

Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and America's War in Afghanistan

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Even though it has spent at least \$60 billion to destroy them, the Pentagon is losing the battle to combat the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), which have accounted for two out of every three U.S. casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan. This won't stop the Pentagon, though, from spending another \$10.1 billion on them next year as it struggles to reduce the human toll the IEDs are taking in its longest-ever war.

While 10 to 15 percent of the IEDs that go off maim or kill U.S. soldiers, "The statistical likelihood of (an enemy) being killed or hurt while planting a bomb was close to zero", writes Andrew Cockburn in the November issue of Harper's magazine. By May, 2007, he reported, some 70,000 IEDs were planted in Iraq alone.

"Assembled from cooking pots, mobile phones, flashlight batteries, farm fertilizer, and other commonplace items, these home-made weapons have altered the course of the Iraqi and Afghan wars," Cockburn writes. "They are also as far removed from our industrial approach to warfare as it is possible to be."

According to Wikipedia, "In 2009, there were 7,228 IED attacks in Afghanistan, a 120 percent increase over 2008, and a record for the war.

Last year, "IED attacks in Afghanistan wounded 3,366 U.S. soldiers, which is nearly 60 percent of the total IED-wounded since the start of the war...Insurgents planted 14,661 IEDs in 2010, a 62 percent increase over the previous year," Wikipedia said.

"As a general rule, we find about 50 percent of the IEDs before they go off," General Michael Oates told Cockburn. The other 50 percent do detonate but of this group one-third do no harm because they were set incorrectly or were not sufficiently lethal or failed to pierce the protective gear of the troops, Oates continued. But, "Somewhere between 10 and 15 percent kill or harm our soldiers or our equipment, and that number's been very stubborn since about 2004."

Military analyst Rex Rivolo said the human networks employed making, planting and triggering the IEDs provide jobs for 15,000 workers so that it "counts as a definite growth sector." IED-planters earn about \$15 per job. Rivolo said the best way to inhibit their deployment was to operate low-flying light aircraft over areas where IEDs might be planted.

"When Rivolo oversaw a test-exercise in Jordan in 2005 that clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of the light-aircraft approach, all copies of the resulting report were recalled

and destroyed,” Cockburn wrote. Rivolo told him, “It was too cheap for their taste.” Rivolo headed research at the Counter-IED Operations Integration Center in Baghdad.

A concurring view comes from Franklin Spinney, a former Pentagon analyst, who said that those who come up with simple responses to nullify the IED impact “are the antithesis of the techno-war that keeps the money flowing. The American military has sold the idea that complex technologies coupled to step-by-step analytical procedures can negate all the uncertainties and surprises of combat to solve any problem in war.”

A big part of the U.S. response money has been plowed into sophisticated surveillance systems. The Air Force and the Army are hard at work building blimps costing \$211 million and \$517 million, respectively, that can hover 20,000 feet or higher for a week at a time that will spy over large areas to detect IED planters.

Those who plant IEDs are regarded as High Value Targets, or HVTs, and their eradication is “the ultimate objective of our entire counter-IED strategy,” Cockburn writes. Yet, when HVT bomb-planters are killed, attacks within three miles of their strikes increase by an average of 20 percent, he writes.

According to Rivolo, the reason is “our principal strategy in Iraq is counterproductive and needs to be evaluated.” The slain HVTs were almost always replaced at once, usually within 24 hours and, Rivolo said, “The new guy is going to work harder.”

If the strategy is counter-productive, a cynic may well wonder if the goal in Afghanistan isn’t so much to win—as to spend. #

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