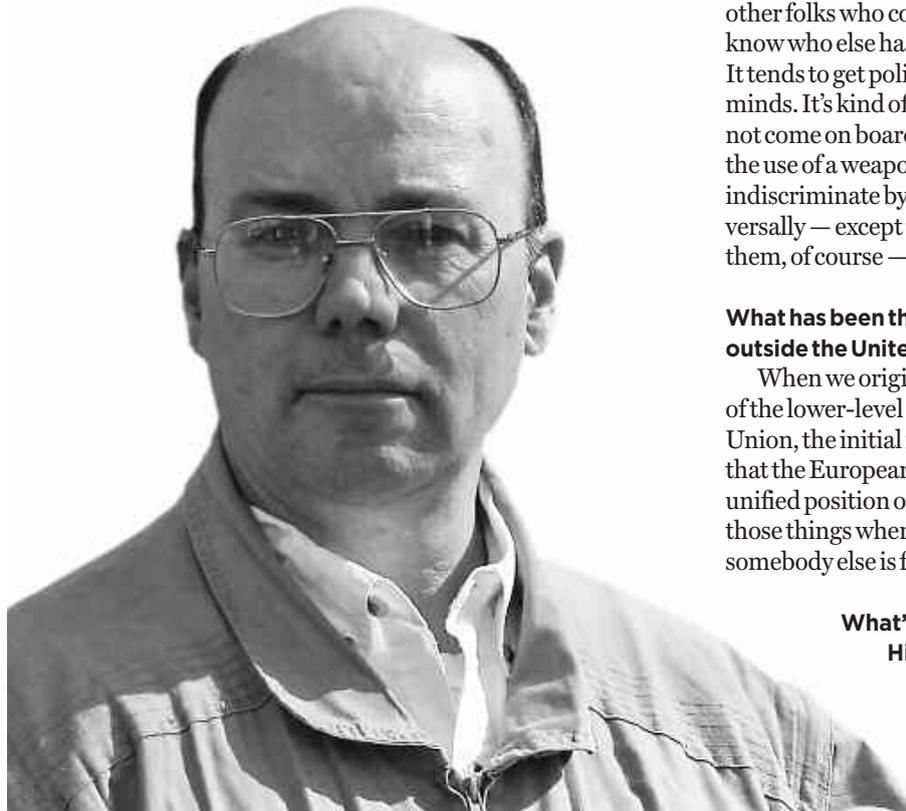


Fighting IEDs, and a paradox

Bob Morris on why even a battle with no losers can't get a unified front from Congress



The nonprofit Partners International Foundation launched a campaign in Washington early this year aimed at getting Congress and the White House to support global action against improvised explosive devices, or IEDs, which have caused tens of thousands of casualties among civilians and U.S. troops. The foundation got Rep. Elton Gallegly, R-Calif., to spearhead a nonpartisan Capitol Hill effort to combat the use of IEDs, but only 27 House members and no senators have agreed to sign. Points asked Bob Morris, a retired Army colonel and founder of Partners International, about the politics behind getting Congress to take a stand.

Considering the losses U.S. troops have suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan from IEDs, why wouldn't politicians enthusiastically back an effort to combat them?

I really don't understand it. With this letter that we're working right now through Congress, we get a couple of different reactions. One reaction, as one congressional staffer put it: "My boss is on board. It's a no-brainer." Then you have other folks who come back and want to know who else has signed the letter first. ... It tends to get politicized in some people's minds. It's kind of baffling why folks would not come on board and at least denounce the use of a weapon that is completely indiscriminate by definition and universally — except for the people who use them, of course — despised.

What has been the campaign's reception outside the United States?

When we originally approached some of the lower-level offices in the European Union, the initial response we got back was that the European Union does not have a unified position on IEDs. ... It's just one of those things where everyone assumes that somebody else is fixing the problem.

What's the excuse on Capitol Hill for not signing?

One response [from an aide] said the individual's boss, the congress-



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man, "does not support causes." Another one said their boss doesn't sign petitions. There's another ... who says the member "appreciates your efforts and those of similar veterans groups to defeat these devices ... [but] at the current time he is focusing his efforts to prevent the catastrophic effects of sequestration from making it more difficult for our government to address these terrible devices and their effects." I'm an English major, and I have no idea what that means. ...

This is not framed as exclusively a House letter. It's framed as a joint letter from members of Congress — the House and Senate. And that was by design. We wanted to show unity — at least, in the United States at this point — between all parties, all ideologies, everything ... on what we believe is a very black-and-white issue.

The international campaign to ban land mines also ran into major obstacles in Washington. Is this the same situation?

There's a fundamental difference between the campaign to ban land mines and the campaign against IEDs. You really can't compare the two. ... One of the reasons, historically, why there's a reluctance of nations to join campaigns against things like land mines is because they use land mines. There's a whole lot of political stuff that goes with that.

Ours is completely different. We're going against IEDs, which have been predominantly the greatest cause of casualties for civilians, in addition to the military. ... Some of the folks we've talked to think that IEDs

are confined to Iraq and Afghanistan, and when the military forces pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan, the IED problem globally will go away. That's not correct. ...

There is some reluctance to accept that there is a problem. In some countries in Africa that we have worked with, you see a lot of news reports that are disputed by local law enforcement. In one case, there was a police station that got bombed in West Africa. The chief of police came out and said that the station hadn't been bombed — the air conditioner exploded. I've had security people from large oil companies in an oil-rich area of West Africa tell me that they would never officially acknowledge there were IEDs because they felt somehow it gave the militants an advantage, being publicly acknowledged that there was an issue there.

The groups that plant IEDs seem not to care about the casualties they cause. How do you change their mind-set?

We're limited in what we can do. For example, I flew to Nigeria about a year and a half ago and met with members of MEND [the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta] and talked to them about this situation. Those folks, and some of the folks involved directly in the attacks, were more than willing to come up with some alternatives. You're always going to have these hard-core folks in the middle who are bent on destruction. Those folks just need to be brought to justice and prosecuted. Other folks who get recruited into this, a lot of these bomb makers, do this because they have no other way to support their family, and somebody's offering them money to do it. They'd love to get an alternative for it.



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