



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**THE PASHTUN BEHAVIOR ECONOMY:  
AN ANALYSIS OF DECISION MAKING IN TRIBAL  
SOCIETY**

by

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June 2011

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**THE PASHTUN BEHAVIOR ECONOMY:  
AN ANALYSIS OF DECISION MAKING IN TRIBAL SOCIETY**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES  
(MIDDLE EAST, SOUTH ASIA, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA)**

from the

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## **ABSTRACT**

Little scholarship exists regarding the ways members of conflict societies think about the economic decisions they face, and what information they value as relevant to those decisions. The literature of the emerging field of behavior economics suggest that in uncertain environments, considerable weight may be given to identity and culture factors to make decisions that will affect personal safety, income prospects and self-fulfillment. Knowledge about the important factors in play when indigenous populations are making decisions regarding their support for government-sponsored counterinsurgency efforts, for example, can lead to better strategies for communication and decision framing on the part of the counterinsurgents to improve the relative attractiveness of the propositions they present to indigenous members in environments where counterinsurgent forces wish to expand their influence. In this thesis, the nature of the decision process in rural Pashtun society will be studied, drawing from sources that study Pashtun ethnography, as well as behavioral economics, to draw conclusions about the way people in conflict societies frame the decisions they make. Studying the Pashtun case in Afghanistan will allow generalizations and patterns to be recognized that can be used in future conflicts to craft operational and communications strategies that have the most chance of counterinsurgency success.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the documentary film *Restrepo*, the camera focuses on a young Army captain, the commander of the garrison at Outpost (OP) Restrepo, seated in a village *shura* alongside a host of wizened Afghan elders in the summer of 2006. Speaking through an interpreter, the captain informs the elders of the prospects for a new road into the Korengal Valley that will economically connect their village to the rest of Afghanistan. The conversation quickly veers to the elders' concern for several younger villagers that had been taken into custody and sent to Bagram for questioning. The meeting quickly stalls, and the frustration is evident on the captain's face. The company's Sergeant Major sums up the exchange after the fact:

The thing that's sad to me is that as much as [the captain] would go down there and conduct different shuras and tell them about the positives [of] what we can do to help them... it seemed like it didn't go anywhere. It seemed like we took one step forward, and they took two steps backward.<sup>1</sup>

Coalition forces were never able to win over the population of the Korengal valley. Four years later, in the spring of 2010, a picture in the *Washington Post* showed a beaming Shahmshir *Khan*, the same elder who had questioned OP Restrepo's commander on the fate of the villagers in his charge, clasping hands with the current commander as the American soldiers prepared to abandon their positions in the Korengal.<sup>2</sup>

United States forces have not been the first foreigners to be confounded by Afghan unpredictability. In 1897, the British in India were caught flat-footed when a mujahideen army coalesced seemingly overnight and attacked British positions in that valley, nearly capturing a British garrison at Chakdara. For many months before, reports had generally reflected improved relations between the British administration and the local Pashtuns. But a local preacher, whom the British would later refer to as the "Mad

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<sup>1</sup> Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington, *Restrepo*, Documentary (Outpost Films in association with National Geographic, 2010), pt. 40:25.

<sup>2</sup> Greg Jaffe, "U.S. retreat from Afghan valley marks recognition of blunder," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/14/AR2010041401012.html>.

Fakir of Swat” for his claims to be able to turn the enemy’s bullets into water, united thousands of factional tribesmen under a banner of *jihad*.<sup>3</sup>

In today’s counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan, many newly-trained Afghan security forces find themselves battling so-called Taliban forces that only a few weeks before had been aligned with government-supported *arbakai*<sup>4</sup> militias. A recent news journal article described an *arbakai* commander who, within the space of a few weeks, had robbed a local bank, joined the Taliban to avoid prosecution, then switched allegiances back to the government just before a coalition offensive in the area, expecting that his “slate would be wiped clean.”<sup>5</sup>

In addition to direct security efforts, the U.S. lead International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has embarked on many nation-building and Afghan governance development efforts, often resulting in programs that are, if not inefficient, outright corrupt. The recent poppy eradication efforts in southern Afghanistan are a case in point, with many regional government officials pursuing poppy eradication with relish in order to push up the market values of their own opium production farms.<sup>6</sup>

## **A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION**

The anecdotes above reflect some of the most basic challenges that counterinsurgent forces face every day in Afghanistan. Rural Afghans continue to make decisions about their security and allegiances based on a seemingly unpredictable logic. This logic often seems irrational and incomprehensible to Coalition forces, especially in light of intense efforts to secure the loyalty of the population through increased focus on what has become known as “population-centric” counterinsurgency.

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<sup>3</sup> David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 172–177.

<sup>4</sup> *Arbakai* are traditional tribal defense forces organized ad hoc to defend the village from a threat.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Wood, “A Battle in Baghlan,” *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/11/my\\_embed\\_with\\_a\\_warlord](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/11/my_embed_with_a_warlord).

<sup>6</sup> Justin Mankin, “Rotten to the Core,” *Foreign Policy*, May 10, 2011, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/10/rotten\\_to\\_the\\_core](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/10/rotten_to_the_core).

Despite many years of effort, stability and reconstruction efforts are proceeding with difficulty in Afghanistan. The country's governance remains mired in corruption and the security situation remains unstable. Modern counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine stresses the importance of providing security and development to win the cooperation of an uncertain population, but it does little to illuminate the “*how*” of that proposition. The COIN practitioner is left with an “if you build it, they will come” approach to security and development that too often leads to overfunded, top-down security and development projects that invite more corruption and more instability.

What remain unanswered are some fundamental questions about winning the cooperation of a population in insurgency: Why do some people decide to join the Taliban? How do Afghans view and confer legitimacy? What makes individuals and small groups of individuals abandon the status quo and join an insurgency? The root question underlying all these is this: Why can the Coalition not predict the way many of its actions will be perceived or the way those actions will affect the decisions of the people it seeks to influence?

## **B. IMPORTANCE**

The United States has been significantly involved in counterinsurgency operations in almost every decade of the 20th century. Beginning with the Philippine Insurrection in the first decade, then Panama and Cuba, the Philippines again in the late 1940s, the Korean communist insurgency of 1950, Vietnam, El Salvador, Iraq and now Afghanistan. In Iraq alone, the United States has suffered over 4,000 dead and over 32,000 wounded in counterinsurgency and stability operations since the invasion of that country in 2003.<sup>7</sup>

This is a new generation of conflict that is fundamentally different from the age of war that preceded it. This so-called “fourth generation” of warfare is much closer to the “people” than the previous generation, which was characterized by great armies representing the state locked in deathly combat. This new warfare is characterized by ideas rather than weapons, and comes complete with its own set of problems, as the

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<sup>7</sup> “Iraq Index – Saban Center for Middle East Policy,” *The Brookings Institute*, March 31, 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/saban/iraq-index.aspx>.

United States struggles to “wage war on non-state actors who hide in states with which we are at peace, even within our own society.”<sup>8</sup> This new breed of warfare is fought more on the individual level, and is complicated by a dissonance with classical warfare, where attacking the enemy is the center of effort. In this new warfare, counterinsurgent forces seek ways to influence an entity that they cannot physically attack: the population.

## **C. PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESES**

### **1. Shrinking Timelines**

If history is any guide, counter-revolutionary wars are long endeavors. Britain’s Malay Emergency lasted 12 years. The French fought in Algeria for eight years before their ignominious withdrawal. The United States’ fought (openly) for nearly nine years in Vietnam until the ceasefire of 1973 and its equally ignominious withdrawal. At just under 10 years as of this writing, America’s war in Afghanistan is the longest in its history.

Political limitations in a democracy often make COIN operations difficult to sustain for long periods because elected leaders are typically wary of committing large numbers of troops for a long time. The political battle over the Afghanistan surge of 2010 is a case in point: the ISAF force component, at 132,000 troops (1:240 troop-to-population ration), remains well short of the roughly 1:50 troops-to-population ration that classical COIN doctrine prescribes.<sup>9</sup> Comparing the Vietnam force commitment to forces in Afghanistan, Johnson and Mason write:

In South Vietnam, an operational area smaller than RC South, the United States and its allies had over 2 million men under arms, including more than half a million Americans, the million-man Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), 75,000 coalition troops, the Vietnamese Regional

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<sup>8</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 291; William S. Lind, “Understanding Fourth Generation War,” *Military Review*, no. September–October (2004).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas H. Johnson, “On the Edge of the Big Muddy: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan,” *China and Eurasian Forum Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (2007): 107; C. D Dessaso, *Toward Development of Afghanistan National Stability: Analyses in Historical Military and Cultural Contexts* (Army Command and General Staff College School of Advanced Military Studies, 2010), <http://www.isaf.nato.int/images/stories/File/Placemats/PLACEMAT.MARCH%2004..pdf>.

Forces and Popular Forces (known as ‘Ruff-Puffs’), the South Vietnamese police, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) and other militias – and lost.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the precedent for high-volume and long-term commitments required in a counterinsurgency war, troop commitments are getting smaller and time-lines for withdrawal are getting shorter. Political limitations in the Obama administration compelled an early withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq in 2010 as well as a deadline of 2014 for the withdrawal of most combat troops from Afghanistan, despite fears that insurgent violence will continue to undermine both governments.<sup>11</sup>

## **2. New Doctrine, Old Ideas**

COIN doctrine has enjoyed a revival as a result of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2006, strategic thinkers in the U.S. Army and Marine Corps drew upon previous work on COIN theory by well-known late colonial-era COIN experts such as Robert Thompson and David Galula. The resulting Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24) gave the U.S. military a much needed doctrine to codify operations using counterinsurgency principles. The field manual shifted the focus of military operations from an “insurgent-centric” approach of destroying insurgent forces, to a “population-centric” approach that focused on development and security issues as a means of eroding insurgent support among the population.

While this approach seemed innovative, it was essentially a retelling of hard-won COIN experience from the 1950s and ‘60s. Eventually, the renewed focus on the population in insurgency environments lead to the reemergence of the concept of “hearts and minds.” This term, originally credited to President Lyndon Johnson who was speaking of a Vietnamese pacification program that would provide economic and

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “Down the AfPak Rabbit Hole,” *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2010, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/03/01/down\\_the\\_afpak\\_rabbit\\_hole](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/03/01/down_the_afpak_rabbit_hole).

<sup>11</sup> Ulrike Putz, “US Withdrawal from Iraq: Baghdad Residents Mourn Departure of Former Enemy,” *Der Spiegel Online*, August 30, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,714592,00.html>; Karen DeYoung and Scott Wilson, “With bin Laden dead, some escalate push for new Afghan strategy,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/bin-ladens-killing-requires-new-look-at-afghanistan-strategy-kerry-says/2011/05/10/AFWylfiG\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/bin-ladens-killing-requires-new-look-at-afghanistan-strategy-kerry-says/2011/05/10/AFWylfiG_story.html).

development assistance to the government of South Vietnam,<sup>12</sup> has become ubiquitous in the modern lexicon of counterinsurgency and refers to a need to win over the population to the counter-insurgent's side through personal and public welfare programs that will theoretically lead the population to the government's side. In contrast to the security-centric approach of classic counterinsurgency, "hearts and minds" focuses on economic development and assumes that when the government provides enough economic opportunity, people's loyalties will eventually follow.

This approach appeals to the American psyche, particularly because it reflects the belief that American political progress and economic success go hand in hand. As one author noted when reviewing a book on the subject of "hearts and minds" policies in Malaya:

'Hearts and minds' recognizes the socioeconomic nature of the conflict and the consequent link between the guerrillas and a sympathetic population. Hence, it can ultimately succeed in defeating the insurgents by re-dressing some of their grievances, as happened in Malaya.<sup>13</sup>

While there was some evidence that pacification could have been making some gains in Vietnam, especially after initial successes by localized integrated security and domestic programs such as the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoon, in the end a combination of several political and military failures culminated in complete mission failure.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Afghanistan, aid programs designed to foster aid and development may have actually worsened the conflict by providing revenue streams for the Taliban and empowering well-connected tribes in an area at the expense of more established power brokers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Njubi Nesbitt, "Hearts and Minds and Empire," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, March 20, 2009, [http://www.fpif.org/articles/hearts\\_and\\_minds\\_and\\_empire](http://www.fpif.org/articles/hearts_and_minds_and_empire). The term was also popularized through a 1974 documentary of the same name.

<sup>13</sup> Craig A. Lockard, "Review of Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960. by Richard Stubbs," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (1990): 1.

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle For Vietnam's Hearts And Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Wilder, "A 'weapons system' based on wishful thinking," *Boston Globe*, September 16, 2009, [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2009/09/16/a\\_weapons\\_system\\_based\\_on\\_wishful\\_thinking/](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/09/16/a_weapons_system_based_on_wishful_thinking/).

One of the problems with a catchy phrase such as “hearts and minds” is that it soon becomes banal and becomes a substitute for critical thinking on an issue. As one commentator put it: “The idea that you can build schools, pave roads, provide electricity and thereby earn the loyalty of the population does not stand up to reality.”<sup>16</sup> A 1970 RAND study concludes that a “hearts and minds” approach that focuses on economic development may be just as likely to aid the insurgent cause through increased revenue opportunities. A similar report from the Iraq war came to a similar conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. A “Whole-Person” Theory of Human Behavior

As discussed above, an important tenet of contemporary COIN theory is that that success can be generated through a “population-centric” strategy of delivering governance to the population, whereby they will eventually reach a level of trust and confidence in the capability of the COIN force to provide long-term security and shift their allegiance from insurgent elements to the COIN government. Experience in counterinsurgencies such as the Malaya Emergency of the late 1940s and the Philippine Hukbalahap insurgency of the same period seems to support this hypothesis. Increasingly, however, COIN operations are being subjected to shrinking resources and timelines relative to these successful counterinsurgencies of the past, making it more difficult to achieve these results without a more sophisticated understanding of the underlying assumptions about why people decide to support the COIN effort or not. The science of COIN today, even though its practice is based on classical economic theory, relies mostly on anecdote and analogy with past conflicts rather than a scientific assessment of decision processes. This is true of most decision analysis, as Bueno de Mesquita complains:

Decision making is the last frontier in which science has been locked out of government and business. We live in a high-tech age with archaic

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<sup>16</sup> Abu Muqawama, “Insurgents, Counterinsurgents, and the Provision of Social Services | Center for a New American Security”, April 22, 2011, <http://www.cnas.org/blogs/abumuqawama/2011/04/insurgents-counterinsurgents-and-provision-social-services.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan Constantine Leites and Charles Wolf, *Rebellion and Authority: an Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Chicago, IL: Markham Publishing Co., 1970), 150–52; E. Berman, J. N Shapiro, and J. Felter, *Can hearts and minds be bought? The economics of counterinsurgency in Iraq* (National Bureau of Economic Research Cambridge, Mass., USA, 2008).

guesswork guiding life and death decisions. The time for peering into tea leaves or reading astrological charts should be long over.<sup>18</sup>

The theory behind “hearts and minds” is basically that human beings respond to rational economic incentives, and that if the COIN force can provide more of the “stuff” that people feel is important, loyalties will follow. This thinking, which has dominated theoretical economics for most of its history, assumes that people will make all their most important decisions based on the perceived likelihood of maximizing economic well-being. This thinking, however, does not recognize the significant contribution that non-monetary factors such as justice, honor and cultural imperatives, make to individual decisions. As Akerlof and Dickens point out:

[W]hile economists have been elaborating their analysis, keeping their basic behavioral assumptions the same, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and psychologists have been developing and validating models based on very different assumptions.<sup>19</sup>

Neither the security-centric approach of classic COIN doctrine nor the development-centric “hearts and minds” approaches incorporate some of the most important advances in the understanding of the human mind that came about in the 1950s and later, such as Solomon Asch’s work on group conformity, Milgram’s experiments regarding the nature of authority, or Muzafer Sherif’s seminal work on group conflict.

