



## Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police (VSO/ALP) and the US Transition Strategy in Afghanistan

BRENNUS 4.0

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**"We have killed thousands and thousands of "enemies" in Afghanistan, and it's obvious that it hasn't no closer to our goals. We could kill a thousand more, and yet, we're still would be no closer in five years."<sup>1</sup>**

**That's how Major Jim Gant of the U.S. "Green Berets", analysis, October 2009, the strategy American in Afghanistan.**

The operation began in October 2001, in retaliation for the September 11 attacks. Its first phase, which saw the fall of the Taliban regime, is already a textbook case of the use of special forces. The Northern Alliance, comprising Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks, and warlords with shifting loyalties in the south, led the operation<sup>2</sup>. The Americans deployed less than 300 men on the ground, essentially coordinating with the air force. After forty-nine days of operations, the Americans deployed less than three hundred men on the ground. air-land<sup>3</sup>, the Taliban are repulsed to the Pakistani border. In December, the victory is declared. America turns to the preparations for the invasion of Iraq, then the difficult management of its consequences. Afghanistan becomes a secondary theater.

Following the Bonn conference, the remaining US forces focus on counter-terrorism and the hunt for Al Qaeda cadres (Operations Anaconda, Harpoon). The rest of the country is left to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). (ISAF), and the 7,000 troops of the Provincial reconstruction teams (PRT). In 2003, the budget of the Agency for international development on relief and reconstruction (AIDRR) barely reaches a billion dollars. The northwest is difficult to control in 2004. The south and east, mostly pashtuns, remain, by and large, out of reach.

In order to control 650,000 square kilometres, the coalition is only aligning than 30,000 men, mostly in and around Kabul. The administration manages to survive by co-opting cadres from Northern Alliance and Warlords (Ismael Khan, Dostom), who give up their fiefdoms in exchange for ministerial positions. The The situation deteriorated, sharply, in 2006<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, it is necessary to The first to do so was in 2009, after the few successes achieved in Iraq by the General David Petraeus, to witness a veritable flip-flop effort towards Afghanistan, implemented within a new strategy. The Village

stability operations/Afghan local initiative police (VSO/ALP), is one of its components. It will represent a real operational and institutional challenge for the forces after more than a decade of focusing on the American specials. on combat and direct action<sup>5</sup>.

### **A SINGULAR EXPERIENCE: JIM GLOVE AND THE "ONE TRIBE AT A TIME" CONCEPT.**

Major Jim Gant was an officer in the United States Special Forces, belonging to the Green Berets. In addition to mastering all commando missions (direct action, reconnaissance), they are, in comparison to other units, specialized in the training, supervision and support of forces foreigners, regular or not. Specialized according to the theatres operations, their base cell is Operationnal detachment. alpha (ODA), cell of twelve men. Most of them have a university degree and/or are in continuing education. (including linguistics)<sup>7</sup>. Major Jim Gant is deployed several times in Afghanistan, between 2003 and 2009, as head of ODA 316 of the 3rd Special Force Group<sup>8</sup>. He arrived in 2003 in Asadabad, in the Konar province. He's assigned there, along with Afghan commandos, the Counterterrorism Pursuit Team (CTPT), and their coordinators of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to missions of action direct<sup>9</sup>. The picture he painted of his arrival in the theatre is the Next: no sufficient information, no updated maps, no preparation on the local population and culture. The word The order is simple, "capture or kill anti-coalition members"<sup>10</sup>.

Randomly from one of the patrols, the team will link up with a tribe of the Pech Valley, with a population of about 10,000 people, the Mohmands, based in the village of Mangwel. Weaving links with its notables, and, mainly, its leader, the Malik. Noor Afzhal, and his sons, the team is gradually managing to improve the security situation in the valley.

This experience has inspired him to write a forty-five pages entitled "One Tribe At A Time", a true plea from its philosophy of "Go Native" (becoming indigenous)<sup>11</sup>. Noted by General David Petraeus, he is recalled by the latter to command and train a group of soldiers in irregular warfare.

