

## **McNamara's Ghost in Afghanistan**

### **By Tom Hayden**

Robert McNamara died the other day as seven American soldiers were killed in Afghanistan.

It wasn't the deaths on the same day that made me remember McNamara's folly.

It was the sense that McNamara's ghost is hovering over the new graveyard of America's future.

McNamara's team of Ivy Leaguers was dubbed "the best and the brightest" by the disillusioned war correspondent David Halberstam. They were deluded by their arrogance into believing computer-driven measures of success, like body counts. Though liberal and secular in temperament, they held a faith-based belief in victory. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died, along with countless Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians, because of these best and brightest. Not one of them went to jail. McNamara went to the World Bank.

Today another Ivy League president has placed his faith in Ivy League generals and an inbred crowd of three hundred national security advisers drawn from the same elite circles. They are the new best-and-brightest, and I believe history will show they are marching to folly in their "Long War."

General Petraeus is an Ivy Leaguer. So is his surrogate spokesman in Washington, John Nagl at the think tank of the best-and-brightest, the Center for a New American Security. So is Gen. Stanley McChystal, the Special Operations spook presiding over Afghanistan and Pakistan. So are Petraeus' Harvard collaborators on the new Marine and Army counterinsurgency manual. So is their top counterinsurgency guru, David Kilcullen, who writes of reviving the Vietnam Phoenix program of detention and targeted killings, not only in Afghanistan, but globally. [For dummies, Phoenix involved the detention, torture and killing of 25,000 alleged Vietcong civilians, and the rounding up millions of peasants into "strategic hamlets" to protect them from any Vietcong still in the jungle. The debacle was terminated in 1971, but Kilcullen, who wasn't born then, keeps hope alive, saying the program was misunderstood. McNamara would have loved Kilcullen, a Ph.D who openly believes in "armed social science."

I first heard of Robert McNamara as an undergraduate editor at the University of Michigan, when a dean of humanities told me that McNamara, a UM graduate and president of Ford Motors, was an exceptionally bright man with whom dialogue about war and peace was finally possible.

I was skeptical, however, of McNamara's application of scientific management techniques to corporate,

government and military policy. I couldn't understand the mystique of intelligence, detached as it was from an understanding of a world in unpredictable transition.

From the perspective of McNamara's funeral, we can take a reckoning. The Vietnam War was the greatest American folly of the twentieth-century. Applied to large universities, the same scientific management approaches provoked the Free Speech Movement. And of course, Ford is in ruins.

The brightest were clueless and, in Leonard Cohen's verse,

*When the very good have stopped their quest  
The very worst are called the best.*

For what earthly purpose did those seven Americans die in southern Afghanistan? Are there al Qaeda there? Not by anyone's account. If they were fighting the Taliban as distinct from local people, the reasons are elusive. Apparently the Taliban of southern Afghanistan are part of a host organization that will welcome the return of al Qaeda whom, we are warned, will use their new caves to plot strikes against our homeland.

You can have the IQ of a plant to smell this stupidity.

The Pentagon predicts an 18-month war for southern

Afghanistan before they can clear, build, hold and hand over the rubble to an Afghan army inferior to the Taliban.

The logical move now for the Taliban would be to draw the young Americans into a bloody quagmire in Kandahar and Helmand, then turn up elsewhere using hit-and-run attacks as they did this week against the gates of NATO or isolated American bases elsewhere.

In an example of further idiocy masked as intelligence, a Pentagon spokesman yesterday said the seven deaths were "what we expected." [LAT, July 7] The Taliban and "other insurgents" had engaged in "less direct combat than was expected by the military", Nagl of the CNAS told the press. [LAT, July 7]. They Taliban and these "other insurgents" used roadside bombs instead of throwing themselves in front of the American guns. This was a surprise. That's what happens when you go into "Indian country", said a Pentagon official.

In more dangerous Pakistan, meanwhile, the best-and-brightest are high-fiving themselves after pressuring the wary Pakistan army into invading the Swat Valley and preparing to assault South Waziristan. This operation has created more casualties than any time since Pakistan was founded and, according to the NY Times, American aid workers are being barred from refugee camps where pro-Taliban forces distribute food and medicine paid for by

American taxpayers. In a recent incident obscured by the fog of war, the Taliban last week apparently attacked a site connected with Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

In Iraq meanwhile, the Pentagon and mainstream media are upset by the very Shi'a coalition put in power by the American military bragging about the US withdrawal and holding a national day of celebration. Only the brightest are blind to the American effort to disguise failure in Iraq with a decent interval, as orchestrated by Henry Kissinger in Vietnam.

None of this makes any Americans safer. If anything, more civilians will grow to hate us in both countries, some of those civilians will join the Taliban or al Qaeda, the Europeans will soon be abandoning the NATO military mission, Russia will be enjoying payback for what the Americans did to them in Afghanistan, and President Obama will be trapped like Gulliver in a Long War he cannot afford, can never win and dare not lose.

The best and brightest, by their own definition, are incapable of being wrong. McNamara couldn't admit his mistake for decades and still remained at loss for words in the painful final moments of the film Fog of War.

The new best-and-brightest are like McNamara in this

respect too: their arrogance makes a mistake inconceivable.

It took an anti-war movement to provoke Daniel Ellsberg, one of the original best-and-brightest, to finally break ranks and tell the truth. Another movement and another Ellsberg are needed now, before the mistake becomes a permanent one. "

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