As COIN theory languished in the aftermath of Vietnam and the military’s desire to refocus on the conventional threat of the Soviet Union, a host of social scientists, anthropologists, economists and psychologists were developing new models in understanding human behavior. Afghanistan itself was a popular subject of anthropological and historical study, as the work of Jon W. Anderson, Olivier Roy and Louis Dupree attest. This body of social science eventually came to inform the field of behavior economics that was advanced by the Nobel laureate economist Gary Becker, in his pioneering work on nonmonetary based preferences.

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<sup>18</sup> Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *The Predictioneer’s Game: Using the Logic of Brazen Self-Interest to See and Shape the Future* (New York: Random House, 2009), xxi.

<sup>19</sup> George A. Akerlof and William T. Dickens, “The Economic Consequences of Cognitive Dissonance,” *The American Economic Review* 72, no. 3 (1982): 307.

Since the early days of partisan warfare, many authors have understood the need to influence the subject population's decisions, if only to improve intelligence collection. During the American Revolutionary War, Captain Johann Ewald of the Royal Hessians remarked on the importance of maintaining political relations with the population:

Above all, one cannot deal harshly enough with those villains who mercilessly torment the peasants who are innocent of the war... On the other hand, with a strict discipline and a congenial behavior one makes friends in the heart of enemy country.<sup>20</sup>

The Marine Corps Small Wars Manual of 1940 asserts that “human reactions cannot be reduced to an exact science, but there are certain principles which should guide our conduct.”<sup>21</sup> The Hessians and the Marines appreciated the utility of understanding the psyches of the people they wished to influence, but did not have a body of scientific work to provide a reliable framework for understanding the science of human behavior.

Given all that we have learned about human social behavior in the latter part of the 20th century, it seems reasonable that this body of science could improve the state of the art of counterinsurgency. Since it is widely acknowledged in COIN theory that the people are the “center of gravity” in an insurgent conflict, then understanding the behavior of human beings alone and in groups could improve the success of COIN operations and strategies. In this thesis, I will show that a behavioral economics approach that incorporates the importance of cultural norms, social influences, and even irrational mental biases can better describe people's decision outcomes in a conflict society than the traditional approach of separating social interventions from decision models. This recognition of the role of culture and society in decision functions will lead to better counterinsurgency operations and, ultimately, better decision outcomes from those the COIN forces wish to influence.

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<sup>20</sup> Johann von Ewald, Robert A. Selig, and David Curtis Skaggs, *Treatise on Partisan Warfare* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 69.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, Original (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), 18.

## D. LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purposes of this literature review, we divide the literature into competing camps: the first we will refer to as the “mono-rationalist” literature which is based on a classical economics view of decision; the second we refer to as the “multi-rationalist” literature which suggests the applicability of behavioral economic considerations that are derived from cultural and social contexts.

### 1. “Rationalist” COIN Literature

Existing COIN theory is consistent with a mono-rationalist interpretation of human behavior. According to this view, members of the population will decide whether to support the insurgency based on a rational calculation of cost and benefit. As we have already noted, existing COIN theory places a great deal of emphasis on “the people” as the center of gravity of the conflict. Galula describes the “battle for the population” as a “major characteristic of the revolutionary war.” Thompson notes that the heart of counterinsurgency is the “war for the people” and that the government’s ability to restore law and order is central to winning the loyalty of the people. McCuen encourages active engagement with the populace by counterinsurgent forces, and winning over the populace through development efforts and security programs. Sewall writes in the introduction to the Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual that the “population waits to be convinced. Who will help them more, hurt them less, stay the longest, earn their trust?”<sup>22</sup>

COIN literature focuses on security and development as a means by which the local population can be persuaded to side with government forces. This is the basis for Kilcullen’s thesis, viewing most of the insurgency recruits as “accidental guerrillas” who are not highly committed to the ideological cause of the insurgency, and can be convinced to give up support for the insurgency with the correct combination of

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<sup>22</sup> David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare; Theory and Practice*. Foreword by Robert R. Bowie (New York: Praeger, 1964), 7; Robert Grainger Ker Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency; the Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 51; John J McCuen, *The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War; the Strategy of Counter-Insurgency* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1966), 98; Sarah Sewall et al., *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xxv.

incentives.<sup>23</sup> This view has become widely characteristic of modern COIN thought, where the primary goal is changing the insurgency environment through security operations and economic development as a vehicle to obtaining decisions in the host population that are favorable to the COIN force. Experience in counterinsurgencies such as the Malaya Emergency of the late 1940s and the Philippine Hukbalahap insurgency of the same period supports this hypothesis.

This view of human decision in an insurgency environment is supported by an impressive history of economic thought. The rationalist approach contends that people make choices based on their preferences, which are entirely informed by the value placed on various goods and services using rational calculus. Beginning with Adam Smith, human decision processes have been modeled by *Homo Economicus* (Economic Man): a being that always acted in accordance with selfish interest and sought to maximize wealth and prosperity. Modern economists such as Milton Friedman and Steven Levitt share in common the principled belief that people respond to incentives and will make choices to maximize their utility (well-being).<sup>24</sup> Modern Game Theory as typified by Bueno de Mesquita refines this reasoning into a predictive model for human behavior and assume fundamental self-interest in motivations.<sup>25</sup> In the rational model, these incentives can be readily quantified in numerical terms or through some tangible benefit.

Overall, traditional COIN theory frames the choices made by the population regarding whether to support the insurgency or not as a rational choice based primarily on considerations of security and prosperity. The rational approach to assessing decision making is popular because it is simpler than the alternative. It is difficult to assess and quantify the complex milieu of identities and biases involved in alternative models of

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<sup>23</sup> Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla*, chap. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 9; Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*, Revised and Expanded. (New York: William Morrow, 2006), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1990); Bueno de Mesquita, *The Predictioneer's Game*, xxi.

decision-making. Additionally, until recently, there has been very little science available on the feasibility of incorporating alternative decision models into an analysis of the economy of COIN.

## 2. “Multi-Rationalist” Literature

The literature of the emerging field of behavior economics suggests that in uncertain environments, considerable weight may be given to identity and culture factors to make decisions that will affect personal safety, income prospects and self-fulfillment. Gary S. Becker, a noted economist, began identifying some problems with classical economic theories in the late 1950s, specifically that people practiced racial discrimination in economic exchanges, and were willing to pay a premium to do so. Around the same time, Solomon Asch began a series of famous experiments that showed that people will often conform to in-group preferences even in the face of obvious evidence that the preference is incorrect. Following up on Asch’s work, Stanley Milgram showed that a majority of people will violate their own deeply-held moral convictions in the face of compelling authority, even willing to undergo significant mental stress while doing so.<sup>26</sup>

Thaler also points to the existence of a readily quantifiable social intervention in people’s rational calculus. Classical, mono-rational economic theory predicts that a purely self-interested individual should seek to maximize personal profit at all times. A popular series of economic experiments begun in the 1970s today shows that people have a compulsion to make (and demand) fair offers, despite having no strictly “rational” incentive to do so.<sup>27</sup> When researchers replicated these experiments in different cultural contexts, they saw also noted variations in the level of social intervention in different societies.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Gary Stanley Becker, *The economics of discrimination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Gary I. Schulman, “Asch Conformity Studies: Conformity to the Experimenter and/or to the Group?,” *Sociometry* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 1967): 26–40; Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> These experiments, known as the Ultimatum Game will be discussed in more detail in Chapter II.

<sup>28</sup> others, “‘Economic man’ in cross-cultural perspective: Behavioral experiments in 15 small-scale societies,” *Behavioral and brain sciences* 28, no. 6 (2005): 801.

Outside academia, insurgent leaders themselves have stressed the importance of social and spiritual factors in insurgency contexts. Rejecting the rationalist model, Guevara's asserts that "it is not necessary to wait until all conditions for making revolution exist; the insurrection can create them."<sup>29</sup> Guevara suggests a "mental tipping point" that can be brought about in the host population, where events can radically alter people's perception of the choice whether or not to support the insurgency. Guevara mentions more "non-rational" factors that aim to help the cause: the revolutionary must be a "true priest of reform" and "an ascetic" in order to inspire the populace by an almost divine example of perfect revolutionary spirit, allowing them to identify with and support the cause.<sup>30</sup> In Afghanistan, the Taliban are adept at using lyrical propaganda in the form of chants to influence their target populations. Interestingly, very few of these artifacts appeal to rational bases in soliciting support for the Taliban movement, relying instead on appeals to social standards such as honor, justice, shame and righteousness.<sup>31</sup>

A significant body of literature on Afghan social studies also exists, mostly drawing upon research completed before or during the Afghan-Soviet war. The works of Dupree, Roy, Barfield, Johnson and Mason suggest strong social interventions in Pashtun decision models, which we will explore in more detail in Chapter III.

### **3. Assessing the Literature**

Current counterinsurgency doctrine recognizes the importance of decision in an insurgency environment, but much of the COIN literature focuses on security and development, aka "hearts and minds," as a means by which the local population can be persuaded to side with government forces. Early U.S. military COIN publications, such as the Marine Corps Small Wars Manual did examine the importance of decisions among the populations, stressing a need to understand the "psychology" of the subject peoples and the nature of small wars as focusing on the "social, economic, and political

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<sup>29</sup> Ernesto Guevara, *Che Guevara on Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger, 1961), 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and Ahmad Waheed, "Analyzing Taliban Taranas (chants): An Effective Afghan Propaganda Artifact," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 1 (2011): 8.

development of the people,” in addition to killing insurgents,<sup>32</sup> but this approach lacked a firm scientific footing and was dismissed in favor of the mono-rationalist approach characteristic of “hearts and minds” style pacification.

Mono-rationalist literature may have been a sufficient intellectual base without any credible competing theories; however, the significant advances in the state of the art of behavior economics demand its inclusion in a new way of thinking about decisions. Classical economic theory was born in the context of Western civilization on the eve of rapid modernization, industrialization and urbanization, and was developed in the modern scientific age. The key value functions identified in the classical economics literature therefore reflect the monetized economic environment from which it came.

More and more; however, Western interactions with other cultures have stymied the mono-rationalist approach, as is evident by a reading of a British news dispatch associated with the 1897 Swat Valley revolt mentioned earlier:

Yet another proof has been given of the wave of fanaticism which is sweeping along the North-West frontier of India. Malakand was the scene last night of some sharp fighting, a sudden tribal rising in the Swat Valley taking place during the day. The story is a curious one, as showing how quickly tribesmen can gather and how readily they respond to an appeal to their fanaticism.

—Excerpted from *The Times*, Wednesday, July 28, 1897<sup>33</sup>

From tribal uprisings that plagued the British in Afghanistan to the discrimination tendencies studied by Becker, there is something social that makes men behave in certain ways. In the past, anthropologists and ethnographers who have made this claim regarding peoples of eastern cultures have been accused of “Orientalism,” and sharply rebuked with the assertion that all people’s basic motivations were essentially the same.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, 172.

<sup>34</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, “Ibn Khaldun and Anthropology: The Failure of Methodology in the Post 9/11 World,” *Contemporary Sociology* 34, no. 6 (November 1, 2005): 591.

The literature that exists on warfare largely avoids the issue of the science of decision making, preferring to concentrate on a relatively simple model of rational decision-making that focuses on a security for loyalty approach to eroding popular support for the insurgent.

Many studies have shown, however, that the security and development for loyalty bargain may be complicated by several other factors. If we wish to succeed in coin, we've got to get a handle on those other factors. In subsequent chapters we will explore the economics of insurgency and pursue a better model of decision theory in a conflict environment.

## **E. METHODS AND SOURCES**

This thesis will attempt to address the gap in the literature between current COIN doctrine, with its focus on the rational bargain of loyalty for security, and the findings of modern behavior economics, which highlights the importance of social factors in the decision process. I will show that the cultural contexts in which COIN operations are conducted exert considerable influence on decision outcomes among the population and must be taken account if information strategies are to be successful.

To accomplish this, I will define an analytical framework for analysis of behavior in a COIN context and apply this framework to the ethnic Pashtun case in Afghanistan to consider whether behavior economic theory can provide useful insights into the conduct of COIN operations more generally. I have chosen the Pashtun case study for three reasons: (1) there is significant anthropological, ethnographical and socio-religious literature that can be consulted when analyzing behavior models, (2) the ethnic Pashtun population in southern and eastern Afghanistan is a core constituency of the Taliban insurgency,<sup>35</sup> and (3) there is a significant amount of Taliban propaganda directed at this constituency that can be analyzed to clarify social value functions that may not be readily apparent from a Western perspective. Studying the Pashtun case in Afghanistan will

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "No Sign Until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier," *International Security* 32, no. 4 (Spring): 42.

allow some generalizations and patterns to be recognized that can be used in the present and future conflicts to craft operational and communications strategies that have the most chance of success in an insurgent environment.

Behavioral economics research has shown that human subjects respond in different ways to information that they will use to make economic decisions. These responses include bias, framing and context-interpretation of the information to be assessed, and these different responses lead to different decision outcomes. The majority of the experimental information available is from Western subjects. I wondered if these findings would hold true in the context of an indigenous society in a conflict environment.