Twenty-two months of uninterrupted operations then began. The application of his theories, and the positive effects that follow, are getting Osama Bin Laden to put a price on his head<sup>12</sup>. These owe a lot, besides his first Afghan experience, in 2003, to its deployment to Iraq in 2006. There he accompanied the fighting, for the first time, a native unit. This is a Iraqi Police Rapid Reaction Battalion, which is, in the facts, a government-backed Shiite militia<sup>13</sup>. It is there that he is aware of the need to rely on institutions local. For him, the main flaw in the American strategy in Afghanistan lies in the inability to rally the Pashtun tribes, which account for nearly 40% of the population, occupy the south and the east of the country, and provide the bulk of the combatants insurgents. To remedy that,

it proposes a tribal engagement strategy (TES)<sup>14</sup>. The main idea is to advise, assist, train and lead arbakaï. The latter are combatants, from a tribe, designated by a Shura (assembly), which is a sort of of the council of elders. They are thus, unlike warlord militias, at the service of a community, of traditional institutions, and not of an individual<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, American special units are based directly in villages and no longer in closed bases, so as to protect the population directly and avoid the improvised explosive devices that constantly threaten the rest of the forces<sup>16</sup>.

For Gant, the main advantage is twofold. On the one hand, it allows it to focus on protecting and improving the daily life of the population, building on pre-existing structures.

On the other hand, the location of most of the Pashtun tribes makes it possible to operate on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border<sup>17</sup>. More generally, according to Gant, the latter are the main guarantors in terms of security (in the broadest sense, physical, patrimonial, financial), and social and political capital (role of honour)<sup>18</sup>. Losing face or not losing face is a key parameter in the strategy of all actors, probably too rarely understood and, or, taken into account. The document eventually reaches some political and military authorities, the Pentagon, White House and Capitol Hill.

## **THE TRANSITION STRATEGY: BETWEEN LAST EFFORT AND ANNOUNCEMENT OF WITHDRAWAL**

The document first reaches Admiral Olson, the first Navy Seal to lead the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). However, Olson is one of the leading figures in a movement of officers defending an alternative position in the first year of the Obama administration's term of office. At that time, the majority of military and think tank leaders were promoting a complete shift to a fully counter-insurgency strategy.

Its main advocate is General Petraeus, who is proud of the successes achieved following the "awakening" of the Sunni tribes in the province of Al Anbar. Its defenders advocate the sending of 80,000 soldiers. The government is also planning to build a real Afghan state and defeat the insurgency. Admiral Olson, on the other hand, is close to Vice President Joe Biden's line of minimalist, counter-terrorism-focused strategy, especially along the border with Pakistan. This approach is accompanied by a desire to strengthen an Afghan army that should hold the major cities, as well as reconciliation efforts aimed at convincing the Taliban to abandon the armed struggle<sup>19</sup>.

For Olson, it is clear that Afghans see the US forces, for the most part, as an army of occupation. A term then carefully avoided by the officers in their public expressions, which he nonetheless used before a White House committee in June 2009. He is also convinced that the American understanding of Afghan society, which is extremely decentralized, remains deficient. In fact, Olson has already launched an initiative, the Lawrence Project (in reference to Colonel T.E. Lawrence, known as the Lawrence of Arabia), to reflect on this issue<sup>21</sup>. At the time, most special forces officers were imbued with the image of the character and, above all, his recommendation to let the locals fight their own war as much as possible<sup>22</sup>. He intended, in fact, to seek this type of competence where they were most present, in his own command, the Green Berets.

Major Gant's paper would give him the opportunity to do so. He passed it on to the man who was then his neighbour on his base, General Petraeus, who had already dealt with Gant in Iraq, where he had decorated him for bravery in combat alongside the Iraqi unit he was advising, in 2007<sup>23</sup>. He was then head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), all US forces in the Middle East and Central Asia. He transmitted the document to General Stanley McChrystal, then commander-in-chief of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in Afghanistan. While Petraeus and Olson disagree on the overall strategy to be adopted, they agree on the ability of operators such as Gant, capable of mobilizing local forces, to influence the outcome of the conflict. Following this orientation, McChrystal recommended the text to his main subordinates and ordered the first steps of the programme to be taken<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Originally called the Civilian Defense Initiative (CDI), it became VSO/ALP less than a year later. ODA 7724 implemented a prototype in the Day Kundi province in July 2009<sup>26</sup>. The beginnings are encouraging. Within a few months, eighteen lightly armed American soldiers, moving around in light vehicles, together with 250 Afghans, stabilise an area of 1,000 square kilometres<sup>27</sup>. Now fiercely defended by American officials, the project was

definitively approved by President Hamid Karzai in September 2010<sup>28</sup>.

