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Special Address

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I. Preamble

It is an honour for me to be here and I would like to thank you for giving me the time. I would also like to thank not only my hosts but also all of you who took time to be here today. This is an extraordinarily important subject: we have young people – not only from the coalition but also young Afghans – in the field today, who depend on the decisions we make and the analysis we do. Taking the time to talk and think about it is always time well-spent, so I thank you for that.

I am privileged to speak here today as the Commander of NATO's ISAF forces, representing people from 42 troop-contributing nations. I represent them today and I hope to do that well. As you know, I have a British deputy, Lieutenant General Jim Dutton, who is coming to the end of his term and will soon be replaced by another great British officer, Lieutenant General Nick Parker.

Before I continue, I would like to recognise the enormous sacrifice that families here in the UK have made. As you know, the losses that we have suffered are significant in terms of those who have fallen, suffered life-changing injuries, or given up parts of their life just by being away from family. I am in awe of the performance of the British brothers whom I have been honoured to work with for a number of years now.

I am humbled to be here because I do not claim to be in the same category as people who have been talking here, such as Prime Minister Brown and President Zardari, who expressed their views on this complex subject. I do, however, believe that I can offer some perspectives and will try to do that today. I will start by posing seven questions before attempting to answer them. If this works according to my plan, it will totally exhaust your appetite for this issue and I will leave the room to wild cheers and lucrative job offers. If my plan fails, as most of mine do, I will be happy to field any questions that we have time for.

II. What is the Right Approach to Use in Afghanistan?

1. People's Own Suggestions

People ask me this question all the time; many people offer their own suggestions. There is a multitude of approaches to what to do. Some people say that we should focus primarily on development; others say that we should conduct a counterterrorist-focused battle, given that this

really started after 9/11 and Al-Qaeda's strikes. Other people say that we should conduct counterinsurgency (COIN). A paper has been written that recommends that we use a plan called 'Chaosistan', and that we let Afghanistan become a Somalia-like haven of chaos that we simply manage from outside.

2. The Complexities of Afghanistan

a. *The delicate balance of power*

I arrived in Afghanistan in May 2002 and I have spent a part of every year since then involved in the effort. I have learned a tremendous amount about it and, every day, I realise how little about Afghanistan I actually understand. I discount immediately anyone who simplifies the problem or offers a solution, because they have absolutely no idea of the complexity of what we are dealing with.

In Afghanistan, things are rarely as they seem, and the outcomes of actions we take, however well-intended, are often different from what we expect. If you pull the lever, the outcome is not what you have been programmed to think. For example, digging a well sounds quite simple. How could you do anything wrong by digging a well to give people clean water? Where you build that well, who controls that water, and what water it taps into all have tremendous implications and create great passion.

If you build a well in the wrong place in a village, you may have shifted the basis of power in that village. If you tap into underground water, you give power to the owner of that well that they did not have before, because the traditional irrigation system was community-owned. If you dig a well and contract it to one person or group over another, you make a decision that, perhaps in your ignorance, tips the balance of power, or perception thereof, in that village.

Therefore, with a completely altruistic aim of building a well, you can create divisiveness or give the impression that you, from the outside, do not understand what is going on or that you have sided with one element or another, yet all you tried to do is provide water.

b. *COIN mathematics*

There is another complexity that people do not understand and which the military have to learn: I call it 'COIN mathematics'. Intelligence will normally tell us how many insurgents are operating in an area. Let us say that there are 10 in a certain area. Following a military operation, two are killed. How many insurgents are left? Traditional mathematics would say that eight would be left, but there may only be two, because six of the living eight may have said, 'This business of insurgency is becoming dangerous so I am going to do something else.'

There are more likely to be as many as 20, because each one you killed has a brother, father, son and friends, who do not necessarily think that they were killed because they were doing something wrong. It does not matter – you killed them. Suddenly, then, there may be 20, making the calculus of military operations very different. Yet we are asking young corporals, sergeants and lieutenants to make those kinds of calculations and requiring them to understand the situation. They have to – there is no simple workaround.

