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Thinking the Unthinkable in the Aftermath of Kandahar

By Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould

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The upcoming campaign for the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar will be the crucial test for the United States' military and the Obama administration's AfPak strategy. It will clearly be an epic military battle and a test of the intellectual movement for counterinsurgency within the military known as COIN. But, like the battle for Marja in February, will the battle for Kandahar be more about the "perceptions" of American victory than about real success? That battle featured what General Stanley McChrystal described as "government in a box," a kind of franchisable, political "happy meal" for Afghanistan with a pre-selected government administration, mayor and police force, ready to go the minute the shooting stopped.

In the end, General McChrystal's government in a box turned out to be more like a government in a coffin. Dead on arrival. Authors Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason likened U.S. policy in Afghanistan to nothing less than British literature's most famous pipe dream, Alice in Wonderland. "Lewis Carroll's ironically opium-inspired tale of a rational person caught up inside a mad world with its own bizarre but consistent internal (il)logic has now surpassed Vietnam as the best paradigm to understand the war in Afghanistan."

Johnson and Mason described Marja as nothing more than a massive exercise in public relations, with one intention only; "to shore up dwindling domestic support for the war by

creating the illusion of progress," while the media gulped down the bottle labeled "drink me," and shrank into insignificance.

But what can the world expect of American policy in the aftermath of what promises to be an even larger opium-inspired tea party in Kandahar? And what happens if the U.S. achieves a military victory, but fails to address the gaping political vacuum necessary to keep the Taliban from returning?

It remains unclear exactly what the U.S. is trying to accomplish politically in Afghanistan with a Karzai government that neither Washington nor the Afghan population appears to want. According to experts, Washington remains divided over whether to engage with the Taliban leadership or follow the Pentagon's line of fighting while talking. The Obama administration has narrowed its military objective down to ridding Pakistan and Afghanistan of Al Qaeda and finding Osama bin Laden. But that leaves a dozen affiliated radical groups like the Tehrik-i-Taliban, Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Haqqani network to organize, train and expand their networks under the ponderous assumption that they can be cut from the influence of Al Qaeda and kept from them.

And what about NATO? Will a public relations victory be enough to convince an increasingly reluctant NATO to hang in for the long term? Absent from much of the public discussion is the growing schism between Washington and European capitals, with cold war hawks like Zbigniew Brzezinski and Madeleine Albright trying desperately to breath new life into what the U.S. military's own thinkers describe as "a discredited Cold War rule set.

Europe and the U.S. remain deeply divided over American policy toward Afghanistan and their role in it. In September 2009, former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski issued a somber admonition at a gathering of military and foreign policy experts in Geneva warning that the U.S. was running the risk of replicating the fate of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and that if Europe left the U.S. on its own there, "that would spell the end of the alliance."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/14/world/europe/14nato.html>

According to its latest mission statement, written by a team headed by former U.S. secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, "NATO must win the war in Afghanistan, expand ties with Russia and even China, counter the threat posed by Iran's missiles, and assure the security of its 28 members."

But not everyone sees NATO's demand for a European rededication to a cold-war-global-security-order ruled over by a diminished United States, as a desirable policy for what may lie ahead. Neither do they see a commitment to winning in Afghanistan as necessary to European security, as the political consensus for NATO's expanded mission cracks apart.

Foreign policy commentator William Pfaff wrote on May 18, from Paris, "The United

States has, since the end of the Cold War, wanted NATO to become an American military auxiliary, largely under the sway of the Pentagon, and on the whole this has happened,.. At the NATO experts' meeting Monday, which considered proposals for what NATO should become by 2020, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asked why the Europeans should pay twice for their defense. I can think of one unspeakable but not unthinkable reason why European countries might wish to defend themselves. What if it should prove one day that the threat the Europeans need to defend themselves against is of American and Israeli origin?"

Pfaff admitted that his speculation of a European vs. American/Israeli conflict is an "Hysterical geopolitical fantasy." Yet, the very idea that Pfaff should find such a development thinkable, is something Americans must open their minds to. In fact, the U.S. military's own thinkers are preparing for a new world in which the U.S.'s containment policy folds in upon itself.

Nathan Freier of the Army's Strategic Studies Institute writes, "Imagine, 'a new era of containment with the United States as the nation to be contained,' where the principle tools and methods of war involve everything but those associated with traditional military conflict. Imagine that the sources of this 'new era of containment' are widespread; predicated on nonmilitary forms of political, economic, and violent action; in the main, sustainable over time; and finally, largely invulnerable to effective reversal through traditional U.S. advantages."

Following World War II, the U.S. built a cold war containment policy that straight-jacketed its communist enemies as well as American thinking. Today, the word on the street is, if the U.S. can't find a way to rethink this policy at a major turning point in its empire, it will soon find itself contained by a straightjacket of its own making.

Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould are the authors of. Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story published by City Lights, January 2009. Their next book Crossing Zero The AfPak War at the Turning Point of American Empire will be published February, 2011. Visit their website at www.invisiblehistory.com