

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Asia times online

The pressure of an expanding war

By Tom Engelhardt
May 23, 2009

Yes, Stanley McChrystal is the general from the dark side (and proud of it). So the recent sacking of Afghan commander General David McKiernan after less than a year in the field and McChrystal's appointment as the man to run the Afghan War seems to signal that the Barack Obama administration is going for broke. It's heading straight into what, in the Vietnam era, was known as "the big muddy".

General McChrystal comes from a world where killing by any means is the norm and a blanket of secrecy provides the necessary protection. For five years he commanded the Pentagon's super-secret Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), which, among other things, ran what Seymour Hersh has described as an "executive assassination wing" out of vice president Cheney's office. (Cheney just returned the favor by giving the newly appointed general a ringing endorsement: "I think you'd be hard put to find anyone better than Stan McChrystal.")

McChrystal gained a certain renown when [president George W Bush](#) outed him as the man responsible for tracking down and eliminating al-Qaeda-in-Mesopotamia leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The secret force of "manhunters" he commanded had its own secret detention and interrogation center near [Baghdad](#), Camp Nama, where bad things happened regularly, and the unit there, Task Force 6-26, had its own slogan: "If you don't make them bleed, they can't prosecute for it." Since some of the task force's men were, in the end, prosecuted, the bleeding evidently wasn't avoided.

In the Bush years, McChrystal was reputedly extremely close to secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld. The super-secret force he commanded was, in fact, part of Rumsfeld's effort to seize control of, and Pentagonize, the covert, on-the-ground activities that were once the purview of the [Central Intelligence Agency](#).

Behind McChrystal lies a string of targeted executions that may run into the hundreds, as well as accusations of torture and abuse by troops under his command (and a role in the cover-up of the circumstances surrounding the death of [Army Ranger](#) and former National Football League player Pat Tillman). The general has reportedly long thought of Afghanistan and Pakistan as a single battlefield, which means that he was a premature adherent to the idea of an Af-Pak - that is, expanded - war.

While in Afghanistan in 2008, the New York Times reported, he was a "key advocate ... of a plan, ultimately approved by President George W Bush, to use American commandos to strike at Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan". This end-of-term Bush program provoked such anger and blowback in Pakistan that it was reportedly halted after two cross-border raids, one of which killed civilians.

All of this offers more than a hint of the sort of "new thinking and new approaches" - to use Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' words - that the Obama administration expects McChrystal to bring to the devolving Af-Pak battlefield. He is, in a sense, both a legacy figure from the worst days of the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld era and the first-born child of Obama-era Washington's growing desperation and hysteria over the wars it inherited.

Hagiography

And here's the good news - We luv the guy. Just luv him to death.

We loved him back in 2006, when Bush first outed him and Newsweek reporters Michael Hirsh and John Barry dubbed him "a rising star" in the army and one of the "Jedi Knights who are fighting in what Cheney calls 'the shadows'."

It's no different today in what's left of the mainstream news analysis business. In that mix of sports lingo, Hollywood-ese, and just plain hyperbole that makes armchair war strategizing just so darn much fun, Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, for instance, claimed that US Central Command supremo General David Petraeus, who picked McChrystal as his man in Afghanistan, is "assembling an all-star team" and that McChrystal himself is "a rising superstar who, like Petraeus, has helped reinvent the [US Army](#)". Is that all?

When it came to pure, instant hagiography, however, the prize went to Elisabeth Bumiller and Mark Mazzetti of the New York Times, who wrote a front-pager, "A General Steps from the Shadows", that painted a picture of McChrystal as a mutant cross between Superman and a saint.

Among other things, it described the general as "an ascetic who ... usually eats just one meal a day, in the evening, to avoid sluggishness. He is known for operating on a few hours' sleep and for running to and from work while listening to audio books on an iPod ... [He has] an encyclopedic, even obsessive, knowledge about the lives of terrorists ... [He is] a warrior-scholar, comfortable with diplomats, politicians ... " and so on. The quotes Bumiller and Mazzetti dug up from others were no less spectacular: "He's got all the Special Ops attributes, plus an intellect," and "If you asked me the first thing that comes to mind about General McChrystal ... I think of no body fat."

From the gush of good cheer about his appointment, you might almost conclude that the general was not human at all, but an advanced android (a good one, of course) and the "elite" world (of murder and abuse) he emerged from an unbearably sexy one.

Above all, as we're told here and elsewhere, what's so good about the new appointment is that McChrystal is "more aggressive" than his stick-in-the-mud predecessor. He will, as Bumiller and Thom Shanker report in another piece, bring "a more aggressive and innovative approach to a worsening seven-year war". The general, we're assured, likes operations without body fat, but with plenty of punch. And though no one quite says this, given his closeness to Rumsfeld and possibly Cheney, both desperately eager to "take the gloves off" on a planetary scale, his mentality is undoubtedly a global-war-on-terror one, which translates into no respect for boundaries, restraints, or the sovereignty of others.

