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Obama Should Read WikiLeaks on Afghanistan

Posted By Ray McGovern

January 3, 2011

Perhaps President Barack Obama should give himself a waiver on the ban prohibiting U.S. government employees from downloading classified cables released by WikiLeaks, so he can get a better grasp on the futility of his Afghan War strategy.

For instance, if Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has hidden from him Ambassador Karl Eikenberry's cables from Kabul, he might wish to search out KABUL 001892 of July 13, 2009, in which Eikenberry reports that Afghan President Hamid Karzai is "unable to grasp the most rudimentary principles of state building."

And, while he's at it, he should dig out the September 2009 cable from the U.S. Ambassador in Pakistan, Anne Patterson, in which she warns: "There is no chance that Pakistan will view enhanced assistance ... as sufficient compensation for abandoning support to these [Taliban and similar] groups in Pakistan."

The same conclusion is contained in the recent National Intelligence Estimates on Afghanistan and Pakistan. My advice to Obama would be: Don't let anyone gist them for you; read at least the Key Judgments.

In his [recent defense](#) of his Afghanistan-Pakistan policy, Obama acted as if he didn't know or understand the full import of these disclosures. Instead, he simply reiterated the "three areas of our strategy" in Afghanistan:

"To break the Taliban's momentum and train Afghan forces so they can take the lead; to promote effective governance and development; and regional cooperation, especially with Pakistan, because our strategy has to succeed on both sides of the border."

But, Mr. President, you should know that the Taliban's momentum has not been broken; nor is it likely to be. And good luck with President Karzai on that "effective governance" thing, not to mention the part about getting cooperation from Pakistan. Indeed, the real

Achilles heel of Obama's strategy, the true showstopper, is the forlorn hope of stronger cooperation from Pakistan.

Other WikiLeaks cables make Pakistan's deep concern about the encroachment of India in Afghanistan unmistakably clear. In one cable, for example, Pakistani Army chief Gen. Ashfaq Kayani is reported to have been "utterly frank" about the consequences of a pro-India government coming to power in Kabul, saying:

"The Pakistani establishment will dramatically increase support for Taliban groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan ... as an important counterweight."

The Great Game

So, here's the important point to understand: While U.S. presidents and European leaders have long viewed Afghanistan as a strategic square on the global chessboard – from the British imperial Great Game to the U.S.-Soviet Cold War to today's "war on terror" – Pakistan sees its Afghan neighbor in the context of Pakistan's fierce regional rivalry with India.

Indeed, Pakistan's powerful intelligence service, the ISI, created the Taliban in the 1990s by recruiting Afghan refugees in Pakistan and building them into a force to drive out an Afghan mujahedin regime in Kabul that Pakistan regarded as having overly close ties to India.

So, Mr. President, with respect to your third "area of strategy" – getting Pakistan to "cooperate" – you may wish to be more careful in making claims like: "Along with our Afghan partners, we've gone on the offensive, targeting the Taliban and its leaders and pushing them out of their strongholds."

Thanks for listening.

What the President Obama doesn't tell us is where those pushed-out Taliban go, but we know, don't we? They go across the border and are given refuge by the same Pakistanis who continue to keep them supplied, trained and armed – as is abundantly clear in several of the ground-truth U.S. Army messages in the "Afghanistan War Logs" made available by WikiLeaks.

Has no one told the President that Pakistan's ace-in-the-hole against encroachment by arch-rival India into Afghanistan is none other than the Taliban?

And, as Ambassador Patterson has emphasized, Islamabad is not about to risk losing that high card even in the unlikely event that Washington should threaten to curtail military assistance to Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan has other cards to play.

What most Americans forget regarding Afghanistan is that you can't get there from here. Some 80 percent of U.S. war materiel must traverse Pakistan.

Gen. Kayani has already demonstrated what he is willing to do when he feels Pakistani sensibilities are not taken seriously by the U.S. – like blocking supply convoys and letting

them be torched by “militants.” In short, the Pakistanis are well aware that the U.S. needs them at least as much as they need the U.S.

Understandably, Pakistan’s leaders are pleased to take their sizable share of U.S. taxpayer money, but among the painful lessons learned in Washington is that this does not translate into influence – and especially not in regard to Pakistani strategic priorities and objectives.

