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### Kipling Haunts Obama's Afghan War

By Ray McGovern  
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The White Man's Burden, a phrase immortalized by English poet Rudyard Kipling as an excuse for European-American imperialism, was front and center Thursday morning at a RAND-sponsored discussion of Afghanistan in the Russell Senate Office Building.

The agenda was top-heavy with RAND speakers, and the thinking was decidedly "inside the box" — so much so, that I found myself repeating a verse from Kipling, who also recognized the dangers of imperialism, to remind me of the real world:

It is not wise for the Christian white  
To hustle the Asian brown;  
For the Christian riles  
And the Asian smiles  
And weareth the Christian down.

At the end of the fight  
Lies a tombstone white  
With the name of the late deceased;

And the epitaph drear,  
A fool lies here,  
Who tried to hustle the East.

With a few notable exceptions, the RAND event offered conventional wisdom to a fare-thee-well. There was a certain poetic justice that President Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who has chaired RAND's Middle East Advisory Board, was chosen to keynote the proceedings.

As national security adviser under President Carter, Brzezinski thought it a good idea to mousetrap the Soviets into their own Vietnam debacle by baiting them into invading Afghanistan in 1979, the war which was the precursor to the great-power Afghan quagmire three decades later.

On Thursday, Brzezinski disclosed that he had advised the Bush/Cheney administration to invade Afghanistan in 2001, but insisted that he told Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld that the U.S. military should not stay "as an alien force" once American objectives were achieved.

Exuding his customary confidence, Brzezinski first addressed — and ruled out — several "No's," the things that the U.S. must not do:

- Withdrawal is "not in the range of policy options."
- The U.S. must not repeat the Soviet experience in going it alone, but rather must "use all our leverage" to make NATO's commitment stick.
- The U.S. should not neglect the need to include "Islamic" groups in the coalition.

Brzezinski offered a much longer litany of “Yeses” — but his list was disappointingly bereft of new ideas. Indeed, it was notable only for his insistence that the U.S. ought to be more actively engaged in promoting a north-south pipeline through Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean.

He said, for example, that India needs access to the resources of central Asia, an area especially rich in natural gas.

Without batting an eye, Brzezinski noted that within three months the war in Afghanistan will be the “longest war in U.S. history,” and warned that the United States could be “bogged down there for another decade or so.”

At the same time, he argued, the world impact of an early U.S. departure “would be utterly devastating.” Quagmire, anyone?

Questioned about growing opposition to the war, he conceded condescendingly that “public fatigue” is understandable, but expressed confidence that adoption of his recommended policies would be “persuasive” enough to turn public opinion around.

### **Outsiders Impinge**

One must give RAND credit for inviting a few outsiders whose remarks came closer to reflecting reality.

Former national intelligence officer for the Middle East, Paul Pillar, and Harvard professor Stephen Walt offered observations that, though eminently sensible, somehow seemed oddly out of step — “out of the box,” as we say in Washington.

Pillar asked if what the U.S. was doing in Afghanistan is enhancing the security of the American people. Are the costs justified, given the amount of change and the “direction of change” in the area that can be realistically expected, he asked?

Even if the U.S. and NATO effort is, as they say, “properly resourced,” large parts of Afghanistan will remain open to the Taliban, and perhaps al Qaeda — not to mention alternative locales like Somalia and Yemen.

And then there are the counterproductive consequences.

It is a given, said Pillar, that sending more troops perceived as occupation forces will — more than any other step — bring more and more recruits to the Taliban. As for the cost, Pillar cited the recent congressional testimony by Stephen Biddle, a defense policy fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Biddle, though supportive of Gen. Stanley Chrystal’s counterinsurgency approach, said it would incur “Iraq-war-scale cost for three to five years.”

Pillar asked if that kind of anticipated cost was worth what he suggested would be “at best, a slight reduction in the danger from terrorism.” This, he said, is the calculation that the President has to make.

### **No Alternative?**

Stephen Walt picked up on Pillar’s themes, pleading for a realistic assessment of benefits against cost.

As for U.S. troop casualties, 850 have already been killed. At a rate of 50 deaths a month, five more years would bring 3,000 dead — not to mention the many thousands more wounded.

