

FOR NOBEL PEACE PRIZE WINNER OBAMA, DIPLOMACY STILL AFTERTHOUGHT IN AFGHANISTAN

The central point argued in Vali Nasr's book "The Dispensable Nation" is that for the Obama administration, diplomacy took a back seat to the military as the administration took control of the war in Afghanistan from the Bush administration. In fact, the second part of the book's title is "American Foreign Policy in Retreat". As the chief aide to Richard Holbrooke, whom Obama chose as his special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Nasr puts Holbrooke on quite a pedestal in the book, and others have built a bit of a cottage industry around attacking Nasr's version of events, but I want to concentrate just on the missed opportunity for diplomacy.

Setting aside the arguing over Holbrooke and Nasr, it is clear that Nasr has identified a fatal flaw in Obama's handling of Afghanistan. Nasr describes a very early opening for negotiations with the Taliban that was squandered:

Around that time, in fall 2009, Holbrooke and I had a meeting with Egypt's foreign minister. Egypt's intelligence chief, General Abu Suleiman (who later became vice president when Mubarak fell), was also in the room. At one point he turned to Holbrooke and said, "The Taliban visited us in Cairo." Holbrooke said, "Really, who came? Do you remember?" Abu Suleiman reached into his bag, pulled out a piece of paper, held it before his face, and read three names. The last one made us all pause. It was Tayed Agha, a relative the

Taliban chief, Mulla Omar, as well as his secretary and spokesman, whom we knew to be actively probing talks with the United States on Taliban's behalf. We knew Tayed Agha to be a player, but we did not know then that he would become America's main Taliban interlocutor in first secret and later formal talks that began in 2011 (and were made public in February 2012).

Although Holbrooke jumped at the opportunity and presented the case to the Obama administration, they were dismissive of the idea during the critical time that they were developing and then implementing McChrystal's vaunted surge of troops in Afghanistan. From the Foreign Policy excerpt of the book:

FROM THE OUTSET, Holbrooke argued for political reconciliation as the path out of Afghanistan. But the military thought talk of reconciliation undermined America's commitment to fully resourced COIN. On his last trip to Afghanistan, in October 2010, Holbrooke pulled aside Petraeus, who by then had replaced McChrystal as commander in Afghanistan, and said, "David, I want to talk to you about reconciliation." "That's a 15-second conversation," Petraeus replied. "No, not now."

The commanders' standard response was that they needed two more fighting seasons to soften up the Taliban. They were hoping to change the president's mind on his July deadline and after that convince him to accept a "slow and shallow" (long and gradual) departure schedule. Their line was that we should fight first and talk later. Holbrooke thought we could talk *and* fight. Reconciliation should be the ultimate goal, and fighting the means to facilitate it.

The Obama administration did its utmost to undermine Holbrooke's efforts on the diplomatic front during this time:

On one occasion in the summer of 2010, after the White House had systematically blocked every attempt to include reconciliation talks with the Taliban and serious regional diplomacy (which had to include Iran) on the agenda for national security meetings with the president, Clinton took a paper SRAP had prepared to Obama. She gave him the paper, explained what it laid out, and said, "Mr. President, I would like to get your approval on this." Obama nodded his approval, but that was all. So his White House staff, caught off guard by Clinton, found ample room to kill the paper in Washington's favorite way: condemning it to slow death in committee meetings. A few weeks after Clinton gave Obama the paper, I had to go to an "interagency" meeting organized by the White House that to my surprise was going to review the paper the president had already given the nod to. I remember telling Clinton about the meeting. She shook her head and exclaimed, "Unbelievable!"

And it was only after the end of the surge, as troop withdrawals were beginning, that Obama finally saw the light of diplomacy:

But that did not happen. The president failed to launch diplomacy and then announced the troop withdrawal in a June 2011 speech, in effect snatching away the leverage that would be needed if diplomacy were to have a chance of success. "If you are leaving, why would the Taliban make a deal with you? How would you make the deal stick? The Taliban will talk to you, but just to get you out faster." That comment we heard from an Arab diplomat was repeated

across the region.

Yet it was exactly after announcing the U.S. departure that the administration warmed up to the idea of reconciliation. Talks with the Taliban were not about arranging their surrender, but about hastening America's departure. Concerns about human rights, women's rights, and education were shelved. These were not seen as matters of vital U.S. interest, just noble causes that were too costly and difficult to support – and definitely not worth fighting an insurgency over.

And even at that point, Obama moved slowly and with very little success. Although the secret talks described above were underway, the public face of diplomacy was still firmly in second place to fighting, especially as seen in the “Fight, Talk, Build” catchphrase that was briefly rolled out by Clinton in November, 2011 (Holbrooke had died suddenly in December, 2010).

And now, a full four years after Obama assumed command over the Afghan war effort, we have John Kerry as the new Secretary of State hosting a trilateral meeting with Afghanistan and Pakistan where we are still trying to figure out just how we can negotiate with the Taliban after having botched the clear opening we had at the beginning of the process:

Secretary of State John Kerry will host a meeting in Brussels on Wednesday with top Afghan and Pakistani leaders to try to foster cooperation over the stalled reconciliation process with the Taliban and other thorny issues, American and Afghan officials said Monday.

“If you are leaving, why would the Taliban make a deal with you?” still applies as the marker for the failure of Obama's team of geniuses in

the White House. And it will get even worse . Another aspect of Kerry's trip is today's meeting with NATO ministers "to discuss the alliance's role in Afghanistan after 2014", but as I have pointed out many times before, it seems very unlikely that Afghanistan will grant full criminal immunity to US troops remaining in the country after 2014, and so there is virtually zero likelihood of US troops remaining. That takes the US right back to "leaving", removing any incentive for the Taliban to negotiate anything other than our hasty departure.

Fight then talk is proving to be a disaster. If only Obama had listened to Holbrooke, would talk and fight have produced a better outcome? We will never know, but it is hard from this vantage point to see how it could have been any worse.