

Bob Woodward book details Obama battles with advisers over exit plan for Afghan war

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President Obama urgently looked for a way out of the war in Afghanistan last year, repeatedly pressing his top military advisers for an exit plan that they never gave him, according to secret meeting notes and documents cited in a new book by journalist Bob Woodward.

Frustrated with his military commanders for consistently offering only options that required significantly more troops, Obama finally crafted his own strategy, dictating a classified six-page "terms sheet" that sought to limit U.S. involvement, Woodward reports in "Obama's Wars," to be released on Monday. (The Washington Post will print excerpts of Woodward's book beginning Monday on the Web, mobile and print editions.)

According to Woodward's meeting-by-meeting, memo-by-memo account of the 2009 Afghan strategy review, the president avoided talk of victory as he described his objectives.

"This needs to be a plan about how we're going to hand it off and get out of Afghanistan," Obama is quoted as telling White House aides as he laid out his reasons for adding 30,000 troops in a short-term escalation. "Everything we're doing has to be focused on how we're going to get to the point where we can reduce our footprint. It's in our national security interest. There cannot be any wiggle room."

Obama rejected the military's request for 40,000 troops as part of an expansive mission that had no foreseeable end. "I'm not doing 10 years," he told Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton at a meeting on Oct. 26, 2009. "I'm not doing long-term nation-building. I am not spending a trillion dollars."

Woodward's book portrays Obama and the White House as barraged by warnings about the threat of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil and confronted with the difficulty in preventing them. During an interview with Woodward in July, the president said, "We can absorb a terrorist attack. We'll do everything we can to prevent it, but even a 9/11, even the biggest attack ever . . . we absorbed it and we are stronger."

But most of the book centers on the strategy review, and the dissension, distrust and infighting that consumed Obama's national security team as it was locked in a fierce and emotional struggle over the direction, goals, timetable, troop levels and the chances of success for a war that is almost certain to be one of the defining events of this presidency.

Obama is shown at odds with his uniformed military commanders, particularly Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gen. David H. Petraeus, head of U.S. Central Command during the 2009 strategy review and now the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan.

Woodward reveals their conflicts through detailed accounts of two dozen closed-door secret strategy sessions and nearly 40 private conversations between Obama and Cabinet officers, key aides and intelligence officials.

Tensions often turned personal. National security adviser James L. Jones privately referred to Obama's political aides as "the water bugs," the "Politburo," the "Mafia," or the "campaign set." Petraeus, who felt shut out by the new administration, told an aide that he considered the president's senior adviser David Axelrod to be "a complete spin doctor."

During a flight in May, after a glass of wine, Petraeus told his own staffers that the administration was "[expletive] with the wrong guy." Gates was tempted to walk out of an Oval Office meeting after being offended by comments made by deputy national security adviser Thomas E. Donilon about a general not named in the book.

Suspicion lingered among some from the 2008 presidential campaign as well. When Obama floated the idea of naming Clinton to a high-profile post, Axelrod asked him, "How could you trust Hillary?"

'Can't afford any mistakes'

"Obama's Wars" marks the 16th book by Woodward, 67, a Washington Post associate editor. Woodward's reporting with Carl Bernstein on the Watergate coverup in the early 1970s led to their bestselling book "All the President's Men."

Among the book's other disclosures:

-- Obama told Woodward in the July interview that he didn't think about the Afghan war in the "classic" terms of the United States winning or losing. "I think about it more in terms of: Do you successfully prosecute a strategy that results in the country being stronger rather than weaker at the end?" he said.

-- The CIA created, controls and pays for a clandestine 3,000-man paramilitary army of local Afghans, known as Counterterrorism Pursuit Teams. Woodward describes these teams as elite, well-trained units that conduct highly sensitive covert operations into Pakistan as part of a stepped-up campaign against al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban havens there.

-- Obama has kept in place or expanded 14 intelligence orders, known as findings, issued by his predecessor, George W. Bush. The orders provide the legal basis for the CIA's worldwide covert operations.

-- A new capability developed by the National Security Agency has dramatically increased the speed at which intercepted communications can be turned around into useful information for intelligence analysts and covert operators. "They talk, we listen. They move, we observe. Given the opportunity, we react operationally," then-Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell explained to Obama at a briefing two days after he was elected president.

