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Foreign Policy

Down the AfPak Rabbit Hole

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03/02/2010

The village of Marjah is a meaningless strategic backwater. So why are the Pentagon and the press telling us the battle there was a huge victory?

The release of Tim Burton's new blockbuster movie, Alice in Wonderland, is days away. The timing could not be more appropriate. Lewis Carroll's ironically opium-inspired tale of a rational person caught up inside a mad world with its own bizarre but consistent internal (il)logic has now surpassed Vietnam as the best paradigm to understand the war in Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan, as we have written here and in Military Review (pdf), is indeed a near replication of the Vietnam War, including the assault on the strategically meaningless village of Marjah, which is itself a perfect re-enactment of Operation Meade River in 1968. But the callous cynicism of this war, which we described here in early December, and the mainstream media's brainless reporting on it, have descended past these sane parallels. We have now gone down the rabbit hole.

Two months ago, the collection of mud-brick hovels known as Marjah might have been mistaken for a flyspeck on maps of Afghanistan. Today the media has nearly doubled its population from less than 50,000 to 80,000 -- the entire population of Nad Ali district, of which Nad Ali is the largest town, is approximately 99,000 -- and portrays the offensive there as the equivalent of the Normandy invasion, and the beginning of the end for the Taliban. In fact, however, the entire district of Nad Ali, which contains Marjah, represents about 2 percent of Regional Command

(RC) South, the U.S. military's operational area that encompasses Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan, Zabul, Nimruz, and Daikundi provinces. RC South by itself is larger than all of South Vietnam, and the Taliban controls virtually all of it. This appears to have occurred to no one in the media.

Nor have any noted that taking this nearly worthless postage stamp of real estate has tied down about half of all the real combat power and aviation assets of the international coalition in Afghanistan for a quarter of a year. The possibility that wasting massive amounts of U.S. and British blood, treasure, and time just to establish an Afghan Potemkin village with a "government in a box" might be exactly what the Taliban wants the coalition to do has apparently not occurred to either the press or to the generals who designed this operation.

In reality, this battle -- the largest in Afghanistan since 2001 -- is essentially a giant public affairs exercise, designed to shore up dwindling domestic support for the war by creating an illusion of progress. In reporting it, the media has gulped down the whole bottle of "drink me" and shrunk to journalistic insignificance. In South Vietnam, an operational area smaller than RC South, the United States and its allies had over 2 million men under arms, including more than half a million Americans, the million-man Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), 75,000 coalition troops, the Vietnamese Regional Forces and Popular Forces (known as "Ruff-Puffs"), the South Vietnamese police, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) and other militias -- and lost.

Yet the media is breathlessly regurgitating Pentagon pronouncements that we have "turned the corner" and "reversed the momentum" in Afghanistan with fewer than 45,000 men under arms in all of RC South (including the Afghan army and police) by fighting for a month to secure a single hamlet. Last year this would have been *déjà vu* of the "five o'clock follies" of the Vietnam War. Now it feels more like the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. "How can we have more success," Alice might ask, "when we haven't had any yet?"

So here we are in the AfPak Wonderland, complete with a Mad Hatter (the clueless and complacent media), Tweedledee and Tweedledum (the military, endlessly repeating itself and history), the White Rabbit (the State Department, scurrying to meetings and utterly irrelevant), the stoned Caterpillar (the CIA, obtuse, arrogant, and asking the wrong questions), the Dormouse (U.S. Embassy Kabul, who wakes up once in a while only to have his head stuffed in a teapot), the Cheshire Cat (President Obama, fading in and out of the picture, eloquent but puzzling), the Pack of Cards army (the Afghan National Army, self-explanatory), and their commander, the inane Queen of Hearts (Afghan President Hamid Karzai). (In Alice in Wonderland, however, the Dormouse is "suppressed" by the Queen of Hearts, not the White Rabbit or the Cheshire Cat, so the analogy is not quite perfect.)

