



FROM *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*, by Jonathan Alter. To be published on May 18 by Simon & Schuster, Inc. © 2010 by Jonathan Alter.

SECRETS FROM INSIDE THE OBAMA WAR ROOM

BY JONATHAN ALTER

THE FIRST OF 10 "AFPAK" MEETINGS CAME on Sept. 13, when the president gathered 16 advisers in the Situation Room in the basement of the White House. This was to be the most methodical national-security decision in a generation. Deputy national-security adviser Tom Donilon had commissioned research that backed up an astonishing historical truth: neither the Vietnam War nor the Iraq War featured any key meetings where all the issues and assumptions were discussed by policymakers. In both cases the United States was sucked into war inch by inch.

The Obama administration was determined to change that. "For the past eight years, whatever the military asked for, they got," Obama explained later. "My job was to slow things down." The president had something precious in modern crisis man-

agement: time. "I had to put up with the 'dithering' arguments from Dick Cheney or others," Obama said. "But as long as I wasn't shaken by the political chatter, I had the time to work through all these issues and ask a bunch of tough questions and force people to sharpen their pencils until we arrived at the best possible solution."

Obama's approach in the meetings was the same as always. He was, according to one participant, "clear-eyed, hard-headed, and demanding." More than once the president felt obliged to remind those briefing him that it wasn't 2001 anymore. The United States had been in Afghanistan for eight years, and doing more of the same wasn't going to cut it. The war in Afghanistan was destined soon to pass Vietnam (11 years) as the longest war in American history.

The AFPAK sessions led to an explosion of unauthorized disclosures, spin, and cutthroat bureaucratic gamesmanship, including the leak of the McClystal Report to Bob Woodward of *The Washington Post*. The president later admitted privately that his administration had handled the assigning of the report "stupidly." Instead of simply asking Gen. Stanley McClystal, the new commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, for a status report on the deteriorating situation on the ground, he let Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, dispatch McClystal with a vague assignment that included making recommendations. He figured he should have known that any report would inevitably get out if put on paper.

The flap over the leak did nothing to chasten the Pentagon. In fact, the military, practiced in the ways of Washington, now ran PR circles around the neophytes in the Obama White House, leaking something to the Pentagon reporters nearly every day. The motive for all the leaks seemed clear to the White House: to box the president into the policy that McChrystal had recommended, at least another 80,000 troops and an open-ended commitment lasting 10 years or more.

Admiral Mullen, the son of a Hollywood publicist whose clients included Bob Hope and Jimmy Stewart, looked unassuming but knew how to handle himself in the press. Gen. David Petraeus, the CentCom commander, of course was a pro at cultivating reporters. Even before the leaking of the report, McChrystal, working with Mullen's approval, made himself shockingly accessible to the press. He sat for a long, colorful interview with *60 Minutes*, appeared on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*, and dismissed the Biden plan (few troops, targeting Al Qaeda with drones) to NEWSWEEK.

Mullen dug himself in especially deep at his reconfirmation hearings for chairman of the Joint Chiefs when he made an aggressive case for a long-term commitment in Afghanistan. White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was enraged at Mullen's public testimony and let the Pentagon know it. When Petraeus gave an interview to *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson on Sept. 4

WITH DEFENSE SECRETARY GATES
OUTSIDE THE OVAL OFFICE ON JUNE 18.



OBAMA WAITS TO ENTER A TRILATERAL MEETING WITH ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU AND PALESTINIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD ABBAS IN NEW YORK CITY ON SEPT. 22.

calling for a "fully resourced, comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign," the chief of staff was even angrier. Mullen and Petraeus thought the whole thing was a big misunderstanding. They said that once they heard the policy was under review, they stopped talking. "Hey, Denis, don't worry," Petraeus told NSC chief of staff Denis McDonough, "I get it."

If so, apparently McChrystal didn't

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get the word. Scheduled to give a speech on Oct. 1 before the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, McChrystal wasn't sure if he should make the trip, but Mullen told him he should definitely go; it would help the transatlantic alliance. The speech was unexceptional until the question period, when McChrystal crossed his commander in chief in ways that would have consequences. When a questioner

asked if he could support a presidential decision to fight the war with drone aircraft and Special Forces that focused on defeating Al Qaeda, McChrystal replied, "The short, glib answer is no."

If the president sided with Biden, the commanding general couldn't support it? This was insubordination, and the White House was livid. Was McChrystal out of control or just naive? (The consensus was naive.) Obama and his senior staff believed this had Mullen's and Petraeus's fingerprints all over it. They were using McChrystal to jam the president, box him in, manipulate him, game him—use whatever verb you like. The president had not yet decided on a policy and didn't appreciate the military sounding in public as if he had.

Some aides worried at least briefly that Petraeus was politically ambitious and was making an implied threat: decide Afghanistan my way or I just might resign my command and run for president in 2012. It wasn't a crazy thought. Rep. Peter King and various blogs were promoting him for high office. Although he insisted he was uninterested, Petraeus was a registered Republican in New Hampshire and well positioned to run as a Colin Powell-style alternative to Mitt Romney, Sarah Palin, or anyone else in the 2012 presidential primaries. When asked about it, Petraeus was, as he later put it, "Shermanesque." Not interested. "What part of 'no' don't you understand?" he said.

