

America's War: Dereliction Redux: A Call For Integrity

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During a marathon fall review in 2009, the White House and Pentagon poured over Vietnam studies in search of lessons and insight into their war in Afghanistan. Two in particular climbed the ranks [to battle for supremacy](#): *Lessons in Disaster*, by Gordon Goldstein and *A Better War*, by Lewis Sorley. Consequently one of the US military's finest treatises, current Brigadier General H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty*, went relatively unnoticed.

Few books come closer to reality as General David Petraeus replaces Stanley McChrystal amid an inferno of political spin and military-speak.

But McMaster's acuity is further illuminated by an additional layer of context. As director of studies of insurgencies and revolution at the National War College, Bard O'Neill authored a rare work on the subject - an eponymous textbook titled *Insurgency and Terrorism*, complete with lesson plans. Celebrating its 20th anniversary, the book supposedly influences Washington policy-makers and defense think-tanks, although it doesn't appear to.

At the very end lies an excerpt of McMaster's conclusion: "The disaster in Vietnam was not the result of impersonal forces but a uniquely human failure, the responsibility for which was shared by President Johnson and his principal military and civilian advisers. The failings were many and reinforcing: arrogance, weakness, lying in the pursuit of self-interest, and above all, the abdication of responsibility to the American people."

O'Neill mirrors McMaster by highlighting that while correct military strategy is obviously necessary for counterinsurgency (COIN), the character of those implementing that strategy is often the decisive factor. O'Neill saves the concept of integrity for last, and with good reason - solid military strategy can be negated by poor political command.

Their thoughts lead directly to the crossroads of President Barack Obama "no change in policy" slogan in Afghanistan.

Obama and Petraeus publicly claim to possess "the right strategy." For the sake of argument they can have it, because they also lack what O'Neill considers the three essential elements for successful COIN: flexibility, integrity, and equanimity. But the second quality, being interconnected, supersedes the others at Afghanistan's critical juncture. Integrity deficiency symptoms can be widely observed: "portraying defeats as victories, ignored shortcomings, and fabricated lights at the ends of tunnels."

O'Neill writes that in the absence of government integrity, situational estimates are warped "either by pessimism or, as seems to be more often the case, undue optimism." Witness US

Defense Secretary Robert Gates pleading before Congress that the war isn't as pessimistic as the US media reports, when the international media makes it look like a trained puppy. Though we can't tell, Gates insists the war is marching in the right direction.

Washington may have a workable military strategy in theory, but demonstrating its viability on the ground has proven exceedingly difficult. Yet the White House's greatest failures comes in handling the political and media aspects of COIN, which carry equal weight as military operations. Not only has Washington struggled to stay on message, but also to deliver that message with integrity.

From Obama's underestimated campaign promise of two combat brigades (now 50,000 troops) to declaring "the right strategy" at West Point, the American people have been fed a steady dose of lies on Afghanistan. Treated with "arrogance" as true leaks were denied. Felt helpless as politicians and generals "lie in the pursuit of self-interest."

The ultimate result: "abdication of responsibility to the American people," who suffer duplicity at the military and political level.

Take for instance the notion that US and NATO casualties are rising because coalition troops are surging into southern Afghanistan. The Taliban is also improving tactics on two notable fronts, marksmen and IED's. The UK is currently studying the [improved skill of Taliban riflemen](#) and snipers who are increasingly targeting likable Western officers. Demoralization among coalition troops multiplies the loss of their positive influence on the local environment.

In the case of IED's, coalition troops aren't just encountering more of them but missing more. A new generation of factory-produced plastic IED's, less visible to metal detectors, was introduced from Pakistan last year. The possibility of Taliban-ISI collusion in itself gives reason to doubt Washington's claim that Islamabad is finally playing on its side.

"In other provinces like Helmand they are using a lot of homemade stuff, but for us Pakistan is a 20-minute drive away," Naimatullah, a Taliban bombmaker, [tells The London Times](#). When pressed on whether Pakistani's military directly supplies the components, Naimatullah quietly responds with a smile, "I cannot say. It comes from Pakistan. That is all."

