

Obama Lacks Clarity on Afghan War

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“Let me be clear,” President Barack Obama is fond of saying – and his desire was on full display two years ago when he announced a “comprehensive, new strategy” for the war in Afghanistan.

Obama laced his speech of March 27, 2009, with nine uses of the words “clear” or “clearly,” but his protestations about clarity looked more like a smokescreen to obscure the image of him lurching into a Vietnam-style quagmire.

After his first “clearly” and just before the first “let me be clear,” Obama posed two rhetorical questions to which he promised a clear answer:

“What is our purpose in Afghanistan? ... Why do our men and women still fight and die there? The [American people] deserve a straightforward answer.”

But we didn’t get one. As a substitute for explanation, we got alliteration, “a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country.”

And seemingly mindful that a call to war required some Texas-cowboy rhetoric, like the tough talk from Lyndon Johnson on Vietnam or George W. Bush on any number of occasions, Obama added, “And to the terrorists who oppose us, my message is the same: we will defeat you.”

His March 2009 speech, given while standing in front of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, represented Obama’s explanation for sending about 20,000 more U.S. troops into the Afghan conflict, a number that has since been boosted by another 30,000 or so, to around 100,000 total.

Despite all the claims about clarity, all that was clear to me was that in choosing to escalate the war, Obama may have sealed his political doom — not to mention the more violent fate for hundreds of occupiers and thousands of indigenous.

Even if there had been some wise grown-ups around to tell him about President Johnson and Vietnam, it is far from clear that Obama would have listened. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Welcome to Vietnam, Mr. President.”](#)]

Pleasing the Establishment

Instead, in his March 2009 speech – and the one on Dec. 1, 2009, at West Point announcing the additional troop buildup – Obama was following the interests of the pro-war political/media Establishment that still dominates Washington. It remains almost as

influential inside his administration as it was inside Bush's.

Hoping to assuage this Establishment, which was a touch nervous by all his campaign talk about "change," Obama offered continuity, from keeping Defense Secretary Gates and the rest of Bush's Pentagon high command to swapping one hawkish Secretary of State for another, replacing Condoleezza Rice with Clinton.

Meanwhile, Washington policymakers and intellectuals who had gotten on Bush's bad side for raising doubts about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were mostly unwelcome in the Obama administration, too.

For instance, there was the case of Paul Pillar, deputy chief of the counterterrorist center at CIA in the late 1990s, who from 2000 to 2005 held a very senior position as National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia. He is now director of graduate studies at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

Pillar's mild manner cannot obscure his razor sharp judgments which made him a *bête noire* of the Bush crowd, but he remains an outsider under Obama.

On Sept. 16, 2009, before the White House decisions on Obama's second escalation, Pillar wrote an incisive op-ed for the Washington Post, entitled "[Who's Afraid of a Terrorist Haven?](#)"

Pillar noted that the key operations for the 9/11 attacks took place in Germany, Spain, and flight schools in the U.S. — NOT in the al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. And today, he observed that terrorists can now choose among several unstable countries besides Afghanistan, and U.S. forces cannot secure them all.

"The issue is whether preventing such a haven [in Afghanistan] would reduce the terrorist threat to the United States enough to offset the required expenditure of blood and treasure and the barriers to success in Afghanistan," Pillar wrote, adding:

"Thwarting the creation of a physical haven also would have to offset any boost to anti-U.S. terrorism stemming from the perception that the United States had become an occupier rather than a defender of Afghanistan."

Unlike most of Obama's hawkish policy advisers, Pillar brought the experience of a soldier as well as a substantive analyst. He served as an Army officer in Vietnam, and that lends an on-the-ground realism in very short supply these days. He also seems to have read Sun Tzu, who observed:

"He who wishes to fight must first count the cost. ... If victory is long in coming, then men's weapons will grow dull, and their ardor will be dampened. ... If the campaign is protracted, the resources of the state will not be equal to the strain."

Another policy realist who was shunned by the Obama administration was former Ambassador Chas Freeman, who was briefly appointed to supervise the nation's overall intelligence analysis by Adm. Dennis Blair, then-Director of National Intelligence.

However, when the Likud Lobby protested that Freeman was overly friendly with Arabs, he got the heave-ho only six-and-a-half hours into his new job. About a year later, Blair was gone, too.

Obama Boxed In

With skeptical analysts like Pillar and Freeman excluded, Obama was left complaining in 2009 that the Pentagon was framing the options on Afghanistan in a way to box him in on accepting a sizable escalation, which he knew had dangerous political as well as strategic risks.