## **F. THESIS OVERVIEW**

The Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command recently called COIN doctrine an “oxymoron,” complaining that it was heavy on rhetoric but was fundamentally untestable, due to the unique cultural context of every insurgency.<sup>36</sup> His criticism of COIN doctrine echoes the complaints of many COIN practitioners who cite the diversity of contexts that render meaningless any set of “rules” by which to abide. This problem was acknowledged by one of the fathers of modern counterinsurgency theory himself, David Galula:

[W]hereas conventional wars of any size and shape can be counted in the hundreds, no more than a score of revolutionary wars have occurred, most of them since 1945. Is it enough to detect laws? Generalization and extrapolation from such a limited basis must rely to some extent on intuition, which may or may not be correct.<sup>37</sup>

In this thesis, I advocate a more scientific understanding of the most important aspect of counterinsurgency strategies: the individual decision. I propose a behavior economic framework for understanding the decision to join or support an insurgency that takes into account social factors such as group identity and learned culture. The

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<sup>36</sup> John T. Bennett, “Olson: Counterinsurgency Ops Should ‘Involve Countering the Insurgents,’ ” *Defense News*, May 26, 2010, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=4643956&c=LAN&s=TOP>.

<sup>37</sup> Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare; Theory and Practice*. Foreword by Robert R. Bowie, xii.

economic literature surveyed suggests that human beings make decisions through three functions which we will hereafter call “decision personalities”:

1. *Economic Man*. Economic Man makes decisions using calculus that aims to maximize possession of money or security.
2. *Irrational Man*. Irrational Man makes decisions that seek to simplify complex decisions and is often affected by context.
3. *Social Man*. Social Man makes decisions using calculus that aims to maximize his identification with a particular social group.

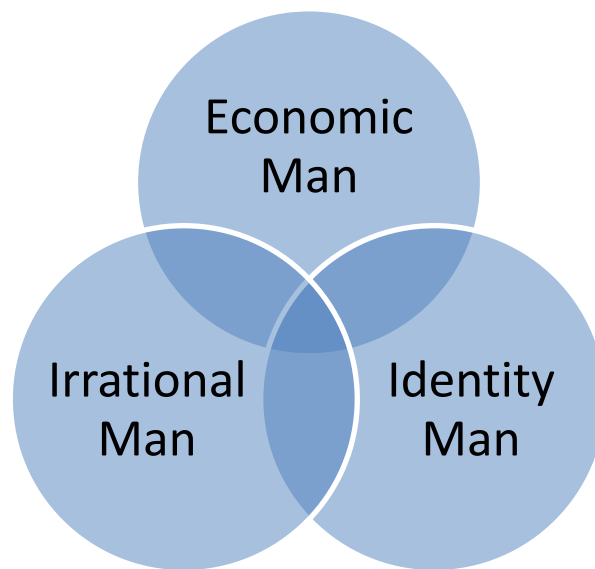


Figure 1: Three Competing “Decision Personalities”

This thesis proposes that all human decisions rely on a combination of these three “decision personalities” and that an understanding of this phenomenon will lead to better counterinsurgency practice.

In the following chapter, we will explore the nature of these three “decision personalities” and discuss the theoretical bases of each. In Chapter III, we will discuss the particulars of Pashtun society to lay the groundwork for a discussion in Chapter IV

that analyzes the Afghan insurgency in the Pashtun population of southern and eastern Afghanistan in terms of behavioral economics theory to test its explanatory power for the Pashtun case.

Current COIN theory focuses primarily on Economic Man, but there are two other major decision components that are part of every decision. A new “decision-centric” model of COIN theory can address all three elements of the individual decision and improve the success rate of COIN operations. Through a better understanding of decision, COIN forces will create better Information Operations (IO) strategies and will achieve more desirable outcomes at the tactical level through individual interactions.

## II. A NEW DECISION THEORY FOR COIN

In the early 1950s, an American intelligence officer, Colonel Edward Lansdale, was assigned to the Philippines as a counterinsurgency advisor to then-defense minister Ramon Magsaysay.<sup>38</sup> Lansdale was able to design many operations that were highly successful against the Philippine Hukbalahap (Huk) insurgency, and was an innovator in the pursuit of psychological advantage over the enemy. For example, Lansdale's psychological operations (PSYOP) teams were able to capitalize on indigenous legends of an *asuang*, a vampire who feeds on the morally corrupt, to solve a local village's problem. A company of Huk insurgents had taken residence in the hills above the village and was hampering the effort to fully pacify the area. The government needed the local security garrison to be reallocated elsewhere, but could not reassign the troops while the Huk threat remained without alienating the leadership of the village. The PSYOP team moved into the village and began discreetly spreading rumors of an *asuang* sighted in the area. After waiting a few days to allow the rumor to trickle up into the hills, they laid an ambush on a moonless night near a known Huk patrol route. Silently snatching the last man on the patrol, his neck was quickly punctured and his blood drained to simulate the effect of a vampire attack. When the remainder of the patrol came back and found the unlucky insurgent, they were sure the *asuang* had gotten him, and they would be next if they remained in the area. Within a day or two, the entire Huk company had moved out.<sup>39</sup>

This anecdote reveals some important truths that are worth acknowledging by the counterinsurgent. Rather than just a clever trick cooked up between Lansdale and his Filipino counterpart over a glass of beer, this operation reflects a highly sophisticated understanding of the science of human behavior, also generally known as behavior economics. Using cultural cues, Lansdale was able to predict how these particular rebels would respond to very highly controlled and selectively applied information. He knew

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, Lansdale is widely believed to be the model for the character of Colonel Edwin Hillandale in the classic critique of American diplomacy in the early Cold War, *The Ugly American*.

<sup>39</sup> Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 72.

based on cultural experience that the information about the *asuang* would be (1) quickly transmitted using indigenous communication schemes, (2) that it would be received credibly based on its source (the “rumor mill”) and (3) that it would produce the desired outcome based on the prevalence of legend and folklore in indigenous decision-making models. Knowing the utility functions of the rebel communists, who were drawn from the subject community, he designed an operation that would produce the desired decision outcome.

In a counterinsurgency environment, the center of gravity is not the enemy’s military capability; rather, it is the population. More specifically, it is the population’s decision whether to support the government or to support the insurgency. This decision can have many degrees of commitment, and can change with time and circumstance. Thus, what is required for a successful counterinsurgency campaign is an understanding of the human decision functions pertinent to the conflict. If we are to understand the nuances of decision, and be able to have a hope of predicting decisions in a conflict environment, we need to understand a bit about economics, the science of decision. In this chapter, we will review the role of decision in military thought and explain the dissociation between decision theory and COIN doctrine. We will then present an alternative framework for understanding decisions in a counterinsurgency context that is based on a behavior economics framework.

## **A. AN ECONOMICS APPROACH**

Economics is one of several disciplines devoted to characterizing human behavior. The fields of psychology, sociology, criminology, anthropology and many other “ologies” attempt to do this same thing. What distinguishes these fields is the approach they use to arrive at their conclusions. For example, sociology attempts to classify and predict human behavior based upon a study of a particular society’s characteristic institutions and organizations. Psychology attempts to predict human behavior in terms of understanding the individual motivations and peculiarities inherent in human thought. Anthropologists examine the history of the development of a particular society in order to predict the general behavior patterns of its members. By contrast, the economic approach, which we will hereafter refer to as behavior economics,

propounds the prediction of human behavior through the study of human preferences and the extent to which human beings will pursue those preferences to maximize their pleasure.<sup>40</sup>

Before we proceed, we should define the basic economics terms that we will utilize in this discussion. The desire to maximize a certain positive asset, or “good,” can be described as a “preference” for that thing. For example, if one has a preference for chocolate over vanilla, that person will most likely choose chocolate ice cream when visiting an ice cream parlor. Once preferences are established, that person can be said to have a “utility function,” or motivation to pursue outcomes that maximize the possession or incidence of that preference. Using the previous example, the utility function produces an outcome of having chocolate ice cream when a person is placed in the environment of an ice cream parlor. More elegantly, the utility function is a “mathematical expression that characterizes what people care about.”<sup>41</sup> For example, if a person’s utility function sought to maximize the possession of money, you could expect that person to choose to join an insurgency if the expected utility of the mercenary pay offered was higher than the perceived negative utility of being killed by the counterinsurgents. This person could be described as having a “goods-based” utility function that was dominated by seeking to maximize possession of “goods” (in this case, money). By contrast, a guerrilla who joined an insurgent movement and forsook pay in favor of social esteem would be described as having an “identity-based” utility function. These examples are necessarily stark, and real people usually fall somewhere in between, but the examples are for illustration. In short, the concepts of preferences and utility functions give economists a useful framework for predicting behavior.

There are three utility functions which human beings use to make decisions which we will discuss in this chapter, each of which corresponds to one of the “decision identities” we introduced in the first chapter: the “Goods-based” utility function (“Economic Man”), the “Context-based” utility function (“Irrational Man”), and the

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<sup>40</sup> Gary Stanley Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 3–4.

<sup>41</sup> George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, *Identity Economics: How Our Identities Shape Our Work, Wages, and Well-Being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 9.

“Identity-based” utility function (“Social Man”). All human decisions can be described as interactions between these three utility functions. Through awareness of the relative value placed upon each utility system in a target population, a counterinsurgent can build strategies that are appropriate to the decision functions of the population she wishes to influence.

### 1. A Theory of “Economic Man”

The writings of Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill created the idea of *homo economicus*—the “economic man”—a being who used perfect rationality and whose behavior could be predicted by analysis of well-being-based preferences. Classic economic theory contends that people make decisions that will maximize physical security—physical security that is typically thought of (in a Western narrative) as the money required to buy the things that sustain life in a capitalist economy. These preferences were simplified into the concept of the utility function, through which a person interprets information from the environment and converts that information into a decision. This process is depicted in Figure 2.

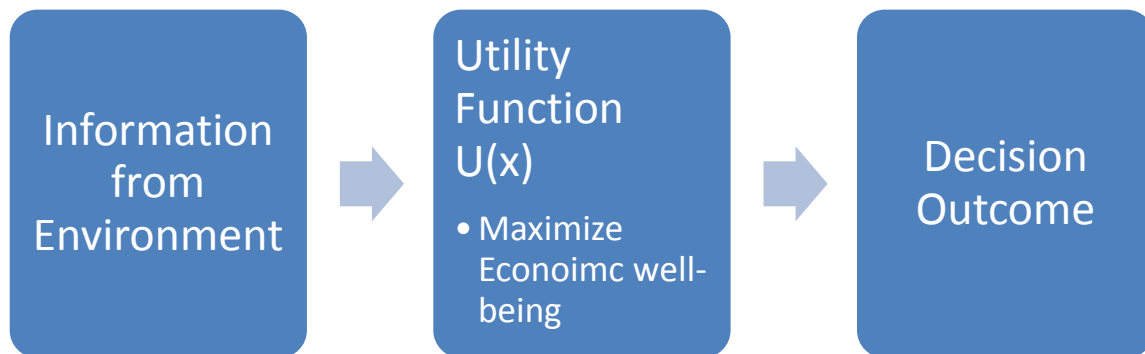


Figure 2: An “Economic Man” Utility Function

In the goods-based utility function, the input of the environment is interpreted by the individual solely in terms of maximizing economic well-being. This means the individual will choose whatever outcome will maximize the amount of food, money or

shelter that will result. This approach is popular because it seems intuitive, particularly from a Western perspective, which idealizes individualism and usually assumes a high degree of self-interest.

As the science of economics advanced, economists have come to understand that simple pecuniary-based rationality functions such as the one above are insufficient to predict human behavior. For example, why do some people prefer vanilla ice cream to chocolate? There is no rational reason why people should choose one flavor over the other, given equal pricing and availability, yet people do. Or, perhaps more usefully, why do rural Pashtun villagers join the Taliban? Hessian Captain Johann von Ewald's description of the American garrison at West Point barracks during the American Revolutionary War illustrates that there are more factors involved than simple economics in people's decisions to take great risk:

The men looked haggard and pallid and were poorly dressed. Indeed, very many stood quite proudly under arms without shoes and stockings. Although, I shuddered at the distress of these men, it filled me with awe for them, for I did not think there was an army in the world which could be maintained as cheaply as the American army.<sup>42</sup>

There is no direct economic payoff from these actions, yet people still participate in these activities. In order to explain seemingly nonrational behavior, economists needed to take into account nontraditional utility functions, such as identity and context. Becker warns that when rational calculus seems to be invalid, there exist “costs, monetary or psychic, of taking advantage of these opportunities that eliminate their profitability—costs that may not be easily “seen” by outside observers.”<sup>43</sup>

Since we have demonstrated the insufficiency of a purely economic basis for decision, let us look at the other two “decision personalities” that may reveal a more complete model for the way people really make decisions.

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<sup>42</sup> Ewald, Selig, and Skaggs, *Treatise on partisan warfare*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*, 7.

## 2. A Theory of “Irrational Man”

A Context-Based utility theory posits that decision outcomes are subject to variations in context. By context, we mean that variations in the way the information is presented can have important effects on the way the information is interpreted. When people are about to make a decision, they will often gather information from various sources, and often the information conflicts. They will triage and prioritize the information based on context and how favorably they feel about the way it is presented.

We hesitate to use the term “Irrational Man,” due to the pejorative nature of the term “irrational.” But what we mean here is that this utility function is the one that people will delegate a significant portion of the decision process to “instinct” based on the way the information is presented.

### a. *Cognitive Dissonance*

One of the difficulties of human coping is dealing with conflicting information. Human beings, uniquely among the species require their wits for their survival. Often, humans must rely on incomplete information when making decisions, and fill in the remainder using assumptions from their specific cultural narrative. When new information conflicts with cherished beliefs, a great deal of psychological discomfort results. This discomfort, which psychologists refer to as “cognitive dissonance” is due to the resultant stress of having to alter many assumptions upon which many other facets of survival depend.

Akerlof and Dickens propose three premises for cognitive dissonance: (1) people have preferences about how they interpret their surroundings (2) people can manipulate their beliefs by selecting sources of information likely to confirm “desired” beliefs and (3) that beliefs persist over time.<sup>44</sup> This means that when information is presented to a person that challenges a preferred “narrative” about the way the world works, they will often reject that information that they perceive as anathema to a belief system, and bend other perceptions to fit a desired worldview.

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<sup>44</sup> Akerlof and Dickens, “The Economic Consequences of Cognitive Dissonance,” 307.

Akerlof and Dickens conclude that “beliefs are adopted if the net pecuniary and psychic benefits are positive. Because of cognitive dissonance, beliefs are persistent once adopted.”<sup>45</sup> This tendency can be useful in explaining many troubling events from the Columbia shuttle disaster to the failure of the U.S. MACV strategy in Vietnam. People like to view themselves as having made correct decisions.

**b. *Desire for Simplicity***

Thaler and Sunstein posit that there are two systems of human thought, the Reflective System, where decisions are made based on actual calculation and the Automatic System, where decisions are made intuitively, rather than analytically.<sup>46</sup> This tendency has evolved in humans over time as a means of simplifying decision processes. In these cases, context matters, and people’s interpretation of information upon which they will base their decisions can be affected by the environment in which one makes the decision.

