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Just back from Afghanistan, Marine Commandant, Gen. James Conway held a news conference Tuesday to add his voice to the Pentagon campaign to disparage the July 2011 date President Barack Obama set for U.S. troops to begin leaving Afghanistan.

Conway claimed that intelligence intercepts suggest that this deadline has strengthened the conviction of those resisting the U.S.-led occupation that it is just a matter of time before most foreign forces leave.

Thus, Conway:

"In some ways ... it's probably giving our enemy sustenance. ... We think he may be saying to himself ... 'Hey, you know, we only have to hold out for so long.'"

Conway, however, was quick to reassure supporters of the war in Afghanistan that Taliban morale is likely to drop when, "come the fall [of 2011] we're still there hammering them like we have been."

Conway began his press conference by adding a new measure to the refrain led by Gen. David Petraeus, commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, that considerable time will be required before Afghan forces can take over from U.S. troops.

The Marine general said, "I honestly think it will be a few years before conditions on the ground are such that turnover will be possible for us," adding, "When some American unit somewhere in Afghanistan will turn over responsibilities to Afghan forces in 2011, I do not think they will be

Marines."

President Obama and his generals have emphasized that any withdrawal will be "conditions based," much as President George W. Bush did regarding Iraq. But setbacks in Afghanistan over the past several months -- in particular, the failure of the large Marine campaign to secure Marja, a rural area of Helmand province -- have made it abundantly clear that "conditions" are not likely to favor more than a token withdrawal next July.

On a June visit to Afghanistan, Joint Chiefs Chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen discussed the setbacks with Washington Post columnist David Ignatius. Mullen admitted, "We underestimated some of the challenges" in Marja, which the Marines tried to clear in March, only to have Taliban fighters return.

"They're coming back at night, the intimidation is still there," said Mullen. Marja had been widely advertised by the Pentagon as the warm-up for driving the Taliban out of Kandahar beginning in June 2010.

The U.S. military postponed the campaign against Kandahar in May, and Mullen conceded that, "It's going to take until the end of the year to know where we are" there.

Top Brass vs. President

The Obama administration's reluctance to discipline senior generals for comments bordering on insubordination seems to have encouraged the generals to believe they can speak their mind with impunity about President Obama's management of the Afghan conflict.

The exception to this rule was the extraordinary case of Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who was commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan until he became the subject of a *Rolling Stone* article, "Runaway General," in which McChrystal and his military inner circle were quoted as mocking Obama and the civilian leadership.

The title had an ironic twist since the derogatory comments enabled McChrystal to run away from the consequences of his stumbling war effort, by getting himself fired. After Marja and the abject failure of his campaign to win hearts and minds of most Afghans, McChrystal knew better than anyone that the war was hopeless.

Crusty old Marines like Gen. Conway do not run away -- they no longer "fade away," either. Scheduled to retire this fall after 40 years, he also isn't angling for some big promotion. Nor is he inclined to sugarcoat military realities in order to calm political nerves in Washington and elsewhere in the country.

Conway has spoken out before against what he considered -- legitimately, in my view -- arrogant politicians trying to micromanage Marine offensives in ways that caused needless killing of his Marines. For instance, he objected to the Bush administration's cavalier use of Marines to crush resistance in Fallujah, Iraq, in the spring of 2004. (See below for more detail on Conway's experience in Fallujah.)

So Gen. Conway let loose at Tuesday's press conference, pointing out "The President was talking to several audiences at the same time when he made his comments regarding July 2011." Implication: The July 2011 date was pure politics; there was no military justification for the deadline then; and there is certainly no military justification for it now.

Conway may be insubordinate, but he is also correct about that.

Obama tried to have it both ways, giving the hawks in his administration the escalation they wanted while offering the doves in his political base a fixed date for beginning a troop withdrawal. Such cleverness can work sometimes in politics, but it won't work in a difficult war like the one in Afghanistan.

However much Obama may have resented it, by last fall he had to admit to himself that he had been thoroughly outmaneuvered by high-profile generals. Take McChrystal, for example, who was well known to have run special operations assassination squads for five years in Iraq under the aegis of Vice President Dick Cheney. McChrystal also demonstrably lied about who killed

football-star-turned-soldier Pat Tillman in Afghanistan.

And yet, Obama couldn't say no, when Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the Pentagon's most famous "water-walker," Gen. Petraeus, told the President to put McChrystal in charge of the war in Afghanistan.

Either from naiveté or hubris or a combination of both, Obama apparently felt he still could maintain some control over the situation through his persuasive skills. Instead, he found himself in a corner.

The Long Reassessment

During last year's long review of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, McChrystal's recommendations for a major escalation of troops and an open-ended commitment for 10 years or more were leaked to the press. Joint Chiefs Chairman Mullen also made a public case for a long-term commitment, as did Petraeus, who was chief of the Central Command.

Then, during a public presentation in London on Oct. 1, 2009, McChrystal himself said he could not support a presidential decision to fight the war primarily with drone aircraft and Special Forces, the more limited approach advocated by Vice President Joe Biden.

