oversight. A civil affairs noncommissioned officer pointed out the necessity of constructing a strategy that would target ‘the gap.’ Young (2011), author of 4th and Long: The role of Civil Affairs in VSO, quotes Master Sergeant Pease as he points out that most of the enemy combatants “live and operate in the rural Afghan countryside” (p. 17). Pease notes that the rural areas are deprived of security and government services, leaving the door open to insurgents with the freedom to operate and mobilize the population. Pease went on to say, “In this gap lies a large Afghan citizenship with grievances that are both resolved and exploited by the insurgents on a daily basis” (p. 17). Pease made this final argument, “…this gap was going to have to be closed by coalition forces rather than our enemies” (p. 17). The winner gets more than a few farmers on his side. Whoever is victorious will be in a position to mobilize the population and realize their collective interests. Overcoming the gap may sound easy, but the barriers between the city centers and the villages have a long and painful history.
The Gap

Although temporary solutions have been used, recent history is full of examples of the gap between a central Afghan government and the rural population. Afghanistan’s history is wrought with hundreds of years of foreign occupiers and tribal strife. With few exceptions, the central government of Afghanistan has typically only coexisted with Afghanistan’s tribal society. Barfield (2010), an anthropologist, historian and author of Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, generally described the typical Afghan central government as a “product of a hierarchical political culture in which only men from certain elite descent groups were believed to have the right to rule or even compete for power” (p. 4). Barfield goes on to point out that these governments did not “rely on popular support” (p. 4), because they would use taxes and tribute to deploy armies for hire. The only real threat to this power came from tribes outside the population centers that could not be reached by the central government (Barfield, 2010). This final statement is significant, as it gives insight into the historical rift between Afghan’s urban and rural populations. Speaking of these rural tribes, Barfield (2010) continues with this significant statement:

They were egalitarian and rejected the legitimacy of any outside authority, but played a minor role in politics except when state power grew weak. In such a situation, tribal groups on the edge of the polity could topple a dynasty and seize the state for themselves. The structure of the system did not change, however, because the leaders of these tribal groups quickly monopolized power themselves and pushed their old followers back into the margins (p. 4).
This political cycle did not bridge the gap. In fact, with each take over, the divide between those that held power and the rural populations neglected by that power continued to grow. The problems between the two populations were only exacerbated in the 19th and 20th centuries, as East and West began their successive occupations.

The weak centralized government of Afghanistan was a convenient vehicle for any reigning super power to highjack. The decision to control Afghanistan through this government would be the inevitable downfall of these occupying forces. Western thinking would dictate that if one held the strings of the centralized government of a country, then they would reign supreme in that land. Unfortunately, Afghanistan is not a country that has ever been successfully run from the top down, especially when a foreign invader is at the helm. The centralized puppet government immediately runs into resistance and faces legitimacy issues. Britain, the former Soviet Union, and the Coalition have all tasted this bitter fruit.

The purpose of writing this research paper is to ascertain whether or not the current strategy in Afghanistan will realize U.S. goals and objectives. Mainly, will VSO overcome the gap and tie the rural villages to Afghanistan’s central government? Leading up to VSO’s implementation, a number of strategies were attempted and failed. Many military commanders became frustrated with the lack of success. Each time they returned, the situation seemed worse than before. Robinson, author of One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare effectively captured one commander’s deep realization. Robinson (2013) writes:

As he packed up to go home, the champion of the counter guerrilla fight had an epiphany.

How many times had Special Forces done this? To what end? Reeder asked himself.
They simply were not getting anywhere with the constant raiding approach. They could conduct raids for the next one hundred years and not finish off the Taliban. ‘It seems like every time I come back here, the security situation is worse,’ he thought. ‘Maybe we need to do something different’ (p. 12).

VSO are drastically different; they also carry significantly higher inherent risk and require highly skilled individuals to implement. With a mixed bag of results, it is vital VSO be thoroughly evaluated.

A strong link between the Afghan Central Government and rural villages is more than a supply line. The ability of the central government to provide security and safety to the populace and stable economic conditions is a major factor in these rural areas viewing the central government as legitimate. Conversely, the inability for the government to provide goods, services, security, and safety has cast a long shadow of doubt over the Afghan government. Bolduc, the commander charged with implementing VSO, establishes the general goal of VSO in his journal article The Future of Afghanistan. Bolduc (2011) explains that the broad purpose of VSO are “to improve security with ALP, connect to governance and facilitate the delivery of goods, services and infrastructure development in order to conduct bottom-up COIN operations” (p. 24). In very general terms, VSO seems to have identified the gap as a major barrier to stabilizing Afghanistan. Connett and Cassidy (2011) describe the details of how special operation forces work with a hybrid of top-down and bottom-up approaches, “In theory and practice, SOF efforts at the village level expand to connect village clusters upward to local district centers, while national-level governance efforts connect downward to provincial centers and then to district-level centers” (p. 24).
Admittedly, bridging the gap between rural Afghanistan and the central government depends on more than just successful VSO. Many external factors also play a role, including government corruption, opium production/eradication, and new policies implemented by Afghanistan’s or the United States’ government. The scope of this research paper is not to delve deeply into these external factors, but to simply illustrate how these variables diminish or enhance stability operations. Instead, several case studies will be analyzed to glean positive and negative team behaviors that either helped or hurt the operations. Additionally, statistical information will be evaluated to determine population trends that indicate true VSO success or failure. In particular, population migration patterns, indicators of economic stability, indicators of rural security, and the percentage of population support will be considered.

Over the past decade, thousands of soldiers, airmen, seaman and marines have been killed or injured due to poor policy. In many cases there was simply no policy or campaign plan. If the concept of VSO is just another poor policy, then it’s failing must be brought to light before more blood is spilled. If it is a good policy that just needs tweaking to be generally successful, then amended courses of action need to be developed and implemented to turn the tide in Afghanistan. This research paper will show that VSO are doctrinally sound. Additionally, recommendations are being made to make them more successful.

Perfecting VSO will further enhance counterinsurgency doctrine; which will also aid in combatting the popular belief that the Army has learned how to fight a counterinsurgency by targeting the ‘bad guys’. The research will illustrate that very few conventional Army commanders are prepared or motivated to truly conduct a counterinsurgency. Additionally, this research paper will conclude with a recommendation for the right balance of conventional Army and special operators that will produce results in a timely manner.
Background & Project Description

How can Village Stability Operations enhance the tie between Afghanistan’s rural population and its centralized government? Implementing a strategy in Afghanistan that will “win” in the short term is easy. In fact coalition forces have perfected the art. Pick a strategy from the Afghan National Police Auxiliary to the Afghan Public Protection Program and you will find evidence of temporary security, state building, and even some positive involvement from the local population. Unfortunately, all of these glimmers of hope seem to end the same way. As coalition forces move on, these semi-trained forces are left to either cause mayhem as an armed gang, become the personal security detail for the local warlord, or they just vanish back into the rural woodwork. The central government never really had their allegiance, and the strategy lacked the foresight to establish an apparatus to provide resources to maintain these forces. If there is one thing coalition forces have learned over the past fourteen years in Afghanistan, it is that Coalition Forces will not have a long-term “win” unless strategists directly address this problem. The Soviet Union also came to the same conclusion. Koring (2008) captured the words of Aushey, a regimental commander for the Soviets, in his article titled, It is impossible to conquer the Afghans. Aushey stated this observation, "We could take any village, any town and drive the mujahedeen out, but when we handed ground over to the Afghan army or police they would lose it in a week" (para 8).

The US-led Coalition Solution

Initially in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the coalition forces decided on a familiar and antiquated philosophy; take the capital and win the war. Ricks (2006), author of Fiasco: The


*American Military Adventure in Iraq*, aptly describes the shortsighted objectives in both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars:

…a group of Army commanders and other top service officials met at the Army War College’s bucolic campus on the outskirts of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to review, among other things the Central Command’s middling performance in the Afghan campaign. The meeting concluded that major errors had been committed in the conduct of that offensive, especially in the handling of the larger, strategic issues. This conclusion was meant to be descriptive of what had happened in the previous year, but it would also prove accurate in predicting what would go wrong in the handling of the Iraq war.

The first major criticism on which the participants agreed was that the Afghan situation had been marred by the excessively short-term approach of top defense leaders (p. 70).

Seven years into the war, it started to become obvious that the shortsighted strategy wasn’t winning the war for the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. The large occupation strategy directly contradicted the propaganda the coalition forces were pumping out. Many rural populations within Afghanistan responded according to their historical norm; unite and fight the occupiers. Large forces mentoring from the top-down would likely work in a Western society. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan, a more traditional bottom-up counterinsurgency model is necessary. Jones (2009) pointed out this error during his testimony presented to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in April of 2009, “Based on increasing Pashtun aversion to outside forces, it is unlikely that the United States and NATO will defeat the Taliban and other insurgent
groups in Afghanistan through a heavy international military footprint that tries to clear, hold and build territory” (p. 6). This wasn’t the first effort to bring security to rural districts.

In 2006, the Afghan National Police Auxiliary (ANPA) was formed. The intent was to create a backup force for the Afghan National Police. The ANPA would lift the rural burden by performing local police duties. Perito (2009) summarized the ANPA theory this way:

Under this plan, provincial governors could recruit 11,271 men from 124 high-risk districts in 21 provinces into the ANPA, a militia force intended to reinforce the ANP. The purpose of the ANPA was to man checkpoints and perform community policing functions, freeing the ANP for counterinsurgency operations (p. 9).

Although the intentions were good, the initiative was a horrible failure. The ANPA recruits only received ten days of training, a laughable amount when considering the opposition they were facing. Additionally, many of the recruits were likely under hostile control: if they were not controlled by the Taliban, then by powerful local warlords. Wilder (2007), a researcher and author focusing on Afghan National Police intimated that the heavily criticized ANPA was sanctioning illegal activities and militias in the Southern part of Afghanistan. In the best-case scenario the ANAP created an untrained force running around with weapons. In the worst-case the initiative actually armed the opposition. In the spring of 2008, the coalition quietly ended this attempt to secure rural areas in Afghanistan.

