

THE EMPIRE FROM WITHIN (PART TWO)

In yesterday's Reflection there appears a key paragraph taken from Woodward's book: "One important secret that has never been reported in the media, or anywhere else, was the existence of a covert army of 3,000 men in Afghanistan, whose objective was to kill or capture Taliban and sometimes venture into the tribal areas to pacify them and get support."

That army, created and handled by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), trained and organized as a "special force" has been made up on tribal, social, anti-religious and anti-patriotic bases; its mission is the follow-up and physical elimination of Taliban fighters and other Afghans, described as extreme Moslems. A Saudi recruited and funded by the CIA to fight against the Soviets when their troops were occupying Afghanistan has nothing in common with Al Qaeda and Bin Laden. When Vice President Biden traveled to Kabul at the start of 2009, David McKiernan, chief of American troops in Afghanistan told him in answer to a question about Al Qaeda that he hadn't seen one single Arab in two years there. Despite the relatively brief and ephemeral importance that the principal international press gave to "Obama's Wars", without a doubt these did not shirk from recording this revealing piece of news.

The American government was faced with an unsolvable problem. In one of the last meetings of the National Security Council during the Bush presidency, a report was approved that stated that the US could not keep itself in Afghanistan unless three great problems were to be resolved: improve governability, decrease corruption and eliminate the Taliban sanctuaries...

One might add that the problem is more serious if one takes into account the US political and military commitments with Pakistan, a country endowed with nuclear weapons, whose stability in the midst of a tense ethnical balancing act has been affected by Bush's war in Afghanistan. Hundreds of kilometres of mountainous borders, with populations having the same origin, that are being attacked and massacred by unmanned planes, are shared by Pakistan and Afghanistan. NATO troops, whose morale diminishes day by day, cannot win this war.

Without enormous amounts of fuel, food and ammunition no army can move itself. The very struggle of the Afghans and Pakistanis, on one side or the other of the border, has discovered the weakness of the sophisticated American and European troops. The long supply routes are turning into a graveyard of enormous trucks and tankers destined for that task. Unmanned planes, the most modern of communications, sophisticated conventional, radio-electrical and even nuclear weaponry, abound.

But the problem is much more serious than these lines express.

However, let us continue with the summary of Woodward's spectacular book.

CHAPTER 8

Jack Keane, the retired General, a man who is very close to Hillary Clinton, advised that the strategy being followed in Afghanistan was incorrect, that the high toll of victims wasn't going to put an end to the insurgency, that these were having the opposite effect, that the only option was a counterinsurgent offensive to protect the Afghans. McKiernan wasn't interacting with the governors of the provinces. Keane told him that they were resorting too much to the antiterrorist struggle and that the counter insurgency strategy wasn't keeping pace.

Keane proposed replacing McKiernan with Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin III, the second in command in Iraq; and he also proposed McChrystal, adding that he was, without a doubt, the better candidate.

McChrystal had run good antiterrorist campaigns in Iraq but the tactical successes did not translate into strategic victories. That was why counterinsurgency was necessary.

CHAPTER 9

At his confirmation hearing as CIA director before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Leon Panetta stated that the Agency would no longer be sending alleged terrorists to another country to be tortured because this was forbidden under the new president's executive orders. He said that he suspected that the CIA was sending people to other countries to be interrogated using techniques that "were violating our norms".

Hayden was watching him on TV and, bothered, he was wondering whether Panetta had overlooked the conversation the two had had the month before. Hayden contacted Jeff Smith, the former CIA general adviser who had been assisting in the transition from Hayden to Panetta and he threatened him, saying that either tomorrow he retract what he said in the public testimony or they would have a show where the current CIA director tells the future CIA director that he doesn't know what he's talking about. Hayden said he would say it publicly and that it wouldn't benefit anyone. The next day it was Sen. Kit Bond of Missouri, the Republican head of the Intelligence Committee, who asked Panetta whether he would retract what he had said the previous day and Panetta said he would.

Hayden subsequently met with Panetta and told him that he had read his work where he was saying that the Bush government had chosen the best intelligence information to allege the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Panetta had laid the blame for it upon a special Pentagon unit that had been created by Rumsfeld. Panetta replied that it wasn't true, that it had been their error and he agreed that a catastrophic lapse of intelligence had occurred in the agency of which he was about to be the director.

