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The horror, the horror

The massacre in Kandahar won't mark the end of all elaborate plans for Afghanistan.

Pepe Escobar

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Hong Kong - It started way before a lone killer, a US Army sergeant, married with two children, walked into villages in Panjwayi, southwest of Kandahar city, and "allegedly" went on a shooting spree, leaving at least 16 civilians dead.

This was Afghanistan's Haditha moment - as in Iraq; or My Lai - as in Vietnam.

It had been building up via the serial drone-with-Hellfire bombings of tribal wedding parties; the serial secret US Special Forces' "night raids"; the serial "kill team" murders in 2010; the ritual urination onto dead Afghans by "our men in uniform"; and last but not least, the Quran burnings in Bagram. Mission ... accomplished?

According to the latest **Post-ABC News poll** - conducted even *before* the Kandahar massacre - 55 per cent of Americans want the end of the Afghan war.

US President Barack Obama once again stressed that 10 years into a war that has cost at least \$400bn, the "combat role" of NATO troops will end in 2014. According to Obama, Washington only wants to make sure "that al-Qaeda is not operating there, and that there is sufficient stability that it does not end up being a free-for-all".

Al-Qaeda "is not operating there" for a long time; there are only a bunch of instructors "not there" but in the Waziristans, in the Pakistani tribal areas.

And forget about "stability". The "Afghan security forces" that will be theoretically in charge by 2014, or even before, are doomed. Their illiteracy rate is a staggering 80 per cent. At least 25 per cent become deserters. Child rape is endemic. Over 50 per cent are permanently stoned on hashish, on steroids.

The level of mistrust between Afghans and Americans is cosmic. According to a 2011 study that became classified by the Pentagon *after* it was leaked to the *Wall Street Journal* - the American military essentially view Afghans as corrupt cowards while Afghans see the American military as coward bullies.

Get a Saigon 1975 moment now or in 2014, the facts on the ground will remain the same: Hindu Kush-rocking instability.

Toss the COIN and I win

Afghanistan was always a tragedy trespassed by farce. Think about NATO's original 83 restrictions on the rules of engagement, which led, for example, to a rash of French soldiers killed in 2008 because France, pressed by the US, stopped paying protection money to the Taliban; or think about Berlin calling it not a war, but a "humanitarian mission".

Internal battles - unlike Vietnam - became legend. Such as the COINdinistas - the counter-insurgency gang, supported by then Pentagon chief Bob Gates - invested in a "new mission" and a "new military leadership", winning against Vice-President Joe Biden's CT PLUS strategy, as in less soldiers on the ground doing counter-terrorism.

The winner, as everyone remembers, was rockstar General Stanley McChrystal, who insisted that the Biden plan would lead to "Chaosistan", which happened to be the name of a classified CIA analysis.

Stanley McChrystal - a Pentagon spokesperson during the March 2003 invasion of Iraq - badly wanted to change the culture of NATO and the US Army in Afghanistan. He wanted to destroy the culture of shoot-first-and-blow-shit-up and go towards "protecting the civilian population". In his own words, he stressed that "air-to-ground munitions" and "indirect fires" against Afghan homes were "only authorised under very limited and prescribed conditions".

He prevailed - shielded by his rockstar status - only for a brief moment.

Meanwhile, even if on one side the State Department, the DEA and the FBI would be warning about nasty drug smugglers and assorted criminals, on the other side the CIA and the Pentagon, praising them for good intel, would always win.

And everything was fully justified by an array of reluctant warriors/liberal hawks in places such as the Center for a New American Security - crammed with "respectable" journalists.

Hamid Karzai won the Afghan elections by outright fraud. His half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai - then provincial council chief in Kandahar - was free to keep running his massive drug business while dismissing elections ("the people in this region don't understand it").

Who cared if the Afghan government in Kabul was/is in fact a crime syndicate? "Loyal" local commanders - "our bastards" - increasingly got funding and even dedicated Special Forces as personal advisors to themselves and their death squads.

McChrystal, to his credit, admitted that the Soviets in the 1980s did many things right (for instance, building roads, promoting central government, education for boys and girls alike, modernising the country).

But they also did a lot of things terribly wrong, such as carpet-bombing and killing 1.5 million Afghans. If only Pentagon planners had the presence of mind to read *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1970-89* (Profile Books), by former British ambassador Rodric Braithwaite, drawing on a wealth of Russian sources from the KGB to the Gorbachev Foundation; from the internet to a spectacular book by the late General Alexander Lyakhovskiy.