What this really means is that humans have no idea of the actual *cost* of things. They really only know the cost relative to something that they can readily compare it with. For example, research has shown that people often have difficulty making decisions without the presence of a suitable comparison. This is why if you want to sell a bread machine, or anything else, you need to have a similar but more expensive version next to it to compare it against.<sup>47</sup> This effect is known in behavior science as *anchoring*. Anchoring simplifies complex comparisons by providing a similar choice with which to compare an item you would like to purchase or a choice that you would like to make. Anchoring allows our Automatic System to make a complex decision using a simple comparison. While the bread machine example may seem trivial, what is important here is that people are willing to pay more money for something simply because there was something more expensive with which to compare it.

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<sup>45</sup> Akerlof and Dickens, “The Economic Consequences of Cognitive Dissonance,” 316.

<sup>46</sup> Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, 1st ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>47</sup> Dan Ariely, *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (New York: Harper, 2009), 14–15. The Williams-Sonoma store introduced a \$275 bread-making machine into their inventory. Sales were slow until they introduced a larger, more expensive version which was placed next to the smaller, cheaper bread maker. Sales of the smaller machine took off shortly thereafter.

**c.      *Salience Theory***

The perceived “salience” of a risk will affect how people calculate its likelihood, and can have an effect on decision outcomes. Thaler and Sunstein note that this is why many people are more afraid of a plane crash than they are of a car crash, even though significantly more people die in car crashes than plane crashes every year; car crashes don’t typically make the news. Thus, “[people] assess the likelihood of risks by asking how readily examples come to mind. If people can easily think of relevant examples, they are far more likely to be frightened and concerned than if they cannot,”<sup>48</sup> regardless of the actual likelihood of the occurrence.

Salience can create self-fulfilling prophecies in a population. In the context of a society in violent conflict, violence creates perception of risk, which causes people to perceive more uncertainty in the viability of investment in society. Economically, this leads to a lower savings rate and socially causes people to coalesce into homogeneous groupings, often along ethnic lines (Iraq at the height of its civil war in 2005-2007 is a good example of this). The lower savings leads to lower capital levels in society and lower investment. The lower social capital creates a perception of “other” between populations and can cause violent reprisals. The combination of these factors leads to greater corruption, less security, and consequently, more violence. The cycle continues (See Figure 3).

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<sup>48</sup> Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 25.

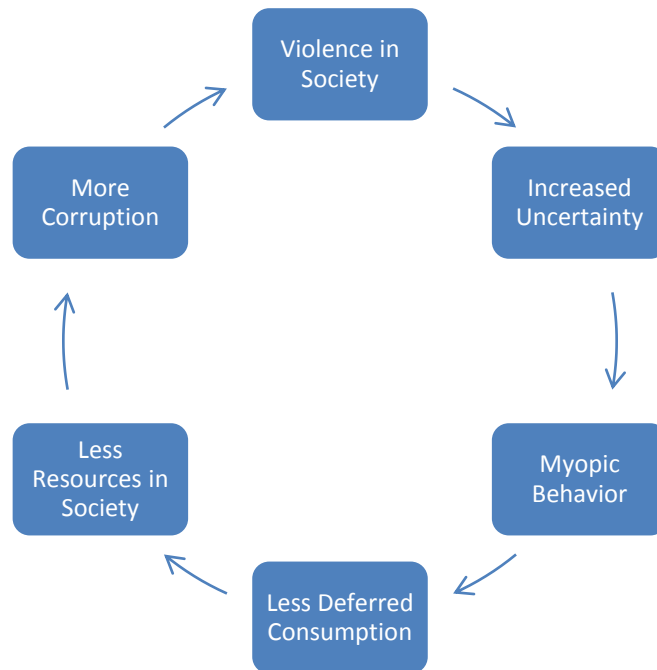


Figure 3: Basic Violence Cycle

Differences in risk salience can cause problems trying to predict priorities of others in a negotiation: the Army captain in the introduction had a much different view of risk, sleeping as he did in a guarded FOB, compared to the Afghan villagers he was interacting with, who typically awake to find threatening night letters nailed to the door of the mosque. For most decisions, people rely on what Thaler and Sunstein refer to as the “lizard brain.”<sup>49</sup> This will be particularly true when people are making decisions under stress and based on incomplete information. In these situations, humans look for answers in their identities and in the context in which information is presented to them. Using context simplifies the decision process by using correlates such as anchors and availability to assess the risk of the decision. Using identity factors also helps to

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<sup>49</sup> Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 19.

lower risk in the decision-makers minds, since making a decision consistent with group norms will at least invoke the support of the group. We will discuss this tendency more in the next section.

In summary, a context-based utility function of “Irrational Man” can be thought of as shown in Figure 4.

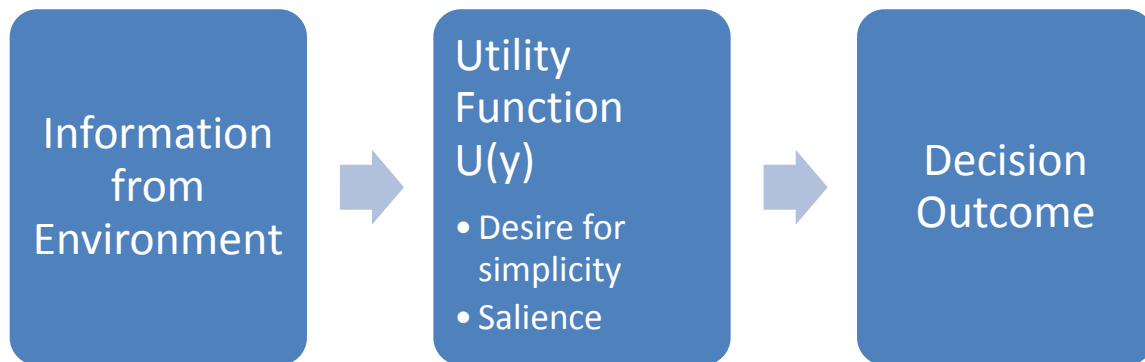


Figure 4: An “Irrational Man” Utility Function

### 3. A Theory of “Social Man”

Since Gary Becker’s work on non-monetary based tastes and preferences, the fields of social science and psychology have increasingly been applied to economic theory.<sup>50</sup> This has resulted in a new field of economic theory, typified by Akerlof and Kranton, which treats social identity as a major determinant in economic behavior. More precisely, human beings will act in ways that are not consistent with a goods-based approach to maximizing control of assets in favor of an identity-based approach that will seek to maximize inclusion in a social group.

An economic experimental method called the Ultimatum Game shows that people will not act in a purely goods-based manner in certain situations. In 1982, three German economists conducted a series of experiments to measure whether people would use behavior norms when dealing with bargaining. The experimental subjects were two volunteers; one designated an Allocator and the other a Recipient. The Allocators were

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<sup>50</sup> See Gary Stanley Becker, *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior*.

asked to divide a sum of money (perhaps 20 Deutsche Mark coins) in any way they saw fit between themselves and the Recipient. If the Recipient accepted the amount, the deal was struck and both parties kept the agreed amounts. If the Recipient refused, both parties received nothing.

Classical economic theories predicted that the recipients would accept any positive value, since it was essentially free money, but this experiment and many others replicating it have consistently shown that Allocators largely offer an even split on the amount, indicating that societal norms of fairness are affecting the bargain.<sup>51</sup> There are two explanations why the Allocators make such fair offers. Either they receive personal satisfaction (utility) by maintaining a societal “fairness norm” in their dealings that is greater than the value of the 9 extra Deutsche Marks that classical economics says they should keep, or there is a fear that if they depart from the fairness norm in order to maximize profit, the other party will be willing to pay the cost of rejection in favor of the opportunity to punish them for their breach of the social contract. Either way, there is without a doubt a “social” variable that causes people to act in ways that are not consistent with classical economic theories.

#### **a. Group Affinity and Identification**

Groups can be said to exist when they meet four criteria: (1) they biologically replicate, (2) share fundamental values, (3) have a unique means of communication and interaction and (4) are self-defined and recognized by others.<sup>52</sup> Shaw adds that a groups involve interactions where “each person influences and is influenced by each other person.”<sup>53</sup> Groups create and sustain important concepts that will be discussed later, such as legitimacy and authority.

Human beings, as social animals, have a need to be included in a group. Groups provide safety from predators and can help ensure the survival of progeny if something should happen to a parent in the group. Thus, people are willing to sacrifice

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<sup>51</sup> Richard H. Thaler, “The Ultimatum Game,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 2, no. 4 (1988): 195–96.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>53</sup> Marvin E. Shaw, *Group Dynamics*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill College, 1981), 8.

certain individual preferences in favor of group preferences in order to signal their inclusion in the group. This inclusion will provide long-term security and stability.

Groups are the building blocks of any society ranging from a small village to large, complex societies. Identity springs from the inclusion or exclusion from some group. Groups create norms, or standards of behavior for group inclusion, as well as creating structures for the legitimate exercise of authority. Groups self-propagate through the learned behavior, or culture, of practicing members. Finally, groups compete with other groups for dominance. All these factors should be understood in order to understand group identity. There are two approaches to understanding group behavior which we will discuss: Group psychology and group sociology.

In a seminal study of group formation and identity, Muzafer Sherif and a group of researchers took two groups of pre-adolescent boys to Robbers Cave State Park in Oklahoma in the early 1950s. The groups were not made aware of each other until the second phase of the experiment, after which the groups formed a durable group “culture,” complete with social norms, flags and emblems and eventually a strong sense of resentment and hostility towards the other group.<sup>54</sup> The existence of social groupings among humans creates a strong incentive to identify with a group, thus obtaining the long-term benefits of social inclusion. Group identity consists of tastes and preferences that are derived from the social norms of the subject grouping and change based on the “social setting and who is interacting with whom.” A desire to identify with a specific social group will lead to behaviors that are believed to be consistent with that group.<sup>55</sup>

### **b. Conformity**

Identity with a group requires the individual to adopt behaviors that are consistent with the values of the group. Norms are created by groups and form the “rulebook” for expected behavior by group members. By following norms, people can be

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<sup>54</sup> Muzafer Sherif, *The Robbers Cave experiment: Intergroup conflict and cooperation* (Norman, OK: University Book Exchange, 1961).

<sup>55</sup> Akerlof and Kranton, *Identity Economics*, 4. Akerlof and Kranton refer to this as the “merry-go-round” effect to explain why children from different age groups, although experiencing the same stimulus from an enjoyable merry-go-round ride, will display markedly different behaviors. The young children display euphoria while the older teenagers exhibit reserved embarrassment.

confident in their status of group inclusion, which acts as a means of lowering psychological stress in uncertain environments. According to Sherif, norms also provide a systematic predictor for the way groups interact with other members of the group as well as outside members.<sup>56</sup>

Norms provide a means of identification for group members as well as provide rules and regulations that ensure the integrity and viability of the group in the long term. Members are expected to subordinate their individual norms to group norms in order to maintain their group membership. Failure to do so will often lead to censure or even ostracization by the larger group. Norms are a common feature of all social groups. As soon as a group establishes itself, a defining system of ideals and characteristics to be upheld emerges and is highly resistant to change.<sup>57</sup>

The power of the motivation to conform to perceived group standards is supported by a great deal of research. In the 1950s, Solomon Asch performed a series of conformity experiments in which naïve subjects were asked to state which of a series of lines was the longest. The subject was seated at a table with several confederates of the experimenter who had secretly been instructed to give the same, incorrect answer to the questions. Asch's results indicated that a significant fraction of respondents gave answers that their eyes told them were incorrect in order to conform with the group consensus.<sup>58</sup>

Research by Hoff and Pandey among Indians showed that lower caste individuals performed 23 percent worse when their caste status was revealed to the subject group prior to beginning a series of maze puzzles, despite a significant monetary incentive for successful completion of the mazes.<sup>59</sup> These findings were replicated by other researchers studying the effects of stereotype on behavior. In a series of behavior experiments, a group of Asian-American women were tasked with performing a series of

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<sup>56</sup> Muzafer Sherif, *Groups in harmony and tension,; An integration of studies on intergroup relations* (London: Octagon Books, 1973), 233.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Shaw, *Group Dynamics*, 173.

<sup>59</sup> George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, *Identity Economics*, 30–31. In India, surnames indicate caste, and the experimenters noted a distinct performance difference when the sessions were begun with a “roll call” read aloud to the subject group.

simple mathematics problems. The results showed that average individual performance changed depending on whether the experimenters “primed” the subjects with preliminary questions about their race or sex. Those primed with questions relating to their Asian heritage performed markedly better on the math test than those primed with questions relating to their female status. Presumably, these results are related to pervasive stereotypes about the mathematical abilities of women and Asians.

Interestingly, the “gender-primed” group was subconsciously willing to sacrifice the satisfaction of performing well on a math test in order to reinforce membership in the “women” group. More remarkably, this effect was also evident on people who were not even members of the “stereotype” group. In related experiments, subjects’ behaviors were modified to match stereotypes by simple suggestions before completing the exams, such as questions about old age or impatience.<sup>60</sup> Other research has shown that social imperatives are not as strong with interactions across cultures. Variants of the Ultimatum Game have shown that people will tend to be less “generous” when they know the recipient in the ultimatum game is from a different culture or ethnicity.<sup>61</sup>

An interesting variant of the Ultimatum Game showed that people will default to normative, socially acceptable behavior until they can discern an indisputable advantage in operating in a goods-based, maximizing way. When players were subject to a multi-round ultimatum game, in which the Allocators and Recipients switched roles between rounds, players were more likely to exhibit maximizing behavior in later rounds as they gained experience.<sup>62</sup> This suggests that risk-averse people will default to the relative safety of behavior deemed “acceptable” by the social norms of society until they can perceive a “foolproof” way to maximize profit. People in the first rounds were still reluctant to depart from social norms even when encouraged by the experimenters to

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<sup>60</sup> Akerlof and Kranton, *Identity Economics*, 30–31; Ariely, *Predictably Irrational*, 169–170. In several experiments, young graduate students were observed walking noticeably slower or behaving measurably more impatient after being primed with questions about old age and impatience, respectively.

<sup>61</sup> George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, *Identity Economics*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Thaler, “The Ultimatum Game,” 199.

behave in profit-maximizing ways. This is important because it suggests that people can change their “decision personality” based on circumstance.