Instead of firing McChrystal then, Obama on Oct. 2 gave the general a 25-minute counseling session on Air Force One. He then told Pentagon leaders to stop their public advocacy of McChrystal's proposals.

In the book, *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*, author Jonathan Alter said the President was sending the Pentagon "an unmistakable message: Don't toy with me." Obama wasn't going to let himself get backed into a corner, said Alter. Right.

Mullen and Gates were summoned to the White House, but all that emerged was a flaccid

statement from Gates saying it was "imperative" that generals provide their advice "candidly but privately." Mullen did tell the generals to knock off the public campaign for a substantial troop buildup in Afghanistan, and the leaks mostly stopped.

However, Obama had been softened up politically. By October 2009, with the reassessment on Afghanistan having dragged on for months, Obama came under attack from former Vice President Dick Cheney and others for supposedly "dithering."

Yet, behind the scenes, other generals -- former ones, with less personal stakes in the Afghan War -- were resisting the push for major escalation.

James Jones, Obama's national security adviser and a former four-star general, had been pushing back against McChrystal and other hawks. Undercutting the rationale for escalation, Jones told the press on Oct. 4, 2009:

"I don't foresee the return of the Taliban. Afghanistan is not in imminent danger of falling. ... The al-Qaeda presence is very diminished. The maximum estimate is less than 100 operating in the country, no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies."

In early November, Obama also received cogent, sober advice from his ambassador in Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, himself a former general who knew twice as much about Afghanistan as McChrystal and Petraeus put together. From 2002 to 2003, Eikenberry was responsible for training Afghan security forces. He then served 18 months (2005-2007) as commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

In two highly sensitive cables of Nov. 6 and 9, 2009, (the texts of which were almost immediately leaked by an unknown U.S. official to the New York Times), Eikenberry declared, "I cannot support [the Defense Department's] recommendation for an immediate Presidential decision to deploy another 40,000 here."

Damning McChrystal's recommendations with faint (and condescending) praise, Eikenberry described them as "logical and compelling within his [McChrystal's] narrow mandate to define

the needs for a military counterinsurgency campaign within Afghanistan."

Eikenberry then went on to list a dozen compelling factors that would make adding more troops a fool's errand -- among them these three:

--Hamid Karzai was not and never would be "an adequate strategic partner;"

--"More troops won't end the insurgency as long as Pakistan sanctuaries remain ... and Pakistan views its strategic interests as best served by a weak neighbor;"

--"We overestimate the ability of Afghan security forces to take over ... by 2013."

(Who would be better qualified to make the judgment on security forces than the senior officer trying to build and train a fledgling, predominantly illiterate Afghan army from 2002 to 2003?)

Obama Bows to the Four-Stars

But Obama found himself outgunned politically by the pro-escalation crowd. Thanks in large measure to a fawning media, Gen. Petraeus and Gen. McChrystal enjoyed much higher public profiles than James Jones and Ambassador Eikenberry.

And, besides, if the U.S. and NATO failed to prevail in Afghanistan (whatever "prevail" might mean), the overly smart advisers in Obama's White House thought they could blame the generals. After all, the President was giving them what they had demanded.

This kind of reasoning seemed to persuade Obama to dismiss the informed commentary of Ambassador Eikenberry and national security adviser Jones, as well as the views of Vice President Biden. Whether Petraeus and McChrystal had it right or wrong, the politically smart

ting to do would be to defer to them.

On Nov. 11, 2009, Veterans Day, Obama called his key advisers and generals together. According to Jonathan Alter, it was then that the President gave preliminary approval for 40,000 more troops to be sent to Afghanistan. But he wanted them in and out quickly.

The Pentagon was to prepare a "targeted" plan for protecting population centers, training Afghan security forces, and beginning a real -- not a token -- withdrawal within 18 months of the escalation.

Too Inexperienced & Too Clever by Half

Obama's dilemma was how to project an image of strength in the fight against the Taliban and still avoid letting Afghanistan become an albatross around his neck in 2011-2012 as the next presidential election drew near.

In Obama's calculation, the image of toughness was to come from giving the generals pretty much what they demanded to carry the fight to the Taliban. The albatross would be avoided, the President thought, by giving the generals a deadline -- a date on which U.S. troops would start coming home. Such a deadline would also be helpful in appeasing what used to be called Obama's base--more recently branded "the professional left."

The dual message was crafted presumably with the help of the inept folks who led the long assessment with the wrong conclusions -- functionaries like former CIA official Bruce Riedel and Ambassador Richard "we'll-recognize-success-when-we-see-it" Holbrooke. Never ones to pick a fight with beribboned four-stars, they probably repeated their mantra: the military knows best.

Next stop for Obama in deciding how to massage the message was to consult with his own inside group of political wheeler-dealers -- folks with long experience in Congress and in White House positions, such as chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, CIA Director Leon Panetta, former White House chief of staff John Podesta, and Joe Biden.

With the help of this brain trust, Obama settled on what he thought would be a win-win solution -- for his administration, if not for U.S. troops.

