

Ghosts Behind Obama's Afghanistan Surge

by Carl Osgood

Dec. 11—When President Obama announced his troop buildup in Afghanistan, at the U.S. Military Academy on Dec. 1, the cadets were not the only ones present in the room. There were also the ghosts of history, going back to the Vietnam War and Britain's Malayan Emergency.¹ When Secretary of Defense Robert Gates or U.S.-NATO Commander in Afghanistan Gen. Stanley McChrystal speak, the only memory they evoke is the U.S. abandonment of the Afghan mujahideen after the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan in 1989. However, the history of the U.S. war in that country does not begin there.

The Obama policy is wrapped around what the military calls "population-centric counter-insurgency." This doctrine emphasizes "protection of the population" from the insurgents, opening the opportunity to provide basic services and good governance. Or, as McChrystal put it in Congressional testimony on Dec. 8: "To pursue our core goal of defeating al-Qaeda and preventing their return to Afghanistan, we must disrupt and degrade the Taliban's capacity, deny their access to the Afghan population, and strengthen the Afghan security forces. This means we must reverse the Taliban's current momentum, and create time and space to develop Afghan security and governance capacity." In many respects, it's a clone of the Iraq surge in 2007, and the cast of characters behind the two surges overlaps, particularly with respect to the neocons.

In 2008, the Institute for the Study of War was formed in Washington. Headed by Kimberly Kagan, wife of the American Enterprise Institute's Fred Kagan, it has become the "go to" place for the latest military analysis. Fred Kagan was one of the architects of the Iraq surge, and he and his wife were members of the team of outside advisors that McChrystal invited to Kabul, last Summer, to help him design a campaign plan. Other members included Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic

and International Studies, Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations, and Andrew Exum of Center for a New American Security. The Kagans also brought along Lt. Gen. James Dubik (ret.), who headed the training mission in Iraq during the 2007 surge. By his own account, Dubik sold McChrystal on the idea of running the training operation in Afghanistan, the same way it had been done in Iraq.

To the neocons and their military fellow travelers, the Iraq surge is deemed a clear success. However, as pointed out by former *Washington Post* reporter Tom Ricks, one of the foremost chroniclers of the surge, while it did reduce the violence from what it had been in 2006, the political problems remain. "It worked tactically, but it didn't work strategically," he told National Public Radio on Dec. 7. "All the basic problems you had in Iraq before the surge are still there."

'Screwing Down the People'

At the same time that the Obama national security team was arriving at the decision in favor of the "winning hearts and minds" approach, a new argument appeared to be gaining ascendancy. It was signaled in Britain by the June 2009 issue of the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and it starts from the premise that the British counter-insurgency campaign in Malaya was actually far more coercive than the currently accepted narrative describes.

The British methods in Malaya included behavior modification of the targeted population, through resettlement and food control. More than 500,000 people were forcibly resettled from the jungle into "new villages," and the supply of food was tightly controlled to deny it to the Communist insurgents. Residents of the new villages could only buy food if they had the requisite ID cards, and since food control was unpopular, the need for it was blamed on the insurgents. Such methods had been perfected after World War II by occupation authorities in Europe, to exert control over refugee populations.

Paul Dixon, of Kingston University in Surrey, England, writes in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, "Initially, the British strategy was massive control and intimidation, with the key to the campaign lying more in 'screwing down the people,' than in winning 'hearts and minds.'" He adds that the back of the insurgency "was broken by a 'law and order' and resettlement approach, with 'hearts and minds' tactics playing an important but auxiliary role." The insurgency was largely defeated by 1952, prior to the arrival of Sir Gerald Tem-

1. A 1948-60 war between the British colonial power and the Malayan National Liberation Army, the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party. The MNLA called it the Anti-British National Liberation War.

pler, Sir Winston Churchill's chosen man to pacify Malaya. Templer's mission was to apply the psychological warfare methods of the British Tavistock Institute,² though Dixon does not say so.