After all, as journalist Gareth Porter pointed out recently in a thoughtful portrait carried on Asia Times Online of the new Afghan War commander, former Rumsfeld granted the parent of JSOC, the Special Operations Command (SOCOM), "the authority to carry out actions unilaterally anywhere on the globe". (See [US choice hardly McChrystal clear](#), May 14, 2009, Asia Times Online.)

Think of McChrystal's appointment, then, as a decision in Washington to dispatch the bull directly to the china shop with the most meager of hopes that the results won't be smashed Afghans and Pakistanis. The Post's Ignatius even compares McChrystal's boss Petraeus and Obama's special envoy to the region, Richard Holbrooke, to "two headstrong bulls in a small paddock". He then concludes his paean to all of them with this passage - far more ominous than he means it to be:

Obama knows the immense difficulty of trying to fix a broken Afghanistan and make it a functioning, modern country. But with his two bulls, Petraeus and Holbrooke, he's marching his presidency into the "graveyard of empires" anyway.

McChrystal is evidently the third bull, the one slated to start knocking over the tombstones.

An expanding Af-Pak war

Of course, there are now so many bulls in this particular china shop that smashing is increasingly the name of the game. At this point, the early moves of the Obama administration, when combined with the momentum of the situation it inherited, have resulted in the expansion of the Af-Pak war in at least six areas, which only presage further expansion in the months to come:

1. Expanding troop commitment: In February, President Obama ordered a "surge" of 17,000 extra troops into Afghanistan, increasing US forces there by 50%. (Then-commander McKiernan had called for 30,000 new troops.) In March, another 4,000 American military advisors and trainers were promised. The first of the surge troops, reportedly ill-equipped, are already arriving. In March, it was announced that this troop surge would be accompanied by a "civilian surge" of diplomats, advisors, and the like; in April, it was reported that, because the requisite diplomats and advisors couldn't be

found, the civilian surge would actually be made up largely of military personnel.

In preparation for this influx, there has been massive base and outpost building in the southern parts of that country, including the construction of 443-acre Camp Leatherneck in that region's "desert of death". When finished, it will support up to 8,000 US troops, and a raft of helicopters and planes. Its airfield, which is under construction, has been described as the "largest such project in the world in a combat setting".

2. Expanding CIA drone war: The CIA is running an escalating secret drone war in the skies over the Pakistani borderlands with Afghanistan, a "targeted" assassination program of the sort that McChrystal specialized in while in Iraq. Since last September, more than three dozen drone attacks - the Los Angeles Times put the number at 55 - have been launched, as opposed to 10 in 2006-2007. The program has reportedly taken out a number of mid-level al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, but also caused significant civilian casualties, destabilized the Pashtun border areas of Pakistan, and fostered support for the Islamic guerrillas in those regions. As Noah Shachtman wrote recently at his Danger Room website:

According to the American press, a pair of missiles from the unmanned aircraft killed "at least 25 militants". In the local media, the dead were simply described as "29 tribesmen present there". That simple difference in description underlies a serious problem in the campaign against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. To Americans, the drones over Pakistan are terrorist-killers. In Pakistan, the robotic planes are wiping out neighbors.

David Kilcullen, a key advisor to Petraeus during the Iraq "surge" months, and counterinsurgency expert Andrew McDonald Exum recently called for a moratorium on these attacks on the New York Times op-ed page. ("Press reports suggest that over the last three years drone strikes have killed about 14 terrorist leaders. But, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700 civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed, a hit rate of 2% - hardly 'precision'.") As it happens, however, the Obama administration is deeply committed to its drone war. As CIA Director Leon Panetta put the matter, "Very frankly, it's the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al-Qaeda leadership."

3. Expanding Air Force drone war: The US Air Force now seems to be getting into the act as well. There are conflicting reports about just what it is trying to do, but it has evidently brought its own set of Predator and Reaper drones into play in Pakistani skies, in conjunction, it seems, with a somewhat reluctant Pakistani military. Though the outlines of this program are foggy at best, this nonetheless represents an expansion of the war.

4. Expanding political interference: Quite a different kind of escalation is also underway. Washington is evidently attempting to insert yet another figure from the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld era into the Afghan mix. Not so long ago, Zalmay Khalilzad, the neo-con former American viceroy in Kabul and then Baghdad, was considering making a run for the Afghan presidency against Hamid Karzai, the leader the Obama administration is desperate to ditch.

In March, reports - hotly denied by Holbrooke and others - broke in the British press of a US/British plan to "undermine President Karzai of Afghanistan by forcing him to install a powerful chief of staff to run the government". Karzai, so the rumors went, would be reduced to "figurehead" status, while a "chief executive with prime ministerial-style powers" not provided for in the Afghan Constitution would essentially take over the running of the weak and corrupt government.