On February 13, the president again met with the National Security Council to discuss four options for the deployment of troops in Afghanistan.

1. To decide only after defining a strategy.
2. To immediately send 17,000 troops.
3. To send the 17,000, but in two installments.
4. To send 27,000, thus filling Gen. McKiernan's request.

Clinton, Gates, Mullen and Petraeus backed sending 17,000 troops immediately. This was also Jones' recommendation. Richard Holbrooke, in a security video, warned that 44 years ago President Johnson was discussing the same thing with his advisors in the case of Vietnam. "We cannot forget history", he added. Vietnam had taught us that the guerrilla wins in an impasse situation and so he was supporting sending the 17,000. Obama finally notified the Pentagon that he had decided to send 17,000 troops.

CHAPTER 10

The objective for the Obama government was clear: dismantle and finally defeat Al Qaeda and its extremist allies, its support structures and its sanctuaries in Pakistan, and prevent its return to Pakistan or Afghanistan. Jones, Gates and Mullen were wondering whether they could trust the Pakistanis. Biden was proposing reinforcing antiterrorist operations and concentrating on Al Qaeda and Pakistan. Obama asked if sending 17,000 troops and 4,000 more later on would make any difference and the answer was that it would. Obama asked how much this operation would cost and the answer was that nobody knew,

that this was just a study and that no budget estimate had been made, but that the cost of stationing a soldier in Afghanistan, including a war veteran pension, health insurance, the cost of family care, food and weapons, would amount to approximately \$25,000 a year. The cost of an Afghan soldier in the terrain would amount to some \$12,000. Later Obama confirmed that Pakistan would be the centrepiece of any new strategy.

At a meeting with the National Security Council, Obama said that he was hoping on counting with popular support for his strategy for at least two years. Biden stated that the die had been cast, even though he remarked that he was in disagreement he assured that he would support the president's strategy.

CHAPTER 11

Petraeus was appearing to be worried. He was worried about becoming the victim of his earlier successes in Iraq. Probably counterinsurgency was not the correct strategy for Afghanistan, but Petraeus had assigned the task of studying the matter to a group of experts in operations and intelligence activities who held an opposing view. It seemed that the president had not accepted his arguments in favour of counterinsurgent operations. The president announced his strategy of dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda in a speech. A Washington Post editorial praised the plan with the headline: "The Price of Realism." The speech surprised some. The president had made changes to the wording himself. Obama had not totally committed to sending all the troops requested by the army. Obama said that he would analyze the matter again after the elections in Afghanistan.

Secretary of Defense Gates appeared comfortable with the decision: two days later he declared that he didn't see the need to ask for more troops or to ask the President to approve them until such time as the performance of these could be seen.

The president of Pakistan met with Obama in his office. Obama told him he didn't want to arm Pakistan against India. He acknowledged that they had moved forward in Swat but that the ceasefire had resulted in the extremists subverting the legitimacy of the Pakistani government, and that the government would be giving the impression that nobody was in charge. Obama acknowledged that Pakistan was now acting more decisively, something that had become evident by its performance in Swat and because they had allowed the CIA to launch an average of one attack with unmanned planes every three days during the course of the past month. The Pakistanis had launched an operation with 15,000 troops, one of the best until that time, against Taliban.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs realized that the solution to Afghanistan was right before his eyes, walking through the hallways of the Pentagon. McChrystal was already a legend. He had worked harder than anyone, solving problems and not complaining. He would follow all orders to the letter. Gates finally announced that McChrystal would be the new commander of the troops in Afghanistan. "Our mission there," he said, "requires new thinking and new approaches from our military leaders". Later Obama stated that he had been in agreement with this decision because he trusted the opinions of Gates and Mullen, but that he hadn't had a chance to talk to him in person.

On May 26, 2009, one of the most sensitive reports from the world of deep intelligence appeared in the TOP SECRET/ CODEWORD Presidents' Daily Brief. Its title was: North American al Qaeda trainees may influence targets and tactics in the United States and Canada. According to the report, around 20 Al Qaeda members with US, Canadian or European passports were undergoing training in the sanctuaries of Pakistan in order to return to their countries of origin and perpetrate high profile terrorist acts. Among them there were half a dozen in the United Kingdom, several Canadians, some Germans and three Americans. Their names were not known. Dennis Blair thought that the reports were alarming and believable enough so that the President should be informed. But Rahm Emmanuel didn't agree. Blair replied, as the president's intelligence advisor, that he felt quite concerned and Emmanuel accused him of trying to make him and the President feel responsible.