Finally, it turns out that Obama refuses to choose. The two approaches are chosen simultaneously, but in a downward direction. The "Surge", with its 30,000 additional men and heavy combat operations, was launched. At the same time, the training of the army and the police is radically accelerated. Finally, raids and drone strikes, on both sides of the border, multiply.

In short, American forces engage, in a violent last effort, in a war of attrition with the insurgency. The aim is to create the conditions for more favourable negotiations with the Taliban, allowing for a withdrawal leaving sufficient time to be honourable between the departure of the theatre and the, very likely, return in force of the insurgency. Within this framework, the VSO/ALP will be employed in such a way as to create, as quickly as possible, sufficient mass to hold the ground in the disputed areas. The date has already been set. American troops will begin, regardless of the outcome, to leave Afghanistan in July 2011.<sup>29</sup> The United States will begin its withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011.

### **THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH: A VERTICALLY INTEGRATED AND HORIZONTALLY INTEGRATED STRUCTURE DISCUSSION**

The change in approach theorized by Gant's "Go Native" philosophy is the transition from a top down strategy to a bottom up strategy. If he is by no means the first to consider it, he is perhaps one of those who have taken the reflection the furthest and, above all, to have set out its concrete implications. Indeed, the concept of strategic hamlets had already been implemented in Vietnam.

The main problem at the operational level is simple: the Afghan government is notoriously weak, unpopular and corrupt<sup>30</sup>. Governing such a decentralised and turbulent society has historically left only two options: an extremely strong, even brutal, central power, or a power relying on the support of local traditional institutions with a large degree of autonomy<sup>31</sup>. Since their arrival in Afghanistan, no doubt in accordance with their own conceptual biases, US forces have been working from the top down. From the capital and the big cities, they are training two national forces, the police (ANP) and the army (ANA), which are to bring security to the outskirts, to the rural world, which is increasingly far away. This approach is clearly a failure for a number of reasons, which are too long to detail here.<sup>32</sup> The problem is that it has not been successful. Major Gant suggests reversing the starting point. Based on what he sees, rightly or wrongly, as the main political and security actor in rural Afghanistan, he advocates bringing security to the villages. From there, assistance and development efforts can be undertaken. This strategy offers, potentially, several advantages. It is against the Taliban militarily, but also, and above all, politically<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> The Taliban instrumentalise economic claims, grievances against an unpopular government and tribal rivalries, accentuated, in part, by certain co-option policies originally implemented by the coalition. <sup>34</sup> Recruiting local fighters also avoids, in part, the ethnicisation of the conflict. <sup>35</sup> Indeed, while most of the insurgents are Pashtun, the army and police recruit mainly from other ethnic groups. Soldiers and policemen frequently do not speak Pashto, are not necessarily very well disposed towards Pashtuns, and are seen as almost as much as foreigners as predominantly white Western soldiers of Judeo-Christian culture. The VSO/ALP see themselves as intermediate levels. Starting from the tribe, the village, links are established at the district and then at the provincial level<sup>36</sup>. <sup>36</sup> Finally, the local approach greatly facilitates the processes of rehabilitation of insurgent combatants who wish to defect, since they are managed at the lowest, most concrete level, that of personal and family links and networks. <sup>37</sup> However, such a strategy is not



without risks.

