

In the Mountains of Afghanistan: Brian Glyn Williams Interview

Interviewed by John Whisenhunt, Editor

Editorial Abstract: *Dr. Brian Glyn Williams shares a ground-level perspective on tribal groups in Afghanistan, noting differences in attitudes toward the Western militaries. He observes a lack of cultural training and awareness among NATO and US forces in the region, and recommends revised standard operating procedures to help the current influence campaign.*

IO Sphere: *We'd like to start off by talking about your last trip to Afghanistan. You've described more of a polarity between groups, especially when it comes to attitudes toward NATO and the US. You coined the expression "POAs" or "Pissed-Off Afghans," suggesting poor trends. What changes did you see?*

BGW: I remember being there in 2003, seeing an almost hubristic optimism. As an American, you felt like "There's nothing we can't do!" Momentum was on our side, the Taliban were "dead-enders," to use the expression coined by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. That sort of captured the moment. There was an occasional bombing in Kabul, and you heard about little rumblings or trouble down in the southern provinces, but momentum was clearly ours in 2003. People had really high expectations. Then the Americans began bringing in more troops. The Taliban regrouped, having gotten a lot of inspiration from the Iraqi insurgency, a lot of "hands on" training, and more examples of how to kill Americans; these things inspired and 'regalvanized' the Taliban. I went back again in 2005, and provinces I had no trouble entering two years earlier were a little more dangerous. The bombings were a little closer to home: an ISAF bus with troops aboard had just been blown up. The level of expectation had been tempered a little bit more by realities. Then I went back again in 2007, and boy, it had changed completely. There had been about 115 suicide bombings in the country, and it had the effect of say, the Beltway Sniper [Washington DC area in 2001] on common people's perceptions of progress. So, things were changing for the worst. For example, you could not drive from the capital



Dr. Williams and young Hazara friends near Bamiyan, Afghanistan. (Author)

in Kabul, to Kandahar [Afghanistan's second largest city], on this brand new "showcase" road we built, because it's too bloody dangerous! Foreigners can't go on that road. Most Afghans are afraid to go on that road unless they have some sort of protection from the Taliban—there are just too many checkpoints. So that speaks volumes on the level of security and stability, and optimism on the ground—things that shapes peoples' perceptions. Combine this with the Americans who are there, the sponsors of the Karzai government, are never really interacting with the populous. Most Afghans see them in the form of say some A-10s [Thunderbolt II "Warthog" aircraft] overhead, or convoys barreling through their town with speakers blaring "clear the way," or heavily armed guys in Kevlar running a checkpoint. If you wanted to spin this from an American perspective, it's like we had SWAT teams with shields and masks in say, Appalachia. Now say, make them from another country and you really compound matters. People would probably have that same perspective [as those who are intimidated by the US presence]. You're going to have disagreements, miscommunications, failing expectations, these all combine... then we have relatively few troops on the

ground: remember this country is larger than Iraq. Our troops rely on close air support, which unfortunately cannot always be close enough, and we have the threat of "collateral damage"—which Afghans call 'dead friends and relatives.' All of these things combine, just like say a little thing like the high price of gas here makes people dislike our own government, to create those "POAs."

IO Sphere: *Did you find a particular ethnic or tribal group more supportive of the West? Do you think we're properly factoring in the various groups in our influence efforts?*

BGW: I think I could almost rate the groups based on their identification with the Western mission. But are we as Americans taking those factors into consideration? No. As Westerners we underestimate the ethnic cleavages, the differences in language, in ways of warfare, religious differences, Turkic-Mongol versus Aryan-Pashtun histories etc. Even here in our conference, the word "ethnicity" doesn't come up! We seem to have a romanticized version of the country as being "Afghan," when only about 38% of the country really identifies themselves as Afghan – the ethnic Pashtuns. So that means we aren't dealing with groups like the Aimaqs [semi-nomadic, multi-ethnic], or the Turkmen, or the Uzbeks, or the Hazara, or the Tajiks. They almost don't exist in our vocabulary, yet they're the majority of the country. Ethnicity is very, very important, and very salient. It shapes everyone's identity, and their perception of our mission, our assistance, in the country. If I had to give a broad generalization, I would say among the Pashtuns, you have greater resentment towards the US. It is Pashtuns who

