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Obligatory Bob Woodward Post

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So Bob Woodward has a new book out, I hear?

[Paul Pillar](#) ^[3] and [Bernard Finel](#) ^[4] have smart posts up regarding the book/*Washington Post* articles, so *Skeptics* readers might want to start there.

But I wanted to pick up on a question related to points raised by both Pillar and Finel: the interaction of doctrine and strategy. This has been a bit of a bugbear of mine for some time now, so this case allows an illustration. Pillar rightly points to the planning process within the Obama administration on Afghanistan (which was also described [here](#) ^[5] by Woodward). As Pillar writes:

The doctrine of General Petraeus, backed by Admiral Mullen and Secretary Gates, became a Procrustean bed into which policy on Afghanistan would be forced, with everything this entails in terms of the time and resources to be applied to the problem. This posture was a classic example of standing Clausewitz on his head and

making the scope and objective of a war fit military requirements rather than making the military the servant of a politically determined objective. In this case the president ultimately imposed a compromise and the military did not get everything it wanted in the way of troops. But the rigidity involved is the prime reason we have today an objective (defeating the Afghan Taliban and stabilizing Afghanistan) that is the standard kind of objective for the military doctrine involved--counterinsurgency or COIN--but is disconnected from the ostensible original purpose of the war of making Americans safe from terrorism.

The first Woodward article, linked above, illustrates how the members of the uniformed military colluded with the defense secretary to circumscribe the debate over Afghanistan:

His top three military advisers were unrelenting advocates for 40,000 more troops and an expanded mission that seemed to have no clear end. When his national security team gathered in the White House Situation Room on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2009, for its eighth strategy review session, the president erupted.

"So what's my option? You have given me one option," Obama said, directly challenging the military leadership at the table, including Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates, Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen and Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, then head of U.S. Central Command.

"We were going to meet here today to talk about three options," Obama said sternly. "You agreed to go back and work those up."

Mullen protested. "I think what we've tried to do here is present a range of options."

Obama begged to differ. Two weren't even close to feasible, they all had acknowledged; the other two were variations on the 40,000.

Silence descended on the room. Finally, Mullen said, "Well, yes, sir."

Mullen later explained, "I didn't see any other path."

What did Mullen think was the unavoidable path? Get ready:

While Obama sought to build an exit plan into the strategy, the military leadership stuck to its open-ended proposal, which the Office of Management and Budget estimated would cost \$889 billion over a decade. Obama brought the OMB memo to one meeting and said the expense was "not in the national interest."

And how did the military work to further limit the president's room for maneuver?

The only distinctly new alternative offered to Obama came from outside the military hierarchy. Vice President Biden had long and loudly argued against the military's 40,000-troop request. He worked with Gen. James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to develop a "hybrid option" - combining elements of other plans - that called for only 20,000 additional troops. It would have a more limited mission of hunting down the Taliban insurgents and training the Afghan police and army to take over.

When Mullen learned of the hybrid option, he didn't want to take it to Obama. "We're not providing that," he told Cartwright, a Marine known around the White House as

Obama's favorite general.

Cartwright objected. "I'm just not in the business of withholding options," he told Mullen. "I have an oath, and when asked for advice I'm going to provide it."

When word of the hybrid option reached Obama, he instructed Gates and Mullen to present it. Mullen had other ideas. He used a classified war game exercise - code-named Poignant Vision and held at the Pentagon on Oct. 14, 2009 - to support his case against the option.

Believing the game was rigged, Army Lt. Gen. Douglas E. Lute, Obama's representative from the National Security Council, boycotted it. According to participants, Poignant Vision did not have the rigor of a traditional war game, in which two teams square off. This exercise was a four-hour seminar.

Mullen and Petraeus both attended, as did Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair, a retired admiral who had once headed the Pentagon's war gaming agency. Blair had suggested the game, thinking it might help in assessing various troop levels.

As the exercise ended, Blair hinted at its limitations. "Well, this is a good warm-up," he said. "When is the next game?"

Blair realized that Mullen and Petraeus had no intention of taking the issue further.

The notion that President Obama is in any way "in control" of the national security portfolio has been seriously called into question. The 28 percent of Americans who believe that civilian control of the military is bad for the United States [6] should sleep soundly. The military appears to have it over on the president.

(Photo by Bektour)

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