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Military thwarted president seeking choice in Afghanistan

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The first of three articles adapted from "[Obama's Wars](#)" by Bob Woodward.

[President Obama](#) was on edge.

For two exhausting months, he had been asking military advisers to give him a range of options for the war in Afghanistan. Instead, he felt that they were steering him toward one outcome and thwarting his search for an exit plan. He would later tell his [White House aides](#) that military leaders were "really cooking this thing in the direction they wanted."

He was looking for choices that would limit U.S. involvement and provide a way out. His top three military advisers were unrelenting advocates for 40,000 more troops and an expanded mission that seemed to have no clear end. When his national security team gathered in the White House Situation Room on Veterans Day, Nov. 11, 2009, for its eighth strategy review session, the president erupted.

"So what's my option? You have given me one option," Obama said, directly challenging the military leadership at the table, including Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#), Joint Chiefs Chairman [Adm. Mike Mullen](#) and Army [Gen. David H. Petraeus](#), then head of U.S. Central Command.

"We were going to meet here today to talk about three options," Obama said sternly. "You agreed to go back and work those up."

Mullen protested. "I think what we've tried to do here is present a range of options."

Obama begged to differ. Two weren't even close to feasible, they all had acknowledged; the other two were variations on the 40,000.

Silence descended on the room. Finally, Mullen said, "Well, yes, sir."

Mullen later explained, "I didn't see any other path."

This stark divide between the nation's civilian and military leaders dominated Obama's Afghanistan strategy review, creating a rift that persists to this day. So profound was the level of distrust that Obama ended up designing his own strategy, a lawyerly compromise among the feuding factions. As the president neared his final decision on how many troops to send, he dictated an unusual six-page document that one aide called a "terms sheet," as though the president were negotiating a business deal.

This inside story of Obama's strategy review, and what it shows about his leadership style and decision-making, is based on meeting notes, classified memos and interviews with more than 100 national security officials. Those firsthand accounts reveal a new president confronting the realization that months of tough debate and hard work had not brought forth a clear solution that everyone could agree on. Even at the end of the process, the president's team wrestled with the most basic questions about the war, then entering its ninth year: What is the mission? What are we trying to do? What will work?

At critical points in the review, the ghosts of Vietnam hovered. Some participants openly worried that they were on the verge of replaying that history, allowing the military to dictate the force levels. While Obama sought to build an exit plan into the strategy, the military leadership stuck to its open-ended proposal, which the Office of Management and Budget estimated would cost \$889 billion over a decade. Obama brought the OMB memo to one meeting and said the expense was "not in the national interest."

From the beginning of the review, it irked Obama that Petraeus, Mullen and [Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal](#), then the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, had been out campaigning for more troops on top of the 21,000 that Obama had approved shortly after taking office.

In September 2009, Petraeus called a Washington Post columnist to say that the war would be unsuccessful if the president held back on troops. Later that month, Mullen repeated much the same sentiment in Senate testimony, and in October, McChrystal asserted in a speech in London that a scaled-back effort against Afghan terrorists would not work.

Mullen's Sept. 15 testimony had been reviewed and approved by [Denis McDonough](#), then the head of strategic communications for

the National Security Council. But it infuriated Obama's inner circle at the White House, particularly [Rahm Emanuel](#), his chief of staff and designated enforcer. What was the president's principal military adviser doing, going public with his preemptive conclusion?

On the day of Mullen's testimony, Emanuel and deputy national security adviser [Thomas E. Donilon](#) jumped on Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell outside the Situation Room, where the national security team had been meeting.

The president is being screwed by the senior uniformed military, they told Morrell. Filling his rant with expletives, Emanuel said, "Between the chairman [Mullen] and Petraeus, everyone's come out and publicly endorsed the notion of more troops. The president hasn't even had a chance!"

Mullen saw the heated powwow as he stepped out of the Situation Room. He was surprised they were giving him hell. The White House knew in advance what he was going to say. No specific troop number was in his testimony. He had been as amorphous as he could be.

Mullen let them seethe. "I just took it," he said later.