Increasing the number of combatants and the volume of weapons distributed risks an increase in violence in the countryside. Similarly, there is a risk that some of the

Charismatic personalities took advantage of this manna to once again set themselves up as warlords leading militias, serving special interests. Not to mention the weakening potential of national troops, who are competing with these new forces, visible witnesses of their weakness and inability to provide security. There are also concerns that they are (rightly) perceived as a powerful brake on the various disarmament and demobilization programmes. In reality, even the slightest disarmament is, as long as the fighting is going on, a powerful brake on the various disarmament and demobilization programmes. Finally, the most important risk remains that of political manipulation by central government officials, particularly through co-optation, at the detriment of the overall strategy. To overcome this, several criteria are set out. It is necessary to identify communities in which the will to resist the Taliban pre-exists in the programme. The Afghans must request it and accept the terms and conditions.

The central government must play a role in the process, whether in the selection of troops or in the provision of materials. Local institutions must be recognized and legitimate. Forces must be defensive only and coordinate with the ANA. Finally, US forces must prevent their neutralisation by setting up rapid reaction forces capable of supporting them, while accompanying assistance and development efforts<sup>38</sup>.

The programme is divided into distinct stages (shape, hold, build, expand and transition),<sup>39</sup> which can be found at all levels (strategic, operational and tactical) of American doctrine:

**Shaping:** This first phase includes intelligence gathering, the gathering of the tribe's consent, capability and/or willingness to fight the insurgency, verification of the localization for overall strategy and logistical feasibility<sup>40</sup>. If necessary, it includes area clearance, i.e. the elimination of enemy presence by US Special Forces and Afghan ANA commandos, who are best able to carry out this task. This phase is crucial because it definitively engages the tribe, identified by the Taliban as an enemy. Insurgent activity increases, almost systematically, at the end of this first phase<sup>42</sup>.

**Hold:** This includes the establishment of the VSO in the heart of the village, which temporarily reduces the level of violence. The team must take advantage of this to select, recruit and supervise the ALP<sup>43</sup>. **Built:** This is the most sensitive phase and involves establishing links with the higher levels, districts and provinces. It is here that the two approaches, top down and bottom up, must be integrated with each other, otherwise tensions will increase and risk creating new opposition in the war<sup>44</sup>.

Two essential institutions are to be noted:

the Ministry of Development and Rural Rehabilitation (MRRD), responsible for poverty reduction, and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), in charge of supervising provincial and district councils and establishing the latter where connections with the government are lacking<sup>45</sup>. **Expansion and Transition:** If the previous phase is successful, the VSO team will look for a new tribe to establish a new platform. The aim is, one tribe at a time, to quote Gant<sup>46</sup>, to achieve effects on the scale of entire districts. It is then crucial to make the population aware, through all the imaginable supports, the successes achieved<sup>47</sup>.

### **TRANSFORMING HUMAN APPREHENSION INTO FACTORS OF OPERATIONAL SUPERIORITY**

The "human apprehension" of contemporary conflicts is an expression of Professor Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, used at a symposium of the schools of Saint Cyr Coëtquidan in 2010.<sup>48</sup> The "human apprehension" of contemporary conflicts is a term used by Professor Hervé Coutau-Bégarie at a symposium of the schools of Saint Cyr Coëtquidan in 2010. He refers to the profound knowledge of human societies, in their different dimensions, linguistic, social, religious, economic and cultural. It is acquired, essentially, through the study and continuity, geographical and temporal, of a theatre. One is struck by the closeness to the text of Future Land Action (FLA) and, in particular, the superiority factor (FSO) understanding<sup>49</sup>. While these issues are well known, as the recent seminar of the Specialised Staff for Overseas France and Abroad (EMSOME) shows<sup>50</sup>, the difficulty lies in their translation, in terms of operational capabilities. It is essentially in this respect that the VSO/ALP experience is most instructive.

The programme consists of a form of coupled combat. The terminology is taken from a book by Thomas Huber. Not widely used in debates, it initially refers, in a 1996 article, to British operations against Napoleon in Spain<sup>51</sup>. In the Afghan case, a regular force uses an irregular force that it helps to train, educate, equip and command, while providing logistical, financial and military support, mainly in the form of ground and air fire support. As Joseph Henrotin points out, its basic principle is a fluidification of the principles of warfare. If the spectrum is broader, the first logic is that of combining the economy of means and the concentration of efforts<sup>52</sup>. The formula is particularly interesting for expeditionary armies centred on high-tech equipment, because it responds to a simple problem: within a constrained budgetary framework, quantity and quality (within a technological acceptance) coexist only with difficulty<sup>53</sup>. Using local fighters makes it possible to regain sufficient mass to control the terrain, at least to some extent (Gant, with the Mohmands, could have as many as 800 armed men)<sup>54</sup>. This mass is then supplemented, if necessary, with more technically advanced support and manoeuvring capabilities. Finally, the protection of the mass allows smaller cells, such as special units, to conduct more complex operations<sup>55</sup>.

