

Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President

From the Archives: As President Trump faces opposition from his generals to pull U.S. troops from Syria, here's a look back to a similar fix another new president had gotten himself into, as Ray McGovern reported on March 28, 2009.

By Ray McGovern *Special to Consortium News*



I was wrong. I had been saying that it would be naïve to take too seriously presidential candidate Barack Obama's rhetoric regarding the need to escalate the war in Afghanistan.

And surely he would be fully briefed on the stupidity and deceit that left 58,000 U.S. troops – not to mention 2 million to 3 million Vietnamese – dead in Vietnam. I kept thinking to myself that when he got briefed on the history of Afghanistan and the oft-proven ability of Afghan “militants” to drive out foreign invaders – from Alexander the Great, to the Persians, the Mongolians, Indians, British, Russians – he would be sure to understand why they call mountainous Afghanistan the “graveyard of empires.”

John Kennedy became President the year Obama was born. One cannot expect toddler-to-teenager Barack to remember much about the war in Vietnam, and it was probably too early for that searing, controversial experience to have found its way into the history texts as he was growing up.

But he was certainly old enough to absorb the fecklessness and brutality of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. And his instincts at that time were good enough to see through the Bush administration's duplicity.

And, with him now in the White House, surely some of his advisers would be able to brief him on both Vietnam and Iraq, and prevent him from making similar mistakes – this time in Afghanistan. Or so I thought.

Deflecting an off-the-topic question at his March 24 press conference, Obama said, “I think that the last 64 days has been dominated by me trying to figure out how we're going to fix the economy. ... Right now the American people are judging me exactly the way I should be judged, and that is, are we taking the steps to improve liquidity in the financial markets, create jobs, get businesses to reopen, keep America safe?”

Okay, it is understandable that President Obama has been totally absorbed with

the financial crisis. But surely, unlike predecessors supposedly unable to do two things at the same time, our resourceful new President certainly could find enough time to solicit advice from a wide circle, get a better grip on the huge stakes in Afghanistan, and arrive at sensible decisions. Or so I thought.

Getting Railroaded?

It proved to be a bit awkward Friday morning waiting for the President to appear... a half-hour late for his own presentation. Was he for some reason reluctant?

Perhaps he had a sense of being railroaded by his advisers. Perhaps he paused on learning that just a few hours earlier a soldier of the Afghan army shot dead two U.S. troops and wounded a third before killing himself, and that Taliban fighters had stormed an Afghan police post and killed 10 police earlier that morning.

Should he weave that somehow into his speech?

Or maybe it was learning of the Taliban ambush of a police convoy which wounded seven other policemen; or the suicide bomber in the Afghan border area of Pakistan who demolished a mosque packed with hundreds of worshippers attending Friday prayers, killing some 50 and injuring scores more, according to preliminary reports.

Or, more simply, perhaps Obama's instincts told him he was about to do something he will regret. Maybe that's why he was embarrassingly late in coming to the podium.

One look at the national security advisers arrayed behind the President was enough to see wooden-headedness.

In her classic book, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, historian Barbara Tuchman described this mindset: "Wooden-headedness assesses a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions, while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs ... acting according to the wish while not allowing oneself to be deflected by the facts."

Tuchman pointed to 16th Century Philip II of Spain as a kind of Nobel laureate of wooden-headedness. Comparisons can be invidious, but the thing about Philip was that he drained state revenues by failed adventures overseas, leading to Spain's decline.

It is wooden-headedness, in my view, that permeates the "comprehensive, new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan" that the President announced on Friday.

Author Tuchman points succinctly to what flows from wooden-headedness:

“Once a policy has been adopted and implemented, all subsequent activity becomes an effort to justify it. ... Adjustment is painful. For the ruler it is easier, once he has entered the policy box, to stay inside. For the lesser official it is better not to make waves, not to press evidence that the chief will find painful to accept. Psychologists call the process of screening out discordant information ‘cognitive dissonance,’ an academic disguise for ‘Don’t confuse me with the facts.’”

It seems only right and fitting that Barbara Tuchman’s daughter, Jessica Tuchman Mathews, president of the Carnegie Foundation, has shown herself to be inoculated against “cognitive dissonance.”

A January 2009 Carnegie report on Afghanistan concluded, *“The only meaningful way to halt the insurgency’s momentum is to start withdrawing troops. The presence of foreign troops is the most important element driving the resurgence of the Taliban.”*

In any case, Obama explained his decision on more robust military intervention in Afghanistan as a result of a “careful policy review” by military commanders and diplomats, the Afghani and Pakistani governments, NATO allies, and international organizations.

No Estimate? No Problem

Know why he did not mention a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) assessing the likely effects of this slow surge in troops and trainers? Because there is none.