Now bomb sniffing dogs, already in short supply, are the best means of accurately rooting out IED's, and even they have a hard time. Naimatullah uses curdled yogurt to throw off the dogs. Though impossible to know the truth, basic facts speak for themselves. America and NATO have spent tens of billions trying to combat devices that cost pennies, yet they're killing more coalition and Afghans soldiers than ever.

[As for Afghanistan's National Army](#), a new in-house audit just accused the White House and Pentagon of being "too optimistic" of its capabilities.

And one cannot speak of duplicity without mentioning Marjah. US and NATO commanders initially promised the area would be secure in a matter of weeks, possibly a month. Five months after the launch of Operation Moshtarak, Walid Jan Sabir, the member of Parliament from Marjah district, [tells reporters](#), "the area is at best marginally safer since the US-led offensive in February."

"I was optimistic about all this at first," he says, "but I'm disillusioned, and so are a lot of the

people I've been talking to. There are increasing numbers of [improvised explosive] devices, the government they installed isn't trusted by the people, people have been beheaded, and US forces are barging into homes and arresting innocents. The people are caught between the US and the Afghan National Army by day, and the Taliban by night."

[Says US Defense Secretary Robert Gates](#) from Washington, "The reality is that the military operations in Marjah were successful, and a place that had been controlled by the Taliban is no longer – for two years or more – is no longer controlled by the Taliban."

All nations and peoples lie and exaggerate to excite their populaces and maintain morale. But fabricating "undue optimism" and imperiling the war is both poor strategy and unacceptable immorality in a democracy. None of these military problems would be so acute if US leadership didn't cover them up, and that's where integrity comes in.

Public dishonesty often leads to private dishonesty as politicians struggle to convince themselves of their own ploys. And the damage is most severe when the absence of integrity manifests at the highest strategic level – war objectives. As President Barack Obama transfers his final hope from McChrystal to Petraeus, America still lacks a fundamental goal in Afghanistan.

Is it to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat" al-Qaeda alone, or its affiliates too? Is it to break the Taliban's "momentum" and then destroy it, or negotiate? Is it to train the Afghan army and hope it can defeat the Taliban once the West withdraws, or simply hold government territory? With so many variations, no one really knows in the White House, Pentagon, or Congress.

"To date, all responses to this question have been vague and lacked clarity," seven members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee [wrote in a letter to their Chairman](#), Senator John Kerry, after interviewing key Pentagon officials.

For example Karl Eikenberry, US ambassador to Afghanistan, defended the war's mission after McChrystal's termination by declaring, "We continue to have a very clear goal. We are going to break the Taliban's momentum. We are going to build Afghan capacity, especially in the area of your army and your police."

No goal is more ambiguous than "breaking the Taliban's momentum," given that defining benchmarks is impossible until retrospect and insurgencies often turn in cycles. Nor is al-Qaeda part of Eikenberry's equation, having mostly fled the country to Pakistan or overseas to Africa. Ask any given US official and they're liable to respond individually, when the objective should be standardized.

A lack of clear goals has led to schisms inside the White House and Pentagon over how much negotiation with the Taliban is too much. Such indecisiveness fuels the discord over Obama's proposed July 2011 deadline, and whether to beat a quicker exit or extend the deadline. This obscurity pollutes Washington's credibility when it comes to "the right strategy," as Obama vows he possesses.

Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claims he "was nearly sick" after reading [Michael Hasting's Rolling Stone report](#).

Many Americans feel his pain [when he continues](#), "My message will be clear: nothing changes about our strategy, nothing changes about the mission and nothing changes about

the resources we are dedicating or the commitment we are making to defeat al Qaeda and its extremist allies in the region.”

“My primary concern over the past few days has been to minimize the impact of these developments on the conduct of the war in Afghanistan,” Gates added. “The president’s decisions fully and satisfactorily address that concern.”

Mullen and Gates believe McChrystal’s remarks in Rolling Stone were an “aberration.” This report was no aberration, but a reflection of Afghanistan’s unfavorable condition and juxtaposition to July 2011. The more US officials convince us that their strategy won’t change, the more foolish they appear for being obstinate to self-reflection. For ignoring how dismal the war is progressing.