And the longer the United States stays, the more it looks like a foreign occupier and the more various Afghan factions are pushed together by giving them a common enemy. Plus, al Qaeda will have a safe haven — in Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, even Europe — no matter the degree of “success” that the U.S. achieves in Afghanistan.

Walt opined that it is the epitome of hubris for the U.S. to take on the monumental task of “social engineering” the 200 million people in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that the chances of succeeding are “not great.”

Walt also questioned the disproportionate attention in resources directed toward Afghanistan when there is little reason to send more U.S. troops there, except that there are already U.S. troops there.

Moreover, Walt pointed to a particularly significant “opportunity cost” in the drain on President Barack Obama’s time, noting there are lots of other problems — domestic as well as foreign — that crave his attention.

Remarkably, among virtually all the speakers there was broad consensus that Brzezinski’s first No-No would prevail — that is, that no U.S. troop withdrawal is in the cards.

Walt put it bluntly, saying the President “painted himself into a corner” last spring and would probably not be able to solve “one of the world’s most intractable problems.”

The Harvard professor predicted that in just a few years the Obama administration will look back with huge regret on how badly it erred.

The Cato Institute’s Christopher Preble took strong issue with the notion that “a country like ours would have no alternative” to escalation. He, too, asked if adding to the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is essential to U.S. national security.

Or, Preble wondered, has the conflict there simply become an interest in itself — “that we must win this war because it is the war we are in.” He, too, gave U.S. policy makers a failing grade on “the cost-benefit test.”

## **RAND and the Establishment**

The biggest surprise for me came in the remarks of well-respected diplomat James Dobbins, director of RAND’s International Security and Defense Policy Center. Dobbins provided no supporting data or reasoning to support what seemed — to me, at least — to be scare tactics.

Addressing the possibility of U.S. departure from Afghanistan, Dobbins predicted a long list of calamities: civil war (as if one isn’t already underway), the involvement not only of Pakistan but of Iran, Russia and China; millions of refugees, widespread disease, negative economic growth, increased extremism and use of Afghanistan for more terrorism.

As for the administration’s public posture, Dobbins pointed to a need to “expand the explanation for our presence in Afghanistan,” so that the rationale will appear more commensurate with an increasing commitment” — read, more troops justified by more rhetorical flourishes.

While Dobbins performed yeoman service in securing, for example, Iranian cooperation in originally setting up the Karzai government in Kabul, his experience with Asian insurgencies is paper-thin.

I was painfully reminded of this by his gratuitous remark that “in Vietnam we had neutralized the Viet Cong” and only when the North Vietnamese came into the fray, and the U.S. commitment slackened, did we lose that one.

With that faux history as background, it is less surprising that Dobbins would tout, as he did, the “Powell doctrine” of overwhelming force and advocate for a still deeper U.S. commitment in Afghanistan, to be accompanied by a more persuasive rationale to explain it.

Walt pointed out that, applying the insurgent-to-population ratio Dobbins has used for Bosnia, 600,000 troops would be needed to defeat the insurgents in Afghanistan.

RAND veteran and former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, addressed the public perception problem regarding the Afghan war with unusual candor: “People don’t believe we know what we’re doing.”

Still, endorsing the Brzezinski No-No dictum, Khalilzad said that “no serious person” would contemplate U.S. withdrawal enabling “extremism” to prevail.

Khalilzad argued for playing to the U.S. strength with a “purchasing power” approach — the United States comes up with the money to pay potential or actual insurgents more than they make fighting for the Taliban. Otherwise, he said the U.S. needed to expand Afghan forces.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin, D-Michigan, also stressed the need for building up Afghan forces, as the administration considers increasing the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. Levin spoke of the need for a 400,000-strong Afghan army and police force by 2012, trained by U.S. and NATO specialists.

### **Panacea: Training the Indigenous**

I am reminded of what former CENTCOM commander, General John Abizaid, described to the Senate Armed Services Committee three years ago as a “major change” in the Iraq war — namely, new emphasis on training Iraqis.

The final returns are not yet in for Iraq, but in my experience this is almost always an unfruitful exercise, as many of us learned from Vietnam. Been there; done that; should have known that.

Three months after John Kennedy's death, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara sent President Lyndon Johnson a draft of a major speech McNamara planned to give on defense policy. What follows is a segment of an audiotape of a conversation between the two on Feb. 25, 1964:

Johnson: Your speech is good, but I wonder if you shouldn't find two minutes to devote to Vietnam.

