

A War of Will

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The war in Afghanistan is one of will and commitment.

The side with the greatest desire for victory will ultimately prevail.

That's the blunt and simple assessment of Lieutenant General John F. Mulholland, Jr., a 1978 Furman graduate who serves as commander of the U.S. Army Special Forces. Mulholland spoke Monday night before a packed crowd in Younts Conference Center.

"At the end of the day this will be about our will, our commitment as a military, and our commitment as a nation to give the Afghan people the peace they deserve," said Mulholland. "No people, at least in the modern era, have suffered as much as they have."

About 100,000 troops are currently engaged in the war, which is in its ninth year. This summer, the United States completed the deployment of 30,000 additional soldiers to stem a rising insurgency against the administration of Afghan president Hamid Karzai.

During an hour-long presentation Monday night sponsored by the Riley Institute, Mulholland painted a broad and complex portrait of Afghanistan, a nation that has been in conflict since the 1979 Soviet invasion.

The country, he said, includes approximately a dozen ethnic groups that compete for power. Against that backdrop is a land of incredible geographic diversity.

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The Taliban, a radical Islamic group, took over the country in 1996 following a four-year civil war and began harboring terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda. In late 2001 NATO and U.S. forces quickly overran the Taliban government after it refused to stop shielding al Qaeda members or to turn over Osama Bin Laden.

Mulholland, who was involved in the 2001 action, likened the scene in some Afghan cities to the celebrations that occurred in Paris when France was liberated by the Nazis. There were, however, a few differences.

Explaining the Taliban's strict social code that prohibits music and shaving for men, Mulholland said, "There was a mad dash to the barbershop . . . and everyone began blaring music, all kinds of music."

In recent years, however, with the United States increasingly turning its attention to Iraq, the Taliban and al Qaeda have regained traction in Afghanistan. "Afghanistan got off the radar screen," said Mulholland. "Whether we lost an opportunity there will be debated for many years."

The general described how the extremes of Afghan weather (bitter cold, frequent sandstorms) and the country's nearly impenetrable, mountainous terrain make transportation — and finding the enemy — difficult. Adding to the problem is the country's feeble infrastructure, as its roads and utility systems (electricity, water and sewer) have been decimated by years of conflict and neglect.

"It's very much a combination of a Mad Max movie with the Peace Corps and the U.S. military thrown in," he said. "We are trying to build anything from literally nothing."

Working in villages in an effort to earn goodwill among the Afghan people, Mulholland said U.S. and NATO forces are "trying to clear and hold areas so that governance can take root and improve their way of life. It is quite a challenge."

On the political front, he said, the military and members of the Karzai administration are searching to find "those elements in the adversary camps that are open to reconciliation. That is what was done in Iraq. For those who are irreconcilable, the only option for us is to kill them. But we'd rather bring them over to our side."

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