Guess why. The reason is the same one accounting for the lack of a completed NIE before the “surge” in troop strength in Iraq in early 2007.

Apparently, Obama’s advisers did not wish to take the risk that honest analysts – ones who had been around a while, and maybe even knew something of Vietnam and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan – might also be immune to “cognitive dissonance,” and ask hard questions regarding the basis of the new strategy.

Indeed, they might reach the same judgment they did in the April 2006 NIE on global terrorism. The authors of that estimate had few cognitive problems and simply declared their judgment that invasions and occupations (in 2006 the target then was Iraq) do not make us safer but lead instead to an upsurge in terrorism.

The prevailing attitude this time fits the modus operandi of Gen. David Petraeus, who late last year took the lead by default with the following

approach: We know best, and can run our own policy review, thank you very much.

Which he did, without requesting the formal NIE that typically precedes and informs key policy decisions. It is highly regrettable that President Obama was deprived of the chance to benefit from a formal estimate. Recent NIEs have been relatively bereft of wooden-headedness. Obama might have made a more sensible decision on how to proceed in Afghanistan.

As one might imagine, NIEs can, and should, play a key role in such circumstances, with a premium on objectivity and courage in speaking truth to power. That is precisely why Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair appointed Chas Freeman to head the National Intelligence Council, the body that prepares NIEs – and why the Likud Lobby got him ousted.

Estimates on Vietnam

As one of the intelligence analysts watching Vietnam in the Sixties and Seventies, I worked on several of the NIEs produced before and during the war.

Sensitive ones bore this unclassified title: “Probable Reactions to Various Courses of Action With Respect to North Vietnam.”

Typical of the kinds of question the President and his advisers wanted addressed were: Can we seal off the Ho Chi Minh Trail by bombing? If the U.S. were to introduce X thousand additional troops into South Vietnam, will Hanoi quit? Okay, how about XX thousand?

Our answers regularly earned us brickbats from the White House for not being “good team players.” But in those days we labored under a strong ethos dictating that we give it to policymakers straight, without fear or favor. We had career protection for doing that.

Our judgments (the unwelcome ones, anyway) were often pooh-poohed as negativism. Policymakers, of course, were in no way obliged to take them into account, and often didn't.

The point is that they continued to be sought. Not even Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon would decide on a significant escalation without seeking our best estimate as to how U.S. adversaries would likely react to this or that escalatory step.

So, hats off, I suppose, to you, Gen. Petraeus and those who helped you elbow the substantive intelligence analysts off to the sidelines.

What might intelligence analysts have said on the key point of training the

Afghan army and police? We will never know, but it is a safe bet those analysts who know something about Afghanistan (or about Vietnam) would roll their eyes and wish Petraeus luck.

As for Iraq, what remains to be seen is against whom the various sectarian factions target their weapons and put their training into practice.

The Training Mirage

In his Afghanistan policy speech on Friday, Obama mentioned training 11 times. To those of us with some gray in our hair, this was all too reminiscent of the prevailing rhetoric at the start of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

In February 1964, with John Kennedy dead and President Lyndon Johnson improvising on Vietnam, then-Defense Secretary Robert McNamara prepared a major policy speech on defense, leaving out Vietnam, and sent it to the President to review. The Johnson tapes show the President finding fault:

LBJ: "I wonder if you shouldn't find two minutes to devote to Vietnam."

McN: "The problem is what to say about it."

LBJ: "I would say that we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. ... Our purpose is to train the [South Vietnamese] people, and our training's going good."

But our training was not going good then. And specialists who know Afghanistan, its various tribes and demographics tell me that training is not likely to go good there either. Ditto for training in Pakistan.

Obama's alliterative rhetoric aside, it is going to be no easier to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat" al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan with more combat forces and training than it was to defeat the Viet Cong with these same tools in Vietnam.

Obama seemed to be protesting a bit too much: "Going forward, we will not blindly stay the course." No sir.

There will be "metrics to measure progress and hold ourselves accountable!" Yes, sir!

And he will enlist wide international support from countries like Russia, India and China that, according to President Obama, "should have a stake in the security of the region." Right.

"The road ahead will be long," said Obama in conclusion. He has that right. The strategy adopted virtually guarantees that.

That is why Gen. David McKiernan, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan publicly contradicted his boss, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, late last year when Gates, protesting the widespread pessimism on Afghanistan, started talking up the prospect of a “surge” of troops in Afghanistan.

McKiernan insisted publicly that no Iraqi-style “surge” of forces would end the conflict in Afghanistan. “The word I don’t use for Afghanistan is ‘surge,’” McKiernan stated, adding that what is required is a “sustained commitment” that could last many years and would ultimately require a political, not military, solution.

McKiernan has that right. But his boss Mr. Gates did not seem to get it.