McNamara: The problem is what to say about it.

Johnson: I'll tell you what to say about it. I would say we have a commitment to Vietnamese freedom. We could pull out there; the dominoes would fall and that part of the world would go to the Communists. ... Nobody really understands what is out there. ... Our purpose is to train [the South

Vietnamese] people, and our training's going good.

McNamara: All right, sir.

But the Vietnamese training wasn't "going good." Before long, half a million American troops were in Vietnam trying to save South Vietnam's government.

Almost always, it is a forlorn hope that unwelcome occupation troops can train indigenous soldiers and police to fight against their own brothers and sisters. That the British also seem to have forgotten these lessons, along with some of Kipling's cautionary poetry about the risks of imperialism, is really no excuse.

If President Obama is depending on the RAND folks and embedded neo-con pundits like the *Washington Post's* David Ignatius ([his Friday's column](#) appeals for more troops "to continue the mission," as the President and his advisers attempt to figure out what the mission should be), we are in trouble.

As I sat at the RAND event on Thursday, I could not help wondering what would be the judgments of my former colleagues in the intelligence community on these key issues? Specifically, what might a National Intelligence Estimate on Prospects for Afghanistan say?

NIEs are the most authoritative genre of analytical product, embodying key judgments on important national security issues. They are coordinated throughout the 16-agency intelligence community and then signed by the Director of National Intelligence in his statutory capacity as chief intelligence adviser to the President.

An NIE can, and should, play an important role.

An estimate on Iran's nuclear program, given to President George W. Bush in November 2007, helped derail plans by Vice President Dick Cheney and White House adviser Elliott Abrams for war on Iran.

The most senior U.S. military officers had realized what a debacle that would be and insisted that this NIE's key judgments be made public.

They expected, rightly, that public knowledge that Iran had stopped working on developing a nuclear warhead in 2003 would take the wind out of Cheney's sails. Bush and Cheney were not pleased; but the NIE helped stop the juggernaut toward war with Iran.

### **There's Always an NIE, Right?**

As one of the intelligence analysts watching Vietnam in the Sixties and Seventies, I worked on several of the NIEs produced before and during the war. All too many bore this title: "Probable Reactions to Various Courses of Action With Respect to North Vietnam."

Typical of the kinds of question the President and his advisers wanted addressed: Can we seal off the Ho Chi Minh Trail by bombing it? If the U.S. were to introduce x thousand additional troops into South Vietnam, will Hanoi quit? Okay, how about xx thousand?

Our answers regularly earned us brickbats from the White House for not being "good team players." But in those days we labored under a strong ethos dictating that we give it to policymakers straight, without

fear or favor.

We had career protection for doing that. And — truth be told — we often took a perverse delight in it.

Our judgments (the unwelcome ones, anyway) were pooh-poohed as negativism; and policymakers, of course, were in no way obliged to take them into account. The point is that they continued to be sought.

Not even Lyndon Johnson, nor Richard Nixon, would be likely to decide on a significant escalation without seeking the best guess of the intelligence community as to how U.S. adversaries would likely react to this or that escalatory step.

Yet, would you believe there is no current National Intelligence Estimate on Afghanistan? Rather, Generals David Petraeus and Stanley Chrystal are running the show, allowing professional intelligence analysts to be mostly straphangers at planning and strategy meetings.

CIA Director Panetta, a self-described “creature of Congress,” is not going to risk putting any senior military noses out of joint by objecting, and neither is his nominal boss, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair.

And, sad to say, National Security Adviser James Jones, in deferring to the military, is serving President Obama just as poorly as Bush apparatchik Condoleezza Rice served President Bush.

How many “militants” are there in Afghanistan? How many “insurgents?” How do you draw a distinction between a militant and an insurgent? Might these combatants be considered, in many areas of Afghanistan, resistance fighters? What would be the implications of that?

### **Packaged by the Military**

Forty-two years ago, my CIA analyst colleague Sam Adams was sent to Saigon to have it out with the Army intelligence unit there.

After several months of exhaustive analysis, Adams had connected a whole bunch of dots, so to speak, and concluded that there were more than twice as many Vietnamese Communists under arms as the Army had on its books.