Upon leaving the White House, Blair was convinced that they were living on different planets in terms of the matter. He was seeing, evermore, a flaw in the government.

CHAPTER 12

General Jones was used to travelling to Afghanistan himself to make his own assessments. It was his opinion that the US could not lose that war, because people would say that the terrorists had won and this type of action would be seen in Africa, South America and in other places. Organizations such as NATO, the European Union and the United Nations could be dumped into the trash bin of history.

Jones visits the wounded soldiers; he meets with the colonels and talks with McChrystal. McChrystal confesses to him that Afghanistan was much worse than he had anticipated. He noticed that there were reasons aplenty for worry and that if the situation did not soon turn around it would become irreversible. Jones asked him to list the problems and McChrystal started to quote a veritable litany: the number of Taliban in the country was much higher than they thought (25,000). Jones commented that that was the result of the treaty signed by Pakistan with its tribes because it was there that the new Taliban could train without interference. The number of Taliban attacks was close to 550 a week and in the last few months they had almost doubled. Bombs going off by the side of the highway were killing approximately 50 soldiers from the coalition troops each month, as compared to eight reported the previous year.

Jones was insisting that the new strategy had three stages:

1. Security
2. Economic development and reconstruction
3. Governance by the Afghans under the rule of law.

Jones was insisting that the war was not going to be won by the army alone, that during the next year the part of the strategy that would be starting to work was economic development, and if this wasn't done well there wouldn't be enough troops in the world to achieve victory. Jones pointed out that this was a new phase and that Obama was not going to give all the forces the army commanders were asking for, like Bush used to do during the Iraq war. Jones added that the president knew that he was treading on the razor's edge, meaning that times were not just difficult and dangerous but that the situation could move forward in some other different direction.

In Helmand province, Jones made clear that the Obama strategy was designed to reduce US involvement and commitment, that he didn't think Afghanistan should be only an American war, but that there had been a tendency to Americanize it.

Upon his return, Jones informs Obama that the situation is disconcerting; that there was no relationship between what he was being told during the last few months and what General McChrystal was facing. Finally Obama asks him how many troops are needed and Jones informs him there is no definite number yet. He thought it was necessary to complete the first two phases of the strategy –economic development and governance –otherwise Afghanistan would simply swallow up any additional number of troops.

The reaction was very different at the Pentagon. Jones was accused of wanting to set limits on the numbers of troops. He was claiming that it wasn't fair for the president to make the decision he took in March, and before reaching the number of 21,000 troops stationed there, to decide that since the situation was going so bad, 40,000 to 80,000 additional troops were needed.

The chasm between the White House and the Pentagon was growing deeper and this was happening only four months after the President informed of his new strategy.

CHAPTER 13

Some US government officials were describing the Obama government using Afghan terminology and they were saying that the presidency was populated by “tribes”, representing its divisions. The Hillary tribe lived in the State Department; the Chicago Tribe occupied Axelrod’s and Emmanuel’s offices; the presidential campaign tribe was occupying the National Security Council that was headed by the cabinet chief Mark Lippert and the director of strategic communications Denis McDonough. This group was known as the “insurgency”.

The Taliban defeat required more men, money and time than its dismantling. Defeat meant unconditional surrender, total capitulation, victory, winning in the broadest sense of the word, completely destroying the Taliban.

Richard Holbrooke was looking pretty pessimistic closet o the August 20th elections in Afghanistan and stated: “If there are 10 possible outcomes in Afghanistan, 9 of them are bad. They range from civil war to irregularities”.

As soon as the polling booths shut down on August 20th, there were reports of voting fraud. Many officials from the UN and the State Department did not leave their residences to visit the voting locations for security reasons.

The day after the elections, Holbrooke and the American ambassador met with Karzai, and they asked him what he would do if there were a second round. Karzai said that he had been reelected and that there would be no second round.