On the day after the London speech,



Reed for another eight years," Obama told the group. That day the president gave preliminary approval to the plan presented to him by the military, which called for 40,000 more troops to be sent to Afghanistan over 21 months. But the timetable stuck in his craw. Already in a snappish mood, he found it appalling that in the world of modern military transport it would take nearly two years to get those boots on the ground. In the Gulf War in 1990-91, the military got half a million troops to the region in less than six months.

"I don't know how we can describe this as a surge," Obama said sharply. The president then turned to Petraeus. "Am I mistaken in remembering that the 30,000 troops in Iraq arrived in a six-month window in 2007?"

"No," Petraeus said, "you're not." The president was treading in a sensitive area. "Any time Iraq was mentioned it was like putting a hot rod under Petraeus. He would practically levitate," said one person in the room. Obama

bore in: "So why is this surge taking place over 21 months if that one was done in six months?"

Petraeus replied that the Afghanistan surge was not modeled on Iraq. "Well, your presentation earlier was on Iraq," Obama reminded him. The general always threw in the caveat that Iraq and Afghanistan were very different countries. Afghanistan would need new runways, ammo storage, billets, and other military infrastructure before many more U.S. troops could arrive. But the whole thrust of his analysis, the basis of his prestige, was that what he had learned in Iraq could be applied to Afghanistan and other nations. They had talked about this for hours in previous meetings and now the president was calling Petraeus's bluff, as one note taker at the meeting put it. "The only way we'll consider this is if we get the troops in and out in a shorter time frame," Obama said.

Obama was moving out of his probing mode and toward conclusions and eventu-

ally presidential orders. This would not be a five- to seven-year nation-building commitment, much less an open-ended one. The time frame the military was offering for both getting in and getting out must shrink dramatically, he said. There would be no nationwide counterinsurgency strategy; the Pentagon was to present 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.

On Sunday, Nov. 29, having made his decision, the president decided to hold a final Oval Office meeting with the Pentagon brass and commanders in the region who would carry out his orders. He wanted to put it directly to the military: Gates, Mullen, Cartwright, Petraeus, and national-security adviser Jim Jones, without any of the others. Obama asked Biden to come back early from Thanksgiving in Nantucket to join him for the meeting.

As they walked along the portico toward the Oval Office, Biden asked if the

AT A BRIEFING ON AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN IN THE SITUATION ROOM OF THE WHITE HOUSE ON OCT. 14.



McChrystal was summoned to Copenhagen to meet with Obama, who was trying—and failing—to lure the Olympics to Chicago. They talked alone for 25 minutes while Air Force One sat on the tarmac. It was only the second time the two had met since McChrystal took over in June. The president wasn't happy, but he held his temper in check, as usual. By this time the White House had concluded that McChrystal was simply in over his head in the media world, a pawn in Mullen and Petraeus's game.

Obama found that he liked McChrystal personally and thought he had the right approach for completing the mission. Of course he wanted more troops, Obama figured. All battlefield generals do. But Obama was perfectly aware of the box he was now in. He could defer entirely to his generals, as President Bush had done, which he considered an abdication of responsibility. Or he could overrule them, which would weaken their effectiveness, with negative consequences for soldiers in the field, relations with allies, and the president's

own political position. There had to be a third way, he figured.

In the meantime it was important to remind the brass who was in charge. Inside the National Security Council, advisers considered what happened next historic, a presidential dressing-down unlike any in the United States in more than half a century. In the first week of October, Gates and Mullen were summoned to the Oval Office, where the president told them that he was "exceedingly unhappy" with the Pentagon's conduct. He said the leaks and positioning in advance of a decision were "disrespectful of the process" and "damaging to the men and women in uniform and to the country." In a cold fury Obama said he wanted to know "here and now" if the Pentagon would be on board with any presidential decision and could faithfully implement it.

"This was a cold and bracing meeting," said an official in the room. Lyndon Johnson had never

talked to Gen. William Westmoreland that way, or George H.W. Bush to Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf. Presidents Kennedy, Carter, and Clinton had all been played by the Pentagon at various points but hadn't fought back as directly. Now Obama was sending an unmistakable message: don't toy with me. Just because he was young, new, a Democrat, and had never been in uniform didn't mean he was going to get backed into a corner.

Mullen described himself as "chagrined" after the meeting. He had always

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WITH GENERAL MCCRYSTAL IN COPENHAGEN IN OCTOBER.



felt strongly about the importance of civilian control of the military, and in 2008 had delivered a message to the armed forces reminding all service personnel to stay out of politics. Now he and Gates pledged support and told the president that the conduct would change, and it did. On Oct. 5, Gates said in a speech to the Association of the United States Army that it was "imperative" that generals provide their advice "candidly but privately." (He felt the White House was just as guilty of damaging leaks as the Pentagon, and he hoped his message of discretion was heard there, too.) Mullen and Joint Chiefs vice chairman Gen. James Cartwright stopped selling the McChrystal plan and told Petraeus and McChrystal to stop talking publicly until the policy deliberations were resolved. "They swore loyalty," said one senior civilian official. "And we chose to believe them."

The Nov. 11 Veterans Day meeting, the eighth on AfPak, would prove pivotal. "I don't want to be going to Walter