Bewildered at first, Adams quickly learned that Westmoreland had instructed his intelligence staff to falsify intelligence on enemy strength, keeping the numbers low enough to promote an illusion of progress in the war.

After a prolonged knock-down-drag-out fight, then-CIA Director Richard Helms decided to acquiesce in the Army’s arbitrary exclusion from its enemy aggregate total paramilitary and other armed elements numbering up to 300,000.

These categories had been included in previous estimates because they were a key part of the combat force of the Communists. The Adams/CIA best estimate was total Communist strength of 500,000.

However, the doctored estimate went to the President and his advisers in November 1967, just two months before the countrywide Communist offensive at Tet in late January/early February 1968 proved — at great cost — that Adams figures were far more accurate than the Army’s.

Years later, when Adams and CBS told the story of this internal battle on “60 Minutes,” Westmoreland sued, giving Adams his day in court, literally. Subpoenaed documents and the testimony of Westmoreland’s own staff in Saigon established the accuracy of Adams’ charges, and Westmoreland withdrew his suit.

Yet, right up until his premature death at age 55, Sam Adams could not dispel the remorse he felt at not having gone public with his findings much earlier. He felt that, had he done so, the entire left half of the Vietnam memorial would not be there, because there would be no names to carve into the granite for those later years of the war.

### **Ellsberg’s Regret**

In recent years, former Defense Department and RAND analyst Daniel Ellsberg also has expressed deep regret that he waited too long; that he did not give the press the “Pentagon Papers” history of the Vietnam War and its many deceptions until 1971.

But it’s important to note that some patriotic truth-tellers, including Ellsberg, did reveal key facts about the war in the late Sixties, as the Johnson administration worked on plans to expand the ground war into Cambodia, Laos and right up to the Chinese border — perhaps even beyond.

In 1967, the beribboned, bemedaled Petraeus — sorry, I mean Westmoreland — addressed a joint session of Congress during which he congratulated himself on the “great progress” being made in the war.

What Congress did not know was that Westmoreland was on the verge of getting President Johnson to agree to sending 206,000 more troops for a widening of the war that threatened to bring China in as an active combatant.

But two key leaks to the *New York Times* helped put the kibosh on that escalation. The first leak revealed the 206,000 escalation figure and the second – by Ellsberg himself – disclosed the suppression of the CIA’s higher count of Vietnamese Communists under arms.

On March 25, 1968, Johnson complained to a small gathering of confidants: “The leaks to the New York Times hurt us. ... We have no support for the war. ... I would have given Westy the 206,000 men.”

I believe President Obama wants to make the right decision regarding Afghanistan. For me, his poignant visit to the U.S. Air Force Base at Dover, Delaware, to receive the coffins of 18 Americans recently killed in Afghanistan tells me something of his authenticity and determination to do this one right.

But he is under great military and political pressure to send more troops on what I believe is a fool’s errand. And his national security adviser and intelligence chiefs have, well, chickened out.

### **The Vietnam Analogy**

One clear lesson is that patriotic truth-telling can prevent wider wars. And so I address this to my erstwhile colleagues and newer analysts in the intelligence community:

Those of you working on Afghanistan and Pakistan have your own educated estimates of the prospects

for success of various U.S. courses of action. Wait no longer to be asked to write a National Intelligence Estimate.

The President should not be deprived of your views.

Perhaps it was serendipity (or maybe a reward for sitting through the RAND event Thursday morning) but that evening I was privileged to attend the Washington premier of an excellent documentary on Dan Ellsberg — “The Most Dangerous Man in America” — the sobriquet he earned from Henry Kissinger when Ellsberg gave the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times*.

The film contained hard-to-watch footage of the war that took the lives of two-to-three million Vietnamese and 58,000 Americans. But I was happy to see that the film did pick up, from Ellsberg’s book *Secrets*, his decision to begin revealing important facts to the *New York Times* in early 1968, a move that helped prevent a still more dangerous escalation of the war in Vietnam and its widening to adjacent countries.

Think about it, intelligence analysts. Don’t just look at each other. Think more about all those young people from the inner city and towns of less than 10,000 forming the pool from which a *de facto* poverty draft sends the bulk of U.S. troops off to bear the modern White Man’s Burden.

That is not the America that so many of us believe in. Do something to stop it.

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