The sum of the norms of the group can be described as “culture.” Culture in turn creates a unique way of interpreting information and forms “the means by which reality is created and grasped.”<sup>63</sup> Cultures are “durable, persistent spontaneous orders, once they are established.” And are means by which in-group members cooperate and communicate. Through adoption of cultural standards, an individual becomes a bona-fide member of the group, eligible for access to in-group “club goods.”<sup>64</sup>

Munger points to the example of the evolution of cultural artifacts such as “kosher” and “halal” as a means of protecting prescientific societies from potentially dangerous foods.<sup>65</sup> In this way, norms and culture can be considered as prehistoric safety mechanisms through which groups ensured their survival by preventing activities that could be dangerous to the group. The learned culture surrounding a person creates powerful, nonmonetary based incentives that can have profound effects on behavior, and can even motivate people to give their lives for a cause which classic rationality would not predict. In effect, culture and identity create their own preferences, and have evolved over time as a means of maintaining security in the long term.

### *c. Authority and Legitimacy*

Group identification and conformity to group norms provide the basis for conferring legitimacy on authority in social groups. As groups form, they naturally create the institutions of authority by which group norms and values are maintained. Milgram’s work on authority indicates people will obey authority figures, even when the directions are contrary to the people’s own moral judgment. Milgram’s work shows that people will submit to authority even if the commands are contrary to their personally held beliefs. Subjects were assigned as “teacher” to a confederate and instructed to administer electric shocks if the “subject” answered incorrectly. Milgram notes that “obedience to

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<sup>63</sup> Lawrence Rosen, “Reply [From Lawrence Rosen],” *Contemporary Sociology* 36, no. 2 (March 1, 2007): 205.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Munger, “Preference Modification vs. Incentive Manipulation as Tools of Terrorist Recruitment: The Role of Culture,” *Public Choice* 128, no. 1/2 (July 1, 2006): 144.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 138–39.

authority occurs within a hierarchical structure in which the actor feels that the person above has the right to prescribe behavior.”<sup>66</sup> This feeling of legitimacy can be conferred in several ways, as Max Weber has identified: through a rational assessment, through tradition or habit, or by charismatic persuasion.<sup>67</sup> We will discuss the concept of authority in the Pashtun case at length in the following chapter.

#### **d. Narrative**

Narrative is the means by which norms are transmitted and interpreted in a society. It also serves as a means for members of a subject society to interpret and make sense of their environment. Ruston defines “narrative” as:

A system of stories that hang together and provide a coherent view of the world. People use narratives to understand how their world works. Narratives contain patterns that fit the data of everyday life (events, people, actions, sequences of actions, messages, and so on), explaining how events unfold over time and how one thing causes another.<sup>68</sup>

Narrative forms an important means of group preservation by the transmission of group norms and ideals between group members. Narrative also forms a means of discouraging cultural innovation by means of providing a cognitive “anchor” for the thought processes of in-group members. We will discuss unique means of narrative transmission in Pashtun culture in the next chapter.

In summary, the identity-based utility of “Social Man” can be depicted as shown in Figure 5:

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<sup>66</sup> Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*, 113.

<sup>67</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 215.

<sup>68</sup> Scott Ruston, “Understand What Narrative Is and Does,” *COMOPS Journal*, September 3, 2009, <http://comops.org/journal/2009/09/03/understand-what-narrative-is-and-does/>.



Figure 5: A “Social Man” Utility Function

## B. CONCLUSIONS

This new interpretation of the classic utility function asserts that being able to identify with certain groups has its own payoffs that are not discernable from a strictly well-being based view of preferences.<sup>69</sup> Human beings, being social creatures, have created these “identity functions” to create security in uncertain environments and create means by which a group can maintain order and survivability. Members who wish to maximize inclusion in a specific group may defer outcomes that maximize short-term well-being for the opportunity to increase long-term inclusion in a group.

All people make decisions according to an interaction between the three decision utility theories discussed in this chapter. I will call this the “Whole Person” Utility function, and it is key to understanding human behavior. This is the approach taken by Durlauf in his attempt to construct a behavior model based on social factors.<sup>70</sup> In the next chapter, we will discuss the “Social Man” decision personality of the Pashtun at length using the model we have presented here. By understanding the relative “weight” that the Pashtuns place on individual “decision personalities,” we can gain a better grasp of decisions in conflict environments like Afghanistan.

<sup>69</sup> George A. Akerlof and Rachel E. Kranton, “Economics and Identity,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, no. 3 (2000): 717.

<sup>70</sup> Steven N Durlauf, “A Framework For The Study of Individual Behavior and Social Interactions,” *Sociological Methodology* 31, no. 1 (2001): 61. Durlauf’s model is somewhat different than the one I present here in that its three deterministic utility functions are designated: (1) private utility (analogous to self-interested goods-based utility), (2) social utility and (3) random (or idiosyncratic) utility.

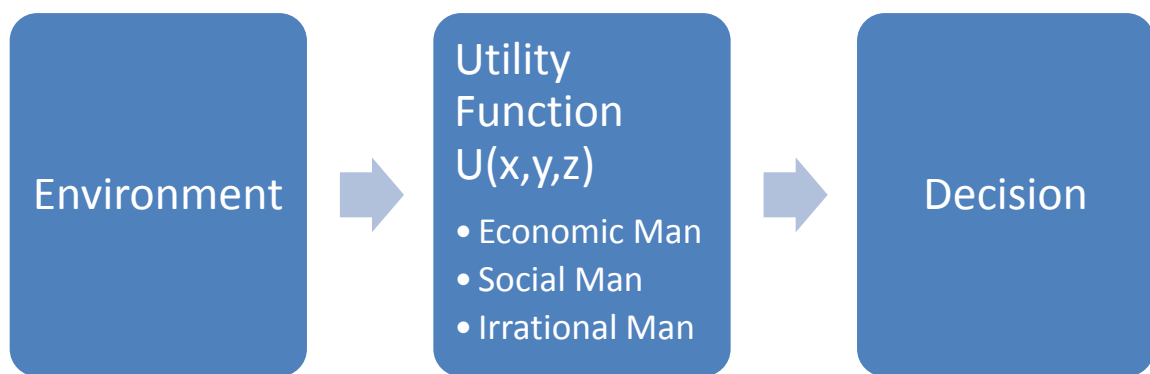


Figure 6: A “Whole Person” Utility Function

### III. A “SOCIAL MAN” MODEL OF PASHTUN DECISION MAKING

In order to understand the decision models in tribal Pashtun society, it is necessary to understand the institutions that make up the Pashtun worldview. The Pashtuns are part of a very old tribal structure that has inhabited the lands south of the Hindu Kush, between the central Afghan highlands and the Indus River valley for about 1,000 years. As Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group, they have dominated Afghan politics since 1747, when Ahmed Shah Durrani, the forbear of the politically dominant Durrani (sometimes referred to as “Abdali”) Pashtuns, carved the area that is now Afghanistan from between the declining Iranian Safavid and Indian Moghul Empires.<sup>71</sup>

It is rather difficult to try and speak of the Pashtun as a homogeneous entity. Though they claim descent from a common ancestor, the various tribes of the Pashtun have very diverse traditions, as is evident when comparing the mostly settled agrarian Durrani and their mountain-dwelling Karlanri cousins, for instance. Also, there are distinct differences between rural and urban Pashtuns. The former are more egalitarian and kinship ties are often more important than capital assets, while the latter tend to be more hierarchical and invested in monetary economics.<sup>72</sup> These differences are functions of the different environments and coping strategies of the two constituencies, and could be the topic of an entirely separate work. For the purposes of this chapter, however, we will focus on the common social-centric aspects of Pashtun society, which will tend to be characteristic of rural Pashtuns. What is important to understand is that all Pashtuns make conscious decisions using a combination of their “Social Man” and “Economic Man” utility functions, and Western efforts to influence Pashtuns have not given Pashtun “Social Man” sufficient due.<sup>73</sup>

In this chapter, we will introduce the social aspects of Pashtun society that are relevant to the construction of the “whole-person” decision model that we presented in

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<sup>71</sup> Johnson and Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire,” 50; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 97–99.

<sup>72</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 61–63.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson and Waheed, “Analyzing Taliban taranas (chants),” 27.

Chapters I and II. Social utility is very important in rural Pashtun society because, in the absence of a monetized economy, personal relationships become of primary importance to the maintenance of security and well-being. We will discuss the models of group identification and group conformity, authority and legitimacy and the maintenance methods in which social institutions are preserved and propagated to subsequent generations. Finally, we will show how these artifacts fit into a behavior economics-based model of behavior, particularly in the context of the significant social upheaval that has taken place in Afghanistan over a generation.

## **A. GROUP IDENTIFICATION**

As noted in the previous chapter, human beings have a tendency to coalesce into social groupings in order to meet various needs, ranging from the basic survival needs to psychological comfort needs. The Pashtun are no different in this regard. What is important to understand is the unique ways that the physical and cultural environments of Afghan society interact to create various group identification structures. Rural Pashtun society, in the context of a patron-client based, subsistence economy produces different social interventions in the “Social Man” model of Pashtun decision-making that may not be readily recognized from a Western, monetized and capitalist economy perspective.

The Pashtun seem hard to predict because their personalities are manifestations of the conflict between the normative institutions in their culture. Quoting an old British Army Field Manual, Anderson describes the Pashtun in this way:

The Afghan character is a strange blend of virtue and vice'; a litany of the usual specifications ('brave,' 'treacherous,' 'hospitable,' 'severe,' 'generous,' 'greedy') summarily concludes that 'The race in short is a mass of contradictions which are accentuated by the strong individuality of the people.'<sup>74</sup>

Pashtuns are part of a patronage-based society in which group identity is very important. Group membership guarantees physical security and provides a means of certainty about the future. The egalitarian nature of Pashtun society allows for shifting identity patterns

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<sup>74</sup> Jon W. Anderson, “Sentimental Ambivalence and the Exegesis of ‘Self’ in Afghanistan,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (October 1985): 203–04. Note that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “Afghan,” particularly from the British perspective, was synonymous with “Pashtun.”

that can complicate understanding of the Pashtun social utility function. In order to understand the dynamics of Pashtun identity, it is necessary to begin with an identification of the competing identity choices from which Pashtuns may select. Generally, Pashtuns have two modes of self-identity that sometimes compete and often cooperate. Patrilineal descent creates a strong impetus for tribal/familial identity schemes while the pervasive influence of Islam throughout society creates a complementary Islamic identity.

The *qawm* is the basic unit of social identity in Afghanistan. It is a flexible term that depends on context, and with whatever particular group which the Pashtun wishes to associate at the time.<sup>75</sup> Group identities, rather than individual identities, tend to be group-reinforced, and highly impervious to influences from outside the group.<sup>76</sup> The *qawm* can be thought to consist of concentric rings of solidarity ties that are based on kinship and patron-client relationships.<sup>77</sup> The rings represent family, extended family, clan, tribe, confederacy, and major cultural-linguistic group. The hierarchy of loyalties corresponds to these circles and becomes more intense as the circle gets smaller (see Figure 7).

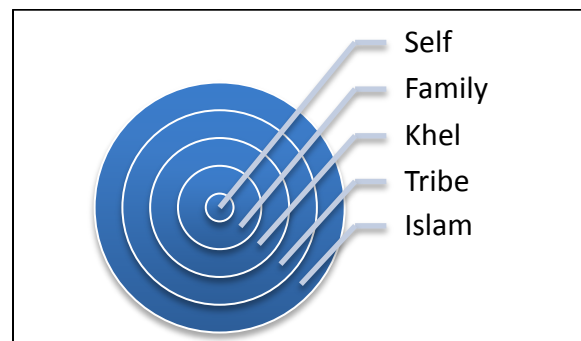


Figure 7: Qawm Rings

Pashtuns see their identities and commitments within the context of these concentric rings, seldom accepting help or dictation from an outside agency, such as the

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<sup>75</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 18; Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 242.

<sup>76</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 248–49.

<sup>77</sup> Olivier Roy, “Afghanistan: Back to Tribalism or on to Lebanon?,” *Third World Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (October 1989): 71.

government, when smaller “rings” can meet their needs. This reflects the structure of patrilineal tribal systems: loyalties are kept close to the individual and immediate familial surroundings, accepting limited influence from “higher order” loyalty schemes such as nationalism and ideology.

Pashtuns identify themselves patrilineally by their descent through one of the four clans (Pashto –*khel*), namely: the Durrani of southern and western Afghanistan, the Ghilzai of the east, the Gurghusht in the southeast and the Karlanri of the Afghan-Pakistan frontier.<sup>78</sup> The work of several anthropologists and ethnographers suggests that there is a heavy emphasis on group identity in tribal Pashtun society. Barfield notes that “rural Afghanistan...provides an excellent example of a place where tribal and ethnic groups take primacy over the individual.” At the same time, the patrilineal nature of Pashtun identity structures creates identity groups of small size that are fiercely egalitarian.<sup>79</sup>

In sometime conflict and partnership with clan-based identity is Islamic identity. Islam makes up an important part of the Pashtun self-identity and subsequent worldview. As Barfield notes: “Afghanistan is an example of an older form of Islamic society in which religion is not an ideology but remains an all-encompassing way of life.”<sup>80</sup> Islam has traditionally been so ingrained in Afghan society that it was seen as not needing a political apparatus to advance its interests. This pervasiveness of Islam in life leads to a very personal manifestation of religion that expresses itself in nearly every aspect of life, coloring the language and traditions with analogies and sayings of the Prophet. Interestingly, the personal nature of religion also results in a rather low station of the clergy in village life. The village mullah is usually a hereditary position that stays well outside the levers of power in the village.<sup>81</sup>

Westerners tend to view Islamic practice, particularly in the countryside, as a “utilitarian” set of rules empty of intellectual foundation. It is important to understand

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<sup>78</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 25.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 17–25; Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*; Dupree, *Afghanistan*; Johnson and Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire.”

<sup>80</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 40.

<sup>81</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 32.

Islam's social meaning in the context of tribal Pashtuns. As Roy notes, Islam provides a transcendental connection to the universal, as well as a deep sense of "aspiration to live...life in accordance with an ethical model... In Islam, truth is something that you arrive at less by interpretation than by imitation."<sup>82</sup> In short, Islam provides the means for the rural Pashtun peasant to think about and interpret the greater world around him through application of a moral standard and a common language with which to communicate those standards within the group.

