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Counter Punch Diary

The Ruin of His Presidency

By ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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The ripest moment of absurdity last week was the spectacle of Pentagon officials berating the Washington Post for publishing the supposedly confidential assessment of the situation in Afghanistan, prepared for General McChrystal, America's Man in Charge of that doomed adventure.

The Pentagon asked the Post to cut certain passages on the ground they would compromise national security.

Since the document is commonly supposed to have been leaked to Woodward by either McChrystal himself or one of his retinue it's seems very silly to start whining about the irresponsibility of the press. The record for willful indiscretion is probably held by Henry "Hap" Arnold, the only five star general holding the grades of General of the Army and later, during World War Two, General of the Air Force.

The leak was a famous one. During the war someone gave a Chicago newspaper the entire order of battle of the US Navy. The newspaper published it, in what was undoubtedly one of the most serious security breaches of the era. The identity of the leaker remained unknown for many years. Finally my brother Andrew discovered it, a few years ago. It was General Arnold, pursuing some ferocious bureaucratic struggle against the Enemy – which was of course the U.S. Navy.

Anyone wanting to understand how JFK plunged into the Vietnamese quagmire, and how LBJ got in even deeper has only to follow the current fight over Afghan policy. Insanity effortlessly trumps common sense.

By common agreement the situation is rapidly getting worse. In terms of military advantage the Taliban have been doing very well, helped by America's bizarre policy of trying to assassinate the Taliban's high command by drones, thus allowing vigorous young Taliban commanders to step into senior positions.

Ahmed Rashid writes in a savage and well informed piece in *the New York Review* that

"For much of this year the Taliban have been on the offensive in Afghanistan. Their control of just thirty out of 364 districts in 2003 expanded to 164 districts at the end of 2008, according to the military expert Anthony Cordesman, who is advising General McChrystal. Taliban attacks increased by 60 percent between October 2008 and April 2009. In August, moreover—as part of their well-planned anti-election campaign—the Taliban opened new fronts in the north and west of the country where they had little presence before. On election day in Kunduz in the far northeast of the country, considered to be one of the safest cities in Afghanistan, the Taliban fired fifty-seven rockets. The US military has acknowledged the gravity of the situation. "It is serious and it is deteriorating.... The Taliban insurgency has gotten better, more sophisticated" in their tactics, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told CNN on August 23.

"Yet if it is to have any chance of success, the Obama plan for Afghanistan needs a serious long-term commitment—at least for the next three years. Democratic politicians are demanding results before next year's congressional elections, which is neither realistic nor possible. Moreover, the Taliban are quite aware of the Democrats' timetable. With Obama's plan the US will be taking Afghanistan seriously for the first time since 2001; if it is to be successful it will need not only time but international and US support—both open to question.

"After Obama's injection of 21,000 troops and trainers, total Western forces in Afghanistan now number 100,000, including 68,000 US troops. It is likely that General McChrystal will soon ask for more. Obama's overall plan has been to achieve security by doubling the Afghan army's strength to 240,000 men and the police to 160,000; but these are tasks that would take at least until 2014 to complete, if indeed they can be carried out.

"Meanwhile the military operation in Afghanistan is now costing cash-strapped US taxpayers \$4 billion a month.

"Across the region many people fear that the US and NATO may start to pull out of Afghanistan during the next twelve months despite their uncompleted mission. That would almost certainly result in the Taliban walking into Kabul. Al-Qaeda would be in a stronger position to launch global terrorist attacks. The Pakistani Taliban would be able to "liberate" large parts of Pakistan. The Taliban's game plan of waiting out the Americans now looks more plausible than ever."

After months of derision about Iran's "faked elections", Karzai's fakery in the recent Afghan election was too blatant to permit even *pro forma* denial can no longer be concealed. The corruption of Karzai's regime is the staple of every news report. CounterPunchers should read the admirable dispatch in this site this weekend by Ehsan Azari. The oft-announced goal of

training an Afghan Army and Police Force is faring no better – in fact considerably worse – that the efforts at “Vietnamization” forty years ago. Once furnished with a few square meals, some new clothes and a weapon, the recruits -- some of them having been sent by the Taliban to get some basic training -- promptly desert.

The expedition to Afghanistan is not popular, either here or in Europe. It is also very expensive. But of course it has powerful sponsors, starting with Obama who made it a campaign plank, but who now may or may not be having second thoughts – but who is showered daily with demented consels to “stay the course”, by his Secretary of States sand about 80 per cent of the permanent foreign policy establishment. So the involvement will get deeper, the disasters will mount and powerfully assist in the destruction of Obama’s presidency, starting with major reverses for the Democrats in the midterm elections next year.