predominantly make up the Taliban, and live in the provinces that support the insurgency. Pashtuns live in Kandahar and Helmand, and Khost. Where there is violence in non-Pashtun areas, typically you will find Pashtun enclaves there. Traditionally they are the ones who fight off the invaders, they have a tradition of being xenophobic—fighting off all external interference, British, Soviet, American... the “infidel of the week.” They are rightly proud of their fighting tradition, and I admire them on that level. They live in what I call the “Quran Belt,” like the US “Bible Belt.” They are more conservative, “family values,” or fundamentalist types. They are more predisposed to see things through the lenses of religion, and a tradition of resistance. If you move to other zones, you have less xenophobic distrust. I have found Hazara... Shiites, to be very warm and welcoming. They are more liberalized, more secular, and have warm perceptions of the US. And if you move down from these mountain people, down to the plains: the Uzbeks, I found them to be very pro-American, very secular, very willing to have us come into their villages. Those are safe areas. You can travel across that [northern Uzbek] realm and not find someone who doesn’t want us there. When traveling there I was told when I returned home to “tell the Americans not to leave! The day you leave, the Taliban will come back, the war will come back!” I found billboards thanking the US military! You just don’t find that in Eurasia. I took pictures of several [such billboards]... amazing. Tajiks too I think are less xenophobic. But part of our problem is the other groups think we have sided with the Pashtuns, President Karzai is a Pashtun, as are many who run the government. So even though that’s what we think of as a majority, it’s not. People in the north say, well, the Americans are sponsoring him [Karzai and the Pashtuns], not us. So we as Americans underestimate the real depth of these historical animosities.

IO Sphere: You touched on this in your blog: the Pashtuns always seem to think “we’ll drive the invaders out.”

Some groups want us there, but don’t the invaders always leave at some point ?

BGW: Yes, you hear this in the Taliban’s pronouncements: “Time is on our side.” They believe that. They will outlast us like all the past invaders. The Soviet experience taught them to believe in their own resilience, how they defeated a modern mechanized army, how they defeated the British Empire. These stories formed their identity in much the same way stories of the Alamo formed ours. So the Pashtuns certainly have that going for them. On the other hand, their self-perpetuated reputation overlooks some historically inconvenient facts. Other foreigners have in fact conquered them, and done a good job at it! The Mongols wreaked havoc with grace and ease, slaughtering thousands of Pashtuns. The Mongols ruled over them for hundreds of years, and Safavids from modern day Iran ruled over them. We typically don’t know about these either, but the truth is they have been beaten, and beaten well in battle. And they won’t tell you about it, but dig into history a bit and you’ll find out. It’s not in glib Western accounts either, which talk about the Pashtuns as being ‘invincible.’ They can be beaten. But they are in some ways living in history, thinking we are just like the last two invaders, Britain and the Soviets. But go back 150 years and the Sikhs ruled over Peshawar (a major Pashtun city now in Pakistan), go back a century before and the Mogols ruled Kabul, and before that the Mongols. So we need to be aware of selective memories on both sides.

IO Sphere: We talk about subtle points of culture, yet we still seem to have trouble learning them. You mentioned you met some of our experts who are in a secure area, behind a fence. Are security concerns making us too cautious at the expense of cultural understanding?

BGW: Yeah. The only time the Afghans interact with Westerners is when our folks end up looking like “Robocop.” Living in garrisoned community, and only getting out into the Red Zone, heavily armed, is going to be

a disadvantage. The Taliban don’t have these constraints. They move freely, use the cultural paradigms to interact with people, at all hours. They don’t have to get approval 24 hours in advance to walk through a village, so this cultural and logistical capability gives the Taliban a tremendous advantage—the difference between the insurgent, and the “imperial” grunt, who is in some ways garrisoning a frontier. There is no way to get around that without getting our troops into the villages. It might make them a target, but it might let them interact on a less hostile basis with those people we want to win over. Once again, we’re back to winning hearts and minds of people, pulling them from the insurgents... very much classic counterinsurgency doctrine. If the insurgents are more successful interacting with people, then you will lose. I’m not a policymaker, and I’m not suggesting we need to get 19 year-olds from Nebraska sitting down with Pashtun white beards [village elders], I’m just relating my experiences.

Let me use another example from when I was in Kosovo. The Americans would follow standard operating procedures (SOP) that would not allow them to interact with the population, and go through a village in full body armor. The Italians on the other hand would drive by with a bottle of wine, stopping in the town, having lunch with the locals, and being much more integrated into the community. They [the Italians] heard rumors, found out about hotspots, because they had their finger on the pulse of the people in a way Americans following SOPs did not. I think these same things hold true for Afghanistan, that if you can shake hands and show less of a fighting face, then of course you’ll be more effective.