This week, Helene Cooper reported on the front page of the New York Times that Khalilzad would be that man. He "could assume a powerful, unelected position inside the Afghan government under a plan he is discussing with Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president, according to senior American and [Afghan officials](#)". He would then be "the chief executive officer of Afghanistan".

Cooper's report is filled with official denials that these negotiations involve Washington in any way. Yet if they succeed, an American citizen, a former US ambassador to the UN as well as to Kabul, would end up functionally atop the Karzai government just as the Obama administration is eagerly pursuing a stepped-up war against the Taliban.

Why officials in Washington imagine that Afghans might actually accept such a figure is the mystery of the moment. It's best to think of this plan as the kinder, gentler, soft-power version of the Kennedy administration's 1963 decision to sign off on the coup that led to the assassination of South Vietnamese autocrat Ngo Dinh Diem.

Then, too, top Washington officials were distressed that a puppet who seemed to be losing support was, like Karzai, also acting in an increasingly independent manner when it came to playing his appointed role in an American drama. That assassination, by the way, only increased instability in South Vietnam, leading to a succession of weak military regimes and paving the way for a further unraveling there. This American expansion of the war would likely have similar consequences.

5. Expanding war in Pakistan: Meanwhile, in Pakistan itself, mayhem has ensued, again in significant part thanks to Washington, whose disastrous Afghan war and escalating drone attacks have helped to destabilize the Pashtun regions of the country. Now, the Pakistani military - pushed and threatened by Washington (with the loss of military aid, among other things) - has smashed full force into the districts of Buner and Swat, which had, in recent months, been largely taken over by the Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas we call "the Pakistani Taliban".

It's been a massive show of force by a military configured for smash-mouth war with India, not urban or village warfare with lightly armed guerrillas. The Pakistani military has loosed its jets, helicopter gunships, and artillery on the region (even as the CIA drone strikes continue), killing unknown numbers of civilians and, far more significantly, causing a massive exodus of the local population. In some areas, well more than half the population has fled Taliban depredations and indiscriminate fire from the military. Those that remain in besieged towns and cities, often without electricity, with the dead in the streets, and fast disappearing supplies of food, are clearly in trouble.

With nearly 1.5 million Pakistanis turned into refugees just since the latest offensive began, UN officials are suggesting that this could be the worst refugee crisis since the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Talk about the destabilization of a country.

In the long run, this may only increase the anger of Pashtuns in the tribal areas of Pakistan at both the Americans and the Pakistani military and government. The rise of Pashtun nationalism and a fight for an "Islamic Pashtunistan" would prove a dangerous development indeed. This latest offensive is what Washington thought it wanted, but undoubtedly the old saw, "Be careful what you wish for, lest it come true," applies. Already a panicky Washington is planning to rush \$110 million in refugee assistance to the country.

6. Expanding civilian death toll and blowback: As Taliban attacks in Afghanistan rise and that loose guerrilla force (more like a coalition of various Islamist, tribal, warlord, and criminal groups) spreads into new areas, the American air war in Afghanistan continues to take a heavy toll on Afghan civilians, while manufacturing ever more enemies as well as deep resentment and protest in that country. The latest such incident, possibly the worst since the Taliban was defeated in 2001, involves the deaths of up to 147 Afghans in the Bala Baluk district of Farah province, according to accounts that have come out of the villages attacked.

Up to 95 of the dead were under 18, one Afghan lawmaker involved in investigating the incident claims, and up to 65 of them women or girls. These deaths came after Americans were called into an escalating fight between the Taliban and Afghan police and military units, and in turn, called in devastating air strikes by two US jets and a B-1 bomber (which, villagers claim, hit them after the Taliban fighters had left).

Despite American pledges to own up to and apologize more quickly for civilian deaths, the post-carnage events followed a predictable stonewalling pattern, including a begrudging step-by-step retreat in the face of independent claims and reports.

The Americans first denied that anything much had happened; then claimed that they had killed mainly Taliban "militants"; then that the Taliban had themselves used grenades to kill most of the civilians (a charge later partially withdrawn as "thinly sourced"); and finally, that the numbers of Afghan dead were "extremely over-exaggerated", and that the urge for payment from the Afghan government might be partially responsible.

An investigation, as always, was launched that never seems to end, while the Americans wait for the story to fade from view. As of this moment, while still awaiting the results of a "very exhaustive" investigation, American spokesmen nonetheless claim that only 20-30 civilians died along with up to 65 Taliban insurgents. In these years, however, the record tells us that, when weighing the stories offered by surviving villagers and those of American officials, believe the villagers. Put more bluntly, in such situations, we lie, they die.