In 2009, ISAF took another swing at the problem and introduced an experimental program in Wardak province: the Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3). AP3 was similar in many ways to the ANPA. Candidates were given a couple of weeks of training, weapons, and were recruited from the local villages they were meant to protect. Unlike its predecessor, AP3
recruits were selected by tribal shuras instead of provincial governors. Additionally, AP3 were set up to be a force directed at stopping the insurgency instead of running checkpoints and filling in as local constables. Finally, US Special Forces would back this new initiative. Unfortunately many of the same issues remained. For instance, AP3 took resources away from establishing the Afghan National Police. Additionally, the program did not bridge the gap between AP3 forces and their urban counterparts. Finally, recruits were not properly vetted and many AP3 soldiers gave their allegiance to warlords and in some cases the enemy they were meant to fight. When Said Jawad, US Ambassador for Afghanistan, first heard of the plan he warned that the program may retard progress for traditional police and military forces and strengthen non state actors oppressing those institutions (Vennard, 2009). Despite the warnings, AP3 did experience some success. In a handful of districts in Wardak province, the areas became secure enough to actually begin the building phase of the plan (U.S. Forces Afghanistan, 2009). Unfortunately in late 2011 the program was disbanded due to the high costs and the amount of time it took to garner relatively small gains (Afghan War News, 2011). Many of the participants in the program fell into the Afghan Public Protection Force and others joined the Afghan Local Police (ALP). The ALP was a piece that fell under the new revamped strategy: Village Stability Operations.

Strategists identified that prior plans did not connect these rural police forces to the central government. There were a couple of reasons the connection was not established. First, the Afghan Central Government was not providing resources for these forces. Instead, the US was providing them weapons, pay, and training. Second, in the absence of direct oversight, these forces would often fall into old patterns and rely on direction from local rural power brokers.
Project Description

In order to derive commonalities that breed success and characteristics that doom VSO to failure, several VSO case studies will be reviewed. Additionally, first-hand accounts are priceless in gaining a ground-truth perspective of stability operations. This perspective will be an invaluable guide as the case studies are interpreted. In addition to the qualitative research, quantitative research will be needed to test the conclusions drawn from the qualitative analysis. These quantitative key measures are used to give empirical evidence that a team was truly successful. Some of these key measures are population migration patterns, economic signs of stability, and percentage of enemy activity.

The case study analysis will cover the time period from 2010 to 2013. Analysis will be conducted on two teams that demonstrated unsuccessful behaviors. Once these behaviors are identified, conclusions and recommendations can be extrapolated to assist future operations in avoiding the same mistakes. Following the analysis of the unsuccessful teams, four successful teams will be analyzed. Two main results will be garnered from this process. First, commonalities of success will be derived. Second, a profile of the type of team members needed to obtain success will also be produced. Key quantitative measures will also be used to demonstrate that these teams accomplished the goal of successfully tying these rural areas to the Afghan central government, improved security in the area, and increased economic activity.

In an attempt to mitigate any subjectivity, an effort will be made to pull information regarding these teams from multiple sources. Additionally, key quantitative measures will be introduced in order to temper the assessment of what is success and what is not. The research is
also limited as many of the results from these teams are classified. In order to increase dissemination, this work is unclassified.

**Quantitative Research**

Each of the following quantitative measures is influenced by many factors. The drivers to determine VSO success are evaluated to show how they relate directly to VSO operations and also to disclose other factors that can affect the results. One of the major indicators of VSO success or failure is population migration patterns.

**Population Migration**

From the onset of village stability operations, some villagers may decide that they do not want to be caught up in the battle for the population. According to Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, as of July 2015 Afghanistan has over 800,000 internally displaced persons and over two and half million refugees (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 2015). Typically, the beginning phase of VSO initiates a migration of the population from the village to the urban centers. As security and building projects are brought to the area, many of these villagers return to their homes. This population migration from the urban centers to the villages is a positive sign that VSO are working. Although VSO are factors of population migration, it is important to understand other drivers influence this as well.

Migration from the village to the urban centers has been a pattern for the past fifty years (Forced Migration Online, 2015). In addition to the intense conflict and economic destabilization at the rural level, many refugees are returning from neighboring countries. In addition to refugees, some rural families are sending a family member to the city to supplement the household income
of the remaining family still in the village. Poppelwell (2007) points out the upside of having a family member stay in the urban center, by capturing the positive correlation between the length of time a person lives in the city and the improvement of their economic situation. In the short-term, the family has to sacrifice by not having an extra person to perform work on the family farm. That sacrifice typically pays off over the long-term.

**Economic Stability**

Village stability operations are typically done on a small scale. It makes more sense to look at microeconomic indicators, rather than use macroeconomics for the whole region. For instance, an increase in the number of shops in a nearby bazaar is more telling than the gross domestic product for the district. Due to a lack of statistical information that directly corresponds to the time of the operations, the use of personal testimony to these factors will be utilized.

**Percentage of Thwarted Attacks**

Another indicator of a successful training operation is how the training audience performs without the aid of the instructors. In this case, did the Afghan Local Police successfully engage and drive back the insurgents? For a team to be deemed successful, the data should show that the ALP were able to repel the insurgents the majority of the time. If the insurgents are able to continue to disrupt the villager’s life, then the region is not truly secure.

**An Increase in Intelligence Reporting**

At the beginning of VSO there will be a natural reluctance of the common villager to report on the activities of the insurgent. Successful VSO will naturally put the villager at ease and demonstrate to the villager that the operation is reliable. A natural byproduct of that feeling of
security is for the villager to mobilize on behalf of the team. A villager reporting on enemy activities is evidence of mobilization. Once the secure phase of VSO are fully underway, there should be a dramatic increase in intelligence reporting.

Significant Activity (SIGACT)

Significant Activity is reported when the enemy attacks coalition forces or the population. Typically, these attacks include the use of improvised explosive devices, small arms fire, indirect fire or a combination of all three. Similar to intelligence reporting, significant activity will be almost non-existent prior to special operators initiating VSO. However, as the team begins to wrest control from the insurgents, SIGACTs will dramatically increase. Successful VSO will effectively root out the insurgents from the battle space, which will influence the percentage of SIGACTs to decrease. Once the area is secure, SIGACTs should once again be almost nonexistent.

Percentage of Population Support for Program

Another key indicator of successful VSO is the percentage of the population that supports the program. The population being the objective, it makes sense that their perception of the program would be incredibly important. Several surveys were conducted in conjunction with the chosen case studies. Additionally, firsthand accounts were also useful in identifying overall population support. In some cases, the program was so successful that surrounding districts and villages were insisting that the program be implemented in their respective areas.
Literature Review

How can Village Stability Operations enhance the tie between Afghanistan’s rural population and its centralized government? According to the Central Committee of Communist Party (1986), the Soviets won nearly every battle and at one time or another occupied every square inch of Afghanistan. Yet, a decade later they returned home in defeat. The Soviets, like so many, could not bridge the gap between the villages and the district centers and therefore could not control the population of Afghanistan. Like the Soviet Union before them, coalition forces have also summarily failed at bridging this gap. The coalition forces have attempted several COIN-based strategies in an attempt to bring stability to Afghanistan. In each attempt, key elements were overlooked. In 2010, CJSOTF implemented a bottom-up approach called village stability operations. VSO addressed many of the weaknesses of previous strategies and, in many cases, found success. Unfortunately, in some cases, the strategy failed to bridge the gap between rural villages and the Afghan central government. Of course, bridging this gap is only important if it is necessary for U.S. interests. During an interview of a veteran on the talk news program Talk of the Nation, the veteran told the host that the goal for troops in Afghanistan from the beginning was to establish a stable centralized government (Talk of the Nation, 2013).

Certainly a stronger, more stable, Afghan government could keep out terrorist organizations, but it also makes way for other American economic interests. Like the Republic of Georgia, Afghanistan is important due to its geography. Eventon points out that Afghanistan is in a prime location as a transit route for oil and natural gas from central Asia to the Arabian Sea (2012). It is clear that leaving Afghanistan without bridging this gap will not only cost U.S. businessmen, but it will also leave a vacuum for terrorist organizations to call home. Finding a
way to tie the loose rural networks to a central government will serve both security and financial interests.

Bridging the gap between urban and rural populations will bring needed resources and security to traditional insurgent safe havens. Tying these rural tribal networks to the central government will mobilize the respective populations to the Afghan cause, ultimately bringing stability to Afghanistan. Understanding why VSO was able to make this connection in some cases and failed in others, will allow strategists to direct informed policy at the root of the problems. It is understood that Afghanistan has several big obstacles to stabilization. Corruption, a poor economy, and aggressive criminal and state actors working against stability operations are just a few of these obstacles. In no way will VSO transform Afghanistan into a little America. Large fundamental issues plague such an outcome. An improved VSO does have the ability to transform Afghanistan into a stable region where many of the United States’ economic and political interests could come to fruition. This will only be possible if the problems with the execution and implementation of VSO are brought to light.

The Road to VSO

Just getting to the change in policy that gave rise to village stability operations was no small feat. A basic understanding of Afghanistan’s history and culture is necessary in order to understand the significance of that decision. Few authors were able to tout as much credibility on the topic as Thomas Barfield. As a young student, Barfield lived among rural Afghans in the mid-1970s. Over the next forty years, Barfield became an expert on the Afghan’s culture and their political history. In his very descriptively titled book, Afghanistan-A Cultural and Political History, Barfield effectively illustrates the apparent miscalculations and misunderstandings of
nations that have attempted to conquer Afghanistan. In three sentences, Barfield exposes the lack of cultural understanding held by U.S. policymakers in the early dawn of the war. Barfield (2010) writes:

The question of creating political legitimacy was at the heart of reconstituting the Afghan government after its installation in 2002. A particularly delicate task would be installing a new political system without giving it the stigma of foreign imposition. Nothing undermined the legitimacy of any Afghan government faster than the charge that it was beholden to foreign masters. Despite the best of intentions, though, Afghan state building in the twenty-first century was fatally flawed because it attempted to restore a system designed for autocrats in a land where autocracy was no longer politically sustainable (p. 7).

Barfield’s comments are significant as they illustrate a fundamental issue with US policy over the first decade of the war; no matter how good your operation, Afghans aren’t going to accept something that is pushed on them by foreign powers.