## **B. GROUP CONFORMITY**

The normative philosophy for Pashtun group identity is the Pashtun code, the *Pashtunwali*.<sup>83</sup> *Pashtunwali* is the most important peer-reinforced manifestation of Pashtun group conformity and social identity. This fusion of ideology and code of common law provides a set of social boundaries that maintain group integrity and provide a means of group administration, focusing on reputation and personal honor (*nang*) as the prime traits to be protected. Among the core tenets of the code are self-respect, independence, justice, hospitality, forgiveness, and tolerance. It also creates a system of core values at the personal level, such as: freedom, honor, revenge, and chivalry. Since the code theoretically applied to all Pashtuns, it provided a means of maintaining law and order by creating a structure by which kinship networks could legitimately be mobilized to right a perceived wrong, usually through revenge (*badal*). In short, *pashtunwali* is the "sum total of collective expectations" in the Pashtun environment.<sup>84</sup>

*Pashtunwali* as a group norm is consistent with the framework of normative behavior as identified by Sherif, which we discussed in the previous chapter. The code is primarily self-reinforcing by all group members and applies equally to authority figures and members of the group alike. In fact, it is the prime means by which authority is

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<sup>82</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 33.

<sup>83</sup> The "Way of the Pashtun." Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 25.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson and Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire," 59–61; Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 35.

legitimized in Pashtun society. The ability to defend the basic core values of Pashtunwali is indicative of the Pashtun social standing. For example, as Edwards notes, the concept of *namus* includes:

All those things [a Pashtun] has that other men might desire and whose inviolability to those desires constitutes the primary criterion of his worth in the tribe. A man who is incapable of defending his *namus* is referred to as *daus* (cuckold).<sup>85</sup>

In light of the importance of *namus*, it becomes evident why the disarming of a Pashtun has such important social implications, as a man who is unable to defend his *namus* enjoys very little social security in the tribal environment. This lack of security can cause significant psychological discomfort to a tribe member. The Taliban are keenly aware of this, and cultural appeals to the ability to protect *namus* are evident in some of their propaganda, as this excerpt from a Taliban *shabnamah* (night letter) shows:

Non-Muslims want to kill and pit Afghan against Afghan and in the name of Talib they are attacking everybody and they are killing Afghans and destroying your houses and they are destroying Islamic madrasahs (Islamic schools) in Afghanistan. They burn their Afghan arms and ammunitions. They want to make Afghanistan as helpless as Palestine.<sup>86</sup>

By appealing to the *Pashtunwali* concept of *namus*, the Taliban are able to access an effective artifact of group conformity that serves to identify their cause within the existing Pashtun values system.

By contrast, efforts to coopt Pashtun peasants into an alternative “decision personality” by appealing to “Economic Man” decision models has often backfired, as is evident in the example of the 1978 rural revolt that would directly precipitate the Soviet invasion. The socialist, urban-centric Khalqi government that had taken power in the wake of the coup against Daud considered the existing system of patronage that existed in the countryside as “feudalism” and sought to replace the existing social order with a new one that would focus on land redistribution. Edwards writes:

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<sup>85</sup> Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, 58.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Thomas H. Johnson, “The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of *Shabnamah* (Night Letters),” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 322.

One of the principal tactics of the revolution from the first was to brand landowners, of even modest means, as “feudals” in order to separate them from the larger number of landless peasants, tenant farmers, and agricultural workers. This was to be the primary means by which the party would jump-start the revolution, the assumption being that there was a widespread underlying antagonism against the wealthy that few were willing to express openly.<sup>87</sup>

This would be accomplished through the expansion of state bureaucracy and sold through political theater rallies in which

Formerly landless peasants would be brought forward to receive deeds to recently confiscated land...[M]any of the peasants who were placed in this position found it humiliating to be recognized publicly for their economic misfortunes. The categories intoned time and again by the Khalqis in reference to the rural poor—terms such as “exploited masses,” “struggling peasantry,” “long suffering toilers”—carried an ignominious connotation for most Afghans, for whom the status of victim was insulting.<sup>88</sup>

The Khalqis made a miscalculation here by publicly affirming that a group of peasants in each village was unable to defend their own *namus*, and needed the government to protect their *namus* for them. The peasants had a perfect opportunity to act in a self-interested, “Economic Man” way, but a social intervention (*Pashtunwali*) prevented them from doing so.

*Pashtunwali* provides the framework for group conformity necessary for the day-to-day functionality and long-term survival of Pashtun identity groups. The patrilineal nature of Pashtun ethnic identity groups creates identity groups that are of small size. This creates small cadres of competing “cousin groups” with limited supra-tribal capability, making Pashtun groups susceptible to organized, large-scale aggression from outside. To defend against large-scale threats, a mechanism for large-scale social mobilization is needed. This requires a supra-tribal group conformity system, which is provided by Islam. The political power of Islam in Afghanistan has historically been directed at external infidels, as when Ahmed Shah Durrani, the first ruler of united

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<sup>87</sup> David B. Edwards, “Learning from the Swat Pathans: Political Leadership in Afghanistan, 1978–97,” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 4 (1998): 717.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Afghanistan, attacked the Hindu Marathes at Panipat in 1761, after considerable pressure from radical 'ulamma preaching an offensive jihadism against the Indians.<sup>89</sup>

Given the fierce egalitarian nature of the Pashtun tribes, Islam has typically been the only force that has been able to unite them for any common purpose. The egalitarian nature of Pashtun society makes it difficult to form durable coalitions capable of accomplishing long-term goals. Pashtunwali-based leadership, dependent on patrilineal identity structures, could not produce an acceptable leader that could hold together a Pashtun coalition. Therefore, "a leader who stood **outside**<sup>90</sup> the tribal system, generally in the guise of a religious prophet, had the best prospect of gaining the cooperation of enough quarreling tribes to create a supra-tribal organization that could overcome its inherent divisions."<sup>91</sup> This is usually accomplished by appealing to Islamic unity via *jihad*. These *jihads*, capable of uniting fractious Pashtun tribes under a banner of "protecting the faith," were often of short duration, and were common enough to earn the derisive shorthand name "mad mullah movements" when the British dealt with them throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>92</sup> The Mullah of Hadda, who led the revolt against the British in the Swat Valley in 1897 which we mentioned in the Chapter I, emerged seemingly from nowhere and was able to establish a mythical sort of charismatic leadership through fantastic claims of turning bullets into water and the ability to feed multitudes from a small bag of rice.<sup>93</sup>

This *jihad* phenomenon has evolved among the Pashtuns to allow the formation of alliances to counter a common threat and involves the voluntary, temporary shift in power from the traditional authority of the *khan* to a charismatic mullah "[W]hile the movement is in the ascendant, the *khan* takes a back seat."<sup>94</sup> Operations then commence under the leadership of the charismatic mullah. When victory seems certain, internecine strife takes over and the *khan* reemerge to establish order. Fighting stops and the status

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<sup>89</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 55.

<sup>90</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>91</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 79.

<sup>92</sup> Johnson and Mason, "No Sign until the Burst of Fire," 53; Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan," *Orbis*, (Winter, 2007): 79.

<sup>93</sup> Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, 176–80.

<sup>94</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 61.

quo resumes. The *khan* then seeks to restore his traditional leadership role and direct dividing up the spoils of victory. Thus, the *jihad* cycle can be seen as consisting of “forcing mechanisms:” a perceived injustice and the emergence of a charismatic mullah to lead a *jihad*; and “braking mechanisms:” *khan* and other secular traditional leadership seeki to restore their influence and the status quo.

While *khan* and mullah are usually portrayed in competition, there are components of the Islamic and Pashtunwali conformity structures that complement each other. For example, Anderson describes the competing values of ‘*aql* and *nafsh*. Derived from Qur’anic interpretations, these concepts are common across the Muslim world and are a recognized means of conveying social expectations in Pashtuns:

Pakhtun draw a series of open and flexible oppositions between politeness and roughness, maturity and immaturity, sociability and egocentricity as characteristics which are ultimately brought to rest on capacities of ‘*aql* and *nafsh*—roughly, sensibility and passion.<sup>95</sup>

‘*Aql* represents the wisdom and sense of purpose that comes with age, while *nafsh* represents the vitality and physical capability of youth. These two qualities are regarded as gifts of God to humans and give them the capacity for deliberate action which sets them apart from animals. Every instance of behavior is conceived to be a combination of ‘*aql* and *nafsh* capacities.’<sup>96</sup>

Secular *Pashtunwali* and Islam form two competing and cooperative structures that fill needs in the social groupings of the Pashtun. *Pashtunwali* provides a normative structure that governs everyday life and relationships among the tribe, while Islam provides a framework for communication and a sense of place within the larger context of society, as well as a means of large-scale social mobilization through the *jihad* cycle. To prevent disintegration, egalitarian social groupings require a cohesive and universally enforced norm structure. Brunton describes egalitarian societies as “culturally unstable” and prone to cultural innovation that makes it difficult to sustain group norms.<sup>97</sup> The Pashtun have developed a unique social structure that provides the necessary universal

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<sup>95</sup> Jon W. Anderson, “Sentimental Ambivalence and the Exegesis of ‘Self’ in Afghanistan,” 205.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 205–207.

<sup>97</sup> Ron Brunton, “The Cultural Instability of Egalitarian Societies,” *Man* 24, no. 4, New Series (December 1, 1989): 679.

norm structure at two levels: a more localized *Pashtunwali* that governs the day-to-day and a more universal Islam that governs the worldview and leavens relationships. Identity and priority are able to shift between the two forms to allow flexibility to meet challenges.

### C. AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY

In egalitarian Pashtun society, authority is a fluid concept, often shifting with circumstance. A leader is only a leader in as far as his actions are consonant with the tribal norm structures discussed in the previous section. Rather than the leadership influencing the institutions, these institutions exercise final authority over the individual and the leader, and as opposed to personal leadership, are “the real instruments of social control.”<sup>98</sup> The primacy of the *system* over the *individual* fits squarely within the system of Pashtun egalitarianism, as the ability of individuals to meet a universal set of standards, be they *pashtunwali* or Islamic, becomes the prerequisite for authority.

#### 1. Egalité and Hierarchy

Patrilineal identity structures have made it very difficult for most Pashtuns to develop durable political institutions, as it creates social groupings of successively smaller size by generation. Most concerted action among more than one tribe is for a very specific purpose and is of very limited duration. After the threat is passed, tribal infighting resumes and the status quo returns. So strong was this tendency for rivalry among cousins, it would be given its own Pashto word: *tarburwali*.<sup>99</sup> This conflict between egalitarianism and the hierarchies needed for supra-tribal politics would have important implications for the destinies of the different Pashtun tribes. Pashtun egalitarianism does not grant authority by some idea of divine right; rather, it must be earned by consensus from below, making Pashtun leaders’ power bases necessarily unstable and subject to shifting allegiances.

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<sup>98</sup> Christine F. Ridout, “Authority Patterns and the Afghan Coup of 1973,” *Middle East Journal* 29, no. 2 (April 1, 1975): 170.

<sup>99</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 59.

James Woodburn's work on egalitarian societies suggests that the *egalité* of a society is a function of its economy. Tribal economies that rely on long-term investment of resources, such as settled agriculture, will tend to develop more hierarchical and authoritative institutions as a means of providing protections for property. This explains why the Durrani Pashtun, compared to their Ghilzai (and even more so their Karlanri) cousins, have developed political hierarchies while the latter have remained fiercely egalitarian.<sup>100</sup> The Durrani, living primarily in the fertile plains between the Helmand River and Herat, developed settled agricultural economies that created these hierarchies, while their hill-cousins did not. This expanded, supra-tribal political capability would help the Durrani dominate Afghan politics for almost 250 years.

What the Durrani gained in political acumen, however, they lost in ferocity. Barfield notes that the settled Durrani "were not as tough as the people from the margins; physically or mentally."<sup>101</sup> As political hierarchies crystallized among the Durrani, partisan infighting and the segmentation of society into specialized groupings would neuter much of the Durrani military strength, causing them to rely on their "meaner" cousins and the unpredictable transfer of power of the *jihad* cycle to achieve big things. The more egalitarian Ghilzai, while lacking the political institutions of power, would wield a formidable military force, and would often be called upon to support the state when it was in danger of invasion.<sup>102</sup>

## **2. Tribal Authority**

Most authority at the tribal level is what Weber would characterize as traditional, dominated by certain families who control the limited resources in a nonmonetized economy. Authority, or domination, as he terms it is "the possibility of imposing one's own will upon the behavior of other persons."<sup>103</sup> As noted in the previous section,

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<sup>100</sup> James Woodburn, "Egalitarian Societies," *Man* 17, no. 3, New Series (1982): 431–51; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 59.

<sup>101</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 63.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

<sup>103</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 942.

however, legitimacy of authority is vested in egalitarian Pashtun society from below on the basis of the ability of the prospective authoritarian to live up to the group norms of *pashtunwali* and Islam.

When attempting to characterize social motivations, an important place to look is in the stories told in a society. Edwards' story of Sultan Muhammed, recounted to him by a Pashtun from the Pech Valley, is illustrative. When Sultan Muhammed is denied the chance to fulfill his *badal* (revenge) duties prescribed by *pashtunwali* after his mother kills his father's murderers, he punishes his mother's presumptuous initiative by blinding her. Sultan Muhammed rebukes his mother as he puts out her eyes:

You have ruined my name and reputation in the tribe. When you committed this act, you thought that you were taking revenge for my father or for your husband, but instead you have lost my position in the tribe.<sup>104</sup>

This story is probably apocryphal, but it relates an important message about social expectations for legitimate authority in tribal society. In a tribal context, this hyperbolic action is necessary because, as Edwards notes, "the way [the *khan*] is remembered is not within his control, and given the ethos of tribal culture, this is exactly as it should be."<sup>105</sup> Reputation and legitimacy is not dynastically conferred and is something that requires constant vigilance in the fleeting nature of authority among egalitarian tribal members.

The central authority figure in tribal settings is the *khan*. *Khan* is a Turkic word that means "lord" or "chief" of a tribe. In the context of egalitarian Pashtun society, it is more accurately translated as a person of influence and means within the tribal framework.<sup>106</sup> Over the years, the Pashtuns have evolved a social structure that relies not on hierarchical leadership, but on informal patron-client relationships between *khan* and tribe member. Rather than creating a monetized economy with his surplus of capital, the *khan* "invest in relationships. Hospitality, communal feasts, gift giving, and other forms of redistribution raise the status of the givers, and it is this social esteem or fame that is

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<sup>104</sup> Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, 37.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>106</sup> Jon W. Anderson, "There Are No Khāns Anymore: Economic Development and Social Change in Tribal Afghanistan," *Middle East Journal* 32, no. 2 (Spring): 169.

more cherished than money.”<sup>107</sup> Of particular importance is the *khan*’s ability to keep up the *hujra* (guest house), as a means of receiving visitors, solidifying clients and alliances, and controlling the discourse that enters the village from the outside world. This ability “takes on a special significance as the symbol of the *khan*’s identity and the way in which he wants to be viewed by his fellow tribesmen.”<sup>108</sup>

This “social capital” created by the *khan* is much more important than monetary capital, and reinforces group loyalties by providing incentives to keep the loyalty of tribe members within the tribal *qawm*. *Khan* provide the “glue” that holds the tribe together by providing a social safety net, a channel through which the tribe communicates with the central government, and a general institution of patrimony that prevents the egalitarian tribes from disintegrating.<sup>109</sup> Authority in rural Afghanistan is typically exercised through a *jirga* (council of venerable elders) dominated by influential *khan* and their clients. These institutions developed independently of Islam and the *shariat*, often standing at odds with the latter.<sup>110</sup>

### 3. Islamic Authority

Islamic authority structures have played a significant role in the political development of Afghanistan. These authority structures have traditionally taken three forms: the charismatic mullah, the ‘*ulama* and the Sufi orders.

