

Confidential Memo for President Barack Hussein Obama

on

U.S. Policy in Afghanistan

Introduction

Mr. President, I am sure you are well aware of the history of Operation Enduring Freedom under the Bush Administration and our involvement in Afghanistan prior to that, so I will not waste your time going into those topics in any detail. However, I will refer to certain aspects of our past operations which are relevant to the decisions that you, as Commander-in-Chief and President, must make.

You know well that this is not a war you started, nor is this a war that George W. Bush started; as both the previous administration and your administration have defined this conflict, this war started when the United States was attacked on September 11th, 2001, a war you have called a “war of necessity.” You are also inheriting a war that was poorly coordinated and poorly prosecuted from a strategic standpoint from the very beginning. In fact, in many parts of Afghanistan and especially in the south, we are starting militarily from a situation not all that different from before our troops first landed there, in late 2001; you will have to fight over the same ground that American troops have fought and died to take already because of the poor planning of the previous administration.

With the right comprehensive approach, using military and non-military approaches and resources in complementary and supplementary ways, and enough public support, the goal of a stable and democratic (yet decentralized) Afghan government that is an ally of the United States against terror is not an unrealistic goal, and the payoff will be proportionate to the enormous amount of time and resources we must commit in order to achieve said goal.

Building Support from a War-Weary Congress and Public

One of the first things you must do with the American people is level with them, that even though we have been fighting this war for eight years, in some ways we are starting over where we were at the beginning of this conflict. Yet you must also state that you and your team are not the previous team that suffered most of the reverses in Afghanistan, and that you will not allow yourself to be distracted from or neglect the mission in Afghanistan, that any battles over the exact same territory, as are occurring now, will not need to happen again under your watch.

This involves a very delicate balancing act. On one level you must place the blame for the fact that we must redo some of the same combat and tasks we have already gone through in Afghanistan over again on the previous administration. With this “do-over” you must encourage Americans not to think in the mentality of “We are eight years into this conflict, when will it stop?” Instead you need to promote a mindset of “Now we are going about this business in the right way; our president has learned from the mistakes of the previous administration and asks our patience because in many ways, we are starting again from where some of the key gains of the past eight years have been lost.”

On the other level, we are both well aware that it is generally not good politics to blame your predecessor, George W. Bush. In this case, you must make an exception, because the previous administration never really leveled with the American people about how much of the early progress in Afghanistan was lost due to incompetence and neglect. Especially your own base will need to have the idea of patience drilled into them, because for the much of the foreseeable future we are need to work on erasing the mistakes

made to reach a point we had already reached in the first few months after the initial routing of the Taliban in 2001. You need to distance yourself as much as possible from those mistakes without appearing overly insulting to former President George W. Bush. As much as possible in the same speech (and this should be nothing less than a primetime, joint-Congressional address), you must single Bush out for having the courage and vision, in terms of the big picture, to know that we needed to go into Afghanistan and help it free and stabilize itself. You must praise him for recognizing that this had to happen in order for there to be a minimum of an ability for any state or non-state group to set up operations there to target our people or our interests ever again. By freeing and empowering a grateful Afghan nation, Bush realized, the rising generation will want to work with us instead of kill us. This will give the right a few things to cheer about early on in your speech, and hopefully will be enough for most rational Republicans to feel you are not taking cheap shots at the former president. After having praised him, personally, you can then talk about the administration in general (avoiding naming Bush during this part) as having unintentionally erased many of its own initial gains, and make it clear to the American people and to Congress that you are asking for their patience in restoring the gains made earlier.

I leave it to a man of your political talents to best discern how to walk that line between personally praising Bush while making it clear that it was his administration, and not yours, which neglected Afghanistan and caused significant gains to be lost back to the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and their allies. In asking for the American people's and Congress's patience, be sure to remind them how different your approach will be, and how Americans can expect steady, incremental progress in Afghanistan under your watch. Acknowledge that yes, casualties have been mounting and progress has been reversed, but that you are just now implementing *your new policy* after careful consideration and consultation; that there is much fighting ahead, but that is because both America and her enemies there realize how much is at stake. Finally, you must emphasize that *your administration is doing what should have been done seven, eight years ago*, that as much as you wish you could be wrapping up a war the reality is that this war is far

from over; *that because your administration is finally approaching the conflict as it needs to be approached, there will be a "light at the end of the tunnel."*

Discussing the Necessity of your "War of Necessity"