Colonel Joseph H. Felter added emphasis to Barfield’s claim when he made the following statement regarding the overall goal of village stability operations. Felter wrote:

The primary goals of this program are to connect villages to their district government using a bottom up approach. The quality of the governance capacity from the district level on up must ultimately provide the popular incentives needed for such a program to succeed. Even the best SOF team (whether ISAF or ANSF) cannot ‘sell’ a product that Afghans do not want to ‘buy’ (p. 6).
Felter retired from the US Army in 2011 following a career as a Special Forces and foreign area officer with distinguished service in a variety of special operations and diplomatic assignments. He has conducted foreign internal defense and security assistance missions across East and Southeast Asia and has participated in operational deployments to Panama, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Felter led the International Security and Assistance Force, Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team in Afghanistan, advising Gen. McChrystal and Gen. Petraeus on counterinsurgency strategy.

Several authors contributed to the overall understanding of the external factors and the way these factors interact with village stability operations. Although all of these factors have an impact, none of them are as great as the legitimacy crisis that the Afghanistan government faces. Eventon (2012) made this statement, “At its core, the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan is an attempt to establish a client regime supported by a military operation to pacify resistance” (p. 1). Rife with corruption, criminal activity, and a not-so-far distant history of abuse, the client regime is a single point of failure to the Afghanistan campaign plan. After all, it is difficult to tie a population to an entity that won’t properly protect and resource them.


Robinson’s *One Hundred Victories* should be mandatory reading for anyone tasked with conducting stability operations. Robinson highlights successful and unsuccessful teams. By self-admission, Robinson has a favorable bias towards special operators. Many of the author’s works are centered on the lives and missions of special operating forces of the various branches of the U.S. military. In spite of this bias, Robinson is able to highlight both the good, bad and ugly of village stability operations. Robinson (2013) sums up the first eight years of the US
occupation in Afghanistan in one simple sentence, “As incredible as it may sound to students of military history, none of the constantly changing cast of commanders even bothered to write a campaign plan for Afghanistan until 2009” (p. xviii). It is almost unbelievable, but it is tragically true. Left without any real guidance, the US-led coalition did what it was designed to do; eliminate the insurgency through targeting operations. During this time period Afghanistan and Iraq were going through similar experiences. Ricks (2006) quoted a senior intelligence officer that aptly identified the real issue, “We were not sophisticated or calibrated in our approach. You know the old saying, If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail” (p. 195).

The conventional military began its version of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations early and often. Essentially these operations boiled down to using the myriad of intelligence disciplines at its disposal to identify anyone that was either an insurgent or a facilitator. The next step was to kill, capture, or neutralize that target. Occasionally, this led to more intelligence and the cycle would begin again. Unfortunately, this method was only one aspect of true counterinsurgency operations. Most military commanders missed the bigger picture. In their defense, these commanders were often given favorable ratings for executing a great number of these targeting missions. It became their main objective. Galula (1964, 2006) writes of the dangers of employing counterinsurgency tactics this way:

A system of military awards and promotion, such as that in conventional warfare, which would encourage soldiers to kill or capture the largest number of enemies, and thus induce him to increase the scope and the frequency of his military operations, may well be disastrous in counterinsurgency warfare (p. 66).
Doctrinally, counterinsurgency operations have at the heart a completely different objective: the population. Essentially, they were given a “hammer” and told they would be building a house. Instead they had a hammer and found that they needed to perform surgery. Ricks (2006) takes an in-depth look at the planning and execution of the first years of the Iraq war. Many mistakes made in Afghanistan were repeated in Iraq and Ricks captured these better than most. Ricks’ observations are especially relevant when he lays out the mistakes conventional military commanders made that aided in the creation of an insurgency.

**Invest in the ANSF, the continuation of a bad policy**

When commanders weren’t targeting, they were attempting to mentor and train Afghanistan’s security forces. The theory seems sound enough. Train up the security forces, so they can secure the country and then the coalition can leave. Unfortunately, the US has poured more than 65 billion into this program with no end in sight (Matishak, 2016). Felter may have found a part of the reason for the program’s failings. Testifying before the House Armed Services Committee Felter (2012) made this statement:

> It is likely that the huge investments made in the ANSF have led to the ‘purchasing’ of a certain amount of cooperation among various leaders and stakeholders. As our investments are inevitably reduced and these incentives diminish, this cooperation will be harder to sustain. Given this, perhaps the biggest threat to the ANSF’s ability to secure the country after the departure of US forces hinges less on its capabilities and more on its internal cohesion and the potential for ethnic divisions to fracture it (p. 6).

What do you get when you create a security force from a mixture of tribes? The answer is a bunch of tribes with military-trained members. Tom Bowman reiterated this observation on the
Radio Show *Talk of the Nation* (2013). Bowman said:

The problem you see in many places of the country where we went, and we went to the eastern part of Afghanistan, hard up against the border with Pakistan and also the south, around the city of Kandahar, a lot of times the army doesn’t get along with the Afghan local police, the armed neighborhood watch. They basically see them as thugs or local yokels, and the Afghan local police look at the army as from other parts of the country. The Afghan army is largely from the north, Tajiks and Uzbeks and Hazaras. They look at them basically, you know, they’re from another part of the country, they’re even foreigners. All they want is a paycheck. They’re not here to help us. You have to have good communication, and they have to work together, and from what we saw, that’s a serious problem (p. 3).

This is an incredibly serious problem as it speaks directly to the long-term strategy. Traditional ANSF may never reach the level of capability or cohesion to secure Afghanistan. This is just one part of it. The other barrier is the corruption rife among the ranks. It doesn’t take much to find a recent example. Martin Matishak wrote about the Afghan National Army’s National Engineer Brigade failure to be “partially capable” by the end of 2014. After spending $29 million on engineering equipment, the NEB claimed that they were still missing required equipment. The Afghan Central Supply Depot could not account for the equipment that had been sent (Matishak, 2016). It is painfully obvious that the invest-in-ANSF strategy has missed the mark.
**VSO, a shift in policy**

Katzman captured the words of General Stanley McChrystal that signaled a new direction in policy. The tenor being a strategy that is more focused on the population and less focused on targeting. Katzman (2013) writes:

> The goal of the U.S. military should be to protect the population rather than to focus on searching out and combating Taliban concentrations. Indicators of success such as ease of road travel, participation in local shuras, and normal life for families are more significant than counts of enemy fighters killed (p. 21).

**Prior Versions**

It appears that sometime in the eighth year of the war awareness began to grow that the current course of action was not working. Neglecting the village, which made up 70-80 percent of the country, was a bad idea. Reeder’s revelation, which was cited in the introduction, was just one of many that led to a myriad of programs to solve the rural problem. The programs came and went owing mostly to a lack of strategic unity on the subject. In 2009, Seth Jones offered testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia United States House of Representatives on April 2, 2009. Jones’ testimony essentially summed up the failures of the first seven years of the Afghan occupation and made several recommendations for the way forward. Village stability operations were largely created from the author’s works and recommendations. A close examination of this document reveals key assumptions made by the author, the modest goals of VSO nested within the Obama administration’s policy, and the foundation from which VSO was built. Recognizing a problem and figuring out how to solve it are two different things. Many authors contributed to outlining
VSO mechanics and the proposed “how” of VSO. Village stability operations are broken down into four phases: these are shape, hold, build, and expand and transition.

**Anatomy of VSO**

**Phase 1: Shape**

Shaping an area for Village Stability Operations is not just about securing the population. Certainly separating the population from the insurgent is a primary objective, but successful key leader engagements will likely determine success or failure. Connett and Cassidy (2011) outline the first steps of shaping operations, “operational elements assess the threat conditions; develop a clear understanding of the human terrain, local history and other critical details related to the village/area; and begin engagement to prepare for long-term success” (p. 24).

Assessing the threat is relatively self-explanatory; before setting up camp in an area, figure out what you’re up against. Although this is a vital piece of the puzzle, figuring out who the power brokers are in the area cannot be downplayed. Occasionally, VSO has failed because the team found out who the actual key leaders were too late (Robinson, 2013). Rust (2011) points out that these key leaders can either help or hurt your cause. Units that fail to “develop a plan for successfully managing powerbrokers” will likely find these local leaders destructive to the team’s operations (p. 30).

As these pieces come together, the real work begins with two types of engagement, which are key leader engagement and enemy engagement. The purpose of the key leader engagements is to gain permission from tribal leaders and local power brokers to live and operate in their area. One of the biggest upsides to VSO is that it identified the need for special operators to actually
coh abitate with the villages they were trying to secure. For nearly a decade, grand operations were conducted to clear rural areas of insurgents, only to have the insurgents move back in once coalition forces had moved on. White space could only truly be created with SOF sleeping, eating, and working alongside the villagers. Galula (1964, 2006) drew out this point in his book titled *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, “The units must be deployed where the population actually lives and not on positions deemed to possess a military value. A military unit can spend the entire war in so-called strategic positions without contributing anything to the insurgent’s defeat” (p. 78).

Donald C. Bolduc, a former CJSOTF-A commander, helped shape the command structure and executed the task of implementing village stability operations. Bolduc does an excellent job laying out the command structure, command intent and the lessons learned in the formative years of VSO. The command structure attempts to create a synergistic environment with COIN operations as the guiding force to military decision-making on the battlefield. It also creates a protective barrier around SOF elements in order to keep them from being misused and misguided. The idea was to push the day-to-day decisions down to the SOF teams. Bolduc (2011) discussed the benefits of the “expanded operational boxes” and how they “allow SOF teams conducting VSO to move at the speed of the populace and the insurgents. That agility and flexibility are necessary to enhance force-protection in a village-stability site, or VSS” (p. 25). Bolduc went on to say that this strategy also assists in mobilizing the population against the insurgents. The following statement not only demonstrates Bolduc’s understanding of these issues, but also exposes the commands key assumptions in developing the VSO courses of action:
We have been directed to operate in key rural areas, secure them, hold them, expand VSO and develop the ALP to facilitate the hold phase of the strategy so that we may progress into the build phase. That will further stabilize rural areas by mobilizing the populace to push out the insurgents, thereby improving security, bringing in development and connecting key rural areas to district governance. That will facilitate the connection of district government to provincial government, making a national connection that begins to set the conditions for reintegration and creation of an Afghan preference for nationalism over tribalism that legitimizes the Afghan government (Bolduc, 2011, p. 26).

