

The empire from within (Part Three)

CHAPTER 15

Admiral Mullen appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee for his confirmation hearing heading towards a second two-year term, two days after the first session dedicated to the strategy. In his statement, the admiral refers to the strategy suggested by McChrystal and he adds that this “probably means more forces”.

When Obama heard about Mullen’s testimony, he let his staff know how unhappy he was knowing that Mullen was publicly endorsing McChrystal’s strategy. The admiral stated that “The Taliban insurgency grows in both size and complexity”, and that was why he was supporting a properly resourced, classically pursued counterinsurgency efforts. Had Mullen ignored what Obama said just two days earlier? Had the President not told everyone, including Mullen, that none of the options looked good, that they needed to challenge their assumptions, and they were going to have four or five long sessions for debate? What was the president’s principal military adviser doing, going public with his preventive conclusions?

At the meeting of the principal members of the National Security Council it was clear that they were furious. The generals and admirals are systematically playing him, boxing him.

Emmanuel commented that what was going on between the admiral and Petraeus was not right, that everyone had publicly supported the idea that more troops needed to be sent. The president didn’t even had a chance.

Morrell realized that Mullen could have ducked the controversy at his hearing by merely saying that his job was to be the principal military adviser to the president of the United States and secretary of the defence, and that he was to present his recommendations to them first in private before stating them publicly and that he didn’t consider it to be proper to share them before the Committee.

Morrell thought this was all part of Mullen’s compulsion to communicate, to enhance the prominence and stature of his position. He had a Facebook page, a Twitter account, videos on YouTube and a Web site called “Travels with Mullen: Conversation with the Country”.

As he left the lobby, Mullen himself discovered that it was he who was the topic of a heated powwow.

Emmanuel and Donilon asked him: How are we supposed to deal with this? You did this, and what should we say?

Emmanuel added that this was going to be the lead storied in all the evening news.

Mullen was surprised. The White House knew in advance what he was going to say, but in his testimony he hadn’t given any specific numbers for troops. He was as fuzzy as he could be. But at his confirmation hearing he had to say the truth and the truth was that he was sharing the idea about the need for counterinsurgency. “That’s what I think”, he said. What was his alternative?

Donilon was wondering why Mullen had had to use the word ‘probably’, and why he hadn’t said ‘I don’t know’. That would have been better.

The headline on the Washington Post’s frontpage the next morning read: “Mullen: More Troops

‘Probably’ Needed”.

Obama summoned the retired General Collin Powell to a private meeting in the Oval Office on September 16. Powell had given Obama an important endorsement during his campaign.

Referring to Afghanistan, Powell told him that it wasn’t a one-time decision that was going to have consequences for the better part of his administration. He recommended: “Mr. President, don’t get pushed by the left to do nothing. Don’t get pushed by the right to do everything. You take your time and you figure it out.”

He also recommended not to get pushed by the media, to take his time, get all the information he needed to ensure that afterwards he was going to feel comfortable with his decision.

“If you decide to send more troops or if that’s what you feel is necessary, make sure you have a good understanding what those troops are going to be doing some assurance that additional troops will be successful. You can’t guarantee success in a very complex theatre like Afghanistan and increasingly with the Pakistan problem next-door.”

“You’ve got to ensure that you’re putting your commitment on a solid base, because at the base is a little soft right now.”, Powell said, referring to Karzai and the generalized corruption existing in his government.

The president wasn’t fully backing a counterinsurgency operation because that meant assuming the responsibility for Afghanistan for a long period of time.

The president said that when he received McChrystal’s assessment it was evident that everyone had to get together in a room to ensure that everyone was on the same page.

CHAPTER 16

On September 29, Jones assembled the principals of the National Security Council for a two-hour discussion as a rehearsal for the meeting the next day, without the president.

Anyone who would have watched a video of the meeting would probably be alarmed. Eight years after starting the war, they were still struggling to define what the core of the objectives were.

Biden had written a six-page memo exclusively for the president, questioning the intelligence reports on the Taliban. The reports portrayed the Taliban as the new Al Qaeda. Because the Taliban who had fought against the Americans, it had become common for the Arabs, Uzbeks, Tayiks and Chechens to cross over towards Afghanistan for their so-called summer of jihad.

Biden pointed out that these numbers were exaggerated, that the number of foreign combatants did not surpass 50 to 75 each time.

On Wednesday September 30th, the president held the second meeting to analyze the problem of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This time the attending group was larger. Petraeus was present.

The president asked: “Is there anybody here who thinks we ought to leave Afghanistan?” Nobody spoke. Nobody said a word.

“Okay”, the president said, “now that we’ve dispensed with, let’s get on.”

Obama also wanted to steer away from the Afghanistan issue for the rest of the session.