Wooing a General

In Obama’s Dec. 16 speech outlining the findings of his cursory Afghan War review, the President insisted that “we are seeing significant progress” in the goal of “disrupting, dismantling and defeating” al-Qaeda, but he complained that Pakistan’s progress in rooting out terrorists “has not come fast enough.”

“So,” he added, “we will continue to insist to Pakistani leaders that terrorist safe havens within their borders must be dealt with.” But Pakistani leaders have wearied of Washington’s imperious tone and have become inured to this kind of empty rhetoric. They brush it aside and laugh all the way to the bank.

The *Washington Post* started the New Year with [a front-page article](#) offering more evidence about the U.S. dilemma, a piece by Karin Brulliard and Karen DeYoung, entitled “U.S. courts Pakistan’s top general, with little result.”

The title should have been “U.S. cannot harness Pakistan behind Afghan effort: Defeat Inevitable.”

Still, the Brulliard/DeYoung report highlights the fact that Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mullen has been assigned the task of bringing Kayani around to Washington’s way of thinking. Their story notes that Mullen has had “more than 30 face-to-face meetings with Kayani, including 21 visits to Pakistan since late 2007.”

Two weeks ago, during his most recent visit to Pakistan, Mullen said it was “very possible” that Pakistan would be able to root out insurgents from havens inside its territory that serve as a launching point for lethal strikes in Afghanistan. Possible perhaps, but don’t hold your breath.

Mullen has spoken of the “criticality of Pakistan in terms of overall success” in Afghanistan. The authors say, however, that both men believe there is a “trust deficit between the two militaries.”

But it’s not really a “trust deficit,” as we’ve seen. It is a strategic difference – a clash of interests – that cannot be bridged.

A Simple Syllogism

In effect, Brulliard and DeYoung set up a simple syllogism, but avoided the politically incorrect conclusion, however compelling:

–Major premise: “What the Obama administration’s recent strategy review concluded is a key to success in the Afghan war [is] the elimination of havens inside Pakistan where the Taliban plots and stages attacks on coalition troops in Afghanistan.”

–Minor premise: “Pakistani army chief Kayani, who as Pakistan’s army chief has more direct say over the country’s security strategy than its president or prime minister, has resisted personal appeals from President Obama...is unlikely to change his mind anytime soon...and is hedging his bets in case the American strategy for Afghanistan fails.”

–Conclusion: If the U.S. must get Pakistan’s help in eliminating the Taliban’s safe havens to and if that cooperation won’t be forthcoming from Pakistan, the prospects of U.S. “success” are close to zero.

Yet, however obvious this conclusion may be, it goes begging in the arch-Establishment *Washington Post*.

What really rubs across the grain is the apparent naïveté that reigns among policy makers in Washington – reflected in the oft-expressed hope by Secretary Clinton, Mullen and others that the U.S. can somehow change the strategic vision of Pakistan with a mix of flattery, threats, money and gifts (usually in the form of sophisticated military hardware).

It was particularly painful to hear Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Michele Flournoy, tell a rapt audience at Harvard’s Kennedy School several weeks ago that she expects the Pakistanis to come around, once we are able to “shift their strategic calculus.”

But Kayani and his colleagues are not naïve. The *Washington Post* article quotes Kayani as complaining that he is “always asking [Gen. David] Petraeus what is the strategic objective in Afghanistan.” As well he might.

I suppose, though, it doesn’t much matter whether or not the likes of Flournoy, Mullen and Clinton really believe they can get more help from the Pakistanis.

My guess is that – given the U.S.’s actual strategic vision as opposed to its stated objectives – senior U.S. policy makers feel stuck in Afghanistan and may realize by now that it is a forlorn hope that they can buy more cooperation from Islamabad, no matter how much money or weaponry they bring to the table.

As Kayani and the Pakistanis are well aware, the actual U.S. objectives have much more to do with the traditional Western interests in the region – strategic geography and natural resources combined with more recent worries over what might happen with Pakistan’s nuclear weapons.

The Pakistani nukes are, in fact, the baleful byproduct of a myopic, Cold-War-conditioned U.S. obsession with Afghanistan in the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan wanted to checkmate the Soviet Union by arming Islamic fundamentalists, both Afghan and Arabs, to battle Soviet troops that had been sent in by Moscow to protect a secular leftist regime in Kabul.