Embedded in this statement is a summary of the prevalent western bias that clouds many commanders thinking. The first and foremost is the belief that tribal societies would be crazy to continue with their tribal traditions when offered the incredible benefits of a nation state. If this dilemma has roots, they are found in forcing these rural areas to choose between hundreds of years of tradition and culture and a puppet government that is controlled by the United States.

In addition to Bolduc, Connett and Cassidy added significantly to identifying the goals and processes of VSO. As a SOF officer and special assistant to commanding general for ISAF, respectively, the authors have great access to the inner workings of VSO. The outlined strategy dovetails nicely with the historical examples of counterinsurgency success. If this proves to be successful, the impact on strategic security could have far reaching effects. Connett and Cassidy (2011) delivered this statement as VSO began to bear positive fruit, “Historical examples of counterinsurgency, as well as the demonstrated propensity of the Afghan culture for raising local security forces, lend weight to the argument that, over time, VSO can achieve significant positive effects in Afghanistan” (p. 27). For VSO to continue to succeed, the concept needed to be firmly nested in proven counterinsurgency doctrine.
A comparison of village stability operations to counterinsurgency theory outlined by Galula became the litmus test. Galula was a French Army Officer that fought in irregular wars in China, Greece, Indochina, and Algeria. The author is one of the “grandfathers” of counterinsurgency doctrine as many of his observations are captured in Army Field Manual 3-24. The author fills in many of the gaps regarding sound general counterinsurgency theory. One of Galula’s opening statements identifies the folly of many when approaching counterinsurgency warfare. Galula (1964, 2006) writes,

Very little is offered beyond formulas – which are sound enough as far as they go – such as, ‘Intelligence is the key to the problem,’ or ‘The support of the population must be won.’ How to turn the key, how to win the support, this is where frustrations usually begin, as anyone can testify who, in a humble or in an exalted position, has been involved in a revolutionary war on the wrong-i.e., the arduous-side (p. xiii).

This quote sums up the coalition’s experience in Afghanistan. Many among the coalition ranks know the population needs to be mobilized, but thus far the resolutions on how to do that, have only been partially successful.

Although the author contributes greatly to the theory of fighting a counterinsurgency, this work does not answer many of the specific challenges faced by VSO teams. It also will not offer solutions to many of the mundane realities on the ground. Admittedly, this is not the point of Galula’s work. Certainly some fundamental problems with the way the coalition has approached Afghanistan are now glaring. For instance, the lack of border control and missing a strategy that included the population as the objective from the beginning are just two. Counterinsurgency Warfare should be read by any officer in charge of leading soldiers into the fight in Afghanistan.
There were a few points that Galula recommended that VSO doesn’t directly address, but overall VSO are nestled tightly into the arms of sound counterinsurgency theory. One of the major similarities lies with the colocation principle. Both Galula and VSO recommend the counterinsurgent live among the people. Additionally, both Galula and VSO agree that securing the population must come first. Once the population is separated from the insurgency, then troops can begin to build and transition. One minor difference is Galula recommends starting the process with a census, but VSO doesn’t formalize this step. A strong strategy means little if the wrong force is used to employ it.

Phase 2: Hold

The main goal of the hold phase of VSO is to build the capacity of the villages to eventually defend for themselves. Examining the origins of VSO, L’Etoile (2011) writes the following regarding the need for building security forces at the village level:

The coalition and Afghan government have neither the time nor resources to secure the most relevant and threatened segments of the population by using only their respective resources. This has led to a shifting in the ISAF campaign plan from operations almost exclusively designed to protect the population to operations designed to enable the population to protect itself (p. 4).

One of the greatest challenges a counterinsurgent force faces is the inherent responsibility to protect the population from the insurgent. Exploiting this counterinsurgent responsibility is one of the great advantages of an insurgency. Galula (1964, 2006) wrote, “The counterinsurgent has a heavy liability—he is responsible for maintaining order throughout the country” (p. 4). Maintaining order in Afghanistan has never been an easy or cheap. In 2009, the war in
Afghanistan began to be unpopular, which ultimately led to a loss of resources directed at the conflict. Policy makers recognized that a shift in strategy was necessary if coalition goals in Afghanistan were going to be realized. Coalition forces needed to find a way to protect the rural population long enough for Afghan National Security Forces to cover down on these remote areas. The VSO vehicle for village security is the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program.

The Afghan Local Police are a major pillar in the VSO strategy. Especially when speaking of the Hold Phase of VSO. Initially the ALP was established as an interim force with a mission to buy the Afghan Government enough time to develop the Afghan National Security Forces. Unfortunately, the ANSF has been a regular disappointment to both the Afghans and coalition forces. Felbab-Brown (2015) describes the current ANSF situation this way:

"The 2015 fighting season between the Taliban and Afghan security forces is turning out to be the bloodiest on record since 2001. Insecurity has significantly increased throughout the country, civilian deaths have shot up, and the Afghan security forces are taking large, and potentially unsustainable, casualties. Other deficiencies of the Afghan security forces persist (p. 1)."

Once key leader engagements have begun, rapport has been established, and the area’s power brokers have indicated that they are willing to assist in force protection, teams will ask the elders to provide information regarding area threats. These discussions will evolve into asking for local leaders to assist in the establishment of an embedded security team. This security team will help defend the rural area from insurgent threats (Connett & Cassidy, 2011). Providing information, although dangerous, is one thing. Providing flesh and blood to defend the area demonstrates far more resolve and commitment. In fact, many villages found this request to be one of the major
obstacles. As Young (2011) points out, villagers were often “apprehensive, as we were foreigners requesting them to stand up against insurgents who are often their own brothers, uncles and cousins” (p. 19). Having the right personalities on the ground to address these concerns cannot be underestimated. Once the villagers are convinced that coalition forces are able to protect them, a group of Afghan Local Police are selected, vetted and trained.

The vetting is accomplished by a village shura (Connett & Cassidy, 2011). Additionally, US forces biometrically enroll the new recruits. Insurgent forces typically challenge the infant system immediately, as this represents the beginning of the end to their popular support.

Galula’s First Law of Counterinsurgency states, “The support of the population is as necessary for the counterinsurgent as for the insurgent” (1964, 2006, p. 52). Since it is so crucial, insurgent forces fight ferociously to regain this support. Unfortunately for villages that undertake stability operations, this crucial point is often the bloodiest. Afghan local police, emboldened by fighting along side special operators, tend to fair well against their insurgent counterparts. Heavy losses are typically incurred on both sides and the will of the village is tested. If all goes well, a security bubble will begin to take form. With a little breathing room, the team begins to initiate the build phase of VSO.

**Phase 3: Build**

The building phase strikes at the heart of the insurgency. One of Galula’s prerequisites for a successful insurgency is that the insurgency needs a cause. Galula writes:

> The first basic need for an insurgent who aims at more than simply making trouble is an attractive cause, particularly in view of the risks involved and in view of the fact that the
early supporters and the active supporters – not necessarily the same persons – have to be recruited by persuasion (p. 12).

In retrospect, the coalition forces have oversimplified the cause taken up by the Afghan insurgency.

Although there are many insurgencies active in Afghanistan, the main body lobbying for political gains is the Taliban or the Islamic Emirate. It is difficult for someone with a western perspective to understand what could possibly be appealing about the Taliban’s cause; however, a cause is essential to any successful insurgency. The International Crisis Group (2008) evaluated the propaganda that the Taliban has published and as a result identified key messages identifying the Taliban’s cause. This first message is captured in the following statement:

In the 1990s, the Taliban had gained a modicum of legitimacy and support by ousting corrupt and brutal commanders. After its own ouster, many of these discredited leaders were brought into power by the international community, particularly the U.S. They were allowed to return to their predatory ways, including involvement in the opium trade, as long as they helped the hunt for al-Qaeda and mouthed allegiance to Kabul. As U.S. attention turned to Iraq, and the peace dividend failed to materialize, disillusionment began. Attacks by ethnic rivals on Taliban foot soldiers, and on Pashtuns in general, particularly in the north, as well as civilian casualties in international military operations in the Pashtun heartland, often the result of poor or deliberately misleading information, fuelled alienation and anger in the southern and eastern provinces (p. 7).

Taliban propaganda brought attention to civilian casualties from the beginning. The International Crisis Group (2008) postulated that the goal was “to frame the international
military intervention as a wider war against Islam and/or Pashtuns” (p. 7). This adequately captures the first pillar of the Afghan insurgency’s propaganda; Coalition forces are occupiers targeting innocent followers of Islam. Instead of answering the propaganda with a proper strategy, coalition forces only reinforced the message by reinstating corrupt leaders and executing haphazard targeting operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. In many cases these targeting operations were fueled by ethnic or tribal differences versus actual intelligence.

The second message of the Taliban’s cause is to paint coalition forces as a military force seeking to ‘westernize’ Afghanistan. For example, during the Taliban’s reign, the group used a loose interpretation of sharia law to deny education to females. Although this idea is not strictly Islamic, Afghan social and cultural norms support it. Friedland (2014) writes that each area ruled by Sharia law has “Different interpretations and laws depending on which of the four schools of Islamic Jurisprudence is being used, and the customs of the sects and country in question” (p. 1). In truth, it doesn’t really matter if this idea is doctrinally correct or not, what does matter is whether or not the Afghan people believe that educating females violates Sharia law. Most western civilizations and coalition forces strongly disagree with this idea, and have undertaken an initiative to educate all genders in Afghanistan. International Crisis Group (2008) reported that in 2008 a night letter directly attacked this policy, appealing to the conservative-minded Afghans to stop the west from corrupting this custom. The night letter reads:

Non-Muslims and Westerners are implementing their own laws in order to spread immorality and corruption throughout Afghanistan and other Islamic countries. An example is schools constructed for females and using these to indoctrinate women with immorality and corruption (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 12)
The third message is to appeal to the Afghan’s warrior spirit. Many DVDs pushed out by this organization portray themselves as a legitimate fighting force. These DVDs show Taliban conducting training and successful attacks Afghan National Security Forces and Coalition Forces (International Crisis Group, 2008). This demonstrates that they are able and willing to stand up to the coalition forces. Appealing to the Afghan warrior spirit dovetails nicely with the fourth message; draw strong comparisons between the coalition and Soviet occupations.