It is that complex: where you build the well, what military operations to run, who you talk to. Everything that you do is part of a complex system with expected and unexpected, desired and undesired outcomes, and outcomes that you never find out about. In my experience, I have found

that the best answers and approaches may be counterintuitive; i.e. the opposite of what it seems like you ought to do is what ought to be done. When I am asked what approach we should take in Afghanistan, I say 'humility'.

III. What Environment Are We Operating In?

1. Generally Accepted Truths

The answer to this question starts with some generally accepted truths about Afghanistan, which we all know to be true:

- It is a graveyard of empires.
- Afghanistan has never been ruled by a strong central government.
- Afghans do not consider themselves Afghans.

All three are untrue. If you ask an Afghan what he is, he will say, 'I am an Afghan'. There have been strong central governments, although different from what you think of as central government. In the sense of governance, there have been periods when Afghanistan absolutely had a central government. Therefore, we have to start by not accepting any of the generally accepted 'bumper sticker' truths.

2. Real Truths

a. Complex, difficult geography and demography

In terms of real truths, it is complex, difficult terrain, both in terms of land and people. It is also a tribal society with a culture that is vastly different from what most of us are familiar with. There are variations around the country; you cannot assume that what is true in one province is true in another. That goes for ethnic, geographic and economic issues. You cannot even assume that what is true in one valley is true in the next any more than you can assume that one neighbourhood in London is exactly the same as another. We would not generalise here, yet sometimes, as outsiders, we want to do that.

b. A long period of conflict

I would also remind people that we have been waging a war for eight years, yet the Afghans have been at it for 30. Life expectancy in Afghanistan is 44 years, so not many people remember pre-conflict life in Afghanistan. Of those 30 years, about 10 were spent fighting the Soviets, followed by six years of 'warlordism' and a further six years of Taliban rule and civil rule, and the last eight years have been eight more years of fighting.

One elder said something that really struck me one night as we were talking: 'What you see in Afghanistan now is a reflection of pieces of each of those eras'. It is now a mosaic of the experiences of all those eras. If you think about the impact of 30 years on people and on a society, calculations change. The certainty that you have when you walk through your neighbourhood in London is not the certainty that they have. The expectation of the future is not the expectation that they may have. The opportunities to be educated and to associate with different ethnic groups, which have become more of a challenge in recent years, are very different.

c. *A damaged society*

The society is what I would call 'damaged'. Individuals may not be damaged, but the society is not as it was. It is not so uniformly; nor can you say 'it is all different here'. Tribal structures, relationships and expectations are uncertain now. When you go into a village in a Pashtun area, traditionally you could have predicted what the role and interrelationships of the mullah or the elders would be. That is no longer true. It varies based upon the experience of that area. In some areas, some have disproportionate influence and others have none. Some have been killed. In other cases, elements like the Taliban have come in and completely turned upside down the traditional structures. You can also not assume that traditional structures have disappeared, so you have to go in and learn what the structure is and how people deal with it.

3. A Uniquely Complex Environment

What we face, then, is a uniquely complex environment, where there are at least three regional and resilient insurgencies, with further sub-insurgencies. They have intersected on top of a dynamic blend of local power struggles in a country damaged by 30 years of war. You then run into someone who raises their finger and says 'here is the solution' – they can have my job.

4. A Crisis of Confidence

We also face a crisis of confidence. Afghans are frustrated after the most recent eight years of war, because in 2001 their expectations skyrocketed. Along with the arrival of coalition forces, they expected a positive change. They saw that initially and then waited for other changes – economic development and improvements in governance – that, in many cases, may have been unrealistic but, in many cases, were unmet. Therefore, there was a mismatch between what they had hoped for and what they have experienced. Again, as we learn in all societies, expectations and perceptions often matter as much as the reality.

IV. What Is the Situation Now?

1. Serious and Deteriorating

The situation is serious, and I choose that word very carefully. I would add that neither success nor failure for our endeavour in support of the Afghan people and government can be taken for granted. My assessment and my best military judgment is that the situation is, in some ways, deteriorating, but not in all ways.

2. Tremendous Progress

I can also point out areas in which tremendous progress is evident: the construction of roads, provision of clean water, access to healthcare, the presence of children in school, and access to education for females. All of these are up dramatically and hugely positive, and portend well for the future.

