

A SHOW OF HANDS

By Michael Ventura

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Fact set No. 1:

The scene is Afghanistan: “‘Let me see a show of hands,’ says Admiral Mullen [chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff], ‘how many of you are on your first deployment?’ A couple of dozen hands go up. ‘Second deployment?’ More hands go up. ‘Third deployment?’ Still lots of hands are raised. ‘Fourth deployment?’ A good dozen hands go up. ‘Fifth deployment?’ Still hands go up. ‘Sixth deployment?’ One hand goes up. Admiral Mullen asks the soldier to step forward and shake his hand (*The New York Times*, July 22, 2009, p.A23).

Please note that date: four months before President Obama announced the so-called surge, his escalation of the Afghan war.

Set that beside this: “In a historical first, more U.S. troops were hospitalized for mental health disorders last year (17,538) than for battle wounds or other injuries (11,156). The Pentagon blamed ‘prolonged exposure to combat,’ resulting from soldiers’ multiple deployments in [at the time] nine straight years of war (*The Week*, May 28, 2010, p.18).” Look again at the number: 17,538, not in therapy but hospitalized.

Set that beside this: “About 18 veterans commit suicide on an average day (*The New York Times*, May 19, p.A26).”

No discussion of U.S. foreign policy deserves to be taken seriously if it fails to begin and end with the facts of what we are doing to our troops.

“There is a significant risk the U.S. military may not be able to respond quickly and fully to new crises, a classified Pentagon assessment has concluded (Associated Press online, Feb. 20, 2009).” Again notice the date: This assessment was made nine months before Obama’s escalation.

“Mullen is openly voicing concerns that professionalism and ethical standards across the armed forces are being severely challenged by the longest period of sustained combat in the nation’s history (*The New York Times*, January 9, p.A20).”

A discussion of foreign policy must begin with the question: What are we doing to our military personnel, and how long can we keep doing it?

That is a question of resources and logistics, the two basic operational elements of fighting a war. Then there is the question of conscience:

Have we the right to use people this way? Who speaks for those young men and women? Who’s looking out for them? A report by the Pentagon’s inspector general revealed that “[m]ilitary leaders knew the dangers posed by roadside bombs before the start of the Iraq war but did little to develop vehicles that were known to better protect forces from what proved to be the conflict’s deadliest weapon (*USA Today*, Dec. 9, 2008, p A1).”

Fact set No. 2:

“C.I.A. Outlines Pakistan Links With Militants (*The New York Times*, July 30, 2008, p.A1).” Lately there have been many “We’re shocked, shocked do you hear?” stories about links between Pakistan’s military and “militants,” but it was known 16 months before Obama’s escalation.

“Four-fifths of Pakistanis oppose America’s striking al-Qaeda within their territory (*The Economist*, Sept. 20, 2008, p.55).” That’s more than a year before escalation. How many fifths oppose American strikes now?

It is not credible to believe that the Obama administration did not know what it was getting into. Or maybe it is. Examine this evidence of arrogance:

“The United States Embassy has published plans for a vast new building in Islamabad for about 1,000 people (*The New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2009, p.A1).” That story reports Pakistani reaction: “People think the government has sold us to the Americans again,” said... a former [Pakistani] cabinet minister. ‘Some people think the United States is out to get Pakistan, to defang Pakistan, to destroy... [Pakistan’s] ability to influence events in India and Afghanistan. Everyone is saying about the Americans, ‘Told you so.’” That’s just two months before Obama assured our country that Pakistan was with the program and essential to its success.

“A report... released this week by the London School of Economics, said that [Pakistan’s] Inter-Services Intelligence not only provides ‘sanctuary and very substantial financial, military, and logistical support’ for the Taliban, *but even has its own seat on the Taliban’s leadership council* [my italics]. And it’s not a case of the ISI going rogue: The report said the Pakistani government... fully supports the agency’s activities (*The Week*, June 25, 2010, p.7).”

If the London School of Economics knew this in June 2010, the CIA knew it months earlier when Obama made his decision to escalate.

I don’t think anything like this has ever been tried before. Consider these tactics: Declare Pakistan an ally, when you know it’s really not; declare Pakistan’s cooperation crucial to your escalation, when you know they won’t play ball; declare that your “surge” is about troops in Afghanistan, when, more to the point, it’s about launching drones and raids into Pakistan – as became unavoidably clear mere weeks after Obama’s announcement.

To wit: The CIA “is in effect running a war in Pakistan. ...The agency has also recently begun sending more operatives into Pakistan, to, among other things, target intelligence for the drone program (*The New York Times*, Jan. 1, 2010, p.A1).” The report notes our “civilian spy agency’s transformation into a paramilitary organization at the vanguard of America’s far-flung wars.”

The CIA was the primary element all along. The ground-escalation in Afghanistan was to cover CIA acts of war against Pakistan. But, from the start, the drone war has been reported as secondary. A drone war isn’t really a war because the CIA is doing it and Obama doesn’t talk about it.

Pakistan wasn’t fooled. Two months after Obama’s announcement of escalation, Pakistan was “shrugging off American pressure[.] [T]he Pakistani army said it would not launch any new offenses against militants this year (*The Week*, Feb. 5, 2010, p.9).”

Then consider this October 2007 *Times* headline: “U.S. Is Top Arms Seller to Developing World.” The article lists Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia as top buyers. And the U.S. is Pakistan’s “largest trading partner” (Associated Press on line, Oct. 3, 2010).

So: The U.S. sells its enemy, Pakistan, conventional weapons to fight a U.S. ally, India, while at the same time the U.S. sells arms to India in order to fight Pakistan, and all while the U.S. is also the largest supporter of Pakistan's economy and is killing Pakistanis with drones and commandos.

Got that? There's never been a war like this. Let's try again:

We arm Pakistan against India and we arm India against Pakistan, while we juice Pakistan's economy, fight important Pakistani factions, and hope Pakistan won't get so pissed that it gives anti-U.S. terrorists nukes to eviscerate our cities.

That's what is actually happening.

Given the chronology of events, there is no reason to doubt that Obama knew what he was getting us into and there is plenty of reason to doubt the judgment of everyone in his administration who overestimated U.S. power and underestimated the risk.

Fact set No. 3: The conventional part of this war costs us \$10 billion a month (*The Week*, July 1, p.2A), while who knows what the C.I.A. war costs?

The Week, Dec.11, 2009, p.22: As Obama announced his escalation, one in four American children depended on food stamps for survival, one in eight Americans were receiving food stamps, and 20,000 additional people were signing up every day.

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