Next, you must remind and further educate Americans as to why this fight is necessary. Remind Americans that failed states are among the greatest threats to our national security and our allies. Discuss how Osama bin-Laden was able to plan attacks from the failed state of Afghanistan, but that also pirates have threatened Americans from the failed state of Somalia; that Somali militants threatened our ally Israel and attacked and IDF troops, supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006; that Americans as well as Israelis were targeted by Hezbollah in the semi-failed state that was Lebanon in past decades; that the Weimar Republic was a failed state that gave rise to Hitler; that parts of Colombia in the past constituted a failed state and contributed in major ways to the problem of drugs in America, costing many American lives; that at the turn of the century in Mexico lawlessness there enabled "Pancho" Villa to raid American territory, and that today in Mexico certain border regions are close to failed state status, with their violence spilling over into the U.S. border states; and finally, that North Korea's constantly being on the brink of failing has made it desperate and dangerous to the security of the whole world. Afghanistan, you will then say, cannot be allowed to become a failed state because most failed states in recent memory have become threats to Americans and/or America's allies.

You must then discuss the repercussions for allowing Afghanistan to revert to being a failed state on our watch: here is a place where America has spent eight years of its time, lost hundreds of its soldiers, deployed many thousands more, and spent billions. If we were to leave there having accomplished little or nothing, leaving it a failed state and simply yielding Afghanistan to the same regime that harbored al-Qaeda when it carried out 9/11, *we will look immeasurably weak-willed and impotent in the eyes of the world, not only to our allies but especially to our enemies and adversaries.* You will provide a compelling argument for conservatives in the mid-term elections and coming presidential election that will resonate

far more effectively than if you maintained our, and your, stated commitments to Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda has had trouble maintaining its relevance and recruits in recent years, but it will be able to claim a victory in a way that will not ring hollow. In short, if we pulled out of Afghanistan now or soon, al-Qaeda would likely experience a revival. And that, you must remind the American people, is a direct threat to Americans of all political persuasions.

Lastly, you must say a few words about image, trust and credibility. You yourself are quite familiar with these themes; you saw how President Bush and his administration weakened our credibility all around the world and reduced the level of trust our allies had in us. You campaigned vigorously on this theme, saying you would restore our image, trust, and credibility by taking a new approach to our dialogue with the world. But dialogue is not enough, and history shows this all too clearly. The Romans had their republic for over twice the amount of time that our republic has even existed, and their empire for centuries after. A key reason for much of their success was that for much of their history their allies trusted them to honor their commitments, and their even their enemies trusted the Romans to be fair and reasonable in victory over them. I recommend *Empires of Trust* on this theme for future reading; your own Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff himself recently read this book and wrote about it in *The Washington Post*. "Like the early Romans," he writes, "we are expected to do the right thing, and when we don't, to make it right again... We don't always get it right. But like the early Romans, we strive in the end to make it right. We strive to earn trust. And that makes all the difference." Even in the Bible, in First Book of Maccabees, the trustworthiness of the Romans is exalted: "...with their friends...and those who relied on them, they maintained friendship."

Mr. President, what will people write about America under your leadership? One old misdeed is often remembered longer than ten recent triumphs, and we know that the world's opinion of us has dropped drastically in recent years. Will you be able to reverse this trend, as you campaigned to do? Will people write that we "maintained friendship" with our "friends" and "those who rel[y] on" us? Or will Afghans say we promised to stand with them, that *you* promised to stand with them, only to be abandoned to death,

destruction, chaos, and medieval Talibanic barbarity? What will our NATO allies think of us? How will rivals, like China and Russia, interpret such action? Like the Romans, Mr. President, our power comes not only from our military and economy, but our reputation, and the trust our reputation engenders. A worthy reputation can take centuries to create, but only one sustained period of betraying friends and allies can ruin it. If our friends and allies lower their expectations for us, then the world must lower its expectations for its future. Mr. President, you cannot allow that to happen; Afghanistan and our commitment to the Afghan people is central to our trust and credibility, and is thus central to our long term success, our long term power, and our ability to project that power. It is central to the security of the world. The American people *must* be told this, must be made to understand how crucial Afghanistan is to how the world will see us for generations to come.

The Comprehensive Way Forward

From the beginning of the war in Afghanistan in November 2001 until February of 2006, with the exception of the one month of April 2004, we did not have more than 20,000 troops deployed in Afghanistan, and until January 2008, American troops were in no more than a handful of provinces. It was not until April of 2009, under your command, that our troop levels even exceeded 40,000, and in the roughly half-year since then up to this very October, that level has risen to over 65,000. The point is that we are only just beginning to really fight there. Under the Bush administration, U.S. troop levels never exceeded 35,000, and the highest levels only came at the very end of Bush's second term. You can proudly know that, in terms of Afghanistan, you have been more willing to put your money where your mouth is than Bush and his team ever were. The start of the real war, then, has been under your watch, and the strategy outlined below has a strong potential to put America in the position of having fought and won the toughest battles of this war, and well into reducing its overall troop levels down from a soon-to-be peak level, by the end of a potential second Obama term.