IO Sphere: Speaking of confused cultures, what about our own? As a body of people trying to develop a common message, we have troubles. Is the US Government as a whole culturally hindered? As an advisor, how do you recommend we work better as a team?

BGW: I think we do have a cultural hindrance. Only ten percent of Americans

have passports! Of that ten percent, if you take out Canada and Mexico, you don't have a whole lot of folks traveling the world. If you take out Spanish, then we are a monolingual society. We believe, in a uniquely American way, that you can go into someone else's country without knowing the language, and reshape it. Only Americans have that sense of "pure optimism." To put the shoe on the other foot, it would be like a bunch of Scandinavians coming here and telling all our women to get out from under the oppression of the fathers, and their husbands... and doing it through the medium of Norwegian, in a place like Texas! It wouldn't work. We are so confident: we put man on the Moon, we discovered electricity, we can reshape a country. These types of optimism are our greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. Because we don't have an imperial history like the British or the French do. We don't have universities like the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, where for the last hundred years they have trained young mandarins to go out and run the empire. We don't have that imperial tradition, or one of embracing other languages and cultures, and in a place like Afghanistan, it shows... in both good and bad ways. We do believe we can dig the wells, and win the village elders over, and build the schools and win over the villages. That is something wonderful and unique about us. But the fact we have to rely on interpreters is also unique: and it's an Achilles' Heel for our operations in Afghanistan. So how do we address that fundamental an issue? Well, I think it begins with better training for people going into the zone, about the culture – providing "context." People going to fight or help in a zone like this need more context. It's hard to do, but knowing how to speak Pashtun or Dari can save lives. These things could really help us get our message across. And certainly could help us win the underlying battle – the real battle of hearts and minds.

IO Sphere: Some folks have pointed out that our soldiers' language

guides have an emphasis on how to say "halt," rather than "please" and "thank you." Let's switch gears a bit. We hear a lot about suicide attacks, and you've done some of your research in this area. In an article you published in late 2007, you described how these bombers are resorting to new ways, I think you said they're being "duped, bribed, or brainwashed." Are they desperate, or just changing tactics?

BGW: Yes, they're changing their tactics. But I wouldn't describe them as desperate, because theirs is a calculated action: they'll use what works. This goes back to Iraq, which showed extremists one thing: suicide bombing wreaks havoc when you have people trying to win hearts and minds. I think of the Canadian troops in Kandahar, who were distributing candy to village children after digging a well—very effective hearts and minds actions—a bomber walked right in between them and detonated himself. Canadian soldiers lost limbs, bled to death, children were slaughtered. With one bombing, those weeks or months of work ended. The Canadians become jittery; forces started putting loudspeakers on their trucks broadcasting "keep away from our convoy" messages. And young people don't hang around with troops anymore to get candy. So unfortunately it is a very effective technique they learned from Iraq. They adjust, they learn, they adapt. In the mid-1980s, they adapted to the air threat by using Stinger missiles against Soviet helicopters. This time they've learned, not from us, but from the Iraqi insurgents; they've seen that suicide bombing is the "Stinger missile" of this war. It is one of the most effective things in their arsenal, the ultimate asymmetric weapon. It makes US troops not do what they need to do, which is go in there and interact closely with these people. I hear the media, and military public affairs people saying the terrorist suicide bombers are becoming desperate, but I don't see it that way. I see it as clever asymmetric tactics, in some ways like a laser guided bomb or a JDAM [Joint Direct Attack Munition]... "Mullah Omar's Missiles" they call them.

IO Sphere: How do we approach this problem? Where do we spend our money to mitigate this threat?