The only distinctly new alternative offered to Obama came from outside the military hierarchy. [Vice President Biden](#) had long and loudly argued against the military's 40,000-troop request. He worked with [Gen. James E. Cartwright](#), the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to develop a "hybrid option" - combining elements of other plans - that called for only 20,000 additional troops. It would have a more limited mission of hunting down the Taliban insurgents and training the Afghan police and army to take over.

When Mullen learned of the hybrid option, he didn't want to take it to Obama. "We're not providing that," he told Cartwright, a Marine known around the White House as Obama's favorite general.

Cartwright objected. "I'm just not in the business of withholding options," he told Mullen. "I have an oath, and when asked for advice I'm going to provide it."

When word of the hybrid option reached Obama, he instructed Gates and Mullen to present it. Mullen had other ideas. He used a classified war game exercise - code-named Poignant Vision and held at the Pentagon on Oct. 14, 2009 - to support his case against the option.

Believing the game was rigged, Army Lt. Gen. [Douglas E. Lute](#), Obama's representative from the National Security Council, boycotted it. According to participants, Poignant Vision did not have the rigor of a traditional war game, in which two teams square off. This exercise was a four-hour seminar.

Mullen and Petraeus both attended, as did Director of National Intelligence Dennis C. Blair, a retired admiral who had once headed the Pentagon's war gaming agency. Blair had suggested the game, thinking it might help in assessing various troop levels.

As the exercise ended, Blair hinted at its limitations. "Well, this is a good warm-up," he said. "When is the next game?"

Blair realized that Mullen and Petraeus had no intention of taking the issue further.

At the Nov. 11 meeting in which Obama expressed his frustration, Petraeus cited the war game as evidence that the hybrid option would not work.

It would alienate the Afghan people whom U.S. forces should be protecting, he said. "You start going out tromping around, disrupting the enemy, and you're making a lot of enemies. . . . So what have you accomplished?"

Petraeus saw what Biden and Cartwright proposed as a repudiation of his protect-the-people counterinsurgency approach, the model he had designed and implemented in Iraq as commander of U.S.-led forces.

"This is not a stiletto, this is a chain saw," Petraeus told Obama.

"So," Obama asked, "20,000 is not really a viable option?"

Mullen, Petraeus, Gates and McChrystal all said it would result in mission failure.

"Okay," Obama said, "if you tell me that we can't do that, and you war-gamed it, I'll accept that."

No one contradicted the claim. Cartwright and Blair weren't at the Nov. 11 review session. Biden later told the president that the war

game was "bull----."

Experienced Obama watchers could see from the back benches of the Situation Room that the president was becoming impatient. He waved a green-colored graph from the military labeled "Alternative Mission in Afghanistan" as if it were a piece of damning evidence in a courtroom.

The graph showed the projected deployments of 40,000 like a slow-rising mountain. The line peaked at about 108,000 troops in late 2010 and then gently slid back down to the then-current level of 68,000 in 2016.

"Six years out from now, we're just back to where we are now?" said Obama in mild disgust. "I'm not going to sign on for that."

Ben Rhodes, the president's foreign policy speechwriter, passed a note to a National Security Council colleague: More troops in Afghanistan in 2016 than when he took office!

The timeline from deployment to drawdown was too long. "Actually," Obama continued, "in 18 to 24 months, we need to think about how we can begin thinning out our presence and reducing our troops."

He later told his staff, "I'm not going to leave this to my successor." The military's plan "compromises our ability to do anything else. We have things we want to do domestically. We have things we want to do internationally."

Obama turned to Gates. "You have essentially given me one option," he said. "It's unacceptable."

Gates replied, "Well, Mr. President, I think we owe you" another option.

It never came.

Mullen and Lute, the National Security Council coordinator for Afghanistan and Pakistan, talked privately after the Nov. 11 meeting.

"Mr. Chairman, the president really wants another option," Lute said. "You're on the hook."

Three days later, Mullen and the Joint Chiefs produced a new version of its "Alternative Mission in Afghanistan" graph. The revised chart showed a faster drawdown beginning in 2012, when Obama would be running for reelection. The then-current level of 68,000 would be reached by spring of 2013. Then the shift to an "advise/assist" mission would begin.

