

Obama is Boxed In From the Gulf to Afghanistan

By [James Gundun](#)

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In-depth Report: [THE BP OIL SLICK](#)

Last week McClatchy [released an inside account](#) of the White House's public response to the BP oil spill, sketching President Barack Obama's 350-part "message machine" in the process. Unfortunately McClatchy limits itself to the BP oil spill since the machine operates in many areas of US foreign policy, but loss is gain and someone must fill the void.

Afghanistan and the BP oil spill are uncannily identical in reality and reaction. Boxing himself in on both, each crisis quickly surpassed "the experts" and Obama's worst expectations. The White House's subsequent cover-ups mirror and at times exceed its actual attempts to halt the flow of Taliban and oil.

Having followed former president George Bush, whose administration is under scrutiny for lax regulations, into offshore and deep-water drilling, turning back simply wasn't an option. Obama had promoted the safety of deep-water drilling weeks before BP sprung its leak in the pursuit of expanding operations along the East Coast, pushing himself past V1 speed.

While those corporations responsible for the leak and cleanup deserve every criticism the White House can lob, Washington also earned the reputation of letting the crook clean up the crime scene. Even the loyal Thomas Friedman [disapproves](#).

Many speculate that Obama feared appearing like Bush after Hurricane Katrina, but distancing his political position from the accident became job one. No room was left to maneuver in after promoting offshore oil sources; rather than freeze or abort, his message machine locked onto BP. Americans needed to first hear that the spill wasn't his fault, second that the oil companies would foot the clean-up bill.

His priority to extract from the oil spill created an impression (and perhaps fostered the reality) that Obama was slow to respond and [afraid to directly intervene](#), ultimately spawning the PR campaign described by McClatchy. Phase two had him hustling around the clock to beat the media cycle, updating Obama's actions at the least appropriate moments like on his way to dinner.

"Whether it's Obama sitting with one reporter or a statement sent via Twitter, nothing happens by accident," writes McClatchy. "The White House message machinery is a crucial element of the ever-expanding presidency, and like his recent predecessors, Obama uses it to shape public opinion, drive the mainstream media's agenda and minimize political blowback."

But as Jackie Savitz of Oceana observes, "It's hard to square his frustration about the Deepwater drilling disaster with his decision to let more drilling go forward."

Obama's message machine jammed on this square. Certainly much can be said in favor of design and well laid plans, but the complication of substituting a machine for sound policy is that a machine breaks. Policy weaknesses are eventually revealed - and sticking to the script threatens the show. Incredible as the oil spill's similarities with Afghanistan are, they should not surprise given that the same errors and message machine are at work.

Obama sealed his fate before taking office by resorting to "the right war" campaign slogan as a counterweight to his early Iraqi pullout; no US president can be seen as a pure dove. Promising to finish the war with two combat brigades (roughly 10,000 troops), Obama woefully underestimated Afghanistan's requirements and was shocked by the Pentagon's 40,000 to 80,000 range.

He would explode on General Stanley McChrystal last October, days after the general exposed his miscalculation in London.

"When a questioner asked if he could support a presidential decision to fight the war with drone aircraft and Special Forces that focused on defeating Al Qaeda, McChrystal replied, 'The short, glib answer is no.'"

Newsweek's Jonathon Alter, the White House's latest PR tool, [recounts in his new book](#), *The Promise*, "If the president sided with Biden, the commanding general couldn't support it? This was insubordination, and the White House was livid. Was McChrystal out of control or just naive? (The consensus was naive.) Obama and his senior staff believed this had Mullen's and Petraeus's fingerprints all over it. They were using McChrystal to jam the president, box him in, manipulate him, game him - use whatever verb you like. The president had not yet decided on a policy and didn't appreciate the military sounding in public as if he had."

But the truth is that Obama was boxed in by himself, not his generals, hoping a modified "offshore" strategy promoted by Vice President Joe Biden would suffice. He was - and still is - guilty of naivety in Afghanistan.

"I just want to be absolutely clear," Obama said after a November leak ([an accurate one too](#)), "because there's been a lot of discussion in the press about this, that there is no immediate decision pending on resources. You don't make determinations about resources, and certainly you don't make determinations about sending young men and women into battle without having absolute clarity about what the strategy is going to be. We are going to proceed and make sure that we don't put the cart before the horse."

Alter recalls of Obama's final decision, "The president encapsulated the new policy: in quickly, out quickly, focus on Al Qaeda, and build the Afghan Army. 'I'm not asking you to change what you believe, but if you don't agree with me that we can execute this, say so now.'

Neither McChrystal, Petraeus, Mullen, nor Gates spoke.

Six months later and America's only enemy in Afghanistan is the 25,000 strong Taliban. The poppy paradox remains unsolved, "reconciliation" still a vague concept, and negotiation with the Taliban a non-starter. Huge question marks linger over Karzai and his brother, Wali, while Pakistan has yet to move off the fence. Doubts continue to creep in whether the West has enough troops and NATO trainers remain in short supply.

Meanwhile the ANA isn't prepared to assume control of the country and is often cited as the chief problem by local Afghans, not the Taliban. ANA and Afghan police cannot handle the stress of a July 2011 transfer/US withdrawal.