“I can’t let this be a war without end, and I can’t lose the whole Democratic Party,” Obama complained, according to Bob Woodward’s 2010 book, *Obama’s Wars*.

When Obama added a caveat to the escalation, requiring that a U.S. military withdrawal begin in July 2011, the Pentagon brass quickly undercut him insisting that the timetable was meaningless and would be largely ignored.

“We’re not leaving Afghanistan prematurely,” Gates declared at a dinner given by Secretary Clinton for Afghan President Hamid Karzai, according to Woodward’s book. “In fact, we’re not ever leaving at all.”

On March 11, Gates told NATO that drawdown beginning this summer would not be dramatic, vowing that he would not do something that would “affect the significant gains made to date, or the lives lost, for a political gesture.”

With Obama’s pledge to begin a U.S. withdrawal dismissed as “a political gesture,” the President was made to look both feckless and weak.

Gen. David Petraeus, commander of troops in Afghanistan, also has depicted the Afghan War as open-ended.

“I don’t think you win this war,” he said, in Woodward’s *Obama’s Wars*. “I think you keep fighting. You have to stay after it. This is the kind of fight we’re in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids’ lives.”

For his part, Obama continues to insist plaintively that he does see an eventual exit, at least an exit of sorts.

“The President has been also very clear from the beginning that we do not seek any permanent bases in Afghanistan — that we don’t seek to have a presence that any other country in the region would see as a threat,” said Michele Flournoy, his Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, at a March 15 congressional hearing.

However, Flournoy indicated that the U.S. plans to conduct what she described as “joint counter-terrorism operations” with the Afghan military after 2014.

Natural Gas Reserves

With all this confusion over whether and why the United States is staying in Afghanistan, one might look at other possible explanations for the determination to stick around, such as Central Asia’s vast energy potential.

One of Afghanistan’s neighbors to the northwest, Turkmenistan, has some of the world’s largest fields of natural gas. A respected Western oil advisory firm has identified one such

field in southeast Turkmenistan as the world's fifth largest gas field, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.

And that interest in Central Asia's energy potential predated the 9/11 attacks.

For instance, in 1997, representatives of the Taliban government were wined and dined in Texas amid hopes that the huge U.S. energy company UNOCAL could conclude a multi-billion dollar contract to build a natural gas pipeline across Afghanistan, according to the British newspaper *The Telegraph*.

The route for delivering the gas would come out of Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India and eventually to the warm-water Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean (nullifying the need to transit Russia or the Strait of Hormuz).

In 1998, Dick Cheney, then CEO of pipeline services vendor Halliburton, gushed: "I can't think of a time when we've had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian."

Halliburton grabbed a Caspian Sea drilling contract. And President Bill Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was quoted as saying that shaping that region's policies was "one of the most exciting things we can do."

A decade later, at a RAND conference on Afghanistan in October 2009, I asked Zalmay Khalilzad, who had been Bush's ambassador to Afghanistan, why no one speaks or writes about the status of what came to be known as the TAPI (for Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) pipeline project, and what was its status.

The question was unwelcome; the answer curt: The pipeline could not be built with widespread violence reigning in Afghanistan.

I was cut short before I could ask if that was the reason U.S. troops remained there, to bring that violence under control.

Last December, the leaders of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India met in Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat, to sign an agreement to move forward with the project. But its proposed route crosses Afghanistan's Kandahar province, the scene of fierce fighting, as well as some of Pakistan's unruly tribal areas.

Concern about security for the pipeline and its workers casts doubt on the project's near-term feasibility. But dreams of trillion-dollar energy reserves die hard, much harder than do U.S. soldiers and Afghans, at least in the view of energy executives and allied politicians and policymakers.

The TAPI project continues to have well-placed advocates. During the 1990s, Khalilzad did consulting work for a firm conducting risk analysis for UNOCAL (now part of Chevron) for the proposed \$2-billion pipeline project.

On Dec. 6, 2001, *Le Monde* ran an article stating that Hamid Karzai, who is now President of Afghanistan, "acted, for a while, as a consultant for the American oil company UNOCAL, at the time it was considering building a pipeline in Afghanistan." A UNOCAL spokesperson has denied this.

Obama's Advisers

When President Obama has tapped former CIA officials to advise him on the Afghan War, he always seems to pick the wrongheaded ones, like my former colleagues Bruce Riedel and John Brennan.

Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at Brookings' pro-Israel Saban Center for Middle East Policy, has been pre-occupied with ways in which the U.S. could help defend Israel from the threat he and Israeli leaders profess to see from Iran.

Riedel's world view is vividly reflected in his article of Aug. 24, 2010, in *The National Interest*, where he suggested that "an American nuclear guarantee would add an extra measure of assurance to Israelis."

"It would be made even stronger if the administration could develop a multinational nuclear deterrent for Israel by making Israel a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Riedel wrote. "Of course, getting Israel into NATO would be a very hard sell ...

"This is why, in the meantime, the administration should go another step and actually assist Israel in developing its own second-strike capabilities further. Already the United States has been deeply involved in building Israel's defense against an Iranian missile strike. ...

"The next step would be to ensure Israel has the delivery systems that would safeguard a second-strike capability. The F-15I probably already does so for the immediate future, but it is worth examining the wisdom of providing the F-22 stealth aircraft to the IDF as an even-more-sophisticated attack system that would be able to assure Israel's deterrence far into the future. ...

"We might look at providing Israel with advanced cruise-missile technology or even nuclear-powered submarines with missile capabilities to enhance its capacity to launch from platforms at sea.

"The era of Israel's monopoly on nuclear weapons in the Middle East is probably coming to an end. Israel will still have a larger arsenal than any of its neighbors, including Iran, for years if not decades. ...

"Only by enhancing Israel's nuclear capability will America be able to strongly and credibly deter an Israeli attack on Tehran's facilities. The clock is ticking on the IDF's [Israeli Defense Forces'] plans."

As you would imagine, Riedel is in full agreement with the neocons who push for more and more U.S. military involvement in the Middle East and southwest Asia. It would be interesting to speculate on who suggested to the President that Riedel should lead his first policy review on Afghanistan.

Another influential CIA alumnus, Kenneth Pollack, is now director of the Saban Center at Brookings. Pollack is author of the 2002 book, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*, which provided a thin veneer of think-tank cover for the Fawning Corporate Media to rally behind Bush's invasion of Iraq.

Pollack is credited (if that is the correct word) with persuading Establishment pundits like the Bill Keller of the *New York Times* that invading Iraq was a swell idea, and that they

should become cheerleaders for it. Which Keller and many others did.

And then there's John Brennan, a protégé of the disgraced former CIA Director George Tenet who thought it his duty to conjure up "intelligence" to help Bush justify his wars.

Brennan was initially under consideration for appointment as Obama's CIA Director, but it became clear that too many people in Washington were aware of Brennan's role as Tenet's accomplice in corrupting CIA analysis and permitting abusive operations, including the "extraordinary rendition" program and the torture of detainees.

Nonetheless, this stellar record landed Brennan at the White House as Obama's chief adviser on counterterrorism.

Yet, Brennan showed himself incapable of dealing intelligently with the key question on terrorism — why do they hate us? In January 2010, veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas had the temerity to seek a cogent answer from him, to no avail. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Answering Helen Thomas on Why.](#)"]

So Where from Here on Afghanistan?

Oddly, at the RAND conference mentioned above, it was Ambassador Khalilzad who addressed with striking candor the widespread public confusion regarding the war in Afghanistan. "People don't believe we know what we're doing," he said.

Now why in the world would he say that?

In recent weeks alone, there has been a cacophony of conflicting commentary from senior officials about Afghanistan.

On Feb. 8, Afghan President Karzai said the Obama administration has been in secret talks with him to formalize a system of permanent military bases across the war-torn nation, though Obama has disavowed an interest in permanent bases.

In a speech at West Point on Feb. 25, Gates implied that he thought the Afghan War was nuts, [telling](#) the cadets that "in my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General [Douglas] MacArthur so delicately put it."

In early March, Gen. Ronald Burgess, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said the U.S.-led coalition has been killing Taliban militants by the hundreds, but there has been "no apparent degradation in their capacity to fight."

On March 11, Gates, told NATO that the U.S. military suffered more casualties in 2010 than any previous year of the war, but that "these are the tragic costs of success."

On March 15, Gen. Petraeus told senators that progress in Afghanistan is "fragile and reversible." He also described the value of sustaining a long-term relationship with Kabul, and raised the possibility of operating "joint" U.S.-Afghan military bases with Afghan forces long after foreign troops are scheduled to withdraw in 2014.

"It's very important to stay engaged in a region in which we have such vital interests," Petraeus said.

So, two years after President Obama clearly sank his feet into the morass of the Afghan War, it's still not clear what the open-ended conflict is all about or who is really in charge.

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