3. A Need to Reverse Current Trends

However, a tremendous number of villagers live in fear, and there are officials who either cannot or do not serve their people effectively. Violence is on the increase, not only because there are more

coalition forces, but also because the insurgency has grown. We need to reverse the current trends, and time does matter. Waiting does not prolong a favourable outcome. This effort will not remain winnable indefinitely, and nor will public support. However, the cruel irony is that, in order to succeed, we need patience, discipline, resolve and time.

V. Who is Winning?

1. A Battle of Minds and Perceptions

a. Not a game with points on a scoreboard

The answer to this question depends on who you ask. This is not like a football game with points on a scoreboard; it is more like a political debate, after which both sides announce that they won. That matters because we are not the scorekeepers: not NATO ISAF, not our governments, and not even our press. The perception of all of these entities will matter and they will affect the situation, but ultimately this is going to be decided in the minds and perceptions of the Afghan people of the Afghan government and of the insurgents, whether they can win or are winning, and, most importantly, the perception of the villager who casts his lot with the winner.

b. Villagers make rational and practical decisions

Villagers are supremely rational and practical people: they make the decision on who they will support, based upon who can protect them and provide for them what they need. If a villager lives in a remote area where the government or security forces cannot protect them from coercion or harm from insurgents, he will not support the government – it would be illogical. Similarly, if the government cannot provide him with rule of law, the basic ability to adjudicate requirements legally, or just enough services to allow him to pursue a livelihood, it is difficult for him to make a rational decision to support the government. The Taliban is not popular. It does not have a compelling context. What it has is proximity to the people and the ability to provide coercion and, in some cases, things like basic rule of law, based upon the fact that they are there and can put themselves in that position. The perception of the villager matters in terms of which side he should support, so winning the battle of perception is key.

c. Allowing the facts to speak for themselves

I also think that winning the battle of perception, as it applies everywhere but particularly to us, is about credibility. As I told you, the situation is absolutely not deteriorating by every indicator, but I will not stand up and say that we are winning until I am told by indicators that we are winning. For me to stand up and claim good things that are not supported by data in order to motivate us and make us feel good very rapidly undermines our credibility. Our own forces are smart enough to do that, so I intend to tell people the best assessment that we can, as accurately as possible, and allow the facts to speak for themselves.

VI. It Has Been Eight Years – Why Is It Not Better?

This is a fair question for the Afghan people and for societies that have supported this effort. It is true that, after eight years of tremendous effort and expenditure and the loss of good people, many things are worse. Why have eight years of effort not made things better? There are a number of complex reasons:

- The insurgency grew.
- Expectations – both expected and unexpected – were not met, which has created frustration.
- It took us longer than I wish it had to recognise this as a serious insurgency. As the Taliban started to regain its effectiveness, we lagged in terms of accepting that as a clear reality.

Through our actions, we – i.e. the coalition and its Afghan partners – sometimes exacerbate the problems.

- We have under-resourced our operations.
- In some areas, we have underperformed; in others, we have under-coordinated.
- We have struggled with unity of effort, national agreements and chains of command that are complex to say the least.
- In some ways, we have not overcome some of our intrinsic disadvantages. We are operating in a very different culture, with language differences, relationships that do not exist and a complex situation that takes time to understand, yet we have not effectively developed enough expertise, continuity of people or sufficient numbers of language-trained people to deal with the situation as effectively as we could have.
- Most importantly, our own operational culture – and by ‘our’ I mean coalition forces – and manner of operating distances us physically and psychologically from the people who we seek to protect. We need to connect with people, yet physical or linguistic barriers make it increasingly difficult. Ultimately, our security comes from the people. We cannot build enough walls to protect ourselves if the people do not.

We must, then, operate and think in a fundamentally new way.

VII. Can We Succeed?

1. Protecting the Afghan People from the Enemy

We can succeed. We must redefine the fight. The objective is the will of the Afghan people. We must protect the Afghan people from all threats: from the enemy and from our own actions. Let me describe it: a few days ago, just before we left to travel here, a bus south of Kandahar struck an improvised explosive device (IED) killing 30 Afghan civilians. That is tragic.

