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The Nation

No Light, Only Tunnel

By Robert Dreyfuss

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Obama has two choices: He will either have to admit defeat and renege on his commitment to start pulling out troops, or he'll have to start working immediately to create the political and diplomatic conditions for a peace settlement with the insurgents -- including the Taliban, says Robert Dreyfuss.

Don't look now, but President Obama's Afghanistan strategy is collapsing on his head. The troops that Obama added to the war in 2009 were supposed to head south into Helmand and Kandahar. Instead, the whole war is going south. Fast.

Last year, in two reviews of Afghan policy, the president twice escalated the war, more than doubling the U.S. troop commitment. At the time, he gave the Pentagon until the end of 2010 to prove that General McChrystal's vaunted counterinsurgency-cum-nation-building policy would work. The headlong rush to add troops resulted, first, in an all-out military campaign to seize and control Marja, a dusty, worthless village of 60,000 in Helmand province; and, second, a planned assault on Kandahar, the city of one million that is the birthplace of the Taliban. Marja was a complete failure, and the Kandahar "offensive" ain't happening.

This is, or should be, devastating for Obama. The Marja offensive, last February, was touted as a demonstration of the "clear, hold and build" COIN that McChrystal was hired to implement. That in itself was silly, because Marja is a tiny town of little or no real

strategic importance. By March, when the Marja operation was deemed completed, it was widely cited by the administration as a great victory. But over the last two months, reporters who've actually been there report back that it's still a mess, plagued by violence, that the Taliban has come back in force. The Taliban is carrying out a reign of terror there, killing civilians and government officials alike and battling U.S. and Afghan force to a standstill.

The Marja operation was also described as a prelude to going into Kandahar, an operation that was described as "decisive" in the nine-year-long war. But yesterday, after a week of media reports suggesting that the Kandahar offensive was being delayed, McChrystal said himself in a news conference that there would be no U.S. or Afghan effort to move into Kandahar anytime soon. In the spring, the military was leaking madly that the move into Kandahar would start in June, but if it happens at all now it won't be until the fall. In his news conference, McChrystal was asked if the Kandahar operation would be decisive. Here's the Q&A:

Q : General, will we know by the end of the year if the Kandahar operation is decisive, if it's worked?

GEN. MCCHRISTAL: I think we'll know whether it's progressing. I think it will be very clear by the end of the calendar year that the Kandahar operation is progressing. I don't know whether we'll know whether it is decisive. I think historians will tell us that. But I think, by the end of the year, we'll have enough progress around Kandahar to be clear to the Afghan people that a substantive change and improvement has been made, and we'll continue on that point.

Don't hold your breath.

Yesterday's Washington Post reported that Marja is failing, that the insurgency there has regained momentum, and it reported "alarm among top American commanders that they will not be able to change the course of the war in the time President Obama has given them."

The day before, the New York Times reported – before McChrystal's news conference – that the Kandahar offensive had been canceled, under a headline that read: "Disappointing offensive in Marja shapes Kandahar plan." It added: "The very word 'offensive' has been banned." Instead, McChrystal and Co. are talking about a civilian surge, new efforts to support economic development, and a series of new jirgas, or councils, with President Karzai. (Last spring, Karzai attended a jirga in Kandahar with hundreds of tribal leaders and pretty much promised them that the Kandahar offensive wouldn't happen without their support, which was not forthcoming. Karzai also opposed the Marja operation, and he had to be dragged, or strong-armed, into going along with it.)

Obama has declared repeatedly that he will start withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan in July, 2011. By now it's clear that that the United States will be no closer to anything resembling success by then. So, Obama has two choices: first, he will have to

admit defeat and renege on his commitment to start pulling out troops, meaning that he'll be lambasted by the left and liberals in his own party and his political base. Or, second, he'll have to start working immediately to create the political and diplomatic conditions for a peace settlement with the insurgents, including the Taliban, along the lines proposed by President Karzai. So far, the administration has treated Karzai like an annoying puppet. He's been disparaged, ridiculed, undermined, ignored and sniped at, and his efforts to reconcile with the armed opposition, including the Taliban, have been sabotaged by Washington. That has to end. And Obama has to start wheeling and dealing with Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia, China and Saudi Arabia to work out the terms of a face-saving political accord.

None of those nations will help President Obama save face without wanting something in return. If Obama doesn't want to be stuck in Afghanistan for the rest of his term in office (i.e., until 2017) he'd better start finding out what they want. Because every day that he delays, the price gets higher.