The prototypical charismatic religious figure to unite the disparate tribes for Islamist rebellion may be the case of Sayyad Ahmed Barehvi (1786-1831) who, supported by the ‘*ulama* of northwest British India, bypassed the tribal leadership and appealed directly to the people to replace tribal law with the *shariat*, unite together and launch *jihad* against the British.<sup>111</sup> The example of Barehvi, who had drawn his strength from the ‘*ulama*, inspired the creation of a *jamaat* (society) devoted to the purification of society and the political mobilization of the ‘*ulama*. This movement, known later as the

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<sup>107</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 58.

<sup>108</sup> Edwards, “Learning from the Swat Pathans,” 717; Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, 67.

<sup>109</sup> Anderson, “There Are No Khāns Anymore,” 168.

<sup>110</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 35.

<sup>111</sup> Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: war, religion and the new order in Afghanistan* (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1998), 79.

Deobandi school, stressed the importance of a return to Islam and fused a highly orthodox view of Islam with the Sufi spiritualism common in Sunni practice in Central Asia.

The Deobandi designated Hindu India as the *dar ul-harb* (abode of war) between believers and infidels and built an influential madrasa north of Delhi in 1857 in part to support the reformist *'ulama* in Afghanistan, who had no proper schooling facilities of their own. A series of madrasas were also built along the Afghan-Indian border to facilitate the education of the Afghan clergy. Most of Afghanistan's modern *'ulama* would be educated at Deoband or in one of their border madrasas.<sup>112</sup> The *'ulama* have traditionally been most influential in the urban centers, where they were co-opted by the ruling elite to legitimate their rule over the independent-minded rural tribes.

In contrast to the *'ulama* and charismatic mullahs, Sufism occupies a less ostentatious role in Islamic authority structures. In fact, it is probably a misnomer to characterize the *pir-murdi* relationships between *pir* (holy men) and their *murdi* (disciples) as authoritarian. These relationships are more affinity based and are not well understood from a social mobilization aspect. What Sufism does is provide a framework of discourse that enables social motivation by innovative entrepreneurs. The Sufi concept of *barakat* (holiness associated with people, places, or objects), probably inspired the charisma of the Mullah of Hadda in his 1897 uprising, as well as the Taliban's Mullah Omar, who seized a significant cache of mystical charismatic authority through his donning of the reputed "Cloak of Mohammed" during a public rally.<sup>113</sup>

#### **D. GROUP MAINTENANCE**

Groups cannot survive without a system of group maintenance. They need systematic ways to continually teach and reteach the consensual norms of the group through various methods. Aside from family-based norm transmission, peer level maintenance techniques are as important, because they allow group norms to be transmitted and prevent the group from degenerating by generation to strictly single-

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<sup>112</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 58.

<sup>113</sup> For a description of Sufi orders and their implications, see Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 37–44.

family based units. In Pashtun society, this maintenance is done in several ways: through building and maintaining patronage networks, storytelling, and prose and poetry. These artifacts create a “narrative” or common theme that runs through society that helps members verify their in-group participation and gives a framework through which they can process new information and make decisions.

## **1. Patronage**

Client patronage by power brokers is probably the most important means of identity group maintenance. In Afghanistan, the social prestige of a *khan* or a *mullah* is dependent upon what patronage he can provide to his clients. In the case of the *khan*, access and control over resources allows him to provide these benefits to his “constituents” as a means of social security, and establishes him as a legitimate interlocutor between the individual and the government. Isby notes:

No single concept is more important to Afghanistan’s internal conflicts than that of patron-client relationships and the patronage networks these create... The importance of patronage relations extends to the battle of ideas in Afghanistan. Afghans are exposed to many different and often competing sources of news, but there is a tendency to follow the views of the provider of patronage or other Afghans that they desire to emulate.<sup>114</sup>

Patronage creates confidence in the social order in Pashtun society. While many urban Afghans view patronage as a “feudal” system, the relationships are much more nuanced than this. Roy contends that power in tribal Pashtun society lies less in specific people than in “an elusive network” of patronage “which needs constant maintenance and reconstruction.” Rather than a feudal entity, dependent upon “oaths of allegiance,” Pashtun patronage networks and the power the *khan* derive from them are based on a delicate consensus of the *qawm*.<sup>115</sup>

## **2. Discourse and Storytelling**

Stories are “implicit communication” that convey values indirectly. The story medium is superior to direct communication because stories are easier to remember and

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<sup>114</sup> David Isby, *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland* (New York: Pegasus, 2011); Johnson and Waheed, “Analyzing Taliban taranas (chants),” 6.

<sup>115</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 22–23 .

serve to reinforce beliefs in an organization. They are easier to understand and people tend to pay attention to them, allowing them to make sense of their world through analogy with the tenets of the story.<sup>116</sup> In Pashtun society, stories provide a template for other group members and show idealized accounts of “men of quality” who are “tested and, by dint of their single-mindedness, their courage, and their capacity, demonstrate the qualities of person and action by which greatness is achieved.”<sup>117</sup> In other words, stories communicate societal expectations through examples of the “prototypical Pashtun” such as Edwards’ account of Sultan Mohammed of the Pech Valley discussed previously.

The societal ideal is represented often in stories in many cultures, and Afghanistan is no exception. Stories and myths are an important part of the maintenance of group integrity. They typically refer to a standard set of values that was practiced in antiquity and encourage the continuation of those values.<sup>118</sup> This serves as a means of preserving the character of the group and prevents disintegration.

### 3. Literature and Poetry

Poems and lyrical media are a preferred means of transmitting societal norms from teacher to learner. Dupree describes Afghans as having a “literate culture [in a] non-literate society.”<sup>119</sup> The lack of widespread literate material, particularly in rural Pashtun areas, makes the transmission of group norms through memorable lyrical media particularly important. This is true of love, honor and religion (particularly Sufism) as poems are used as means of transmitting ideals.<sup>120</sup>

Johnson and Waheed provide an important analysis of the use of lyrical media as a means of promoting group identity with their investigation of Taliban *taranas* (chants). A popular Taliban *tarana* (chant) rails against the foreigners’ presence in Afghanistan:

*Oh Afghan, the Foreigners are present in your country*

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<sup>116</sup> Albert H Hastorf and Alice M Isen, eds., *Cognitive Social Psychology* (New York: Elsevier/North Holland, 1982), 261; Annette Simmons, *The story factor : secrets of influence from the art of storytelling*, Rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 29.

<sup>117</sup> Edwards, *Heroes of the Age*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Hastorf and Isen, *Cognitive Social Psychology*, 263.

<sup>119</sup> Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 75.

<sup>120</sup> For more on Pashto poetry, see Dupree, *Afghanistan*, Chapter VII.

*They are your yesterdays' enemies whom your ancestors defeated, and  
Then they ran away. Today they are the rulers who dominate your soil.  
Those people are present who pretend themselves to be your friends but  
They are your previous enemies.* <sup>121</sup>

This verse shows an attempt by the Taliban propagandists to elicit sympathy for the Taliban cause by showing that the values of the *jihad* are consistent with the “Social Man” values of the broader population. This is accomplished by appealing to analogy with past actions against the “Foreigners” (“*whom your ancestors defeated*”), and a sense of shame or disappointment with the current order and a suggested inability by Afghans to defend their *namus* from foreign domination (“*Today, they are the rulers who dominate your soil*”). The chant also attempts to show that a core Afghan value of straightforward behavior and the “Foreigners” values are at odds (“*Those people are present who pretend themselves to be your friends but they are your previous enemies.*”)<sup>122</sup>

By conveying this message through a traditional lyrical medium, the Taliban propagandists access several facets of their audience’s decision process. They access “Social Man” through the appeal to common values and norms. They also increase the salience of their message by using the musical medium, which has been shown by research to significantly increase memory retention of the wording and message contained in the song.<sup>123</sup> Taliban use of songs and chants keeps their threat and their appeal in people’s memory longer, meaning they are more likely to take their message into consideration when making choices.

#### **4. Narrative**

The common narrative among Pashtuns is that their people are descended from Qais, a contemporary of the Prophet Mohammed. Qais supposedly returned to his native Afghanistan after his service with the Prophet was completed and converted many

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<sup>121</sup> Johnson and Waheed, “Analyzing Taliban taranas (chants),” 7–8.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>123</sup> B. Tillmann and W. Dowling, “Memory decreases for prose, but not for poetry,” *Memory & cognition* 35, no. 4 (2007): 628.

multitudes, making Qais and his Pashtun descendants among the first defenders of the faith, with particular importance due to its proximity to the infidel frontier with India. The veracity of this narrative has been challenged, with some scholars suggesting that most Pashtuns came rather late into the Islamic fold, but what is important about a narrative is less its truth than its existence.<sup>124</sup>

Narrative is an important vehicle for the interpretation of information in social society. Akerlof indicates that people will tend to reject information that is not consistent with previously held views, or in other words, if this information is not consistent with their narrative.<sup>125</sup> By prioritizing and weighting information that is consistent with their beliefs, people reinforce their group membership and ensure their behavior is consistent with the established group norms.

People have a need to “create narrative descriptions for ourselves and for others about our own past actions, and we develop storied accounts that give sense to the behavior of others.”<sup>126</sup> As pointed out above, the Taliban have a sophisticated grasp of the narrative form, which is a function of their existence within the narrative frame of their effort. By comparison, Western attempts at narrative often boil down to messaging, typified by the “leaflet bombs” that are popular in psychological operations. It is important to distinguish the terms “narrative” and “messaging.” Simply put, Afghan “narratives” are a system of cognitive standards that allow “messages” to be interpreted. Ruston notes:

Part of the reason the extremist narratives are more successful than American narratives is that the American messages are often not narratives at all. “The Taliban have archaic values” (to paraphrase Ashley Bommer, advisor to Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke) is not a narrative. It is an opinion, forged within a particular worldview, a worldview itself shaped

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<sup>124</sup> Johnson and Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire,” 50; Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 BC – AD 1957* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 9.

<sup>125</sup> George A Akerlof, *An Economic Theorist’s Book of Tales: Essays That Entertain the Consequences of New Assumptions in Economic Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 138.

<sup>126</sup> Donald Polkinghorne, *Narrative knowing and the human sciences* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 14.

by certain narratives that valorize equality, a free market regulated by law rather than pecuniary circumvention, the role of women as leaders in society, etc.<sup>127</sup>

In order to effectively communicate with an Afghan audience, messages must be crafted in a way that resonates in the target audience's *own* narrative, and is consistent with the transmission schemes identified above.

In contrast to Western attempts at narrative resonance, three Taliban themes found in their prose and lyrical propaganda are consistent with existing narratives and is based on social principles which we identified in Chapter II, particularly with Sherif's analysis<sup>128</sup> of group dynamics:

1. *Othering*: creating a distinction and placing social distance between the audience (Muslim) and the out-group (Non-Muslim).
2. *Appeal to positive in-group attributes and traditional values* by reminding of ancestor's accomplishments.
3. *Cultural paranoia*. For example an accusation of the West's plan to teach Christianity to Afghan children creates a feeling of "group under siege" leading to more conservative (in-group) choices.<sup>129</sup>

With these messaging strategies, the Taliban are trying to create social identification with their cause. This is why you don't see Taliban "advertising" talking about the benefits of their governance, even though it is in many cases technically superior to the governance provided by the central government. They want people to identify with them on an ideological and social level. If this is achieved, the target audience becomes psychologically invested in the Taliban message, and cognitive dissonance will create a motivation to discard any evidence (and any attempts by the government of Afghanistan) that is contrary to these narrative-conforming beliefs.

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<sup>127</sup> Ruston, "Understand What Narrative Is and Does."

<sup>128</sup> Recall Sherif, *The Robbers Cave experiment*.

<sup>129</sup> For an analysis of several *shabnamah* used by the Taliban, see Johnson, "The Taliban Insurgency and an Analysis of Shabnamah (Night Letters)."

## D. “SOCIAL MAN” AND THE TALIBAN

### 1. Decline of Secular Authority

The rural Afghan economy is characterized by patron-client relationships in which *khan* dispense patronage to their clients. As Barfield notes, *khan* invest surplus capital in social relationships rather than a monetized economy as a means of getting and maintaining influence. As participants in the market economy between rural village and towns, *khan* have traditionally formed an important link between urban and rural populations as well as between the central government and the diffuse authority structures of the egalitarian Pashtun tribes.<sup>130</sup>

Economic changes in Afghanistan have created incentives for a shift in identity patterns. In the late 1960s, Anderson described the introduction of tractors to the highly egalitarian social structure of Ghilzai Pashtun tribes in eastern Afghanistan. These heavily subsidized tractor grants were part of an intensive agricultural modernization effort in the Pashtun areas that also served as a means to increase dependency of the Ghilzai power brokers on state largesse. As this new technology spread into Ghilzai areas, certain “new” *khan* who were better connected and friendlier to the institutions of government received preferential treatment, despite not having a significant client base. The “new *khan*” proceeded to charge fees for tilling, an innovative practice in a nonmonetized subsistence economy. The wholesale transfer of economic power as a result of tractor possession led to a loss of prestige for traditional *khan* and an overall degradation of the traditional authority structure that had been in place for centuries.<sup>131</sup>

The onset of the Soviet-Afghan War in 1979 served the *khan* no better. The massive devastation and almost total economic disruption during the war caused the *khan* to be completely sidelined in the nontribal areas. In the tribal areas, the physical devastation to fruit orchards and irrigation systems as a result of Soviet COIN efforts caused the economic power base of the *khan* to nearly disappear in the rural areas as well. Roy notes that the *khan* also suffered politically due to their traditional links to the central government “at a time when the state has suffered overwhelming rejection.” Many *khan*,

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<sup>130</sup> Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 58, 222.

