# Commentary & Reply

# On "Time for a Strategic and Intellectual Pause in Afghanistan"

Paul Jones II

*This commentary is in response to Mr. Raymond A. Millen's article "Time for a Strategic and Intellectual Pause in Afghanistan" published in the Summer 2010 issue of* Parameters *(vol. 40, no. 2).*

In the Summer 2010 issue of *Parameters*, writer Raymond Millen avers that it is "Time for a Strategic and Intellectual Pause in Afghanistan." He laments that "the tipping point in favor of an irreversible momentum toward functional governance remains elusive," and thinks it clear that "the current strategy is not working." While one cannot help but appreciate the judgment which seems to lurk behind these inexact and jargon-laden phrases, it is far from clear that his ideas bring us any closer toward the point at which we will tip over favorably and with an irreversible momentum, et cetera. It is ironic that, in an article which calls for policy-makers to require "greater intellectual rigor on issues involving counterinsurgency and state-building," Mr. Millen offers an argument plagued by vague assertions and founded upon questionable and unarticulated premises. His discussion of and prescriptions for "government legitimacy" are particularly flawed. By writing in an impressionistic and disorganized manner, applying a shallow and parochial understanding of intellectual and social history, and assuming away the difficult aspects of the problem, he demonstrates the very lack of rigor that he decries.

Mr. Millen begins by observing, with some irony, that in the putatively dominant conception, the presence of an insurgency draws us into a "parallel universe" in regards to "the meaning of government legitimacy." He refers to a "traditional political philosophy" that has been "displaced by the nostrum of Hearts-and-Minds [sic]." While this traditional political philosophy is not elucidated, the use of the phrase "social contract" seems most likely to indicate that it consists of the half-digested Locke typically associated with hagiographical accounts of the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers of the United States. (This is substantiated by direct references to this history.) The reader is then treated to a scattershot criticism of "Hearts-and-Minds," said to be plagued by "inherent ambiguity," a "laundry list of silver bullets," with "prevalent themes [of] physical security, law and order, aid, social services, construction, economic development, and political reform." Since no particular "Hearts-and-Minds" campaign is identified, the reader is free to fill in whichever employment of this label he most dislikes. After a brief digression on the

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unfairness of editorial comments regarding "Hearts-and-Minds," as well as an aside during which he makes the unsupported assertion that "authoritarian rule is . . . brittle and eventually crumble[s] as a result of inherent flaws and contradictions," Millen states that his real problem with the "Hearts-and-Minds" concept is that it is a "proposed shortcut to securing government legitimacy and avoiding intellectual rigor to get fast results." One might think that we don't need shortcuts to the avoidance of intellectual rigor, but there's no time to consider that, since Millen is moving us along to the impact of the framework of a political system on functional governance, not to mention the essence of political legitimacy.

What is that essence? "Traditionally," the capacity to provide security, but that has sometimes proven counterproductive. Apparently, "twenty-first-century legitimacy" requires the array of services comprising a welfare state, and democratic representation is also very helpful. We are then treated to a couple of sentences of political philosophy, in which the unnamed Locke "note[s]" the basis of his theory as if it were an obvious and incontestable feature of the physical world. Now, in the popular version of Locke's political philosophy, individuals in a naturally anarchic condition freely consent to surrender some of their freedoms and submit to the special obligations imposed by a particular state. It is this consent which establishes the state, granting it legitimacy and the right to enforce obligations which exceed the requirements of natural law. It is notable that Locke himself defines consent in a way which arguably equates consent with acquiescence. He also imposes constraints upon a government that would be legitimate; it must confine its action to preservation of the community and its members, acting only for the public good, and subjects itself to overthrow if it violates the terms under which consent was given. But we don't have time for these finer points; Millen is already moving on to the Founders' application of some unattributed Montesquieu.