BGW: We have to go after it on many levels. You have to go on the offensive. Let's look at Chechnya: suicide bombing came and went there. It began in about 1999, and ended by about 2004, in part because the Russians were clever—they helped change the (local) religious culture. They sponsored moderate Sufi mullahs (priests) who loudly proclaimed that those who committed suicide went to Hell, even those who committed a so-called "martyrdom operation." That was heard loud and clear in the mountains of Chechnya, and needs to be done in the mountains of Afghanistan. Families of people whose sons commit a suicide attack should not be given grace, they should not be taught their sons are in Heaven, they should be taught this was the equivalent of murder. Suicide is a taboo for Muslims in the same way abortion is for Catholics, yet the paradigm has been warped by the extremists. So we need to go after the culture, use the mullahs to issue fatwahs [religious edicts], decreeing and bringing to light the verses of the Quran and in the Al-Hadith [Muslim sacred text]—the words of the Prophet Mohammed—that make this very clear. Suicide in any form, even in an offensive form of combat against infidels is in fact suicide and it is wrong. You also begin by highlighting the havoc these actions wreak on society. My studies have found the vast majority of victims of these suicide bombing are civilians. We need to go in there and photograph and distribute the carnage to the area where the bomber came from and say "this is your handwork! You call this jihad?" If the Afghans can use "Shabnamahs," the so-called "night letters" to threaten and intimidate, as well as get their word out, we need to issue some ourselves. We cannot let them have victory in this field. We need to highlight the carnage this tactic creates: it's killing women and children, it's not "macho," it's not a noble war, it's fodder that sends you to Hell. The other level of interaction is of

course working more closely with local communities, getting out of your body armor, talking to people at home and at work to get information, get local tips... but we're constrained by our own SOPs on that one.

IO Sphere: *Many would say that (approach) is exactly what helped with recent security gains in Iraq. What are your impressions so far in this Afghan seminar?*

BGW: I find something missing from the discussions: *the Afghan people*. I think that data such as polling numbers is incredibly useful and interesting. But it gives you two dimensions, not three. I think this whole exercise tells us something interesting about ourselves: we honestly believe that using polls, metrics, and charts, we can reshape our identity in this conflict. Or reshape our identity in the Afghan's eyes that is. I see the facts, and I compare them with my own experiences of months and months trudging the ground in Afghanistan, and I find them to be useful... but they don't provide the whole picture. If Al Qaeda wanted to understand us, they could do opinion polls! They could say this percentage of Americans favors the war, this percentage doesn't, so let's do this based upon Taliban polls! But does that really capture the granularity—to use a key term these days – the nuances of America any more than it does Afghanistan. Can it tell you the difference between a Cubano from Miami, a Yankee from Maine, or a Good 'Ol Boy from Texas? There are many different levels and nuances polls can't tell you: why the New York Yankees fans hate the Boston Red Sox fans. If you really want to understand Americans, you have to know that stuff. Conduct all the polls you want, you won't get all those colors and layers. We're doing surface analysis based on science. Don't get me wrong, these are based on good methods, but we're leaving out certain factors when building the stats and data harvesting. They are a good starting point, but there is a danger we will bureaucratize and metricize the Afghans, using otherwise useful tools,

but we will take it too far. We won't include key aspects like geography, ethnicity, religion, and culture—these things that need to be woven into the data to give us the third dimension. The data is a good basis, but we shouldn't give it more clout than it deserves. I think it is brilliant that we are doing this, God know the Soviets could have done with this when they wreaked havoc in Afghanistan, but as this seminar and others show, unlike the Soviets we care, and want to know what Afghans are thinking. Collecting opinions is very beneficial, but this is only the beginning. I was in one of the “hearts and minds” conferences, and a guy came in and talked about how to sell Coca-Cola [to Muslims], and it was a very interesting talk. I recall sitting down with these Pashtuns, who were illiterate, living in the frontier region between Pakistan and Afghanistan, near Jalalibad—near Usama Bin Laden's old base—actually about five miles from Darunta, where he planned a lot of his attacks. And I'm remembering this guy's excellent [Coca-Cola] talk, his surety about marketing this product, yet looking at these nomad elders, eating rice with their hands, telling stories about Bin Laden. I'm thinking to myself, no amount of

marketing expertise in Washington, DC about how to sell Coca-Cola is going to reach this guy with grease in his beard, who prays before, during and after each meal, and devoutly throughout the day. He doesn't read, he can't find his homeland on a map, because he's never seen one. You can almost write a novel about America's optimistic perceptions, based upon Hollywood marketing, and how someone like that would never fit the paradigm. The best conference would be to drop all the participants into that village for a month, then come back and regroup, and see how much of our thought process turned out to be superfluous. How much of our cool data is actually wheel spinning.? It doesn't have true reflections of illiteracy, xenophobia, blind fanaticism. There are ancient blood feuds, isolation, misogyny, and poverty... things I am only now beginning to understand from my experiences. I hope these factors will come more into play as we continue our discussions.

IO Sphere: *Thank you for your time and insights.*

BGW: My pleasure, thanks for the invitation. 