<sup>131</sup> Anderson, “There Are No Khāns Anymore,” 173.

unable to rely on their traditional client power bases, chose exile over poverty or persecution at the hands of their ascendant rivals, the mullahs.<sup>132</sup>

The importance of the fall of the *khan* cannot be overstated. As part of a traditional, secular authority structure, the *khan* provided an important negative feedback mechanism to the *jihad* cycle discussed earlier. The *khan*, by nature, is unsuited for participating in a unified, supra-tribal party structure, such as the *mujahideen* resistance, since his traditional role has been to break up the unity of the *jihad* cycle. From a behavior economics standpoint, the presence of the *khan* traditional authority and its position that was traditionally hostile to the peer-driven, charismatic impetus of the *jihad* function served to limit levels of conformity to the “*jihad* norm” in favor of the “pashtunwali norm” and served as a stabilizer to society.<sup>133</sup>

This monetization of an economy that was previously dependent on the flow of social capital from *khan* to patron inevitably led to changes in identification patterns, as traditional tribal identification became less profitable to certain segments of society, leading to a shift from the “Social Man” decision model toward the “Economic Man” model. This shift has enormous implications, as social stability in tribal areas is heavily dependent upon personal relationships and networks.

## **2. The Rise of the ‘Ulama**

As secular identification and authority structures were being neutered by a lack of resources stemming from the Soviet-Afghan War, Islamic identity and authority structures were ascendant. Among Pashtuns in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Pakistani government pursued an active policy of empowering Islamist segments of Pashtun society as a means of neutering the tribal threat of the Pashtuns in these difficult to govern areas, and also as a means of projecting power into Afghanistan both before and during the War.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 151.

<sup>133</sup> Schulman, “Asch Conformity Studies,” 31. Schulman showed that the presence of an authority figure that was opposed to the prevailing norm lowered levels of conformity among males.

<sup>134</sup> Johnson, *On the Edge of the Big Muddy*, 117.

A favorite form of foreign policy leverage employed by Afghan kings was the “Pashtunistan Card;” the threat of a united Pashtun homeland as a means of undermining Pakistan. Despite the fact that a united Pashtunistan might mean the disintegration of Afghanistan itself, it served Afghan purposes effectively enough to provoke Pakistani insecurity, as the latter felt much threatened by their Indian neighbors and Baluch separatists in their southwestern provinces. From the mid-twentieth century, Pakistan had responded to Afghan foreign policy provocations by seeking “strategic depth” through influence over the some 12 million Pashtuns living in the western provinces (and particularly in the FATA). Unable to strike a deal with tribal leaders, influence would be accomplished through undermining the tribes’ traditional authority structures by actively subsidizing the *mullahs* over the *khans*.<sup>135</sup>

Many early Taliban were drawn from madrasas, particularly ones that had been operating under Pakistani auspices along the border in the FATA. These madrasas had been subsidized and built in the 1970s as a way to empower destabilizing forces in Afghanistan in order to counter the threat of Pashtun nationalism among the very large Pashtun population that straddled the border between the two countries. Through the madrasa system and the active subsidization of the Islam identity at the expense of the Pashtun identity, Pakistan had created a well-resourced patronage network similar to the one that existed among the *khan*, but with vastly greater resources and centrally controlled. This was a unique development, as Sufi and religious networks traditionally relied on ideological “buy-in” and voluntary resourcing from khan-based identity structures. This framework, as we discussed earlier, allowed the Pashtun identity to act as a brake against any overreach by the Islam identity movement. With the collapse of khan based authority, this braking mechanism no longer existed, and the only viable social network capable of meeting Pashtun needs sprang from the Islamic identity model.

These changes in society were reflected in the discourse of the war, as Edwards points out:

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<sup>135</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study–Volume 4*, 1st ed. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 28; Johnson and Mason, “No Sign Until the Burst of Fire,” 70; Johnson, *On the Edge of the Big Muddy*, 117; Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 216.

Poetry from the first period of the war tended to be hortatory, centering around symbols of honor, descent, and heroic action. By the early 1980s, however, the poetry had changed, most obviously in the new centrality of Islamic symbols and the absence of honor-based imagery.<sup>136</sup>

The traditional authority and identity structures had been decimated, replaced by charismatic authority of the mullahs, best personified by the eventual emergence of the Taliban in the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan War.

Additionally, the technocratic fighting against the Soviets did not afford the same social “honor” opportunities as traditional tribal warfare, with no Pashtun-identity *badal* benefits to defend.<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, the social benefits of associating with the Islamist identity structures were myriad. The Islamists were better resourced through their Pakistani patrons. This quickly became apparent with the shift in operational format of the mujahideen fighting, moving from a *Pashtunwali* model of combat to a *jihad* model. During the early stages of the war, operational decisions were made along a tribal combat model, empowering decisions through the tribal *lashkar* (army) system, reflecting the nonhierarchical and segmentary structure of Pashtun society. Traditional, khan-based authority was not organized to cope with a well-organized external enemy. Over time, however, the better-organized and resourced Islamist groups under Pakistani patronage would eclipse the traditionally organized *Pashtunwali*-style resistance.<sup>138</sup>

The new way of war also brought changes to the discourse of Islamic resistance. Just as technocratic combat diminished the resonance of tribal valor themes, the traditional narrative of Islamic resistance changed. Edwards notes:

References to heroic combat were no longer appropriate or resonant in this setting. Islam helped to fill this void, but the Islam that came to the fore was not that of charismatic saints who turned enemy bullets to water as in an earlier era in Swat. Miracles and saints were no more plausible or relevant in the context of modern warfare than heroic ancestors. What did resonate was the promise of immortality and eternal paradise.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Edwards, “Learning from the Swat Pathans,” 718.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 719.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 718–19.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 719.

The Soviet-Afghan War created a shift from the diffuse authority structure of the Pashtun tribes to a more centralized one. Central authority over the Pashtun had been a dream of Kabul for generations, and it is ironic that it would eventually manifest under an Islamist banner headquartered out of Quetta.

### **3. Dismantling the Family Unit**

The Soviet-Afghan War also created one of the largest refugee migrations in history, as millions of Afghans, mostly Pashtun sought to escape the indiscriminate violence of the Soviet rural counterinsurgency campaign. Many of these refugees settled in refugee camps set up in the Pashtun areas of the Northwest Frontier Provinces (NWFP) of Pakistan. With limited educational opportunities, the youth who have grown up in these camps have often been educated in one of the thousands of militant Pakistani-subsidized madrasas in the NWFP that we discussed earlier.<sup>140</sup>

Many of these refugee camp children had lost at least one parent to violence. In 2005, 61% of reported Afghan refugees were under 17 years old, with almost a third (28%) under 5 years old.<sup>141</sup> This social upheaval, particularly among the developing social identities of Afghan refugee children, provides an environment that can lead to instances of Reactive Attachment Disorder. Studies among institutionalized children in Romania, who experienced little parental-figure nurturing during their formative years, showed an marked inclination (45%) toward socially uninhibited behavior.<sup>142</sup> Interviews conducted by the author confirmed that Reactive Attachment Disorder can lead to identity associations that favor ideologically-driven charismatic authority over a more reserved form of traditional identity associations.<sup>143</sup>

Family upheaval, coupled with the overall disintegration of the traditional tribal identity structures has created a generation of poorly-socialized Pashtun inhabiting the

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<sup>140</sup> Johnson, *On the Edge of the Big Muddy*, 112.

<sup>141</sup> “UNHCR – 2005 UNHCR Statistical Yearbook Country Data Sheet – Afghanistan,” n.d., <http://www.unhcr.org/464183592.html>.

<sup>142</sup> The Bucharest Early Intervention Project Core Group, “Attachment in Institutionalized and Community Children in Romania,” *Child Development* 76, no. 5 (2005): 1021.

<sup>143</sup> Shakira Espada Younger (Social Worker), interview with the author, May 2011. The interviewee suggested a strong tendency in instances of RAD in the U.S. for gang-type associations that are contra to the established social order.

border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The lack of a “sense of place” and belonging among these Pashtun youth can create a great deal of psychological discomfort. Edwards’ observations of Pashtuns separated from their traditional social orders showed a strong tendency to revert to overly conservative behaviors, typically centered around Islamic identity, in their interactions with others, as people seek to reinforce social ties and establish their place in new social orders.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> David B. Edwards, “Afghanistan, Ethnography, and the New World Order,” *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 356.

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## IV. CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis, we have advocated a reconsideration of classical decision theory in counterinsurgency thinking. Current counterinsurgency doctrine is based on a strictly economic interpretation of the decision models in the subject population. The “Economic Man” approach, while effective in certain populations that have urbanized, hierarchical and monetized economies and social structures, does not take into account the strong social interventions that characterize decision models in tribal and nonmonetized economies, such as the Pashtun case that we have presented in this thesis. Classical counterinsurgency theorists such as Sir Robert Thompson have recognized that a simple security-for-loyalty bargain between the government and the subject population is not enough for success:

Security by itself is not enough to make the peasant willingly choose to support the government. Without it he cannot, even with it he still may not. The next step, therefore, is to influence his choice, which must still remain a free choice. He can only be made to choose freely to support the government if the government can show him that what it has to offer is something better than the insurgent can offer him. You must improve his lot not only economically, but also socially, politically... and culturally.<sup>145</sup>

Until relatively recently, we have understood little about how social factors affect economic thinking when making important decisions. Behavioral economic theory, which has incorporated many of the advances in social psychology, anthropology and game theory, may hold the keys to understanding decision making in populations like the Pashtun.

In this thesis, we have shown that Pashtun behavior is consistent with the behavior models described in the growing field of behavior economics. Strong social interventions exist in the Pashtun behavior model that are tied to culture and the social institutions that have evolved over the centuries. The group dynamics of the Pashtun show similar characteristics to the group norms identified by Sherif in his work on groups

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<sup>145</sup> Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency; the Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*, 143.

and conflict and the egalitarian nature of Pashtun society has been described in similar terms by anthropologists such as Woodburn and Brunton.<sup>146</sup>

#### **A. IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS**

When designing counterinsurgency campaigns, the COIN government must find ways to significantly lower the economic, political and social costs of supporting the government over the insurgent. A primary objective of the COIN practitioner is to separate the insurgent from the population, both physically and mentally. Traditional COIN doctrine places emphasis on the physical separation of the insurgent from the population. In this thesis, we have advocated a scientific basis for the mental separation of the population from the insurgent, using an understanding of the cultural and social motivations that are part of the decision models of all human beings.

Without a systematic way to understand human motivation, the practice of counterinsurgency will continue to be based on previous experience and the application of previous “best practices” by way of analogy. Without understanding why some practices worked in certain contexts, operations risk considerable time lost to “learning curves” in new cultural contexts. Trying to apply COIN practices that worked in a hierarchical, urban social setting could prove tragically misguided when applied to an egalitarian, rural tribal setting.

In the first chapter, we established “decision” as the center of gravity in COIN operations. Since economics is the science of decision, it is logical that if COIN practitioners understand a bit about the science of decision, they may be able to make better strategies for convincing, cajoling and threatening their way to the positive decision outcome desired. Influencing outcomes through the selective application of information is the province of Information Operations (IO).

The joint U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual mentions the importance of effective Information Operations (IO), but the examples given are primarily concerned with “getting the word out” about the host nation narrative

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<sup>146</sup> Recall Sherif, *The Robbers Cave experiment*; Woodburn, “Egalitarian Societies.”; Brunton, “The Cultural Instability of Egalitarian Societies.”

and countering insurgent propaganda. In fact, the field manual's section on IO is only a few pages long. Similarly, the Army IO Field Manual provides a good overview of IO principles, but essentially treats IO as a supporting component of kinetic military operations.

While supporting combat operations is an important part of IO, this approach does not address the real problem of influencing and persuading the population. Current attempts at crafting COIN narratives for consumption by the population usually take the form of unsophisticated “information bombs” of repeated messages and leaflets that hold little relevance in the context of a rural and tribal insurgency. Many efforts to create an effective information campaign have been “downright silly and an embarrassment” in the words of one analyst.<sup>147</sup>

An understanding of human decision models will allow information operators to craft more sophisticated messaging strategies that are more likely to resonate in the target audience. By moving from information strategies that focus on the purely economic benefits of supporting the government to strategies that tap the population's deeply held beliefs, culture and social imperatives, information strategies are more likely to produce positive outcomes for the COIN force. Additionally, by leveraging the appropriate transmission media that are effective in different societies, such as poetry, chant and song in the Pashtun case, message strategies are more likely to influence decision outcomes in the target population.

## **B. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Traditional COIN theory assumes what is known in economics literature as “expected utility theory.” In this model, people make decisions involving risk by weighing their options based on maximizing expected utility. Research has shown that this model falls short in several instances, particularly when social factors and perceptions distort the value placed on various options.

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<sup>147</sup> Ruston, “Understand What Narrative Is and Does”; Matthew Dupee, “Interview on Coalition Information Operations”, September 7, 2010.

A great deal of research has been conducted studying the social interventions that cause people to deviate from expected utility theory when making decisions. Much of this research has been conducted on Western experimental subjects, although some work, most notably Henrich et al. has attempted to apply the findings of behavioral economics across cultures.<sup>148</sup> What is needed is more comparative economic research among nonurbanized and nonmonetized populations, in order to provide more detail on the extent to which social interventions cause deviation from expected utility in different cultural environments.

COIN requires a sophisticated understanding of human beings, particularly an understanding of how they will make decisions in different environments. For a long time, however, COIN theory has relied upon a corpus of knowledge that is based on a Western interpretation of motivation, springing as it did from an Enlightenment era of understanding of economic decision-making. This corpus grew up in an environment of urbanized, monetized industry, and made assumptions on human behavior that were consistent with this worldview. With a homogeneous view of human interpretation and meaning, it was assumed that all human motivation sprang from the same cognitive processes, and views to the contrary were dismissed as Orientalism, particularly as a backlash against Western-centric anthropology in the late 19th century. This view is in need of reassessment, as Polkinghorne states succinctly: “the study of human beings by the human sciences needs to focus on the realm of meaning in general, and on narrative meaning in particular.”<sup>149</sup> An understanding that meaning and narratives are relative terms is a good place to start.

Successful COIN is predicated upon the ability to craft relevant narratives that resonate with the population and to predict the behavior that results from the activities of the COIN force. To do this reliably, we need economic tools that are informed by anthropological and ethnographic experience to devise effective information strategies.

Game theorists and classical economists contend that everyone has an economic price that will ensure a positive outcome for a COIN force, but it is dangerous to assume

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<sup>148</sup> Henrich et al., “‘Economic man’ in cross-cultural perspective.”

<sup>149</sup> Polkinghorne, *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*, 11.

that price involves a road, a school, a goat or a well. The price may be based entirely on identity, or the context in which the choice is made, or a combination of all three decision personalities which we have presented in this thesis: economic, social and context. COIN practitioners must unlock these nuances and learn to make the choice to support the government the least costly, in terms of economic well-being, physical safety, identity and context.

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