The British strategy against the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (1952-60), in that the insurgency was limited to the Kikuyu tribes, which could be isolated from the rest of the population. The British counterinsurgency campaign featured the "gang-counter-gang" operations of Sir Frank Kitson, which penetrated the Mau Mau tribe so deeply that some units were actually led by Kitson's men.

Lt. Col. Wade Markel, a U.S. Army officer then assigned to the Army Training and Doctrine Command's Futures Center, argued, in an article in the Spring 2006 issue of *Parameters*, the quarterly of the U.S. Army War College, that the main lesson to be drawn from the British experiences in both Kenya and Malaya, "is that control of the contested segment of the population is essential," and that control "is greatly facilitated when the insurgency's support is concentrated among a small and relatively unpopular minority of the population." In Kenya, that control was much more brutal than in Malaya. The population was much larger, the resources were much more sparse, and the colonial authorities relied heavily on the white settler population, which Markel describes as "fairly racist and highly self-interested." All of this made the campaign "especially and unnecessarily cruel." But nonetheless, "these tactics broke the Mau Mau."

Markel was writing in the context of the increasingly ferocious Sunni insurgency against the U.S. occupation in Iraq, and he did not advocate the tactics of Kenya in that conflict. "Now is not the time to implement such a strategy, however, and we should refrain from doing so as long as current methods continue to show signs of progress," he wrote. Markel recommended, instead, that it remain an option, should events dictate a change in strategy.

The Ghosts of Vietnam

The neocons, however, are motivated by their interpretation of what happened in the last five years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. That narrative, promoted by such as historian Lewis Sorley in his *A Better War*, and which dates back to at least former CIA director William Colby's 1987 memoir *Lost Victory*, is that the CIA-

run rural pacification program instituted in 1967 was actually successful against the Viet Cong in the long term, in contrast to the Army's search-and-destroy operations. If only the U.S. had continued to support the government in Saigon after 1973, the war would have ended in victory for the anti-Communist forces.

This ignores, among many other things, President Harry Truman's strategic blunder of 1945, when he went along with Churchill and supported the return of Southeast Asia to European colonial control, upon the surrender of Japanese forces. It also ignores that Ho Chi Minh's movement was as much nationalist as it was Communist, a fact recognized by Americans in the OSS who deployed into Vietnam during World War II.

Among more sober thinkers, Obama's decision invokes a different parallel with Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson's 1965 decision to give Gen. William Westmoreland the massive troop increase he was asking for. Harry Middleton, an historian and former Johnson aide, told the Dec. 6 *Dallas Morning News*, "We can hear echoes of conversations from our past... I am quite fearful about it, as I do have the feeling we've been down this path before." Like Obama, Johnson held a series of meetings with his top advisors, some of whom warned him against further involvement in Vietnam, before granting Westmoreland's request.

"We're headed down the same road," said former Sen. George McGovern. "And Obama is not going to get out of there with only sending 30,000, and we are not going to come out in 2011. Two years from now, he's going to look up and say 'Gosh, we have lost 5,000 troops over there, we can't pull out now.' It's a no-win proposition. And in Afghanistan, nobody has ever been able to prevail in that deserted and mountainous country."

Obama's narcissism makes him think he can avoid the Vietnam parallel altogether. Unlike John F. Kennedy with Douglas MacArthur, Obama did not turn to a great military mind when he had to make the decision on Afghanistan. Instead, according to the Dec. 6 *New York Times*, he turned to White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, who, in turn, got advice at a dinner party from a Deputy National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon, who pointed Emanuel to the book *Lessons in Disaster* by Gordon M. Goldstein, about McGeorge Bundy's role in the Vietnam war.

When McChrystal's strategy of "winning hearts and minds" fails, in addition to asking for even more troops, will Obama also adopt a more brutal strategy, informed by British psychological warfare methods?

2. See L. Wolfe, "Tavistock's Imperial Brainwashing Project," *EIR*, May 24, 1996.