For his part, as the Economist noted this week, Karzai has made fools of all the Western officials who sternly admonished him to begin a new era of transparent democracy, seizing control of the Electoral Complaints Commission to dismiss its independent members. Like the Queen of Hearts, Karzai has literally lost his marbles, according to our sources in the presidential palace. Or, as U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry more diplomatically phrased it in his leaked cable, his behavior has become "erratic." He hasn't started shouting "off with their heads" yet, but the legitimacy thing is toast. Only the massive public relations exercise in Marjah kept Karzai's kleptocracy out of the media spotlight in February.

The military and political madness of the AfPak Wonderland has entered a new chapter of folly with the detention of a few Taliban mullahs in Pakistan, most notably Mullah Baradar, once the military strategist of the Quetta Shura, the primary Taliban leadership council headed by Mullah Omar. Like the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon in Alice in Wonderland, this has the Washington establishment dancing the whacked-out Lobster-Quadrille: Instant Afghanistan experts at the White House and pundits at august Beltway institutions like the Brookings Institution are absurdly calling the detentions a "sea change" in Pakistani behavior.

In fact, it is no such thing. Pakistan has not abandoned overnight its 50-year worship of the totem of "strategic depth," its cornerstone belief that it must control Afghanistan, or its marriage to the Taliban, and anyone who believes that is indulging in magical thinking. What has happened is, in fact, a purge by Taliban hard-liners of men perceived to be insufficiently reliable, either ethnically or politically, or both. It is well-known that there had been a schism in the Quetta Shura for months, with hard-liner and former Gitmo prisoner Mullah Zakir (aka Abdullah Ghulam Rasoul) coming out on top over Mullah Baradar. Baradar sheltered fellow Popalzai Hamid Karzai in 2001 and possibly saved his life after an errant U.S. bomb in Uruzgan province killed several men on the Special Forces team that was escorting him. Baradar later became a confidant of the president's brother, paid CIA informer Ahmed Wali Karzai, and met occasionally with the president himself in the tangled web of Afghan politics.

The core Ghilzai leadership of the Taliban had long suspected Baradar of being too willing to negotiate and too partial to his kinsmen in making field appointments. Indeed, this suspicion led to the creation of the Quetta Shura's Accountability Council in late 2009, whose job apparently included removing many of Baradar's excessively Durrani and Karlani appointments.

This explains why when Mullah Zakir, the hard-line military chief of the Quetta Shura along with Baradar, was detained near Peshawar two weeks after Baradar was detained, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) - Pakistan's powerful military spy service -- released him immediately. Meanwhile, all of the other lesser figures currently in detention (including Abdul Kabir, aka Mullah Abdul Kahir Osmani, the RC East regional commander; Mullah Abdul Rauf Aliza, an Alizai Durrani, former Gitmo prisoner, and Taliban military chief for northern Afghanistan; and Mullah Ahmed Jan Akhundzada, former shadow governor of Uruzgan province and Ishaqzai Durrani) are known moderates and allies of Baradar.

In other words, the Quetta Shura has used the ISI, its loyal and steadfast patron, to take out its trash. Those few mullahs suspected of being amenable to discussions with the infidel enemy and thus ideologically impure have now been removed from the jihad. This is not cooperation against the Taliban by an allied state; it is collusion with the Taliban by an enemy state. Pakistan is in fact following its own perceived strategic interests, which do not coincide with those of the United States. Pakistan has masterfully plied the Western establishment with an LSD-laced "drink me" cocktail of its own, convincing everyone that it is a frail and fragile Humpty-Dumpty that must not be pushed too hard, lest the nuclear egg fall off the wall. This is nonsense. In fact, what is needed against Pakistan's military leaders is a lever more powerful than "strategic depth" to force them into compliance and make them stop sheltering al Qaeda, destabilizing Afghanistan, and killing hundreds of Americans by proxy.

Unfortunately, in this AfPak Wonderland, there does not appear to be any magic mushroom to get back to normal. Instead, Afghanistan and Pakistan policy is trapped in an endless loop in a mad policy world operating under its own consistent internal illogic. Unlike Alice, the handful of Afghan analysts in the United States who actually understand what is happening cannot wake up or break through the corporate media noise. Far worse, thousands of brave U.S. Marines and soldiers are caught up in this deadly political croquet game where IEDs, not hedgehogs, are the game balls. The Duchess's baby really has turned into a pig, and there seems to be no way out of this increasingly insane rabbit hole.