“Let’s start where our interests take us, which is really Pakistan, not Afghanistan”, he said. “In fact,

you can tell the Pakistani leaders, if you want to, that we are not leaving Afghanistan.”

Obama set the rules for the rest of the session. “I really want to focus on the issue of the U.S. homeland. I see three key goals. One, protecting U.S. homeland, allies and U.S. interests abroad. Two, the concern about Pakistan’s nuclear weapons and stability. If I’m just focused on the U.S. homeland, can we distinguish between the dangers posed by al Qaeda and the Taliban?

Lavoy and Petraeus spoke. MacChrystal gave a presentation about what he called “The Pathway” towards his initial assessment.

Obama stated: “Okay. You guys have done your job, but there are three developments since then. The Pakistanis are doing better; the Afghanistan situation is much more serious than anticipated; and the Afghan elections did not provide the pivot point hoped for – a more legitimate government”.

Biden was favouring the assumption, contested by the president, that Pakistan would evolve the same way Afghanistan had.

Robert Gates proposed keeping in mind the interests abroad and the allies.

Towards the end of the meeting, Hillary asked how the additional troops would be used, where they would be sent, if they were going as advisors and how the lessons learned in Iraq would be applied.

The intelligence analyses at the most senior level were never conclusive about action in Afghanistan at this time. A completely destabilized Afghanistan would, sooner or later, destabilize Pakistan. Thus, the question facing the president and his team was this: Could the United States take on this risk?

Gates met with Haqqani, the Pakistani ambassador in the US. He had to deliver an explicit message from the president: We are not pulling out of Afghanistan. Haqqani unfurled a shopping list of gear and vehicles that the Pakistani army needed. Congress had given them a 400 million dollars fund in May to pay for the improvements to Pakistan’s counterinsurgency arsenal. Haqqani brought up the 1,6 billion that America owed the Pakistani military for conducting operations along the Afghan border. After September 11th, the U.S. set up an expense account for Pakistan and other countries called the Coalition Support Fund; from this fund the allies were reimbursed for the assistance they provided.

CHAPTER 17

Obama met with a bipartisan group of about 30 congressional leaders to update them on the strategy review.

A number of legislators criticized the counterterrorism approach that Biden had been advocating. They interpreted it as a way of reducing the U.S. presence.

Biden made it clear that he wasn’t defending a policy that would imply an operation carried out only with the use of Special Troops.

The president had to make it clear that nobody was talking about abandoning Afghanistan.

McCain said he was only hoping that the decision was not being made leisurely and that he respected the fact that Obama, as the commander in chief, had to make the decision.

Obama responded to him: “I can assure you that I’m not making this decision in a leisurely way. And you’re absolutely right. This is my decision, and I’m the commander in chief.”

Obama continued by saying: “Nobody feels more urgency to make this decision –but to make it right –

than I do”.

That same day, at 3:30 in the afternoon, Obama again called his group together for a meeting to analyze the Pakistan situation.

The consensus within the intelligence community was that the situation in Afghanistan was not going to be resolved unless there were stable relations between India and Pakistan.

Mullen pointed out that the collaboration programs between the US and Pakistani armies had reached the sum of almost 2 billion a year for equipment, training and other factors.

There were suggestions to open up new facilities in Pakistan in order to infiltrate information sources in the tribes and to include US military advisors in the Pakistani units.

Obama approved all the actions in the field. It was rare to receive an immediate order from the president since up to that time there was a lot of talk at the sessions and not much decision-making.

CHAPTER 18

At last McChrystal had his chance to present his option for the troop increase alone before the principals (Obama was not present) on October 8th.

The essence of his presentation, along with 14 slides, was that conditions in Afghanistan were much worse than those people had thought and that only a counterinsurgent offensive counting on full resourcing could fix the situation.

Jones said that there were still some unanswered questions and he jotted down in his notebook that it was impossible to put any strategy for Afghanistan into practice that didn't tackle the problem of the sanctuaries in Pakistan”.

McChrystal listed three options:

1. 10,000 to 11,000 troops, mainly for training the Afghan security forces
2. 40,000 troops to protect the population.
3. 85,000 troops for the same purpose.

McChrystal made it clear that the aim in this case was not to defeat the Taliban but to wear it down, in other words, prevent them from taking control again of the key parts of the country.

Hillary asked whether it was possible to carry out a mission to degrade them down with fewer troops, and the general answered that it wasn't, that he was advocating the 40,000 man option.

The next day, Obama awoke to the news that he had received the Nobel Peace Prize.

The same afternoon at 2:30, the National Security Council plenary had a work session with the president. Obama began the meeting asking them all to tell him what should be done with the war.

Lavoy started talking about Pakistan and his obsession with India, and that the Pakistanis had reservations about American commitment.

McChrystal said that unless the mission would change, he was presenting the same options.

Eikenberry took 10 minutes to summarize his options; they were rather pessimistic ones. He agreed that the situation was getting worse and that it was necessary to send more resources, but he thought that the counterinsurgent offensive was too ambitious.

Gates reminded them that everyone had embraced only three options:

1. Counterinsurgency, which has come to mean nation building.
2. Counterterrorism, which people think means missiles coming from a ship in the ocean.
3. The counterterrorism plus proposed by the vice president.

But evidently there were more options and not just those three. Gates added that it was necessary to redefine the objective and that probably the US was trying to achieve more than it could manage.

Petraeus concluded: "We are not going to defeat the Taliban, but we do need to deny them access to key population areas and lines of communication to "contain" them.

Biden asked: "What's the best-guess estimate for getting things headed in the right direction? If a year from now is no demonstrable progress in governance, what do we do?"

No answer.

Biden tried again: "If the government doesn't improve and if you get the troops, in a year, what would be the impact?"

Eikenberry answered that if indeed the last five years had not been heartening, there had been small progress, and they had been able to capitalize on it, but that they shouldn't expect significant forward movement in the next six to twelve months.

CHAPTER 19

It was Hillary's turn at the October 9th meeting. Hillary said that the dilemma was to decide which came first, more troops or a better government; that in order to avoid collapse more troops were needed, but that that would not ensure progress.

She asked if it were possible to achieve the objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan without committing to send more troops. She herself answered that the only way to get the government to change was to send more troops, but even then there would be no guarantees that this would succeed.

She added that all the options were difficult and unsatisfactory and added: "We do have a national security interest in ensuring the Taliban doesn't defeat us. The same with destroying al Qaeda, which would be difficult without Afghanistan. It's an extremely difficult decision, but the options are limited unless we commit and gain the psychological advantage".

Mullen echoed the other hawkish comments. Dennis Blair suggested that domestic politics might be a problem due to the number of casualties, since in the past month the figure had gone up to 40, double the rate of the year before. He was wondering whether it would be worth it. The answer was that the people would support it as long as they believed there had been gains.

He said: "For the first time, the president would have a strategy developed by his full war cabinet, and we'll be able to tell the American people what we are doing".

Panetta's opinion was: "You can't leave. You can't defeat the Taliban. They were not talking about a Jeffersonian democracy in Afghanistan", said Panetta who was believing that this was the basis for reducing the US mission and accepting Karzai in spite of his defects. According to Panetta, the mission was to fight against Al Qaeda and ensure that no more sanctuaries existed. It was necessary to work with Karzai.

Susan Rice said she hadn't made a decision but was thinking it was necessary to reinforce security in Afghanistan in order to defeat Al Qaeda.

Holbrooke said that they needed more troops and the problem was to know how many and how to use them.

John Brennan was asking what it was that they wanted to achieve since the decisions on security matters that would be adopted here would also be applied in other regions. If it was a matter of a non-corrupt government, that wouldn't be achieved in his lifetime. "That's why", he was saying, "using terminology like 'success', 'victory' and 'win' complicates our task".

Two and a half hours had gone by. The president said that those meetings had resulted in a useful definition of the problem, that a new definition was emerging.

"We won't resolve this today", said Obama. "We've recognized that we're not going to completely defeat the Taliban".

Obama said that if he approved sending 40,000 troops that would not be enough for a counterinsurgency strategy that would cover the entire country.

Obama was asking whether it was possible to get the Afghans to the point where the US could pull out in a period of two, three, four years.

"We can't sustain a commitment indefinitely in the United States", said Obama. "We can't sustain internal support at home and with allies without having some explanation that involves timelines".

Holbrooke returned to his office in the State Department where the personnel was complaining that they were staying up all night long writing analyses that nobody was reading.

Holbrooke answered that the person to whom they were being addressed did read them, that the sleepless nights hadn't been in vain and that they should prepare a new reports package for the president.

Thus concludes the summary of Chapters 15 to 19 of the 33 chapters in "Obama's Wars".

Yesterday, almost at the same time, the publication of another book, *Conversations with Myself*, with a prologue by Barack Obama, was announced. But this time, the edition will come out in 20 languages. According to statements, it has the important letters and documents from the life of its author, our well-known and esteemed friend Nelson Mandela.

In the final years of his cruel imprisonment, the United States converted the evil apartheid regime into a nuclear power, providing it with more than half a dozen nuclear bombs, destined to strike at the internationalist Cubans in order to impede their advance into territory occupied by South Africa in Namibia. The crushing defeat of the armies of apartheid in southern Angola wiped out the monstrous system.

Our representatives in Spain promised to obtain and send copies of the book immediately; its launching is announced for today, October 12th. But at almost six in the afternoon, we had heard nothing about it yet because it was a holiday in Spain and the booksellers are closed. They are celebrating the 518th anniversary of the day when they discovered us and Spain became an empire.

To be continued tomorrow.

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