The FSO whose possession is most critical to an initiative such as the VSO/ALP is understanding. Units must not only achieve a solid understanding of their The latter is not only a means of improving the environment, but also of translating it into a genuine aid to operational decision-making<sup>56</sup>. The first challenge in Afghanistan is to capture the multiplicity of actors and data. Such as explains Daniel R. Green<sup>57</sup>, it is difficult and time-consuming to map tribal networks of interest and influence<sup>58</sup>. Gant predicts a minimum period of one to two months of preparation prior to the deployment of a unit to a village, plus a month's period of analysis and initial contact with the target tribe.<sup>59</sup> Getting to this stage obviously requires at least a minimum knowledge of the local language. More precisely, as the ATF points out, it is the temporal and geographical continuity of the presence that brings a real proximity. However, as Green and Gant point out, even the Transition Strategy does not break with the permanent rotation of units, which often alternate between Iraq and Afghanistan, while not, for the most part, being sent back to the same location<sup>60</sup>. Already in Vietnam, General Westmorland noted in this regard that American forces had "not fought one war for eight years, but eight one-year wars."

If knowledge can be translated into understanding, it allows, at the tactical level, for agility<sup>61</sup>. Since the operators know their environment and are, in part, reinforced by a larger mass of combatants, they become capable of to provoke change, to make himself unpredictable. As the ATF points out, understanding enables intelligence-led manoeuvre to be developed<sup>62</sup>. Indeed, tribes have of their own network of informants, the Kasheekas. Gant recounts that when his team was ambushed several dozen kilometres from the village of Mangwel, where the Mohmands, have the surprise, on his return, to

find the notables assembled, in order to inquire about his condition, having been warned of the incident<sup>63</sup>. According to him, the enemy's map provided by the The analysis of local people and families, who often have relatives on both sides of the conflict, is much more accurate than the analyses provided by the military. Agility is also enabled by development and

the encouragement of subsidiarity<sup>64</sup>. If the special units are Here, the initiative must be able to go down to the lowest levels (the ODAs and Seals teams inserted in the villages), guided by the intention of the higher levels.

Gant recommends the following:

- - drastically shorten the chain of command,
  - expedite the mission approval process (which can involve up to a dozen people),
  - allow teams to dress in the local and allow themselves to be dressed in the local and allow themselves to be grow a beard,
  - interact with the tribes at all levels,
  - empowering the process of allocating financial and material resources (which sometimes takes more than two weeks for some operators, ranging from main bases in main databases, to retrieve all the signatures required for an assistance or development project),
  - relax the rules of engagement and, in particular, those relating to the approval of air strikes, including at the request of the Arbakai<sup>65</sup>. To do so, and to increase responsiveness, the teams deployed, which include up to thirty operators per VSO platform, can be split into groups of twelve, teams of four, or pairs. Cooperation, i.e. the ability to fight with the Arbakai's, the renowned Afghan Local Police (ALP), with military effectiveness uncertain, conditions, very concretely, many technical aspects. The combatants are selected and co-opted by the village elders during a shura (village council). The appointment must then receive the approval of the chief of police of the district, the province, the American team and, finally, the Ministry of the Interior<sup>66</sup>. Photographs are taken, with biometric information recorded by an iris scanner. Basic training (Gant estimates that he gets correct results from 90 days onwards), organised by the special forces, includes: weaponry, physical endurance, small unit tactics, ethics, checkpoint holding. Recruits receive a basic uniform, most often in the form of a black vest with the national flag<sup>67</sup>. Trucks, motorcycles, machine guns (PKM) are occasionally distributed. Coalition radios were used to maintain the link. Each recruit receives part of the salary of a member of the police<sup>68</sup>. Gant also refers to the separation into three distinct elements: protection force, intelligence gathering force, reconnaissance force (capable of fighting with the ANA from time to time)<sup>69</sup>. 69 Special forces teams must also adapt. While the equipment is certainly not fixed, and the descriptions vary, Gant lists, for a team of 12 (ODA) :
- two interpreters (equipped, armed and trained to fight with the team),
  - two satellite phones,
  - two satellite radios,
- two PRC119s (radios for ordinary communication/ combat),
  - two ATVs (multi-role light combat vehicles),
  - two pick-up trucks,
  - three generators,
  - two computers with biometrics kit<sup>70</sup>.

