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Tom Dispatch

American Blitzkrieg

By Tom Engelhardt

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Remember the 100 hours of combat that made up the first Gulf War, the mere weeks it took for Kabul to fall in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, or the "shock and awe" wave of air attacks that led off the 2003 invasion of Iraq, followed by the 20-day blitzkrieg-like campaign that left American troops occupying Baghdad? Those were the days when, as retired lieutenant colonel and TomDispatch regular William Astore reminds us, the civilians in the Bush Pentagon thought they were the masters of lightning war. Now, skip almost seven years, and in Afghanistan the US military has just launched the largest campaign since the invasion of 2001. Fifteen thousand US, British, and Afghan troops have been dispatched to take Marja, a single, modest-sized, Taliban-controlled city of 80,000 in one of more than 700 districts in Afghanistan, many under some degree of Taliban control or influence. How the time frame for success has changed.

As the Americans went in, Marine Commander Brigadier General Larry Nicholson was already warning that it might take up to 30 days, longer than it took to capture Baghdad, just to clear Marja of hidden explosives and, despite overwhelming power arrayed against perhaps a few hundred Taliban guerrillas, the fighting in the town has gone on relatively steadily for days. What, in 1991, 2001, and 2003 was the swift claim of total victory is now a long-haul campaign, according to American military sources, to blunt Taliban success (or, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates put it, to "degrade the capability of the Taliban") and so, evidently, bring the enemy in a chastened state to the negotiating table before an American drawdown begins.

As for timelines, US officials now talk about the combat portion of the Marja campaign being but the beginning of a full-scale, militarized version of nation-building on a local level. Think of it as city- or district-building, and the process includes (we're told by the US war commander

with some pride) the unpacking of an imported "government in a box" -- the governing and security forces of Hamid Karzai's central government -- and the launching of a well-funded, local reconstruction program to win "hearts and minds." As a result, the test of success is now considered to be months down the line, and that's if the Marja campaign doesn't turn out to be a classic counterinsurgency quagmire.

The story of how Pentagon strategists and the US military went from being the masters of war to a force of would-be long-haul city-builders in the backlands of Afghanistan is a strange one indeed, made stranger yet by the bizarre detour they took through modern German military lore.