Bob Gates at the Gate

Late last year, as he maneuvered to stay on as Defense Secretary in the new administration, Gates hotly disputed the notion that things were getting out of control in Afghanistan.

The argument that Gates used to support his professed optimism, however, made us veteran intelligence officers gag – at least those who remember the U.S. in Vietnam in the 1960s, the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s and other failed counterinsurgencies.

“The Taliban holds no land in Afghanistan, and loses every time it comes into contact with coalition forces,” Gates explained.

Our Secretary of Defense seemed to be insisting that U.S. troops have not lost one pitched battle with the Taliban or al-Qaeda. (Engagements like the one on July 13, 2008, in which “insurgents” attacked an outpost in Konar province, killing nine U.S. soldiers and wounding 15 others, apparently do not qualify as “contact.”)

Gates ought to read up on Vietnam, for his words evoke a similarly

benighted comment by U.S. Army Col. Harry Summers after that war had been lost.

In 1974, Summers was sent to Hanoi to try to resolve the status of Americans still listed as missing. To his North Vietnamese counterpart, Col. Tu, Summers made the mistake of bragging, “You know, you never beat us on the battlefield.”

Colonel Tu responded, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

I don’t fault the senior military. Cancel that, I DO fault them. They resemble all too closely the gutless general officers who never looked down at what was really happening in Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff of the time have been

called, not without reason, “a sewer of deceit.”

The current crew is in better odor. And one may be tempted to make excuses for them, noting for example that if admirals/generals are the hammer, small wonder that to them everything looks like a nail. No, that does not excuse them.

The ones standing in back of Obama on Friday have smarts enough to have said, NO; IT’S A BAD IDEA, Mr. President. That should not be too much to expect.

Gallons of blood are likely to be poured unnecessarily in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan – probably over the next decade or longer. But not their blood.

Sound Military Advice

General officers seldom rise to the occasion. Exceptions are so few that they immediately spring to mind: French war hero Gen. Philippe LeClerc, for example, was sent to Indochina right after World War II with orders to report back on how many troops it would take to recapture Indochina. His report: “It would require 500,000 men; and even with 500,000 France could not win.”

Equally relevant to Obama’s fateful decision, Gen. Douglas MacArthur told another young President in April 1961: *“Anyone wanting to commit American ground forces to the mainland of Asia should have his head examined.”*

When JFK’s top military advisers, critical of the President’s reluctance to go against that advice, virtually called him a traitor – for pursuing a negotiated solution to the fighting in Laos, for example – Kennedy would tell them to convince Gen. MacArthur first, and then come back to him. (Alas, there seems to be no comparable Gen. MacArthur today.)

Kennedy recognized Vietnam as a potential quagmire, and was determined not to get sucked in – despite the misguided, ideologically-salted advice given him by Ivy League patricians like McGeorge Bundy.

Kennedy’s military adviser, Gen. Maxwell Taylor said later that MacArthur’s statement made a “hell of an impression on the President.”

MacArthur made another comment about the situation that President Kennedy had ***inherited*** in Indochina. This one struck the young President so much that he dictated it into a memorandum of conversation: Kennedy quoted MacArthur as saying to him, “The chickens are coming home to roost from the Eisenhower years, and you live in the chicken coop.”

Well, the chickens are coming home to roost after eight years of Cheney and Bush, but there is no sign that President Obama is listening to anyone capable

of fresh thinking on Afghanistan. Obama has apparently decided to stay in the chicken coop. And that can be called, well, chicken.

Can't say I actually KNEW Jack Kennedy, but it was he who got so many of us down here to Washington to explore what we might do for our country.

Kennedy **resisted** the kind of pressures to which President Obama has now succumbed. (There are even some, like Jim Douglass in his book "JFK and the Unspeakable," who conclude that this is what got President Kennedy killed.)

Mr. Obama, you need to find some advisers who are not still wet behind the ears and who are not brown noses – preferably some who have lived Vietnam and Iraq and have an established record of responsible, fact-based analysis.

You would also do well to read Douglass's book, and to page through the "Pentagon Papers," instead of trying to emulate the Lincoln portrayed in *Team of Rivals*.

I, too, am a big fan of Doris Kearns Goodwin, but Daniel Ellsberg is an author far more relevant and nourishing for this point in time. Read his *Secrets*, and recognize the signs of the times.

There is still time to put the brakes on this disastrous policy. One key lesson of Vietnam is that an army trained and supplied by foreign occupiers can almost always be readily outmatched and out-waited in a guerrilla war, no matter how many billions of dollars are pumped in.

Professor Martin van Creveld of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the only non-American military historian on the U.S. Army's list of required reading for officers, has accused former President George W. Bush of "launching the most foolish war since Emperor Augustus in 9 BC sent his legions into Germany and lost them."

Please do not feel you have to compete with your predecessor for such laurels.

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