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Believe in power of 'roads and rice'

By SALLY SCHUFF

FORMER U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia Ken Quinn has firsthand knowledge of what it takes to defeat a terrorist insurgency.

Quinn, who has served as president of the World Food Prize Foundation for the past 10 years, believes in the power of "roads and rice."

"There is now a significant body of experience and evidence that some of the most powerful weapons we have in the arsenal to defeat terrorism are roads and agricultural technology," Quinn said in a recent *Feedstuffs* interview.

His remarks came after a rare ceremony at the State Department this spring, when he became the first civilian to be awarded the Air Medal for his service on air sorties over war-torn Vietnam.

It was in Vietnam as a young, self-described "wet-behind-the-ears" Foreign Service officer that Quinn learned the "profound power" of combining road building with agricultural technology, particularly high-performing seed technology.

Quinn, who grew up in Dubuque, Iowa, and had no agricultural background, said it was simple "serendipity" that demonstrated to him that roads and rice could accomplish what military might could not.

"I saw during my time in Vietnam how roads and new seeds could combine in a way that could root out and destroy the underpinnings of an insurgency like the Viet Cong in a way that bombs and troops on the ground could not," he said.

As part of the U.S. diplomatic mission during the war, Quinn was dispatched to the district surrounding the key U.S. airbase at Can Tho, which included eight villages loosely connected by a decaying road.

He recounted that just by chance, there was also a U.S. agricultural adviser assigned to the district who brought seeds to the villages for a new "miracle rice" known as IR8, which was developed at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines.

Quinn said the four villages in his district that got improved roads and the new rice were "transformed ... in remarkable time."

The farmers were doubling or tripling their rice yields and got two or three crops instead of just one. The roads let them market the rice, and trucks began coming from Saigon, Vietnam, to buy rice. The rebuilt roads allowed children to get to medical help and to commute between the hamlets to continue into higher levels of schooling.

"Farmers were living better, they had more sturdy houses, the children were better dressed and better nourished," Quinn said, but most of all, "what I observed was that security got better."

Where he previously had had to take armed security with him to visit the villages by day -- and night visits were not advised -- security improved.

"Now, you could go just by yourself without any worries, and you could even go with light security at night because the Viet Cong were evaporating," Quinn said.

He believes the roads and new rice gave the villagers hope. Young men who previously might have joined the radical insurgency instead believed they could build a peaceful future.

Only four villages of the eight in his district benefited from the reconstruction, though.

"At the end of the roads and across the canal, in the next four villages, things were basically unchanged from the last 100 years. People were less nourished or malnourished. Children were thin and couldn't get to school. In these other villages, there were no roads, no rice, no market, and security was as bad as ever. It was the lesson of a lifetime for me," Quinn said.

It was a lesson he would use much later in his career, when he was ambassador to Cambodia from 1996 to 1999, but this time against the genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge.

With just \$11 million in start-up funds the first year, Quinn said the Cambodian government, with U.S. assistance, started building rural roads in the Khmer Rouge base areas.

"The strategy paid off enormously. ... When I left at the end of my tour as ambassador in 1999, the last Khmer Rouge surrendered," Quinn said.

"The bases for the Khmer Rouge to exist, to recruit and to sustain itself eroded and eroded and eroded, so we destroyed -- not alone, but in partnership with the government there -- a huge terrorist organization -- a radical, genocidal organization that had killed 2 million people out of a population of 7 million people," he said.

Quinn found a soul mate when he met Nobel Laureate Norman Borlaug after his service in Cambodia, when he returned to Iowa and took up his duties at the World Food Prize. Borlaug was a leader in the "green revolution."

Quinn noted, "I'm sure if Dr. Borlaug and I were asked by the new President how to defeat terrorism in the Middle East, one of the very first things we'd say would be: 'Build roads.'"

Last week in Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a foreign policy initiative during a ceremony to announce the new World Food Prize winner, whose work bears a marked resemblance to Quinn's.