After the meeting Karzai called the State Department operations centre and asked to speak to either Obama or Hillary. The American ambassador recommended that the president not take the call since Karzai had taken the offensive saying that a second round was impossible. Obama agreed not to speak with him.

Intelligence reports would describe Karzai as a person who was increasingly more delusional and paranoid. Karzai told them: “You guys are opposing me. It’s a British- American plot.

In August, a group was created to interview the members of General McChrystal’s strategic group who had just returned from Afghanistan in order to know what was happening in the terrain, how the war was going, what was working and what was not. McChrystal gave the group three questions as a guide for his study: Is the mission achievable?; if so, what needs to be changed to accomplish the mission?; are more resources necessary to complete the mission?

McChrystal told the group to be pragmatic and focus on things that would actually work.

The group came to the conclusion that the army understood relatively very little about the Afghan population. They couldn’t understand how the intimidation campaigns launched by the Taliban were affecting the population. The intelligence information gathering was a disaster. The group discovered that 70 percent of the intelligence requirements were enemy-centric. Some group members thought that within one or two years the war would be completely Americanized. The Americans preferred that the NATO allies supplied money and advisors for the Afghan security forces, instead of wandering throughout the country asking for air support to attack suspicious-looking Afghans.

The group had only bad news for McChrystal. They could carry out the best counterinsurgency campaign in the history of the world, and even so it would fail because of the weakness and corruption existing in the Afghan government. McChrystal looked as if he’d been hit by a train. In any case, he thanked the group.

McChrystal told Gates he would need 40,000 more troops. After lengthy discussions, Gates promised to give him as many troops as he could, while he could. "You've got a battle space over there and I've got a battle space over here", he told him.

"CHAPTER 14

"Biden had spent five hours trying to design an alternative for McChrystal, something he called 'counterterrorism plus'. Instead of an intensive amount of troops, the plan concentrates on what he believed was the real threat: Al Qaeda. This strategy emphasizes the destruction of the terrorist groups by the murder or capture of its leaders. Biden thought that it was possible to dissuade Al Qaeda from returning to Afghanistan, and so to avoid getting involved in the costly mission of protecting the Afghan people.

"Biden thought that Al Qaeda would take the path of least resistance and that they would not return to their former places of origin if:

"1. The U.S. maintained at least two bases- Bagram and Kandahar- so Special Operations Forces could raid anywhere in the country.

"2. The U.S. had enough manpower to control Afghan air space.

"3. Human intelligence networks inside Afghanistan provided targeting information to Special Operations Forces.

"4. The CIA's elite, 3,000-Afghan-strong-Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams (CTPT) could move freely.

"Afghanistan had to become a slightly more hostile environment for Al Qaeda than Pakistan so that they would decide to not return.

"Obama needed someone to guide him. He had been in the Senate for only four years and Biden had been there for 35. The President thought that the military couldn't put pressure on him, but they could crush an inexperienced President. Biden came to Obama's aid and Obama said to him: 'You know these guys. Go after it. Push'.

"Later Obama confessed that he wanted his vice president to be an aggressive detractor, and that he said exactly what he was thinking, that he would ask the most difficult questions, because he was convinced that that was the best way to serve the people and the troops, establishing a strong discussion about these matters of life or death.

"Obama called on a small group of the most experienced members of his national security staff in order to analyze the 66-page classified assessment written by McChrystal which, in summary, said that if more troops were not going to be sent it was probable that the war would likely end in a failure in the next 12 months. The President added that the options in this case were not good and he made it clear that he would not automatically accept the solution proposed by the general or by anyone else. 'We need to come this with a spirit of challenging our assumptions'.

"Peter Lavoy, the deputy for analysis in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, believed that behind the attacks of the unmanned planes, Bin Laden and his organization had been beaten, besieged, but not finished off, that Al Qaeda had become the Taliban leech.

"Obama wanted to know if it were possible to defeat Al Qaeda and how; if it were necessary to defeat the Taliban to defeat Al Qaeda; that it could occur in the next few years; what kind of presence was it necessary to have in Afghanistan in order to be able to have an efficacious antiterrorist platform.

"What wasn't said and what everyone knew was that a President could not lose a war nor could he be

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perceived as losing it.Obama said that it was going to be necessary to work for five years and he was proposing that other national priorities be considered.

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