[Even CIA director Leon Panetta admitted](#) – during his own defense – that Obama’s surge is moving “slower than I think anyone anticipated.” And yet no change in strategy is in order.

So what is the truth? It’s likely that July 2011 was always a phantom date to promote the war from both angles. But such political duplicity naturally backfired, with anti-war advocates demanding a quicker withdrawal to a futile war and pro-war proponents pleading for an end to the deadline. Reality is simple – since Marjah was over-hyped and is taking longer than expected, so too goes the entire US strategy in Afghanistan. The equation already works for Kandahar.

But a lack of integrity breeds more undue optimism and instead of reviewing a strategy with the potential to collapse, Washington is forging ahead with extended blinders. In McChrystal’s aftermath, [The New York Times reported](#), “administration insiders acknowledge that there have been preliminary discussions about whether to rethink the approach to a war that is clearly bogging down.”

This may become truer if the war flat-lines, yet the boat is moving in the opposite direction. President Barack Obama recently complained about [“a lot of obsession”](#) surrounding his July 2011 “deadline.” This “obsession” exists because no one believes him, because he lacks integrity. Obama promises that Petraeus represents “a change in personnel but it is not a change in policy,” when he’s really stepping on the gas.

The policy is changing and they don’t want to tell us.

[According to Newsweek’s Jonathan Alter](#), Petraeus told Obama point-blank that 18 months would be enough time to begin transferring authority to Afghan security forces and commence a US withdrawal. He even promised “no one is going to suggest we stay.” Six months later and the deadline has retreated at least six months. Obama claims he “won’t tolerate division,” that “we will conduct a full review,” but he just tapped a general that played down both the December review and July 2011 deadline.

[Petraeus told Congress](#) during his testimony to “not make too much” of December, while July 2011 is totally conditions based. [Nor is it a withdrawal date](#), only a “transfer” date. Ironically Petraeus may be operating with the highest integrity: “It is important that July 2011 be seen for what it is, the date when a process begins, based on conditions, not the date when the U.S. heads for the exits.”

That was two weeks ago. With Petraeus set for his Senate confirmation, Congressional support from all sides has targeted the deadline for destruction. Asked what Obama should

do if Petraeus requests six extra months, Democrat Dianne Feinstein, chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and vocal opponent of the war, [replied](#): “I would say give it to him, absolutely.”

“I’m against a timetable,” Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, flatly told NBC’s “Meet the Press.” And to really observe which way the wind blows, uber-insider Henry Kissinger [reaches the conclusion](#) that, “Neither the premise nor the deadline is realistic.” His solution: “Artificial deadlines should be abandoned.”

Instead Kissinger argues for “regional diplomacy,” all the while ignoring the scant incentive China, Russia, and Pakistan have to bail out America or do its dirty work. Nevertheless he believes, “military operations could be sustained and legitimized by such diplomacy,” out of, “a need to do justice to all those who have sacrificed in the region, particularly the long-suffering Afghan people.”

Expect Washington to spread this message as long as possible until July 2011, and beyond if it gets that far.

Feinstein attempts to portray her weakening as prudence, claiming another six months gives Petraeus “flexibility, realistically.” The same argument has already been made by the Pentagon and the GOP. But six months is relatively insignificant in the long lifespan of counterinsurgency, especially when December and July 2011 are being treated with disregard. Why six more months? Because another six months will follow. And another.

As O’Neill observes, flexibility without integrity leads exactly to the stalemates that are Vietnam and Afghanistan. The same goes for equanimity: the ability to deal with adversaries after a conflict. In the absence of a clear goal and deadline, Washington also lacks a consensus over whether to negotiate with the Taliban. Those negative effects are currently being manifested in Taliban commander Sirajuddin Haqqani, [who reportedly meets](#) with Afghan President Hamid Karzai on occasion.

O’Neill muses how commonsense and simple the idea of integrity is, and how often overlooked. Thus “its importance cannot be emphasized enough.” But it hasn’t been in Washington and if left uncorrected, the void of integrity will systematically annihilate even the best laid military plans.

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