In the formal meeting on Nov. 29, Obama would get the top brass on record buying into the escalation and timetable. In other words, he would turn the tables on the generals, boxing them in for a change. According to Alter, the dialogue went like this:

Obama: "David [Petraeus], tell me now. I want you to be honest with me. You can do this in 18 months?"

Petraeus: "Sir, I am confident we can train and hand over to the ANA (Afghan National Army) in that time frame."

Obama: "If you can't do the things you say you can in 18 months, then no one is going to suggest we stay, right?"

Petraeus: "Yes, sir, in agreement."

Mullen: "Yes, sir."

Obama then asked Defense Secretary Gates if he had any problems with the scenario, eliciting a response from Gates saying he was fine with the decision.

Obama: "I'm not asking you to change what you believe, but if you don't agree with me that we can execute this, say so now. Tell me now."

Mullen: "Fully support, sir."

Petraeus: "Ditto."

Am I the only one who finds that scene extraordinary?

Alter adds that as Biden walked with the President to the meeting, the Vice President asked if the new policy of beginning a significant withdrawal in 2011 was a direct Presidential order that could not be countermanded by the military. Obama said yes.

That response no doubt accounts for the assurance that Biden later gave at the end of an interview in his West Wing office: "In July 2011 you're going to see a whole lot of people moving out [of Afghanistan]. Bet on it. Bet on it."

I imagine that this is not the first foolish bet Joe Biden has made. How naïve for him and Obama to think that they had the generals boxed in and that the generals -- along with their powerful allies -- could not figure out some way to insist that a change in circumstance necessitated a longer time frame or additional resources.

The next two years are far more likely to witness a Donnybrook between the Pentagon and White House, as the security situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate and Petraeus -- now commander of U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan, with his vaunted reputation riding on success -- inevitably demands more troops.

Can Obama really believe that Petraeus will honor his Nov. 29 pledge; that when things go really bad in Afghanistan the beribboned general will say, "Shucks, I was wrong"; and then tuck tail, forfeiting any ambition he may harbor eventually to run for President?

With all due respect, President Obama and Vice President Biden, I wouldn't bet on it.

Gen. Conway and Fallujah

We are likely to hear more from Gen. James Conway before he retires this fall. The Marine Commandant has been outspoken for over five years -- and with very good reason since his Marines were often the ones bearing the brunt of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, at times taking casualties because of politically inspired orders that made no military sense.

After turning over command of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force in Iraq in early September 2004, Conway let not a day pass before excoriating higher officials for misguided, counterproductive orders to attack the Iraqi Sunni stronghold of Fallujah in retaliation for the brutal killing of four U.S. Blackwater contractors on March 31, 2004.

Conway did not repeat the criticism of UN envoy in Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, and many others who denounced the Fallujah offensive as "collective punishment," a war crime under international law. But the Marine general did observe that the attack "certainly increased the level of animosity that existed."

Conway stressed the stupidity of ordering the attack, in which six Marines were killed and six more wounded, and then halting it just three days later.

The reason for the rash order to attack and the sudden reversal related to concerns within George W. Bush's White House, first, that the killings of the contractors could not go unpunished, followed by the realization that the worsening war in Iraq could affect Bush's chances in the 2004 election.

Conway found particularly galling what happened after he was ordered to break off the attack. A handful of former Iraqi generals were allowed to form the "Fallujah Brigade" and were put in charge of the city.

The 800 AK-47 assault weapons, 27 pick-up trucks and 50 radios that the Marines gave this

"Brigade" wound up in the hands of the resistance, which remained in control of Fallujah. The equipment also was used against Marines positioned near the city.

Asked who issued the order to attack and then halt, Conway would only say that he had advised against the attack in the first place but that "we follow our orders." According to *The Washington Post*, senior U.S. officials in Iraq said the command to attack and then desist originated in the White House.

Just days after Bush won a second term in November 2004, the assault on Fallujah resumed with U.S. forces virtually leveling the city, partly in retribution for the dead Blackwater contractors and the humiliation that had been dealt the Bush administration.

Eye for an Eye

Most Americans are unaware of this sequence of events in Fallujah in 2004, but should know and ponder what actually happened. First, the Blackwater contractors had taken a wrong turn on March 29 and ended up in the wrong neighborhood in Fallujah.

Western press accounts left the impression that the murder of the four Blackwater operatives was the work of fanatics who acted without provocation and eventually got -- along with thousands of their neighbors -- the punishment they deserved. Few are aware that the killings of the contractors represented the second turn in that particular cycle of violence.

On March 22, 2004, Israeli forces assassinated in Gaza the spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Yassin -- a withering old man, blind and confined to a wheel chair. The Blackwater operatives in Fallujah were killed by a group that described itself as the "Sheikh Yassin Revenge Brigade." One of the trucks that dragged the bodies of the mercenaries had a large poster of Yassin in its window, as did many Fallujah storefronts.

Gen. Conway may already know the full story. As his retirement nears, he may feel free to point out the actual sequence of events stretching from Gaza to Fallujah and join other realists who have served in the U.S. military and noted the increased dangers to U.S. troops that flow from

the widespread perception that U.S. policy is identical to that of Israel.