You have the right to be misinformed

The Pentagon will never accept the withdrawal date of 2014: it goes full-frontal against its own Full Spectrum Dominance doctrine, which counts on scores of US bases in Afghanistan to monitor/control/harass strategic competitors - Russia and China.

The way out will be a ruse. The Pentagon will **transfer** its special operations to the CIA; they will become "spies", not "troops on the ground".

This will mean, essentially, an extension ad infinitum of the Phoenix Program in Vietnam, which carried out the targeted killing of over 20,000 "suspected" Vietcong supporters.

And that leads us to the current CIA director, media-savvy General David Petraeus and his baby - COIN field manual FM 3-24, the Pentagon's answer to William Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* as the marriage of counter-insurgency with the war on terror. And this, even after a 2008 RAND study titled *How Terrorist Groups End* stressed that the only way to defeat them was through a good old law enforcement operation.

Petraeus couldn't care less. After all, his "information operations" - as in all-out media manipulation, coupled with the massive distribution of the proverbial suitcase full of US dollars - had won "his" and George W Bush's surge in Iraq.

Proud Pashtuns were a much tougher nut to crack than Sunni sheikhs in the desert. They went so low-tech - fabricating tens of thousands of IEDs with fertiliser, wood and old munitions - that they in fact froze US technology dead in its tracks, leading to endless Pentagon newspeak reports on "vast increase in IED activity".

Since Obama's inauguration, the Pentagon had been playing extra-dirty to extract the exact war they wanted to carry out in Afghanistan.

They got it. Petraeus went on non-stop spin mode on "progress". Local populations were "becoming more receptive" to US troops, even as a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) - the cumulative knowledge of 17 US intelligence agencies - remained grim.

Petraeus did what he does best: he remixed the NIE. He never admitted that the war would be over by 2014. He cranked up airstrikes, unleashed Apache and Kiowa attack helicopters, tripled the number of night raids by Special Forces, authorised a mini-Shock and Awe, **totally levelling** the town of Tarok Kolache in southern Afghanistan.

After yet another US massacre in February 2011 in Kunar Province, with 64 dead civilians, Petraeus even had the gall of **accusing Afghans** of burning their own children to make it look like collateral damage. Good for him. At the time, his relationship with Obama was even improving.

The Obama administration is, in fact, convinced that Obama's surge, led by Petraeus and scheduled to finish by September, has left Afghanistan "stable", at least in the region known as "regional command east"; that's what Petraeus dubs "Afghan good enough".

Most of the country is in fact "Talib good enough", but who cares? As for burning babies, cynics might qualify it as a feature of American exceptionalism. One just has to remember the Amiriya Shelter in Baghdad on February 13, 1991, when no fewer than 408 children and their mothers were burned to death by the US.

I'll never look into your eyes... again

How not to remember the inimitable Dennis Hopper as the psychedelic photojournalist in *Apocalypse Now*, talking about Colonel Kurtz/Marlon Brando: "He's a poet-warrior in the classic sense..."

"Poet-warrior" McChrystal was convinced Afghanistan was not Vietnam; in Vietnam the US was fighting a "popular insurgency", unlike Afghanistan (wrong: the many strands bundled under the moniker "Taliban" have become more popular in direct proportion to Karzai's disaster, not to mention that in Vietnam the official Pentagon spin was that the Vietcong were never popular).

Generals, anyway, don't go on Kurtz-style killing sprees. Petraeus was promoted to unleash Shadow War Inc at the CIA. After he was sacked following a profile in *Rolling Stone* magazine - how rockstar is that? - McChrystal ended up rehabilitated by the White House.

He taught at Yale, went into consulting, is making a fortune on the conference circuit - distilling wisdom about "leadership" and the Greater Middle East - and was made an unpaid adviser to military families by Obama.

McChrystal sees Afghanistan as stuck in "some kind of post-apocalyptic nightmare". Conrad's "the horror... the horror..." is perennial. The Pentagon's key lesson from Vietnam was how to seal off the horror, how to put it in boxes, and how to, voluptuously, embrace it.

So it's no wonder McChrystal could not possibly see that he was starring as the remixed Colonel Kurtz - while Petraeus was a more methodical, but no less deadly Captain Willard. Unlike Vietnam, though, this time there won't be a Coppola to win the war for Hollywood. But there will be plenty of Hollow Men left at the Pentagon.