[Foreign Policy points out](#), "Alter uncritically endorses this view and describes the new strategy as crystal clear on the terms and timing of the exit. However, as Alter surely must have known, the exact opposite is true: there has been considerable confusion and contradictory statements out of the administration on what the exit strategy entails."

This confusion extends from micro to macro.

Though Combat operations in Marjah "ended" at the end of February and the US military [declared victory](#), much of the local Taliban never left, "including at least four mid-level commanders. The insurgents' extensive intelligence network in Marja has remained intact, and they have been able to maintain a hold over the population through what residents have described as threats and assassinations."

[The New York Times reports](#), "At the beginning of May, a well-liked man named Sharifullah was beaten to death, accused of supporting the district chief and not paying taxes to the Taliban. His killing froze the community and villagers stopped going to the district administration."

"The Taliban are everywhere," says Mr. Rahman, a farmer. "They are like scorpions under every stone, and they are stinging all those who get assistance or help the government and the Americans."

According to local accounts Marjah is neither cleared, held, nor safe. US commanders talk frequently of Afghan perceptions. Well, the reality is driving a perception that America can neither clear nor hold Marjah, let alone most Taliban territory, and this perception has spread to Kandahar. Quite the contrast to Obama's [recent declaration](#) that the Taliban have been "driven out of Marjah."

What else can he say though? No Marjah and no Kandahar, and nothing close to victory.

The only clarity in Obama's strategy is that it remains unclear in the objectives, enemy, resources, how to fund it, and for how long. Biden emphatically promised that US troops will pull out by July 2011, emphatically telling us to "bet on it," but the author is betting that no US troops withdraw other than a symbolic gesture. The only NATO troops headed home will be from those countries who've had enough.

The White House indefensibly sold the Afghan review as the pinnacle of decision making - its finest achievement, according to Alter - and turning back now isn't an option.

Contrary to Obama's notion that he will withdraw if the war protracts further, the likelier outcome is more troops, resources, and time. Leaving Afghanistan worse than he found it or pulling out if the situation improves aren't options. Thus the White House message machine kicked into high gear throughout Karzai's "re-election," the Afghan review, Operation Moshtarak, Karzai's visit, extends beyond summer and is already targeting next year.

But while the White House's PR cycle has been directed through Alter, a favored reporter, he ends up revealing a flawed and artificially-packaged strategy clogging the machine. The 2010 review will be even more contentious than the last. Alters claims Obama asked

Petraeus one more time, “David, tell me now. I want you to be honest with me. You can do this in 18 months?”

“Sir, I’m confident we can train and hand over to the ANA [Afghan National Army] in that time frame,” Petraeus replied.

Obama apparently believed him, or had no other choice given his own position, jamming his message machine indefinitely. The concept of long-term counterinsurgency doesn’t square with an in-and-out, 18 month time-frame, especially against the world’s most advanced insurgency in one of the least developed states.

As with the BP oil spill the White House had no other choice in the wake of Afghanistan’s contradictions: a relentless (though futile) PR campaign was launched. But it also needed a scapegoat, and who would play the role of BP? None other than the Pentagon. Alter describes the now-infamous, “presidential dressing down unlike any in more than half a century,” back in October 2009.

“Gates and Mullen were summoned to the Oval Office, where the president told them he was ‘exceedingly unhappy’ with the Pentagon’s conduct. He said the leaks and positioning in advance of a decision were ‘disrespectful of the process’ and ‘damaging to the men and women in uniform and to the country.’ In a cold fury Obama said he wanted to know ‘here and now’ if the Pentagon would be on board with any presidential decision and could faithfully implement it.

Gates pledged his conduct would change – ‘and it did.’ Mullen and the rest of the generals ‘swore loyalty,’ said one senior civilian official. ‘And we chose to believe them.’”

But the picture of Obama lecturing Gates in particular – and gaining his “loyalty” at that – is doctored. Gates never committed the slips of McChrystal, Mullen, and Petraeus, instead blasting his own department for the leaks. He performed his duty the entire time, a silent backer of escalation praised [in a NYT account of the review](#).

Alter’s version is an anomaly – a system error.

The obvious question then, in a White House where nothing occurs by random, is why this “dressing down” would be any different? Obama desperately needs to appear in control of the Pentagon as Afghanistan dips further and this story upholds that narrative.

“Alter credits Obama with a dramatic, decisive assertion of civilian authority over the military that has gone largely – and unjustly – unnoticed.” For good reason: maybe it never happened. The military, having already forced Obama’s hand once, still controls Afghanistan’s fate.

Not coincidentally, this same “dressing down” tactic was leaked last week during Karzai’s awkward visit. Again Obama “put his foot down,” this time by ordering silence, and again refusing to adjust his policy to meet reality. The Pentagon and White House detractors bit their tongues, but many saw through the charade and anticipate further conflict between Washington and Kabul.

President Obama must make some real policy changes if he wants his message to actually persuade. Like the wave of oil flowing across the Gulf of Mexico, Afghanistan’s problems and contradictions are too massive to conceal with propaganda.

They've broken his machine.

James Gundun is a political scientist and counterinsurgency analyst based in Washington D.C. Contact him in *The Trench*, a foreign policy blog, at www.hadalzone.blogspot.com.

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