Through western eyes this comparison seems profoundly illegitimate, but to the rural Afghan the message often strikes a chord. Both the Soviets and the current coalition have tallied a significant number of civilian casualties, especially among the rural population. Both wars were hallmarked by a failed attempt to control the population through a puppet regime. This only ignited the warrior spirit within many rural Afghans to do what they have always done; defend against foreign occupation.

The fifth message is the classic idea that the central government of Afghanistan cannot secure or resource the population. Galula (1964, 2006) describes why this message can carry so much weight:

The population’s attitude in the middle stage of the war is dictated not so much by the relative popularity and merits of the opponents as by the more primitive concern for safety. Which side gives the best protection, which one threatens the most, which one is likely to win, these are the criteria governing the population’s stand (p. 8).

The central government is duty bound to protect the population. In Afghanistan, countless “super powers” have failed to accomplish this task, let alone a corrupt, under resourced, and undermanned organization. For this reason propaganda targeting the central government’s
failure to protect is typically the strongest. One of the theoretical breakthroughs of VSO is that VSO address both security and resources. More than that, the resources are tied back to the central government, as opposed to being provided by the occupiers.

The build phase is really about legitimizing the Afghan central government. If the government is able to provide resources and security to these rural populations, then a major pillar in the Taliban’s cause is mitigated. Admittedly, VSO are not able to completely legitimize a highly corrupt central government. On the other hand, VSO does target one major issue at the local level. It is obvious the Taliban recognizes the danger these actions present to their cause, as seen in a night letter delivered in Khost province cited by International Crisis Group (2008), “Reject all of the assistance coming from the National Solidarity Program, and don’t accept their solar panels because through this honey they will give you poison” (p. 12). In addition to demonstrating that the central government is able to provide needed resources to the villages, the build phase also aims at establishing more durable links between the village and the government. This relationship is often tenuous even at this stage in the process. Due to the long history of bad blood between the urban centers and the villages, time and repeated delivery of essential resources will ultimately build strong confidence that will create a foundation to build on. Connett and Cassidy (2011) write:

The links assist the Afghan government in providing critical infrastructure needs and delivering essential services at local levels. Success in the build phase can yield exponentially positive effects on the quality of life for local populations and, at the same time, cultivate some confidence between the local and national levels of government. From the village-level perspective, VSO can provide a viable alternative to oppression and a compelling incentive for the insurgents to reintegrate (p. 26).
Afghans desiring to spread stability operations throughout the region is a positive sign that it is time to move into the expand and transition phase. Galula (1964, 2006) sites another indicator, “…the turning point really comes when leaders have emerged from the population and have committed themselves on the side of the counterinsurgent” (p. 57). Leadership emerging from the population to carry on the operation, almost exclusively determines whether or not the operation as a whole will be sustainable. Finding this leadership is easier said than done. Once it is managed, it is time to move on to the final phase of VSO operations: expand and transition.

**Phase 4: Expand and Transition**

The Expand and Transition phase of VSO, is truly about capitalizing on the gains stability operations have garnered. Young (2011) notes, “During the expand-and-transition phase, the VSP begins expanding its influence and transitioning the responsibilities of governance, security and development from coalition forces to GIRoA repsresentatives” (p. 20). With solid leadership in place that is backed by ALP the area is ready to stand on its own. This is not say that it will all be rainbows and unicorns. Many issues will arise as the tenuous relationships between district level leadership and local villages are tested. Overall, successful VSO should give rise to other villages desiring the same effects in their areas.

Although the principles of VSO seem sound enough, the practical application of these principles has produced a mixed bag of results. Through examining both successful and dismal failures of stability operations, a picture of the type of unit and subtle improvements to the theory will emerge.
**Making It Go Faster**

This becomes very relevant when considering how to make VSO go faster. In a political war like counterinsurgency, a protracted war typically spells failure. General Patraeus foresaw this enigma. Robinson (2013) writes,

> In November 2010, he asked the army for a conventional army infantry battalion that he would place under Miller’s operational control. The army was not enamored of this idea, but Petraeus insisted that it was critical to the success of his campaign. The army was loath to chop conventional units away from their chain of command to work under special operators. Even more unpalatable was that the battalion’s squads were to be parceled out to help secure the teams’ remote sites and thicken their patrols. It was a huge responsibility to levy on young platoon and squad leaders, and discipline would be at risk. Moreover, the battalion commander’s career path could be compromised, because he would not be leading an intact unit in the traditional way (p. 30).

Supplementing special operator teams with conventional forces is a possible solution, but at what ratio and what type of units? Additionally, sending these forces into the village without proper mental and tactical training could be disastrous.

Several underlying issues need to be addressed in order to facilitate the stability operation mission. The main crux of stability operations is to connect rural populations to district level governance by securing the population and establishing a flow of logistical support from the central government. The Afghanistan government is facing a legitimacy crisis. Connecting anything to this unstable hub will likely result in disaster. An appendage of this shaky platform is the Afghanistan National Security Forces. It is clear that these forces may never reach the
level needed to fully secure all of Afghanistan. Even if by some miracle they gain the capability, they may continue to face significant cohesion issues that would prevent them from realizing this lofty goal.

A comparison between the counterinsurgency doctrine found in Army Field Manual 3-24 and that set forth by Galula showed that VSO are made up of sound counterinsurgency principles. The failures seem to originate from trying to make this operation go faster than it is able. Robinson revealed that the use of conventional forces without proper training and selection only detracts from mission success. Many of the VSO failures resulted from conventional forces reverting back to old “counterinsurgency” habits. These habits amount to indiscriminate targeting and lose sight of the true objective in counterinsurgency operations, which is the population.

In some cases, VSO was highly successful. In other cases, VSO failed miserably. For instance, ODA 3325 had incredible success all along the corridor where they worked. At the end of their tour they had won over nearly 25 subtribes with a total population of nearly 100,000 (Robinson, 2013). At the other end of the spectrum, ODA 1112 during a subsequent tour and nearly in the same area of Afghanistan utterly failed. Robinson (2013) described the consequences of a bad team effort this way, “Poor team performance could unravel several districts or an entire province, and incidents that caused a national or international outcry could jeopardize the entire program” (p. 191). The existing body of research does not provide a solid process on how to take an ODA 1112 and turn it into an ODA 3325. It also seems to lack what actions can be taken at the district level to make ODA 3325’s efforts more sustainable. This research paper will derive the formula for success that will enable VSO to be sustainable and move at the pace needed to win the political war in Afghanistan.
Analysis & Critical Application

Once coalition forces toppled the Taliban government and Karzai’s government was placed in its stead, a fundamental error was committed. Repeating the pattern of prior occupying forces, the coalition threw money and treasure at their newly formed government with the expectation that a newly formed government could pacify the warrior population of Afghanistan. The coffers of the coalition were opened, but only a small percentage of Afghans benefitted from the outpour. In 2005 a World Bank (2005) country study noted, “The country inherited a highly centralized system of government social service provision, which reached only a small proportion of the population (mainly the urban elite) and was devastated during the war” (p. xxvi). It is arguable as to whether or not the centralized government of Afghanistan was willing to impart of this bounty, but it seems undeniable that Karzai’s system was unable to deliver needed resources to its rural population. Jones (2009) described the situation this way:

Weak administration and lack of control in some provinces made tax policy and administration virtually impossible. The Afghan government also struggled to provide security outside of the capital. The result was a weak security apparatus after the overthrow of the Taliban regime that could not establish a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within the country (p. 3).

Nothing unifies the tribes in Afghanistan like a foreign occupier. It seems that no foreign occupier has the commitment to follow through with a bottom-up approach. Admittedly, this approach demands a lot of money, blood, and time. Regrettably, a bottom-up approach, founded in sound counterinsurgent principles may be the only way to overcome the gap and achieve true success in Afghanistan.
Defining Success

In order to be considered successful, village stability operations need to fulfill several primary objectives. Connett and Cassidy describe three areas targeted by village stability operations: first and foremost, VSO will bring security to the targeted villages (Connett & Cassidy, 2011). The military can build a thousand roads and schools for these villages, but those efforts will not mobilize a population to the coalition’s cause without the population first feeling they will be protected from the insurgent. The Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis Division (2012) stressed the importance of protecting the population, “The security of the population underlies everything; without it, efforts to move governance and development forward will fail” (p. 7). Before any other initiatives or efforts are made, Coalition forces must secure the area. Said another way, Coalition forces must separate the population from the insurgent. An impossible task if attempted from the urban district centers.

One of the main pillars of village security is establishing a strong Afghan Local Police Program. Training a competent security force to combat the insurgents in contested rural areas is a vital mission for village stability operations. Few other operational acts will lead to more sustainability than strong local police. As noted earlier, how these security forces hold up against the enemy will largely dictate whether or not the area will fall back into the hands of the insurgent after the team transitions to another area.

When teams initiate stability operations, the insurgent typically increases attacks against the population or coalition forces. Additionally, VSO teams often take the fight to the enemy in order to create space between the population and the insurgency. This also initially increases enemy activity in an area. In Lisa Suam-Manning’s working paper, Past and Current
Challenges to Local Defense, she identifies a solid indicator of a successful local defense operation. Suam-Manning (2012) writes, “Enemy attack data (SIGACTS) indicates that although violence levels initially increase as teams embed in a district, after five months the rate of attacks decreases to pre-embed levels and continues to decline” (p. 8).

Connett and Cassidy’s (2011) second objective of VSO is to “re-empower traditional local governance mechanisms that represent the populations, such as shuras and jirgas (decision-making councils)” (p. 24). Barfield (2010) noted that historically, central governments tended to adopt autocratic policies versus continuing, “democratic and federal political institutions commonly used among Pashtun tribes at the local level” (p. 4). Autocratic policy was one of the main causes of friction between the tribal areas and historical central governments. Thus by re-instituting a village shura, VSO was giving a voice to the rural population and simultaneously easing a historical liability.