-- A classified exercise in May showed that the government was woefully unprepared to deal with a nuclear terrorist attack in the United States. The scenario involved the detonation of a small, crude nuclear weapon in Indianapolis and the simultaneous threat of a second blast in Los Angeles. Obama, in the interview with Woodward, called a nuclear attack here "a potential game changer." He said: "When I go down the list of things I have to worry about all the time, that is at the top, because that's one where you can't afford any mistakes."

-- Afghan President Hamid Karzai was diagnosed as manic depressive, according to U.S. intelligence reports. "He's on his meds, he's off his meds," Woodward quotes U.S. Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry as saying.

'The cancer is in Pakistan'

Obama campaigned on a promise to extract U.S. forces from Iraq and focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan, which he described as the greater threat to American security. At McConnell's top-secret briefing for Obama, the intelligence chief told the president-elect that Pakistan is a dishonest partner, unwilling or unable to stop elements of the Pakistani intelligence service from giving clandestine aid, weapons and money to the Afghan Taliban, Woodward writes.

By the end of the 2009 strategy review, Woodward reports, Obama concluded that no mission in Afghanistan could be successful without attacking the al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban havens operating with impunity in Pakistan's remote tribal regions.

"We need to make clear to people that the cancer is in Pakistan," Obama is quoted as saying at an Oval Office meeting on Nov. 25, 2009. Creating a more secure Afghanistan is imperative, the president said, "so the cancer doesn't spread" there.

The war in Iraq draws no attention in the book, except as a reference point for considering and developing a new Afghanistan strategy. The book's title, "Obama's Wars," appears to refer to the conflict in Afghanistan and the conflicts among the president's national security team.

An older war - the Vietnam conflict - does figure prominently in the minds of Obama and his advisers. When Vice President Biden rushed to the White House on a Sunday morning to make one last appeal for a narrowly defined mission, he warned Obama that a major escalation would mean "we're locked into Vietnam."

Obama kept asking for "an exit plan" to go along with any further troop commitment, and is shown growing increasingly frustrated with the military hierarchy for not providing one. At one strategy session, the president waved a memo from the Office of Management and Budget, which put a price tag of \$889 billion over 10 years on the military's open-ended approach.

In the end, Obama essentially designed his own strategy for the 30,000 troops, which some aides considered a compromise between the military command's request for 40,000 and Biden's relentless efforts to limit the escalation to 20,000 as part of a "hybrid option" that he had developed with Gen. James E. Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In a dramatic scene at the White House on Sunday, Nov. 29, 2009, Obama summoned the national security team to outline his decision and distribute his six-page terms sheet. He went around the room, one by one, asking each participant whether he or she had any objections - to "say so now," Woodward reports.

The document - a copy of which is reprinted in the book - took the unusual step of stating, along with the strategy's objectives, what the military was not supposed to do. The president went into detail, according to Woodward, to make sure that the military wouldn't attempt to expand the mission.

After Obama informed the military of his decision, Woodward writes, the Pentagon kept trying to reopen the decision, peppering the White House with new questions. Obama, in exasperation, reacted by asking, "Why do we keep having these meetings?"

Along with Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan at the time, they kept pushing for their 40,000-troop option as part of a broad counterinsurgency plan along the lines of what Petraeus had developed for Iraq.

The president is quoted as telling Mullen, Petraeus and Gates: "In 2010, we will not be having a conversation about how to do more. I will not want to hear, 'We're doing fine, Mr. President, but we'd be better if we just do more.' We're not going to be having a conversation about how to change [the mission] . . . unless we're talking about how to draw down faster than anticipated in 2011."

Petraeus took Obama's decision as a personal repudiation, Woodward writes. Petraeus continued to believe that a "protect-the-Afghan-people" counterinsurgency was the best plan. When the president tapped Petraeus this year to replace McChrystal as the head of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Petraeus found himself in charge of making Obama's more limited strategy a success.

Woodward quotes Petraeus as saying, "You have to recognize also that I don't think you win this war. I think you keep fighting. It's a little bit like Iraq, actually. . . . Yes, there has been enormous progress in Iraq. But there are still horrific attacks in Iraq, and you have to stay vigilant. You have to stay after it. This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives."