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Our Afghan "Government in a Box"

Did Gen. McChrystal reveal more than he intended?

Terry Michael | February 18, 2010

"We've got a government in a box, ready to roll in," Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top American commander in Afghanistan, told *The New York Times* last week about the largest military offensive since an American-led coalition invaded the country in 2001. Six thousand U.S. Marines, plus British and Afghan forces, descended on a Taliban stronghold in Marja, in the southern Helmand Province, a mission described as a "test" of America's new counter-insurgency strategy designed to win over civilians and establish order, all while chasing away or killing Taliban fighters.

Government in a box? What a foolish thing to say, what hubris. Ironically, it's probably more truth than the general wanted to reveal about American manipulation of the Afghan "government." But what should we expect when we put a military commander—underscore the word *commander*—in charge of a nation-building folly. Apparently, the general thinks you can bring in a government as easily as he requisitions more meals-ready-to-eat for his troops.

Of course, we'll get a result as tasty as those MREs. The outcome will be what any intelligent observer with a sense of history will understand—a client government in name only, in a failed non-state, rife with corruption. If that sounds familiar, you probably know what we tried unsuccessfully with an earlier American client regime, in "South" Vietnam in the early 1960s. And it's what another general touted by the Military Industrial Complex, David Petraeus, did with his rent-a-bad-guy "counterinsurgency strategy" in Iraq, heralded by neocon loonies as the "victory" for their elective war.

The *Times* story that quoted McChrystal's nonsense appeared under the headline, "Afghan Offensive Is New War Model." "Marja is intended to serve as a prototype for a new type of military operation," the *Times* correspondent wrote, "based on the counterinsurgency thinking propounded by General McChrystal in the prelude to President Obama's decision in December to increase the number of American troops here to nearly 100,000. More than at any time since 2001, American and NATO soldiers will focus less on killing Taliban insurgents than on sparing Afghan civilians and building an Afghan state."

Well, that's an improvement over President Lyndon Johnson's napalming distant villages in Vietnam in order to save them. But military nation-building is still a fool's errand, particularly when there is no indigenous infrastructure to build a nation, let alone build a liberal democracy.

Dr. Nadir Atash, an Afghan native who has mostly lived in the United States since he came here as a student in the 1960s, recently made that point to me as we both sat in the guest waiting room of RT-TV. I was there to assess the first-year failures of President Barack Obama, and he followed me to discuss how McChrystal's Afghan adventure was doomed to fail.

"This (the assault on Marja) is not a break through," said Atash, who recently authored a memoir, *Turbulence: The Tumultuous Journey of One Man's Quest for Change in Afghanistan*. After a career in teaching and building a successful business, Atash went back to Afghanistan after the U.S. removed the Taliban from Kabul in 2001, hoping to help restore a nation assaulted by the Soviets in the 1980s and terrified by the Taliban in the 1990s.

Military efforts won't produce anything lasting, Atash told RT TV. We first "need to focus on [instilling] rule of law, [ending] corruption and creating jobs."

He had some real-life experience battling corruption in the Karzai government when he returned to Afghanistan in 2001. He was asked to head the state-owned airlines, but finally gave up and returned to the U.S. in 2006 after failing to make headway for years.

For those who advocate following Petraeus' Iraq model of trying to purchase peace, Atash had this to say in his interview: "We cannot buy peace. Maybe time. But it is sure to backfire. The insurgents are fighting for ideology, not money." The rent-a-Taliban theory, he noted, "was cooked up by the Afghan government" and its American and NATO "allies", who, he said, "only see dollar signs."

The Obama-McChrystal military "solution" for Afghanistan, which fell on Presidents Day weekend, should remind the historically-informed of America's own efforts to build a nation-state in the New World. Our founders created an indigenous movement for liberal democracy. They were nobody's clients.

If Barack Obama hopes to join George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in the pantheon of wise American leaders, our very brainy president needs to stop outsmarting himself. He needs to study—and *understand*—the lessons of our failed attempts to impose liberal democracy where no indigenous liberal or democratic movements existed. Gen. McChrystal is no Gen. Washington. And thus far, Barack Obama doesn't resemble the founder of his political party, Thomas Jefferson.

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