On the one hand, you might say that the Afghan people would recoil against the Taliban who left that IED. To a degree, they do, but we must also understand that they recoil against us because they might think that, if we were not there, neither would be the IED. Therefore, we indirectly caused the IED to be there. Second, we said that we would protect them, but we did not. Sometimes, then, the most horrific events caused by the insurgents continue to reinforce in the minds of the Afghan people a mindset that coalition forces are either ineffective, or at least that their presence in Afghanistan is not in their interest. That does not happen all of the time. There are times when they feel differently, but you have to put things in that context to understand what we must do.

2. Protection from Our Own Actions

a. *Respecting the people*

We also need to protect them from our own actions. When we fight, if we become focused on destroying the enemy but end up killing Afghan civilians, destroying Afghan property or acting in a way that is perceived as arrogant, we convince the Afghan people that we do not care about them. If we say, 'We are here for you – we respect and want to protect you', while destroying their home, killing their relatives or destroying their crops, it is difficult for them to connect those two concepts. It would be difficult for us to do the same. The understanding, then, must be that we respect the people.

b. *Changing our mindset*

We must assign responsibility because, ultimately, the Afghans must defeat the insurgency. As a force, however, we must change our mindset. Whether or not we like it, we have a conventional warfare culture – not just our militaries but our societies. Our societies want to see lines on a map moving forward towards objectives, but you will not see that in a counterinsurgency because you do not see as clearly what is happening in people's minds. We will have to do things dramatically and even uncomfortably differently in order to change how we think and operate.

In short, we cannot succeed by simply trying harder. We cannot drop three more bombs and have a greater effect; it is much more subtle than that.

3. Crucial Next Steps

In my mind, therefore, what we must do over the next period of time is:

- Gain the initiative by reversing the perceived momentum possessed by the insurgents.
- Seek rapid growth of Afghan national security forces – the army and the police.
- Improve their effectiveness and ours through closer partnering, which involves planning, living and operating together and taking advantage of each other's strengths as we go forward. Within ISAF, we will put more emphasis on every part of that, by integrating our headquarters, physically co-locating our units, and sharing ownership of the problem.
- Address shortfalls in the capacity of governance and the ability of the Afghan government to provide rule of law.
- Tackle the issue of predatory corruption by some officials or by warlords who are not in an official position but who seem to have the ability, sometimes sanctioned by existing conditions, to do that.
- Focus our resources and prioritise in those areas where the population is most threatened. We do not have enough forces to do everything everywhere at once, so this has to be prioritised and phased over time.

4. A Need for Resolve

As you know, the concepts that I have outlined here are not new, but if we implement them aggressively and effectively, we can create a revolution in terms of our effectiveness. We must show resolve. Uncertainty disheartens our allies, emboldens our foe. A villager recently asked me whether we intended to remain in his village and provide security, to which I confidently promised him that, of course, we would. He looked at me and said, 'Okay, but you did not stay last time.'

VIII. Why Bother?

1. The Risk Posed by Al-Qaeda

Afghanistan is difficult, so why bother? It is a long way away. It is not our business. As we know, however, 9/11 brought us here to the latest interaction, and transnational terrorist threats absolutely remain. I believe that the loss of stability in Afghanistan brings a huge risk that transnational terrorists such as Al-Qaeda will operate from within Afghanistan again.

2. High Stakes for Afghanistan and the Region

I also believe that the stakes are high for Afghanistan and for the region. An unstable Afghanistan not only negatively affects what happens within its borders but also affects its neighbours. Afghanistan is, in many ways, one of the keys to stability in south Asia. A state that can provide its own security is important to all international security, and certainly to that of the UK, the US and our international partnership. The Afghan people are worth bothering about and they deserve that.

IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, I am exceptionally proud to serve at ISAF. Within my office, I have a picture of a British battle group, led by Lieutenant Colonel Gus Fair, with whom I worked for a long time in Iraq. He is with his soldiers, who I had the opportunity to speak with when I visited them during operations in Spin Majid this summer in the Helmand River valley. I keep that picture because, when I looked into their eyes, which were bloodshot with fatigue, I remember the extraordinary professionalism, competence and sheer courage of those young men. Whenever I come to London, I like to run through the city, and I particularly like the statues that you have erected to heroes. I hope that you erect one to that generation – they have earned it. Thank you.