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Will Afghanistan Be a Forgotten War? Spirit of America fought through the government bureaucracy to support the troops in Afghanistan. Will the rest of us stay the course?

BY DANIEL HENNINGER

We are here, and 97,000 men and women from all over the United States are in what in wartime is known as "over there" in Afghanistan, at risk, fighting for us. When the opinion-poll people call, some 60% of Americans say they are against the war there. Some of that may be war weariness. But I hope it doesn't mean people are drawing the curtains on what is going on there, including our nation's troops. The U.S. already has one "forgotten war" in Korea from 1950 to 1953. We don't need another one.

In 2004, when enthusiasm for the Iraq war was still tied to post-9/11 national unity, I wrote a column (

Even as the nation dialed back its attachments to these far-off battles between U.S. troops and Islamic fanaticism, Mr. Hake and his Spirit of America associates stayed in the game. First in Iraq and now in Afghanistan, they've continued to fill requests from commanders on the ground for the sort of stuff sewing machines, blankets, radios, soccer balls that is too small to register with the Pentagon's procurement bureaucracies but matters in terms of creating trust between the troops and local villagers.

Until the Defense Department made them stop.

For seven years, Spirit of America had worked with the U.S. military, mainly with the Marines in Iraq, to provide civilian aid to battalion commanders engaged in counterinsurgency operations at the village level. Last year, Mr. Hake thought it would make sense in Afghanistan to broaden the relationship by creating a formal Commander Support Program (CSP). Senior Marine officers, who had developed a good working relationship with the ground in Iraq, supported Mr. Hake's

idea.

Until then, Spirit of America had been operating at whatever level is below micro. Then Mr. Hake stuck his head up. "Because we pushed on the Commander Support Program," he says, "we got scrutiny from the military's lawyers at a higher level. They not only concluded the CSP couldn't be done, but what we'd been doing the past seven years couldn't be done either. It wasn't what we were hoping for."

Spirit of America had fallen down the rabbit hole of government ethics rules.

The lawyers said in June that what Spirit of America had been doing sending goods into the war zone through battalion commanders could be defined as a "gift" to the commanders under current ethics rules. Spirit of America was dead in the water.

Through a friend, Mr. Hake found Washington attorney John Bellinger, formerly legal adviser to the State Department, where he had dealt with the arcana of government ethics. "The military's lawyers have gotten cautious about everything," Mr. Bellinger told me, "because people can get so beaten up even on something well-meaning like this. Even trying to find ways around the rules could subject them to criticism."

Mr. Bellinger thought senior Pentagon officials would want to solve this if they could, and he and Mr. Hake met with the Defense Department's general counsel, Jeh Johnson, an Obama appointee, and its chief ethics officer, Leigh Bradley.

Mr. Bellinger argued that "these ethics rules are on the books to prevent corrupt conduct for private gain by public officials. This doesn't do that. It saves lives."

It also helped that Spirit of America's work in Iraq had earned the support of Marine Gen. Jim Mattis, currently head of U.S. Central Command, and Gen. Joe Dunford, the Marines' No. 2 officer. Gen. Mattis said that if the program fit within the Pentagon's guidelines, his lawyers would write it into a workable regulation.

Mr. Johnson and Ms. Bradley signed off in late October, Gen. Mattis's lawyers wrote the reg, and Spirit of America this week has Matt Valkovic and Chris Hellie on the ground with the Marines in Helmand Province. Mr. Hake arrives in Afghanistan next Wednesday.

It is hard not to note the irony of needing government at the highest level to green-light a good idea at the lowest level. That, I'm afraid, is the story of government in our time.

Asked about his involvement, Gen. Mattis characteristically cut to the chase: "When capable people with good intentions meet bad processes, bad processes win nine out of 10 times. The CSP is a good process that connects good people on opposite sides of the earth Afghan and American to each other using our troops who can see the immediate needs." Gen. Mattis says the program "opens a whole new vista for direct support when U.S. government money is not the right answer."

Mr. Hake, wearing his software cap, thinks the right analogy for unlocking private, civilian expertise to support modern warfighting needs in places like Iraq or Afghanistan is the way we developed Web standards, which set in motion waves of innovation. His guys on the ground in Afghanistan, for example, carry satellite Internet access everywhere they go and plan to set up Skype video conferences to access expertise for

immediate, nonmilitary needs say, for village health or local commerce.

"Even if you don't think we should be there," says Mr. Hake, "you should want us to be successful as long as we are there. This is the time to lean forward and this private support is one way to do it."

It's also one good way to ensure that the Americans over there on our behalf aren't forgotten by the rest of us back here.