Finally, the final goal of the VSO/ALP initiative is the planning and conduct of a genuine influencing strategy<sup>71</sup>. The aim is to achieve influence on the perceptions of the population in a manner at least equivalent to the impact of a kinetic operation<sup>72</sup>. This involves the creation of effective links (brotherhood of arms, friendship, respect, honour, interests, even, in the case of Glove, family), strong, maintained, and pragmatic. In fact, in addition to the links with the tribe and its Arbakai, Gant theorizes and then prioritizes the constitution of these links in the following way: local ANA/ANP chiefs, link with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) for development actions, media agencies (TV, radio, newspapers), US Battlespace owner, other ODAs of the (PsyOps) units, civil affairs (CA) units, network of air units for medical evacuation or support, non government officials, Afghan National Government officials<sup>73</sup>. <sup>73</sup> Thus, following a classic distinction, the aim is to protect the image of the force and, at the same time, to undermine the credibility of the adversary and its support among the population. <sup>74</sup> If hearts and minds cannot be won, tongues and silences must be won. <sup>75</sup> At best, we must obtain the support of the population, at the very least, its absence of opposition<sup>76</sup>. Gant is prolific in this regard. He explains that hours playing with village children are ultimately more productive than all the raids on the same period<sup>77</sup>.

He talks about how the development of this type of strategy involves hours of sitting, drinking tea, discussing, trying to understand the other and his or her relationship to the world<sup>78</sup>. In this framework, confronting the enemy becomes almost a secondary consideration, since its destruction has no real impact on the evolution of the balance of power, where, on the contrary, it has the opposite effect, the political commitment of the population leads, in concrete terms, to tactical and even operational progress. Gant's formulation is "listen, understand, learn, influence"<sup>79</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

There are many lessons to be learned from the VSO/ALP experience. In particular, it raises the question of how to combine special and conventional forces. Because of the over low number of operators available for this type of operation, the choice is made to add conventional units to them. Two infantry battalions are assigned to Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A), which sends one group per VSO deployed. The latter relieves special forces of certain missions, mainly protection and PLA training. As such, they allow for a more significant extension of the program<sup>80</sup>. The incorporation of feminized teams, the cultural support teams (CSTs)<sup>81</sup>, due to the specificity of the latter's place in Afghan culture, is also noteworthy.

Consideration should therefore be given to the composition of the units arming this type of initiative. The question of the place of civilian specialists and researchers and intelligence officers, ...is a sharp one. In contrast to previous experiences of US Special Forces, for example, in Latin America, it is becoming increasingly difficult to get access to civilian specialists to combat zones. An evolution of career prospects and options for operators developing specific skills in interculturality and cooperation with other government departments (CIA, State Department) has begun<sup>82</sup>. It has, in particular, led to discussions on a programme called Volckmann<sup>83</sup>. While the VSO/ALP experience is instructive, it has unfortunately been conditioned from the outset by an extremely difficult political and strategic context. As in previous experiences, such as in Vietnam, it is likely that the initiative, based on an analysis by practitioners in the field of the drivers of the conflict, came too late<sup>84</sup>. <sup>84</sup> Another extremely important factor was the opposition to the Battlespace owner. <sup>85</sup> Once the Battlespace owners, which had evolved from conventional forces, became responsible for the different areas of operations, SOF began to be used only in support of conventional units, concentrated on the insurgency<sup>86</sup>. Their employment focused on missions 8



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