Gen. McChrystal's report, dated August 30th, 2009, says it is now-or-never in terms of "revers[ing] "insurgent momentum" and gives a 12-month window to accomplish this or, he says, we face "...an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible." I fully endorse Gen. McChrystal's, "Commander's Initial Assessment," which is one of the most unique military documents I have ever read. Many in the military argue that "politics should be left to the civilians," but he recognizes von Clausewitz's credo that "war is a continuation of politics by other means." Gen. McChrystal has incorporated military, diplomatic, political, economic, and societal analysis so fully that one might even question if the report itself originates from the military. He recognizes that trying to fix the military problems in isolation—or the political or economic problems in isolation—from any of the other parts dooms the whole mission to failure. He sees as necessary simultaneous, intense, and coordinated progress on all fronts, something the Bush administration never really attempted en masse with its more hands off approach, segmented approach. As he see it, "[t]he conflict in Afghanistan can be viewed as a set of related insurgencies, each of which is a complex system with multiple actors and a vast set of interconnecting relationships among those actors. The most important implication of this view is that no element of the conflict can be viewed in isolation—a change anywhere will affect everything else." He also argues that it is imperative we seize the initiative decisively from the Taliban.

In McChrystal's view, the insurgent will be defeated by good governance that offers a clear and steady alternative to Taliban rule, the bomb plot will be defeated when there is enough economic development to draw people away from Taliban attempts to engage them, and the U.S. soldier will succeed in fighting the enemy and protecting the local Afghan population with both these in place, since nothing provides good intelligence like a community that is wanting and accepting of your presence, having experiences positive, concrete results. The military will constantly have to work with civilians, Afghan, American, and international, and do the work of civilians when it is too dangerous for them, in an approach that revolutionizes current operating procedures and mentalities; it will also have to be constantly and properly training new Afghan personnel. "Hard-earned credibility and face-to-face relationships," McChrystal

writes, “rather than close combat, will achieve success.” Protecting the people and ensuring the development of local, regional, and national Afghan governance, based on rule of law and not violent intimidation, is the only way to conduct a counterinsurgency operation and to protect our interests in the long run. Protecting and empowering people is harder to measure in reports, but the “kill count” statistic only makes us feel good about our combat prowess, and does little to move Afghanistan further up the road to success or retard the forces that have brought success to the Taliban and its allies.

You have already read the memo, so I am not here to parrot or paraphrase what is already an extremely well written piece, only why I agree with it. Everything from command structures, to focus of mission, to better partnering of allies, to the delivery of appropriate amounts and types of resources at the right times will be essential for any kind progress, and the general advocates for all of these emphatically. By changing our approach, we can ensure we are helping Afghanistan rather than unwittingly sabotaging our own long term goals for it. Part of this means being more involved in combating corruption within the Afghan government; unfortunately, as Afghanistan builds its government capacity, it falls on us to fight corruption in Afghanistan at all levels. Furthermore, this recent election was a disaster in terms of Afghans building trust in their government. Yet you and your advisors recently said that your decision about troop levels would hinge on how the election dispute would be resolved; this was the right move, as McChrystal acknowledged any further loss of confidence by weary Afghans in their government risks mission failure, and Karzai responded to the idea that he might be getting less aid with acceptance of the legitimacy of a runoff. This is a very concrete example of your administration addressing Afghan official corruption, but it remains to be seen how this will play out.

Also, as McChrystal mentions, time is extremely important; the Afghan people’s patience is not infinite, and after eight years of American operations, there is little to show in terms of improvement that is “observable to the population.” If another year goes by with losses for NATO and gains for the Taliban, McChrystal’s—and my own—sense is that we may pass a point-of-no-return. This may even be true for our domestic public opinion at home; McChrystal realizes this when he writes of patience being