Two things make this "incident" at Bala Baluk more striking. First of all, according to

Jerome Starkey of the British Independent, another Rumsfeld creation, the US Marines Corps Special Operations Command (MarSOC), the Marines' version of JSOC, was centrally involved, as it had been in two other major civilian slaughters, one near Jalalabad in 2007 (committed by a MarSOC unit that dubbed itself "Taskforce Violence"), the second in 2008 at the village of Azizabad in Herat Province. McChrystal's appointment, reports Starkey, has "prompted speculation that [similar] commando counterinsurgency missions will increase in the battle to beat the Taliban".

Second, back in Washington, National Security Advisor James Jones and head of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen, fretting about civilian casualties in Afghanistan and faced with President Karzai's repeated pleas to cease air attacks on Afghan villages, nonetheless refused to consider the possibility. Both, in fact, used the same image. As Jones told ABC's George Stephanopoulos: "Well, I think he understands that ... we have to have the full complement of ... our offensive military power when we need it ... We can't fight with one hand tied behind our back ...".

In a world in which the US is the military equivalent of the multi-armed Hindu god Shiva, this is one of the truly strange, if long-lasting, American images. It was, for instance, used by president George H W Bush on the eve of the first Gulf War. "No hands," he said, "are going to be tied behind backs. This is not a Vietnam."

Forgetting the levels of firepower loosed in Vietnam, the image itself is abidingly odd. After all, in everyday speech, the challenge "I could beat you with one hand tied behind my back" is a bravado offer of voluntary restraint and an implicit admission that fighting any other way would make one a bully. So hidden in the image, both when the elder Bush used it and today, is a most un-American acceptance of the United States as a bully nation, about to be restrained by no one, least of all itself.

Apologize or stonewall, one thing remains certain: the air war will continue and so civilians will continue to die. The idea that the US might actually be better off with one "hand" tied behind its back is now so alien to us as to be beyond serious consideration.

The pressure of an expanding war President Obama has opted for a down-and-dirty war strategy in search of some at least minimalist form of success. For this, McChrystal is the poster boy. Former Afghan commander General McKiernan believed that, "as a NATO commander, my mandate stops at the [Afghan] border. So unless there is a clear case of self-protection to fire across the border, we don't consider any operations across the border in the tribal areas".

That the "responsibilities" of US generals fighting the Afghan War "ended at the border with Pakistan", Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt of the Times report, is now considered part of an "old mind-set". McChrystal represents those "fresh eyes" that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates talked about in the press conference announcing the general's appointment. As Mazzetti and Schmitt point out, "Among [McChrystal's] last projects as the head of the Joint Special Operations Command was to better coordinate Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency efforts on both sides of the porous border."

For those old enough to remember, we've been here before. Administrations that start down a path of expansion in such a war find themselves strangely locked in - psychologically, if nothing else - if things don't work out as expected and the situation continues to deteriorate. In Vietnam, the result was escalation without end. President Obama and his foreign policy team now seem locked into an expanding war. Despite the fact that the application of force has not only failed for years, but actually fed that expansion, they also seem to be locked into a policy of applying ever greater force, with the goal of, as the Post's Ignatius puts it, cracking the "Taliban coalition" and bringing elements of it to the bargaining table.

So keep an eye out for whatever goes wrong, as it most certainly will, and then for the pressures on Washington to respond with further expansions of what is already "Obama's war". With McChrystal in charge in Afghanistan, for instance, it seems reasonable to assume that the urge to sanction new special forces raids into Pakistan will grow. After all, frustration in Washington is already building, for however much the Pakistani military may be taking on the Taliban in Swat or Buner, don't expect its military or civilian leaders to be terribly interested in what happens near the Afghan border.

As Tony Karon of the Rootless Cosmopolitan blog puts the matter: "The current military campaign is designed to enforce a limit on the Taliban's reach within Pakistan, confining it to the movement's heartland." And that heartland is the Afghan border region. For one thing, the Pakistani military (and the country's intelligence services, which essentially brought the Taliban into being long ago) are focused on India. They want a Pashtun ally across the border, Taliban or otherwise, where they fear the Indians are making inroads.

So the frustration of a war in which the enemy has no borders and we do is bound to rise along with the fighting, long predicted to intensify this year. We now have a more aggressive "team" in place. Soon enough, if the fighting in the Afghan south and along the Pakistani border doesn't go as planned, pressure for the president to send in those other 10,000 troops General McKiernan asked for may rise as well, as could pressure to apply more air power, more drone power, more of almost anything. And yet, as former CIA station chief in Kabul, Graham Fuller, wrote recently, in the region "crises have only grown worse under the US military footprint".

And what if, as the war continues its slow arc of expansion, the "Washington coalition" is the one that cracks first? What then?