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Telegraph

Debate over Afghanistan 'almost tore White House apart'

By Alex Spillius

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The debate on Afghanistan policy caused major divisions in the White House, according to a new book, provoking bitter rows and bickering between senior advisers to President Barack Obama.

New York - During the long debate in 2009 about to what degree to escalate the war, two officials expressed doubt that the Afghan war strategy would work, while the meaning of a July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing US troops was misunderstood by some generals.

"Obama's Wars" by Bob Woodward, the best-selling author who broke the Watergate scandal in the early 1970s, chronicles the often heated debates inside the White House.

According to an advance copy obtained by the New York Times, it portrays the president as a calm, professorial presence who could at times snap and show his frustration. It says he grew tired with the military demanding more and more troops for Afghanistan.

Among his staff and aides there was regular back-biting. Vice President Joe Biden called Richard Holbrooke, the special envoy to Afghanistan, "the most egotistical bastard I've ever met."

There is scorn is expressed for James Jones, who has never been highly rated in Washington. Robert Gates, the Defence Secretary, worried that General Jones would be succeeded by his deputy, Thomas Donilon, who would be a "disaster". Gen David Petraeus, then chief of the central command region that included Iraq and Afghanistan, is said to have avoided contact with David Axelrod, the senior strategist, whom he regarded as "a complete spin doctor".

Despite criticism from Republicans that he doesn't have the stomach to defend America, the author says that Mr Obama strongly supported the CIA drone attacks on al-Qaeda militants in Pakistani territory. Rahm Emanuel, the White House chief of staff, reportedly asked a security adviser, "who did we get today?".

Mr Woodward has written more than a dozen bestsellers, several of them offering detailed accounts of major decision-making processes in different White House administrations.