A major step in empowering traditional governance is to develop strong local leadership. Any counterinsurgency operation has little chance of sustainability without identifying and building local leaders to take the counterinsurgent’s place once they are gone. Of the case studies below, two teams achieved this high benchmark. In addition to enhancing continuity, the local leader will also boost all aspects of selling VSO to the villagers and village elders. Finding a team leader that is not only good at leading, but also proficient at creating a leader from the local populace is paramount.

The third objective of VSO as described by Connett and Cassidy (2011) was to develop and “improve the quality of life within village communities and districts” (p. 24). Once the area was secure, VSO would begin to develop critical infrastructure in the villages. Promoting both the
economy of the area and giving villagers tangible positive reinforcement for mobilizing to the coalition’s cause.

Case Studies

ODA 3316 (March 2011 – December 2011)

A team would be considered “successful” if they are able to accomplish Connett and Cassidy’s objectives. In 2011, ODA 3316 worked Kunar Province, one of the most challenging areas in Afghanistan. The team was able to bring security to surrounding villages as is shown in studying the enemy activity during that timeframe.

![Afghanistan March to December 2011](image)

**Figure 1**

In Afghanistan from March to December 2011, the enemy activity is shown in Figure 1. The graph illustrates that as the year progresses there is a general rise in enemy activity. Although specific data is not available, Robinson describes several instances of enemy activity for the
Khas Kunar area at the beginning of ODA 3316’s operations, with a gradual tapering towards the end of 2011. For instance, upon arriving in the area, the insurgents decapitated a local village elder that had agreed to help establish the ALP in his area. Additionally, the team executed several joint operations with the ALP to a key village named Maya (Robinson, 2013). These incidents and operations occurred in the first few months of the team initiating VSO. Although the insurgency continued to test the ALP’s resolve by attacking checkpoints, it appears that direct assault on the villages seemed to decrease.

ODA 3316’s persistent effort to demonstrate to the locals that they were willing to take the fight to the enemy helped them turn the tide against the insurgency. The team regularly visited known insurgent areas in order to create whitespace. Establishing “warrior credentials” is a constant theme among successful VSO teams in Afghanistan. According to Galula, the first step in operations is the destruction or expulsion of the insurgent forces. Galula (1964, 2006) writes, “The destruction of the guerilla forces in the selected area is, obviously, highly desirable, and this what the counterinsurgent must strive for” (p. 75). The enemy engagement piece is especially important in Afghanistan. For many years, Coalition Forces were so focused on getting from one place to another, that there enemy engagement tactics were limited to returning fire long enough to “get out of the kill zone.” Breaking contact was the primary technique. Unfortunately, rural Afghanistan is a warrior culture and weak tactics and techniques are not respected (Barfield, 2010). Robinson (2013) highlighted this disparity as she described how special operators did the unexpected:

Villagers were not going to come forward unless they were convinced the new leaders stood a chance of winning. The climate of fear had to be dispelled by demonstrating a willingness to fight fire with fire; this is what Hutch meant by saying firebase diplomacy
alone would not work. They had to establish their warrior credentials before people would begin to have hope. The pervasive belief had been that the Taliban would inevitably come back to rule the province; a new dynamic had to be set in motion for the people to believe they could shape their own fate (p.79).

Establishing “warrior credentials” by directly engaging the enemy is essential to successful VSO. Coalition forces need to demonstrate to the villages that they truly can “secure” them. In the foreword of Galula’s (2006) work, Nagl writes, “To win, the government must secure and control the local population” (p. viii). For Afghanistan, this is nonnegotiable. As these steps are successfully taken, coalition forces will begin to see certain common signs. For instance, the village elders will allow the coalition forces to collocate with the villagers. Additionally, the villagers will demonstrate that they are willing to assume some responsibility for their own defense.

Additionally, ODA 3316 was able to re-empower traditional local governance. Once of the biggest indicators of this was the establishment of a healthy and effective Afghan Local Police program. According to Robinson (2013) in just a few short months, the district elders were able to muster a roster of 393 trainees out of a maximum 400 billets. The ALP significantly aided in holding the gains the team had achieved. The team was also able to develop and empower a local leader that significantly added to sustainability of the program. One of the saving graces, and what potentially gave the area a chance, was the development of a strong local leader. Galula (1964, 2006) writes, “…the turning point really comes when leaders have emerged from the population and have committed themselves on the side of the counterinsurgent” (p. 57). Leadership emerging from the population to carry on the operation, almost exclusively
determines whether or not the operation as a whole will be sustainable. Finding this leadership is
easier said than done. Fortunately for ODA 3316, they found Nur Muhammad.

Nur was a true leader that had the backing and respect of the village elders. The ALP under his
control followed him because they respected him. More ALP would join because they knew
they could trust him. The ability of the team to identify and empower such a leader should not
be underestimated. If VSO has any chance of sustainability, teams must find and develop
leaders to carry the torch after coalitions forces are gone. In addition to the quality leadership,
the area also had reliable coordination between the villages.

In spite of exhibiting the right qualities and conducting a solid mission, ODA 3316 was derailed
by a common freight train; the conventional army. Robinson summarizes the “conventional”
problem faced by the team:

The success of the team in Kunar was tempered by reality: the conventional forces kept tasking
the Afghan commandos to help with their own priorities farther north. This left the team and the
nascent Afghan Local Police without a remedy to the threat closer to their doorstep: the ever-
present shadow of the border, and the numerous ratlines leading right to them (p. 101)

The reallocation of resources and lack of a unified vision resulted in making a tenuous situation
all the more precarious.

ODA1411 (Fall 2012 – Spring 2013)

Like ODA 3316, ODA 1411 also established their “warrior credentials.” Classically, ODA 1411
had a significant increase in enemy activity as they commenced operations. The difference is
that ODA 1411 had sustained activity throughout the deployment (Robinson, 2013). The reason
seems to lie in an important lesson regarding site selection. Moyar (2014) points out that a lack
of quality human terrain analysis could lead to a team being ineffective. It seems that ODA 1411 fell into this category. The desire to clear Perkoti appears to have driven the team into an area that did not have the population’s support. This accounts for the team never really reaching the point where they were able to separate the population from the insurgency.

Although ODA 1411 was not able to clear Perkoti, they were able to hold the ground that was gained by prior teams. The team was also able to improve relationships with existing local leaders. Better than most teams, ODA 1411 fine-tuned the task of key leader engagements. Robinson (2013) writes of the high level of skill required to navigate the troubled waters of tribal conflict that is often encountered during key leader engagements:

> What was profoundly different about the latter years in Afghanistan was that special operators were tasked to engage deeply with civilian populations in remote areas and then to lead those willing to bear arms. They were forced to learn new skills and to stretch themselves in entirely new ways. Prominent among these skills was the art of sitting with elders to figure out the complicated web of rivalries and alliances that were at work in individual villages, and listening carefully to find out how the people of these villages could be motivated to come together for a common purpose (location 4433).

Through successful key leader engagements, teams enable the local powerbrokers to stand up to the intimidation of the insurgent. Just as the enemy uses the population to facilitate their efforts, teams must become the facilitator for those village elders that desire to bring security to their areas. ODA 1411 did this better than most (Robinson, 2013).

**Zerekoh Valley (January 2010 to August 2010)**
The team in Zerekoh Valley was also a success at VSO. The team mobilized the population and brought back personal testimony that staying and fighting goes a long way in building trust with the locals. Petit (2011) writes:

On 8 May 2010, after we had established basic village defenses in Zerekoh Valley over a period of weeks, the Taliban directly attacked the locals and Special Forces teams. Our response—with its speed, violence of action, and effective but discretionary use of indirect fires—was a defining moment for the village. Tactical firefights rarely produce lasting victories, but they can demonstrate the competent use of lethal force. The Special Forces teams viewed the tactical firefight of 8 May 2010 as a decisive moment in coalescing the support of the villagers (p. 28).

Any team conducting VSO must understand that Afghanistan has a strong culture of resistance. As was mentioned earlier, the rural population unites against outsiders. The true test of success for any local defense operation is whether or not the population becomes mobilized to the counterinsurgent’s cause. The short-term success in Zerekoh Valley in the spring of 2010 is highlighted by Petit’s (2011) own words:

In the Zerekoh Valley in spring 2010, the villagers resisted the Taliban, which lead to an increase in Taliban attacks and population control measures. The escalation of violence caused open resentment of the Taliban. The villagers bravely took up arms and soon it was their turn to assume the honorific of mujahedeen. The villagers came to regard the Taliban—and not U.S. troops—as the outsiders (p. 29).

Petit’s statement also supports Suam-Manning’s hypothesis that once the team commences operations, there will be an increase in activity. Unfortunately there is a lack of data to
determine whether or not the area reached a period of decreased enemy activity as proposed by the second half of the hypothesis. What seems to be certain is that the Zerekoh team effectively divided the insurgent from the village and empowered traditional local governance.

**ODA 1326 (September 2012 to February 2013)**

The discovery noted by ODA 1326 demonstrates the fundamental shift in strategy that true counterinsurgency breeds. Targeting had long been the mantra for both special operators and conventional forces. ODA 1326 realized quickly that physical prowess alone would not accomplish the mission. Significant human terrain mapping and intelligence would be required. Additionally, the focus of that intelligence would not only be on the enemy combatants, but also on the local power brokers. Robinson (2013) writes, “Over the past decade, special mission units had perfected systems for rapidly fusing large and disparate sources of intelligence for the purpose of finding and capturing (or killing) enemy targets, but this was an altogether different type of intelligence problem” (p. 206). In VSO it is just as important to understand who is working for you, as it is to understand who is working against you. Finding the motivations of the local village elders was one of the major factors of success for ODA 1326.