“understandably short, both in Afghanistan and in our own countries. Time matters; we must act now to reverse the negative trends and demonstrate progress.” Conditions right now are also favorable in Pakistan. Despite a sensational wave of attacks in recent weeks, this has served to draw more Pakistani military attention to militants in the north, including the Taliban. One of our own drones assassinated Baitullah Mehsud, the leader probably behind the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and many other attacks, just at the beginning of this past August. His influential group afterwards began fighting among itself and was in disarray as we increased our pressure in southern Afghanistan. We should continue to aid Pakistan and should attempt to coordinate military operations with them, squeezing the Taliban and al-Qaeda from their hiding spots from multiple directions at once. It would also serve us to help defuse Indo-Pakistani tensions, and Richard Holbrooke should be engaged in his current capacity in this task, so Pakistan can feel comfortable enough to free more resources to fight the Taliban. Now is also when we should continue to engage Iran, not ruling out the possibility or working together even more on our common interests in Afghanistan. Just last week, attacks near Iran’s border with Pakistan killed several senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards commanders, and this incident may provide us with a unique window to make the Iranians realize that the network of militant groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan threatens the interests of both our nations. Finally, you must exhort your NATO allies for more troop and resource commitments; the U.K.’s recently announced intent to add 500 more troops to Afghanistan is welcome, but only a start. However, the U.S. will need to continue to take the lead in deploying more troops if we are to convince any of our allies to do the same...

Vice-President Biden and the Debate Over Resources

Aside from adopting a revolutionary approach, the type of approach I felt was necessary even in 2001, and weaving the essential non-military components into the overall military strategy, I am very much in agreement with Gen. McChrystal that “[r]esources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it.” A significant increase in troops and resources will have to come along with these changes in order for them to have the necessary impact over the necessary areas of the country in the necessary

amount of time, something I know you are probably hoping to avoid but which is, unfortunately, unavoidable and integral to mission success. Here is a situation where I am asking you to break away with your Vice-President (and my former boss); he advocates a much more limited, less comprehensive approach in Afghanistan. He is in favor of focusing on al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and insurgents instead of the Afghan people. Vice-President Biden is doing his job; he is not Commander-in-Chief, and he is trying to insulate you, his boss, from the political risks that a massive increase in commitment, troops, aid, time, and resources to Afghanistan at a time of rising American unemployment would generate for you as president, risks to you and your entire administration's agenda. But President Biden's plan does not address the underlying causes for the resurgence of the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

Vice-President Biden may be wary of "another Vietnam" as are many, but the major difference is definitive: the Vietnamese always saw us as successors to the colonialist, imperialist French; in Afghanistan, despite all our mistakes, wasted time, and wasted opportunity, the Afghans as a whole *reject the Taliban and its allies* and prefer us empowering their own leaders over the violent extremists; they can easily recognize that we are not the Soviets, do not have their same aims or methods, and, for now, want us there if we are going to be steady, reliable partners. What the Afghans do *not* want is a phantom American presence that leaves them open to retaliation if they have helped us when the Taliban come rolling back through. This situation has happened too often in Afghanistan (and Iraq as well), and it has severely weakened our credibility and ability to work with the population.

Only a comprehensive, ambitious plan along the lines of Gen. McChrystal's gives this administration the potential to show massive short-term gains to Afghans, our allies, and Americans, all of whose support may be wavering, and puts in place the mechanisms for sustained intermediate and long-range gains now. A more narrow ("focused," as Biden would say) military strategy may deliver some demonstrable results in the short term, and may even translate into some short-term American increase in support, but then we risk our longer term foundation and the support of the Afghan people as well as our allies. Biden's plan would fall back, whether he thinks of it this way or not, on the "kill-count" mentality, and that was a key

reason why we did not achieve our political and strategic military objectives in Vietnam. Biden's plan focuses on reducing our military operations to a tactical level, while Gen. Stanley McChrystal envisions a broad strategic revolution that is a necessary part of counterinsurgency operations on this level.

Conclusion

Gen. McChrystal realized that “[t]he insurgents cannot defeat us militarily; but we can defeat ourselves.” Our enemies’ mission is also far easier than ours, as “the insurgents can...succeed more simply by preventing GIRoA [Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] from achieving their [sic] goals before the international community becomes exhausted.” As *The Economist* recently stated:

Mr Obama may be tempted to compromise—to show military resolve by acceding to the commander’s request, yet appease anti-war opinion by picking the lowest number... This would be a mistake. General McChrystal says that the core of his strategy is its first stage: to regain the initiative. To do that, a substantial surge is needed. Gordon Brown’s announcement of an extra 500 is a welcome gesture, but will make little difference. Mr Obama should send at least 40,000 more... Most of all, Mr Obama needs to fight this war with conviction... Only if he persuades his troops, his countrymen and the Taliban that America is there for the long haul does he have a chance of turning this war around.

Success is possible, and likely if we follow Gen. McChrystal’s plan, for, as he notes, “[t]hrough proper resourcing, rigorous implementation, and sustained political will, this refocused strategy offers ISAF the best prospect for success in this important mission.” The general has come up with the plan; now you are responsible for the “resourcing,” “implementation,” and building “political will.” Give Gen. McChrystal exactly what he asks for, and while possibly losing some short-term political points, you will lay a foundation for a better future for Americans, Afghans, and the entire world.