It might normally be unfair to expect even a brief summation of a political philosophy in an article on strategy in Afghanistan. But it is surely less unfair when the author calls for "intellectual rigor" and faults his "Hearts-and-Minds" bogeyman for failure to comprehend or address the essential nature of state legitimacy. Sadly, what we have instead of rigor is a soup of loosely connected and unsupported assertions seemingly supported by a picture of history—both intellectual and societal—in which seventeenth-century England belongs to a past so remote that it can only be referred to as "traditional," and in which other traditions of political philosophy, with their own radically different premises and prescriptions, do not even exist. A glance at the end notes reveals worse still: the discussion of specifically American political foundations depends for understanding upon the ideas put forward by W. Cleon Skousen in his 1981 book *The Five Thousand Year Leap*. Skousen was a widely derided quasi-historian affiliated with the John Birch Society and Mormon "fundamentalism"; his book describes twenty-eight beliefs supposedly held by the Founding Fathers which enabled them to create a just and progressive government, like that enjoyed in ancient Israel. Riddled with errors of fact and logic, this work languished

in well-deserved obscurity through Skousen's death in 2006, until television personality Glenn Beck began publicizing his admiration for its author.

Proceeding further with Millen, we hear that the Founding Fathers "developed an absolute faith in the power of private enterprise to generate wealth," a faith which, if accurately attributed (on Skousen's authority), is presumably wholly justified, since the rest of the paragraph is a description of this process, followed by a warning against a command economy. Apparently, this is the problem with "Hearts-and-Minds"—it doesn't create wealth, it just provides services and infrastructure, even while forestalling locally-initiated development. While the present writer certainly observed actions in Afghanistan that had these effects, were they the totality of "Hearts-and-Minds" as conceived by Millen? Do its "prevalent themes [of] physical security, law and order, aid, social services, construction, economic development, and political reform" consist only of government handouts to Afghan welfare queens? Or is the author simply disregarding the complete picture?

At the end of this winding road, Millen offers his strategy to "build legitimacy." He says that this requires a democratic and representative political system based on subsidiarity and structured so as to ensure that separated powers check and balance each other, the encouragement of "free enterprise to foster the creation of wealth," and a concentration on the provision of basic security for small communities. The degree to which this differs from current strategy is not obvious. For example, the 2003 Afghan constitution established a system of government formally similar to that which now prevails in the United States (the degree to which this conforms to that described in the US constitution, and what this implies about that document's enduring relevance, will go unremarked). The major difference is that the Afghan president appoints provincial governors, albeit with the approval of the legislature. Is this a formal difference great enough to doom that government to the illegitimacy from which Millen believes that it suffers? Or are there other factors to be taken into account? Similarly, is it realistic to expect that the free market will generate increasing wealth in Afghanistan? If so, what currently prevents this; if not, what other factors are relevant?

Millen says that "[u]nless a political system has a self-correcting mechanism to check the accumulation of power in one government body . . . its demise is inevitable." This is congruent with his previously cited comments regarding the inherently brittle nature of authoritarian regimes, but would be surprising to historians of imperial Rome, or of almost any state-governed society outside of Western Europe or preceding the fifteenth century. Granted, the Roman state did fail to avoid its own demise, after several hundred years of existence, though it did bequeath a political heritage which influences us still. Perhaps Millen is so confident in universal-suffrage and liberal-democratic welfare states that he predicts that they will surpass this record of longevity; if so, he might at least be expected to make an argument to this effect. Similarly, he says that "[t]oday, the focus of debate should not be whether democracy will work in Afghanistan but whether the Afghans' democratic political structures

are sufficiently balanced . . . . It would be specious to suggest that Afghans or any culture are incapable of practicing democratic governance simply because they may display undesirable political traits. Organizational flaws in the nation's constitution are the likely culprit." One could certainly try to make this case, though it would be quite controversial, and in any case, Millen fails utterly to even attempt to do so. He simply states his ideas baldly, as if a myopic interpretation of two hundred years of very atypical political history were a universal law of nature, the political equivalent of gravity.

Credit must be given to Mr. Millen for at least supporting the notion of intellectual rigor. It is evident that our strategy and operations in Afghanistan suffer from our ongoing failure to consider fundamental issues in political philosophy, and to attempt to employ the means at our disposal to accomplish the objectives which such consideration would suggest. That being said, Millen's own article serves as a demonstration of the reasons for this failure: even our policy-making elites generally lack the philosophical tools, the breadth of historical knowledge, and the intellectual catholicity to succeed in the endeavor.

# The Author Replies

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*Parameters* provides an excellent venue for writers to introduce differing perspectives on national security issues. Accordingly, published articles are often thought provoking, encouraging debate and generating new ideas or perspectives. Although Major Paul Jones and I differ in world views, I do value his contribution to the discourse. His critique provides a perspective readers should consider when reading my article.

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- Send the e-mail to carl_parameters@conus.army.mil.