**ODA 3325 and ODA 1112**

ODA 3325 found a recipe for success. Eastern Paktika found a security and economic rhythm that has not been repeated since. Like ODA 3316, ODA 3325 found an incredible leader. Before taking too much credit, “the team was quick to say that the improvements would not have been possible without the Afghan partner force led by Commander Aziz. He and his men played key roles in brokering deals and bringing the various district governors and elders into the fold” (Robinson, 2013, p. 89). What ODA 3325 was able to accomplish could be a partial solution to
one of the major criticisms of VSO. The bottom-up approach appears to have been successful. The downside is in most cases it moves very slowly. General Petraeus identified this issue by the end of 2010, which is why he began requesting infantry battalions in an attempt to speed it up. By many special operators’ accounts, this move was a mistake (Robinson, 2013). Most conventional forces are not a great fit for VSO. In the foreword of Galula’s (1964, 2006) *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, Nagl brings to light the mistake of using conventional forces in counterinsurgency operations, “Conventional armies are not well suited to the demands of counterinsurgency. The firepower on which they pride themselves cannot be leveraged against the insurgent” (p. ix).

Galula (1964, 2006) adds, “As long as the insurgent has failed to build a powerful regular army, the counterinsurgent has little use for heavy, sophisticated forces designed for conventional warfare” (p. 65). In addition to not needing the heavy equipment, conventional forces also bring an adverse culture to counterinsurgency operations. The consensus among special operators seems to be that conventional force culture makes their soldiers ill-suited for counterinsurgency operations. If pressed these soldiers would likely say that conventional forces rely heavily on their leadership for guidance. The conventional military tries to keep major decisions at the upper echelons. This practice creates soldiers unprepared to make big decisions in a timely manner. The special operator culture is the exact opposite. Special operators often have to think themselves out of challenging situations. This is precisely the asset teams need in order to successfully execute stability operations. The main charge of Colonel Bolduc’s organization was to “push the day-to-day decisions down to the SOF teams” so they could “move at the speed of the populace and the insurgents (Bolduc, 2011).”
ODA 1112 appears to have failed. Uncharacteristically, the team leadership was unable to effectively manage the challenges presented by village stability operations. It is not that the team committed any egregious errors; ODA 1112 simply did not make any real gains during their tenure. Identifying the cause of ODA 1112’s stagnation is not difficult. A lack of proper team personnel, especially team leadership, is one of the most destructive reasons leading to VSO failure (Robinson, 2013). Robinson (2013) captured the characteristics of a good VSO member as told by the team 3325’s warrant officer, “Jawad” who encapsulated VSO by inferring that teaching and a love for cultures are prerequisites to a successful team member.

The following is a comparison between the two teams using Suam-Manning’s hypothesis as a guide. The enemy activity in their respective time of operations has been compared to that of Afghanistan’s national average for the same time period. A brief explanation will follow each combined chart to illustrate an assessment of the analysis.

_The Success of ODA 3325_

ODA 3325 completed two tours in close succession in Paktika Province, Afghanistan. The national averages for enemy activity for the time period of these tours are shown in Figure 1. The data used in this analysis was derived from the Global Terrorism Database.
Figure 2

The following line graph (Figure 2) illustrates enemy activity in ODA 3325’s area operations during the same time period.
ODA 3325 returned home for a brief leave period. The area highlighted in red shows the approximate time period that ODA 3325 was not in the area. The following line graph (Figure 3) shows the ODA 3325’s Area of Operation compared to the national level of enemy activity.

![Graph showing ODA 3325's Area of Operation compared to national level of enemy activity.](image)

**Figure 3**

Successful stability operations typically see sharp rises in enemy activity as the team wrests control from the enemy. The red arrows identify the peaks in activity. It is important to note that these peaks are followed by periods of relative peace as the team’s shaping operations effectively separate the population from the insurgency. Equally important to note is that as the team returned the second time, they expanded into a new area. Phase 1 or shaping operations
began again and the enemy activity sharply increased a second time. As the team left the area for the second and final time, there is a noticeable decrease in enemy activity, illustrating the enduring effect stability operations can have on an area.

**The failure of ODA 1112**

Team 3325 was replaced by ODA 1112. Robinson described the new team’s operations as “a downright disaster (Robinson, 2013).” Afghanistan’s enemy activity trends are illustrated in Figure 4. The following line graph illustrates the enemy activity in ODA 1112’s area of operations.

![Figure 4](image-url)
Figure 5

Figure 5 shows a significantly different pattern. Upon arriving in the area, the team experiences a continued decline in enemy activity. The following graph compares the national trend to the trend experienced by ODA 1112. Although the area experiences a decline in the beginning, the percentage of attacks rises well above the national average in May. If ODA 1112 had started stability operations in a new area, this trend would be consistent with the last. Unfortunately, the team was simply holding ground. It appears the insurgents were attempting to reacquire control over the population. Although this blip in attacks is not completely consistent with Suam-Manning’s theory, it does show that the Afghan Local Police force was able to repel the attack and ultimately enjoy a greater level of peace.
Figure 7

The examples shown illustrate and support the assessment of Suam-Manning. The beauty of the last example is that it shows that even a bad team can effectively hold an area if the right components are in place.
Conclusion

There were certain common behaviors among the prosperous teams that assisted them in accomplishing Connett and Cassidy’s (2011) objectives of bringing security to the targeted villages, re-empowering traditional local governance, and developing and improving the quality of life within the village. Successful teams secured an area by establishing their warrior credentials, establishing a formidable ALP program and selecting appropriate sites. A major contributing factor in accomplishing these objectives was the team having the right qualities. These qualities facilitated the relationships that led to re-empowering traditional local governance and banding together village clusters. The third objective is really a result of the first two and beginning the build phase of the operations. Teams that reached this phase typically enjoyed greater allegiance from the villagers as tangible benefits from aligning with the central government were being enjoyed. Increased economic activity and improvement projects are just a couple of those tangible benefits. Accomplishing these objectives in a timely matter is vital to the success and sustainability of VSO. Counterinsurgencies are also political wars and slow gains are judged as harshly as no gains at all.

Establishing Security

From the coalition perspective, an area isn’t truly secure until insurgents no longer influence it. Separating the innocent villager from the insurgent takes bold tactics and a long-term strategy. The teams that brought security to their areas did three things right. First, the teams strayed from traditional tactics and took the fight to the enemy. Second, the teams built a formidable Afghan Local Police. Finally, the teams selected appropriate sites as embed locations.
Establishing Warrior Credentials

For years in both Afghanistan and Iraq, military units conducted daily presence patrols. This tactic does not fit within established counterinsurgency doctrine. Ricks (2006) illustrated how the Special Forces community typically spoke out against a large military footprint in Iraq and Afghanistan. One Special Forces Captain intimated that Coalition Forces should lower their profile. The officer clarified, “Not pull out, but find a way to stop feeding the insurgency. Our presence there is feeding the fire” (p. 367). The numerous presence patrols seemed to just reinforce that Coalition Forces were set on occupying the country.

From the western point of view, driving through villages and around the district center would bring a sense of safety to the area. Police in the United States do this all of the time. Just their presence makes the typical citizen feel more at ease. Although this may make sense to a westerner, to an Afghan, a foreign military driving through your area does little to make you feel safe and secure. Especially when you are being intimidated by the insurgent the other 23 ½ hours of the day. Additionally, the typical rural Afghan historically resists foreign occupiers (Barfield, 2010). Regularly being reminded of that occupation by a presence patrol seems to only further insight the Afghan’s almost innate hostile response to outside influence.

Prior to the commencement of village stability operations, when a patrol would get attacked, the general tactic was to break contact and get out of the kill zone. This technique hardly brought a sense of security to the rural Afghans not participating in the attack. In fact, it likely reinforced the insurgents’ superior position. When the special operators arrived, the insurgents were likely surprised that these forces were not going to back down. Staying and fighting became the new mantra and with it came the admiration of rural Afghanistan. For those of the rural population
still on the fence, they found a group of warriors that could stand between them and a relatively
unpopular insurgency.

From the outset the villager elders commit to special operators embedding in their area.
Typically this is driven by their vision of receiving building projects that will likely stimulate the
local economy. The population on the other hand, is typically sitting squarely on the fence until
one side or the other demonstrates that they are the superior fighting force. This sweeping
deviation from historical practices goes a long ways in convincing the rural Afghan that they can
align themselves with coalition forces. Typically an increase in intelligence reporting and the
identification of insurgent facilitators are byproducts of this increased level of trust.

**Build a Strong ALP Program**

As was seen in previous versions of stability operations, building a local police force is relatively
easy in a country where the insurgency is unpopular, although building one that can stand against
the insurgency is another matter entirely (Jones & Munoz, 2010). Teams that succeeded in this
typically had strong support from the village elders. This support not only included the village
elders being heavily involved in the ALP selection process, but also their own family as potential
candidates. This type of tangible and significant investment demonstrated to the village that the
elders were truly committed to this course of action. In addition to support from the village
elders, successful teams also created links between the village elders and the district government
to resource the ALP.

For ODA 3316 and 3325, the link came in the form of a strong local leader that had been chosen
and supported by local powerbrokers. For others that were not so lucky, the team members
established those logistical links. Establishing a precedent for the district government to
resource and pay the ALP was key in creating sustainability in the ALP organization. Villagers were willing to initiate the program, but without evidence that there was buy-in by the district government the program is unlikely to last.

A well-supported and well-resourced force is a great start, but teams that fought side-by-side with the ALP made the force formidable. Robinson (2013) sites several examples where teams would not only conduct quality training, but also show these recruits what right looks like in battle. Fighting alongside special operators cultivated confidence and taught valuable lessons that can only be acquired in combat situations.

**Appropriate Site Selection**

Another key to success comes down to site selection. Many of the teams selected the embed sites appropriately. Although ODA 3316 established their warrior credentials, their efforts were largely frustrated by improper site selection. Connett and Cassidy (2011) write,

> Entering a village without the elders’ consent would, in all likelihood, not lead to long-term success. Areas with potential for VSP embeds are areas in which elders have asked for coalition forces’ assistance or have previously demonstrated a willingness or capacity to defend themselves against insurgent violence (p.24).