Part of the price for securing Pakistan’s cooperation was Washington’s willingness to look the other way while Pakistan circumvented non-proliferation protocols to secretly build a

nuclear arsenal. [For details, see ConsortiumNews.com's "[Reagan's Bargain/Charlie Wilson's War](#)."]]

A Long-Term Approach

Given the variety of U.S. strategic interests in Central Asia, today's bedrock American policy appears to be the creation of an enduring U.S. presence in Afghanistan. That's right; think longer term than even 2014.

The *Post's* Walter Pincus reported on Dec. 21 that Bagram airfield in Afghanistan continues to grow. In mid-December, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers put out a "pre-solicitation notice" for a contractor to build the eighth of nine planned increments for troop housing at Bagram "to replace expeditionary housing facilities." Pincus adds that 18 months ago there were already 20,000 American military and civilian personnel housed there.

In 2008, the Army explained the need for supplemental funding for an ammunition storage facility at Bagram, where 12 "igloos" were planned to support Army and Air Force needs. The Army wrote, "As a forward operating site, Bagram must be able to provide for a long-term, steady state presence which is able to surge to meet theater contingency requirements." Read: The U.S. military is in Afghanistan for the long haul.

A year earlier, CENTCOM commander Adm. William Fallon, in testimony to Congress, described Bagram as "the centerpiece for the CENTCOM Master Plan for future access to and operations in Central Asia."

Strategically situated as it is, Afghanistan is not only a key chessboard square from which to hunt down the few hundred surviving al-Qaeda operatives in the border area with Pakistan. Nor is it simply to be positioned to launch some future emergency mission to secure Pakistan's nukes if Islamic extremists take over. Afghanistan also happens to sit next to huge reserves of natural gas and oil.

Are we getting the picture? The Great Game has simply found new trappings with a rationale more attuned to the Western political realities (and sensibilities) of today – and with a fresher title.

We now have the "Long War," which has many similarities to the old Great Game. It is still a competition for the region's resources and strategic bases, albeit with the United States and China joining the ranks of outside powers now elbowing for position.

The Grim Ground View

On Dec. 27 another *Washington Post* [front-page article](#) by Greg Jaffe highlighted how the misadventure in Afghanistan looks to the oft-praised but more often forgotten forces on the ground:

"Earlier this year, Lt. Col. Joseph Ryan concluded that his 800-soldier battalion was locked in an endless war for an irrelevant valley.

“There is nothing strategically important about this terrain,’ said Ryan, 41, a blunt commander who has spent much of the past decade in combat. ‘We fight here because the enemy is here. The enemy fights here because we are here.’

“Ryan’s challenge for the past several months has been to figure out a way to leave the Pech Valley ... without handing the insurgents a victory....”

“Pech” means bad luck in German – and maybe not only in German. The word seems to speak to the reality that the Lt. Col. Ryans and grunts of this world take the casualties while the Clintons, Mullens, and Flournoys of Washington plot high strategy, including packaging the costly conflict as necessary to protect the fearful American people from terrorism.

However, the documents released by WikiLeaks and the recent analysis by the U.S. intelligence community combine to make it clear that the stated objectives of the U.S. either are unachievable or are facades for other unstated goals.

It is not rocket science. Not only the WikiLeaks documents and U.S. intelligence analyses, but simple logic gives the lie to Obama’s recent claim, after his perfunctory Afghanistan-Pakistan policy review, that “we are on track to achieve our goals.”

Is President Obama impervious to documentary evidence, intelligence analysis and logic? That beggars belief. So why does the President insist on continuing the March of Folly begun by his predecessor?

WANTED: A Cogent Answer

We owe it to those being killed and maimed every day to demand a cogent answer to this question. The alternative is to revert to the ethos of Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade,” a classic poem commemorating a battle between British and Russian forces in the Crimean War in 1854, during the Great Game era:

*“Forward, the Light Brigade!’
Was there a man dismay’d?
Not tho’ the soldiers knew
Some one had blunder’d:
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die,
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.”*

Update: Into the Hindu Kush rode the 140,000 U.S. and NATO troops.

It is essential that we resist the administration’s attempts to infantilize and seduce us by the comfort of soothing illusion.

