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Why Barack Obama is boxed in

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From the army that gave us meals ready to eat, comes a new product. It is called governments ready to govern.

It is difficult to have confidence in a general who sets himself up so obviously for a fall. Among the many nonsenses uttered about the long-heralded offensive against the walled town of Marjah in Helmand yesterday was the claim by the US commander, General Stanley McChrystal, that he had an Afghan administration that would be brought to life in the newly liberated areas "in a box, ready to roll in". From the army that gave us meals ready to eat, comes a new product. It is called governments ready to govern. All you do is add water. If such a thing did exist, it has got unlimited potential in a global market of failed states.

But take Gen McChrystal at his word and examine what is in his tuck box. The Taliban has retreated many times before in the last nine years of warfare when faced with overwhelming odds, but it has returned each time. To the counter-insurgency formula of "clear, hold and build" has now been added a fourth injunction: return to Afghan authority. So the contents of the general's box are important, because they are the only fresh elements to this campaign. The numbers of troops being applied may have a military effect in clearing the area of IEDs and booby traps. But those numbers are not permanent and they will not stop the Taliban infiltrating after foreign troops leave and the spotlight of international attention moves elsewhere. Civilian programmes, not helicopter landings, will determine the winner.

So what is in the box? Once the fighting has ended, Isaf has dedicated "district development teams" to move into Marjah. A US team is working alongside a group of Afghan civil servants which the Karzai government is allegedly meant to deploy. To encourage them to serve in what

must be a highly risky secondment, their average monthly salary is being quintupled to about \$300. Once all this is done, the plan is for the US Agency for International Development to help farmers plant crops by opening up the canal network, a project started by the US half a century ago, but which it has yet to complete. As if that were not enough, Hanif Atmar, the Afghan interior minister, urged elders from Marjah's main tribes to give him their sons so that he can recruit 1,000 local police officers, whose job will be to keep the Taliban out.

Even in peacetime, this plan is ambitious. It is bolder still when a full-scale guerilla war is raging in the countryside around. So the test of this strategy will come when Isaf starts to withdraw, as it must, in the months ahead and we find out what sort of town it has transferred to Afghan authority. It has happened repeatedly in Musa Qala before and each time the withdrawal is sotto voce and when the spotlight of the world's media has been turned off. To follow Gen McChrystal's argument to its logical conclusion, the withdrawal of Isaf forces from Marjah will be more significant than their insertion. If this operation is designed to be as important to the Afghan surge as the capture of Falluja was for the Iraq campaign, then the objective is not to kill the insurgents so much as make it impossible for them to come back.

Last night that objective was already slipping, when Nato confirmed that two of its rockets had struck a house in Nad Ali killing 12 civilians sheltering from the fighting, 10 from the same family. They will not be the last civilian casualties. As the operation's US commander, Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, said yesterday, it could take a month to make the whole area safe. For there is one commodity which the Taliban has in abundance and that Gen McChrystal lacks. It is called time, years of it, if need be. The longer the Taliban can string the battle out, the sooner the west will tire and Barack Obama will see the fatal flaw of his exit strategy: that Afghan dependency is built into it. Not least in the figure of Hamid Karzai himself, whose government would collapse if the US pulled out and who has no interest in seeing that happen.