Perkoti, the area 3316 was attempting to mobilize, was not an area that had the locals’ or their village elders’ support. VSO does not seem to be a viable option for areas like these. A different strategy would need to be employed against this area to see any long-term benefits. Proper site selection takes thorough human terrain mapping.
Civil Affair assets seem well suited to produce human terrain mapping for future stability operations. Connett and Cassidy speak to the importance of knowing the area before attempting VSO, “The SOF team must understand the potential VSP location’s history and human terrain. Tribal dispositions, power brokers and insurgent shadow leaders can affect the success of shaping efforts and the selection of embed locations” (p. 24). Had ODA 3316 been more thoroughly apprised of the human terrain in Perkoti, they likely would have made a better decision regarding this site selection. It is unclear whether or not the team had permission from the Perkoti village elders prior to embedding in that location. It is evident from the spike in enemy activity and the fact that this activity never really subsided that the team never really brought security to that area. It stands to reason if they did have permission, then the village elders did not really hold any real power with the population. Proper human terrain mapping would have identified the true powerbrokers of the area and possibly been more helpful in identifying the true desires for the future of that village.

Although a willingness to receive a SOF team at the location is crucial, the embed site should also be strategically important as well. With limited resources, site selection becomes even more vital. In a tribal society, certain tribes will likely follow the lead of a stronger tribe. Using human terrain mapping will help identify these tribal nuances. Ultimately, the sites should be nested in an overall strategy. Otherwise the coalition is simply putting soldiers at undue risk, with little hope of ever accomplishing their goals and objectives.

Empower Local Governance
Key Leader Engagements

Conducting effective key leader engagements is a critical step in re-empowering local governance. Care should be taken to be involved enough to identify and exploit key leaders’ motivations, but not be so involved that the team is dominating the meeting. One of the main purposes of key leader engagements is to demonstrate to the local populace that the tribal elders are able to resolve day-to-day issues without the help of the insurgents. Filling this background role takes the right mindset. Galula writes, “If the forces have to be adapted to their new missions, it is just as important that the minds of the leaders and men…be adapted to the special demands of counterinsurgency warfare (Galula, 1964, 2006).” Robinson captured the thoughts of a team member working in Maiwand district who had the “right mindset.” Robinson writes, Hayes “knew his most important role was behind the scenes; it was vital that Afghans interact directly in the formal meetings. Many conventional forces, and even civilian diplomats, did not heed that basic rule of advising, choosing instead to sit at the main table and often dominate the discussion (Robinson, 2013).”

A soldier conducting VSO must be mindful that VSO are the vehicles to combat the insurgency. The war in Afghanistan is not conventional. The enemy is employing asymmetric methods and the military must adapt its methods to counter the insurgency. Galula (1964, 2006) draws out this important distinction:

Reflexes and decisions that would be considered appropriate for the soldier in conventional warfare and for the civil servant in normal times are not necessarily the right ones in counterinsurgency situations. A soldier fired upon in conventional war who does not fire back
with every available weapon would be guilty of a dereliction of his duty; the reverse would be the case in counterinsurgency warfare, where the rule is to apply the minimum of fire (p. 66).

The above statement would likely make many conventional soldiers ill to the core. This is why selection of the soldier is so important. Without the mindset that the population is the objective, a soldier will likely not be restrained to factor the strategic cost prior to engaging the enemy. The leaders must be the kind to have enough influence with their soldiers that they will adhere to strict rules of engagement during the most strenuous times. The purpose here is not to argue the merit of engaging the enemy or not. The purpose is to stress that there are times when it will benefit the mission and there are times that it will not. The soldier conducting VSO must have this frame of mind.

**Develop Local Leaders**

ODA 3316 and 3325 found the support of a local leader. In both cases the tribal elders of the area supported these leaders. Finding leaders like Nur and Aziz is difficult. Getting a consensus from the local power brokers takes an amazing diplomat. The following statement from Galula (1964, 2006) supports this when he wrote:

“No Politics” is an ingrained reaction for the conventional soldier, whose job is solely to defeat the enemy; yet in counterinsurgency warfare, the soldier’s job is to help win the support of the population, and in so doing, he has to engage in practical politics (p. 66).

Navigating a historical minefield of past grievances is just one of the daunting tasks laid at the feet of a VSO technician. As discussed, connecting one rural village to another will take extensive human terrain mapping and a team that possesses interpersonal skills to assist the
village elders in recognizing that these connections are in their best interest. Developing and mentoring these leaders, takes the right team, a significant amount of time, and a lot of influence.

Whether training a new batch of ALP or working with village elders on requesting assistance from the central government, special operators are teaching. In fact much of the sustainability of the VSO mission rests in the ability of team members to teach. Too often coalition forces find it too difficult to sit behind the scenes and allow the host nation to learn and develop. This tactic can be frustrating, but it is unlikely that the program will reach the necessary level of sustainability without CF staying within the advisory role.

**Speed**

The three objectives listed above are vital to the short-term success of VSO, but still may fall short in achieving US interests if the sluggish pace of VSO is not overcome. Although this is not something that can be readily influenced at the team level, three strategic recommendations can be made to set the teams up for long-term success. Training and doctrine needs to incorporate applicable counterinsurgency doctrine for conventional forces, teams should deploy to the same area twice, and mentors should be embedded at the district level.

**Training and Doctrine**

It seems that one of the major disconnects between conventional forces and the special forces is their respective understanding of counterinsurgency operations. In many cases it seems that conventional units tend to believe that counterinsurgency operations are synonymous with targeting operations. Typically special operators understand more fully that targeting is only a
small part of the overall counterinsurgency philosophy. The Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis write,

However, if the trend of increased reliance on conventional forces persists, preparing select numbers to assume greater roles in such missions implies the individual Services and even the U.S. interagency will have to address other doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities considerations to ensure success (p. 12).

Any changes to training and doctrine need to be deliberate. Additionally, these changes will need to be made with the understanding that they will likely transform the Army into something far more surgical than a hammer.

Two Tours, One Area

Pre-deployment education is important, but the education one receives once they arrive at their respective area of operations is vital. For most soldiers it takes several weeks to gain and adequate amount of area familiarization to be adept at their job. One key difference between ODA 3325 and the rest of the teams, was the fact that they returned for a second tour in the same area. During the second tour, ODA 3325 was able to connect over 100,000 people to the district level government (Robinson, 2013). The correlation between time on task and the monumental success this team enjoyed does not seem to be an outlier. Because the team had already established relationships and had absorbed the areas political nuances, 3325 was able to mobilize the villagers from day one of their second tour.

District Level Mentorship
The single point of failure for VSO lies at the district level. A team can do everything right, but if the district level is unable to deliver logistically the team’s efforts are in vain. One of the main causes of district level failure is corruption. Petit (2011) describes this significant challenge, however, a successful village stability program such as the Khas Oruzgan effort will have limited effects when the district level governance is not capable or willing to continue the forward progress. When villages seek aid from a dysfunctional, undermanned, or corrupt district center, progress becomes tenuous, and islands of security become vulnerable to anti-government influence (p. 30).

Jones identified this rampant problem and suggested a possible solution. Jones (2009) testified, “Corruption is often a top-down phenomenon. This means embedding partnering teams with district-level police chiefs and their deputies” (p. 8). Embedding at the district level should bring a level of transparency to district government operations. Nearly any conventional unit could fill this role, but a military police unit seems to be the optimal fit. In addition to mentoring the district level government, the unit would be in a prime position to also train the Afghan National Police for that district. This unit would enable logistical support to the VSO team, establish a layer of accountability for the district government, encourage ANP and ALP coordination and cooperation, and make the ANP a little more proficient.

Robinson identifies the benefits of the initial investment of logistical flow from the district government. Robinson (2013) writes, What seemed more likely than wholesale success or failure was continued success in those areas where several conditions pertained—where Afghan Local Police supported each other, where they were well led, and where provincial police chiefs ensured the flow of logistical support,
such as in Kunar, Paktika, and possibly Ghazni. In these places, the Afghan Local Police had achieved an impact beyond the village or district level. Where the scaling up occurred, economic activity increased and in turn generated more support for the ALP program (p. 273).

A top-down approach alone did not prove to be very successful. Conversely, a bottom-up approach seems to be unable to capitalize sustainable gains. Working the issue from both sides in a coordinated manner will likely produce the links that Afghanistan and coalition forces need.

**VSO Wrap-Up**

Village stability operations appear to be backed by sound counterinsurgency theory. Galula (1964, 2006) writes, “No significant segment of the population can be abandoned for long – unless the population can be trusted to defend itself” (p. 21). The very nature of VSO is to provide security to a village until that village has a fighting force that can “defend itself.” Multiple factors determine long-term success for stability operations. First and foremost, the team should be selected based on fighting ability and proper mindset. This becomes especially important as conventional forces are used to increase team numbers or to autonomously conduct VSO. Strategists must then select an appropriate site that has the support of the true powerbrokers of that area. This decision should be made based on extensive human terrain mapping. Additionally, the team should deviate from conventional tactics and demonstrate to the villagers that they are the superior fighting force. This tactic should result in giving the team enough time and space to train a formidable Afghan Local Police Force. Training should not stop on the range, but should continue as the team fights along side the new recruits in battle. Mentors placed at the district level should ensure that the district government and police force is operating transparently. Additionally, these mentors should demonstrate how to provide
logistically for the newly established ALP force. Every effort should be made to create a positive link between the central government and the village.

Achieving the aforementioned objectives is not enough to win the political war. Teams need to accomplish these goals in a shorter timeframe and to be able to cover more ground. With resources spread so thinly, finding a way to add conventional forces to the fight is vital. Enhancing training and doctrine for conventional forces will assist in creating a larger pool of conventional forces with the “right mindset.” Additionally, teams that deploy to the same area at least twice are able to effectively accomplish the objectives in a timelier manner. Having already established key relationships, teams are able to begin leveraging these connections from day one of their second tour. Finally, enhancing the mentorship at the district level will ensure that the promises being made at the village level are being fulfilled at the urban centers. Bridging this gap will bear fruit of increased economic activity and an overall higher quality of life for the true objective of Afghanistan; the population.
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Appendix

[If using only one Appendix, delete this paragraph. If using more than one appendix, place the letter A, B, C, etc. after the word Appendix. Start each appendix on a new page by inserting a page break as the last item in the prior appendix. Be sure to update your table of contents.]