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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Blunder on the Mountain

By [MAUREEN DOWD](#)

Flying over the waves of snow-covered mountains that make Afghanistan a natural fortress and a sinkhole for empires, it's impossible not to think of Osama's escaping from Tora Bora as one of the greatest bungled opportunities in history.

Unlike the Bushies, who tried to play down Osama's importance the longer he was on the lam, Gen. Stanley McChrystal acknowledged in recent Congressional hearings that "he is an iconic figure."

"It would not defeat Al Qaeda to have him captured or killed," he said, "but I don't think that we can finally defeat Al Qaeda until he is captured or killed."

I asked Bob Gates, as we flew over the notorious terrain, if he had any insights into why such a bellicose team as W., Cheney and Rummy flinched at the very moment they could have captured our mortal enemy. Gates, who said there hasn't been any good intelligence on Osama's whereabouts in years, said "it's just hard to find somebody who has a sympathetic network and local support."

(It seems hard to believe the C.I.A. can't infiltrate terrorist networks, given all the Americans who keep popping up as wannabe jihadis.)

During the climactic showdown at Tora Bora, Rummy distracted Gen. Tommy Franks by demanding that he freshen up an Iraq invasion plan. The insufficient number of troops at Tora Bora was a harbinger of things to come in Afghanistan, as the Bush administration heedlessly moved on to Iraq.

"Afghanistan was a vastly underresourced operation because, as some of the generals say in the Pentagon, we were just out of Schlitz," Gates said. "We didn't have any more troops to send."

Noting that the dad of Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was a Hollywood publicist whose clients included Julie Andrews, Bob Hope, Jimmy Stewart, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett and Anthony Quinn, and his mom was an assistant for a time to Jimmy Durante, I said that if this were a movie, an elite Rambo team would have gone into the Pakistan border area long ago to fulfill W.'s empty threat to get Osama "dead or alive."

I wondered why Bush and Obama officials went along with the mythological geological alibi of "impassable" mountains. Health care has often seemed impassable. Lots of things are difficult. But in America, given all our resources, we pride ourselves on achieving the difficult.

Gates told U.S. soldiers in Kirkuk that, in essence, we went to war twice in Afghanistan: a brief one in 2001

that America won, and one that started at the end of 2005 when the Taliban regenerated.

“What we didn’t realize,” he said, “was that, particularly beginning toward the end of 2005, the deals that the Pakistanis cut with the tribes to back off and leave them alone created the space in which the Taliban were able to come back.”

The Bush administration may not have realized that, but common sense told you the deal was lousy, giving those who hated us a sanctuary in which to rejuvenate.

In a compelling cover story in the current *New Republic* called “The Battle for Tora Bora,” Peter Bergen, a terrorism expert, reconstructs the debacle, calling it “one of the greatest military blunders in recent U.S. history.” He reports that Tommy Franks rebuffed the C.I.A. request for 800 Army Rangers from nearby bases to assault the complex of caves where Osama was hiding and block his escape. In the end, Bergen notes, there were more journalists there than Western soldiers.

General Franks told the C.I.A. he wanted to keep a light-footprint approach.

(Curiously, Gates — who is known in the Obama administration as “the man who leaves no footprints” — decided to support the heavy-footprint surge after McChrystal made the argument that it’s not the size of the footprint, but how hard the foot comes down.)

Franks and Rummy were risk averse about American troop casualties at the very moment they could have decapitated Al Qaeda. Instead, Osama’s myth grew with his escape as a 15,000-pound Daisy Cutter bomb and a series of 500-pound bombs rained down on the caves.

Bergen writes that bin Laden’s son, Omar, said “bin Laden would routinely hike from Tora Bora into neighboring Pakistan on walks that could take anywhere between seven and 14 hours. ‘My brothers and I all loathed these grueling treks that seemed the most pleasant of outings to our father,’ Omar bin Laden later recalled. Bin Laden told his sons they had to memorize every rock on the routes to Pakistan. ‘We never know when war will strike,’ he instructed them. ‘We must know our way out of the mountains.’ ”

Eight years after Tora Bora, the failure there poses the question at the heart, or Achilles’ heel, of President Obama’s strategy: What if victory over Al Qaeda and other terrorists lies in Pakistan, not Afghanistan?

Are we going to go get them in Pakistan or not? Osama’s evading us and ending up in Pakistan is the perfect humiliating symbol of our failure to deal with that question.

Nicholas D. Kristof is off today.

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