The new timetable relied on four "key assumptions," none of which the strategy review had suggested was likely. The assumptions were that Taliban insurgents would be "degraded" enough to be "manageable" by the Afghans; that the Afghan national army and police would be able to secure the U.S. gains; that the Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan would be "eliminated or severely degraded"; and that the Afghan government led by Hamid Karzai could stabilize the country.

The chart projected about 30,000 U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan through 2015.

Two weeks later, on the day before Thanksgiving, the president and Emanuel met in the Oval Office with Donilon and his boss, retired Gen. [James L. Jones](#), the national security adviser. No Pentagon officials were there.

Obama said this had been his most difficult decision - and it seemed to show on his face.

"I've decided on 30,000," he said.

Obama described how he wanted to explain his strategy to the American people in a speech scheduled for Dec. 1 at West Point.

"This needs to be a plan about how we're going to hand it off and get out of Afghanistan," he said. "Everything that we're doing has to be focused on how we're going to get to the point where we can reduce our footprint."

He said he didn't want to use the word "counterinsurgency." The language he wanted was "target, train and transfer."

The president then said, "I want everybody to sign on to this - McChrystal, Petraeus, Gates, Mullen, [U.S. Ambassador [Karl W. Eikenberry](#)] and [Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#)]. We should get this on paper and on the record." With the president speaking as though there would be a signed contract, some had the mistaken impression that he wanted actual signatures.

Donilon pointed out that not everything was resolved with the military. The Pentagon had revived a pending request for 4,500 more "enablers" - logistics, communications and medical personnel.

"I'm done doing this!" Obama said, clearly annoyed.

The 30,000 was a "hard cap," he said. "I don't want enablers to be used as wiggle room. The easy thing for me to do - politically - would actually be to say no" to the 30,000.

The president gestured out the Oval Office windows, across the Potomac River, in the direction of the Pentagon. He said, "They think it's the opposite. I'd be perfectly happy . . ." He stopped mid-sentence. "Nothing would make Rahm happier than if I said no to the 30,000."

There was some subdued laughter.

The military did not understand, he said. "It'd be a lot easier for me to go out and give a speech saying, 'You know what? The American people are sick of this war, and we're going to put in 10,000 trainers because that's how we're going to get out of there.' "

It was apparent that a part of Obama wanted to give precisely that speech. He seemed to be road-testing it.

Donilon said Gates might resign if the decision was 10,000 trainers, an option the military leaders had all rejected in the early stages of the review.

"That would be the difficult part," Obama said, "because Bob Gates is . . .there's no stronger member of my national security team."

No one said anything more about that possibility.

"We're not going to do this unless everybody literally signs on to it and looks me in the eye and tells me that they're for it," Obama said.

The president was as animated as most in the room had ever seen him. "I don't want to have anybody going out the day after [the speech] and saying that they don't agree with this."

But even as he laid out how he planned to explain his choice to send 30,000 more troops, he added a caution. "There's a chance the decision could change," he said. "We may need another speech."

Later that same day, Obama held his regular weekly meeting with Gates in the Oval Office. The room is so well lit, bright with no shadows, that it has a stark feeling. It is assuredly a setting for business.

Jones was also there; Mullen was traveling, so Cartwright attended in his place.

Under the redefined mission, Obama told Gates, the best I can do is 30,000. "This is what I'm willing to take on, politically," the president said.

Gates had worked for seven other presidents. Each had his own decision-making style. They often floated assertions and conclusions, sometimes emphatically, sometimes tentatively. It wasn't always evident what they meant.

"I've got a request for 4,500 enablers sitting on my desk," Gates said. "And I'd like to have another 10 percent that I can send in, enablers or forces, if I need them."

"Bob," Obama said, "30,000 plus 4,500 plus 10 percent of 30,000 is" - he had already done the math - "37,500." Sounding like an auctioneer, he added, "I'm at 30,000."

Obama had never been quite so definitive or abrupt with Gates.

"I will give you some latitude within your 10 percentage points," Obama said, but under exceptional circumstances only.

"Can you support this?" Obama asked Gates. "Because if the answer is no, I understand it and I'll be happy to just authorize another 10,000 troops, and we can continue to go as we are and train the Afghan national force and just hope for the best."

"Hope for the best." The condescending words hung in the air.

Joshua Boak and Evelyn Duffy contributed to this report.

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