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Bananas in Bananastan

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The long war just got longer, by fiat of Minister of Peace Robert Gates. In an interview with [al Jazeera's Abderrahim Foukara](#), Gates said, "both Afghanistan and Pakistan can count on us for the long term." To paraphrase the punch line to a joke about asylum inmates, *we're freaking nuts and we're never getting out of there.*

The long warriors have won. They have their everlasting conflict that will eternally justify the existence of a bloated U.S. military, and they suckered a Democrat into doing it for them. "I do not believe that President Obama would have made the commitment he has made if he did not believe we could achieve our objectives in Afghanistan," Gates told *Al Jazeera*.

It seems more certain by the day that Mr. Obama has, in fact, signed off on an open-ended involvement in the Bananastans*. Gates and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen have been on message of late about their boss's "war of necessity" and of the need to promise the two countries involved that we will never abandon them. It is a singular symptom of America's diseased strategic thinking that our top military leaders seek to reassure people in foreign countries who want nothing more than for us to go away by telling them that we never will.

Another leading symptom is Bananastan NATO commander [General Stan McChrystal](#) saying that "We are operating in a way that is truly protecting the Afghan people from all threats" as he surveys the damage from a NATO drone strike that killed Afghan people. Also indicative is that McChrystal was sold to the Senate as a counterinsurgency expert when, in fact, his main experience in Central Command had been as head assassin of [Donald Rumsfeld's Joint Special Operations Command hit squad](#), a rogue unit that operated outside of the formal chain of command.

As journalist Gareth Porter noted in May 2009, McChrystal's nomination to become director of the Joint Staff in May 2008 was held up for months while the Senate investigated abuse of detainees by military personnel under his command. Sixty-four service personnel assigned or

attached to Stan the Man's Special Operations units were disciplined for detainee abuse between early 2004 and the end of 2007.

[Gaunt and steely-eyed](#), McChrystal was also sold to Congress for his ascetic habits; he supposedly only eats one meal a day and sleeps only a few hours a night. Which is crazier: that those are his habits or that those habits are supposed to be considered suitable in an officer expected to make sane decisions on matters of national strategy? (Hungry and sleep deprived? Sure, he's the guy we want calling the shots.)

McChrystal recently submitted a classified report on the Bananastan situation that apparently asks for a new strategy. It would replace the [strategy Obama's White House war wonks](#) whipped together in March which was no strategy at all, but rather a cut-and-paste job that kluged together the most deranged think tank talking points from the last nine years. [Gates](#) says the March strategy hasn't had time to work. So it looks like we'll do what we always do when we don't know what to do: escalate. If that doesn't work, we'll escalate again (strategy to follow).

A number of models exist that define the elements of strategy. One of my favorites is ends-ways-means-risk. Ends are the objectives, ways are the methods or tactics, means are the amount and type of resources needed and risk considers costs, necessity and consequences. This is the calculus most of use, at least subconsciously, for virtually every decision we make (I want to own expensive, sinful and fattening thing X. How do I afford it? Would the consequences of taking another job be worth whatever sin or fat thing X will give me? Do I really want to be sinful, fat and broke?) The way our military works now, we say "Just go buy thing X and we'll figure out the rest later, maybe."

Obama says he wants to "finish the job" in Afghanistan, but nobody in his national security brain trust can tell him what the [end game](#) is so there's no way of telling when the job is finished. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's remark that the United States had to be "clear about what our national interests are," but success can only be defined as something we'll know "when we see it." If we can't define it, we can always say we can't see it yet but it's just around the corner.

The [New York Times](#) reported that National Security Adviser James Jones approved a July 17 policy document "setting out nine broad objectives for metrics to guide the administration's policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan." Metrics, or measures of effectiveness, are things you use to determine if you're meeting your objectives. I have no idea what "objectives for metrics" are, and probably never will because the policy memo is classified. [Gates and Mullen](#) say that some of the metrics will remain classified. So we'll have secret measures to determine whether a rudderless escalation is succeeding. When they tell us they're making progress, we'll just have to take their word for it, like we took Dick Cheney's word for everything.

Every time we ask how long we'll be embroiled in Bananastan, we hear that time is running out. Time has been running out for almost eight years now. If time keeps running out for as long as it looks like we're going to stay, it will never run out.

If the war brass sound to you like they're the maddest hares at the tea party, it's because they are. Folks who spend time around the five-sided puzzle palace quickly become as puzzled as

the rest of the inmates, and the puzzle masters have been around so long that it all makes perfect sense to them.

Everything about the Bananastan scenario is bananas. Petraeus, Mullen, McChrystal, Odierno and the rest of the cockamamie cast are straight out of Gilbert and Sullivan (they are the perfect models of the modern crazy general), and they're about to embalm this country on the far side of the Khyber Pass.

President Obama fell into this trap when, as a candidate, he deflected criticism that he voted against the Iraq surge by saying it took focus away from the "war of necessity" in Afghanistan. If you've noticed, the war mafia constantly refers to "Obama's war" and "[President Obama's strategy](#)" and the "mission the commander in chief has given us." In a recent open letter, neoconservative icon Bill Kristol and his [Foreign Policy Initiative](#) loonies reminded Obama that he has "called Afghanistan an 'international security challenge of the highest order,' and stated that 'the safety of people around the world is at stake.'" And, of course, they invoked 9/11.

That's all quackery of course. None of the 9/11 hijackers came from Afghanistan. Afghanistan has never and will never successfully invade another nation. The safety of the world would be better served by keeping its strongest nation from squandering its military and economic might in a country still trapped in the middle ages.

But Obama has made an undeniable commitment, one that he can only reverse by showing the set of baby-makers he displayed when he slapped down the demented right during his health care speech.

*Pakistan and Afghanistan, our banana republic-style quagmires in Central Asia.