President Obama’s [brief address](#) on Dec. 16 about achieving “core goals” in Afghanistan was riddled with a Swiss-cheese patchwork of holes – a case study in non-sequiturs and empty phrases suitable for a Rhetoric 101 class on specious logic.

If the White House PR people still think that the sonorous alliterations out of a Dr. Seuss stylebook –“disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda”– will suffice to ensure the support of the American people, they have another think coming.

But the President’s form-over-substance speechwriters keep at it nonetheless, adding some “r” alliterations to the earlier “d” sounds. In his speech, Obama said al-Qaeda “remains a ruthless and resilient enemy bent on attacking our country. But make no mistake – we are going to remain relentless in disrupting and dismantling that terrorist organization.”

Does this mean that with the 140,000 NATO troops now in Afghanistan, we’ve been able to kill or capture some of the 50 to 100 al-Qaeda operatives who CIA Director Leon Panetta has said may still be in Afghanistan and maybe some of the few hundred hiding on the other side of the border with Pakistan?

The Taliban Tangent

Alas, we are left to figure out that answer for ourselves, as Obama went off on a familiar tangent, equating al-Qaeda with the Taliban. (BULLETIN: For those who only think inside the Fox box, please know that the two are not the same.)

This bloody adventure in Afghanistan is made all the easier to continue by the reality that is not “we” who are condemned “but to do and die,” but mostly disadvantaged folks from our small towns and inner cities whom we privileged Americans are happy to let do the dying for the rest of us.

Is it that Americans no longer care about this sort of thing? Are we so dumbed down as not to be able to see that there is no justifiable logic behind the killing, maiming and destruction, even assuming the professed goals in Afghanistan are the real ones – a dubious assumption indeed.

Facades of Empire

Washington’s present course in Central Asia can be much more logically understood if the real goals of the violence are to achieve what an empire requires in terms of military bases, natural resources, strategic interests and further enrichment of the super-wealthy.

This is to explain, not to defend. And, in case you’re wondering, my view is that these goals are both morally indefensible and unachievable in the longer run.

Combine them, however, with back-home political interests – Democrats fearful of being called out by Republicans and the Right as weak on defense and soft on terror – and you have a better sense of why the Afghan War drags on.

Americans have been generally inclined to give the government and its official explanation for war the benefit of the doubt – but only for so long. Many are now coming around to the realization they’ve been had.

According to a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey of Americans conducted from Dec. 17 to 19 (immediately after Obama’s public reassurances), 63 percent of the respondents expressed opposition to U.S. involvement in Afghanistan – an all-time high.

For those who think Afghan opinion also matters, recent polling conducted by the BBC, ABC, and other news organizations shows that, in provinces where there is the most fighting, the proportion of people approving of attacks on U.S. troops has risen from 12 to 40 percent in the last year.

Since Gen. Petraeus loves metrics for gauging the progress of his counterinsurgency strategies, he might want to put those numbers into one of his PowerPoint displays about his success at winning hearts and minds.

As Harry Truman was fond of saying, most of us were “not born yesterday.” Those able to think outside the Fox box can discern when artificial alliteration and dubious logic masquerade as articulation of sound policy.

Congressional Hearings?

It may take a couple of run-throughs of this background, but Americans are inclined to “dis” (to use inner-city vernacular) artifices like “disrupt, dismantle, defeat” as empty slogans hiding a lamentable lack of cogent thinking.

I find myself asking, a la John Kerry before he let the imperial Establishment do a lobotomy cutting the connection to the Vietnam file in his brain, “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

Maybe it is too much to expect today’s John Kerry to do better than his timorous predecessor as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vice President Joe Biden.

In the run-up to President George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, Biden caved in to strong White House pressure and staged faux hearings featuring the kind of “experts” who predicted that an invasion of WMD-laden Iraq would be a “cakewalk,” and shunning those of us predicting catastrophe.

Et tu, John? One can always pray for miracles, but the current Foreign Relations Committee chairman appears to be the same empty shirt who let himself be persuaded by his handlers in the 1990s that his dreams for political advancement required making peace with the Establishment.

Sadly, it’s almost impossible to envision Kerry converting back to the more courageous politician of his early days in the U.S. Senate when he challenged the Reagan administration’s foreign policy, let alone to the gutsy young Navy officer who in 1971 confronted the same committee he now chairs.