

Afghanistan: The speech you'll miss

By Jim Hoagland

Sunday, November 29, 2009

Dec. 1, 2009:

RELEASE IN FULL

My fellow Americans,

This is not the speech you expected to hear. But my wordsmiths are tied in knots writing an acceptance speech for the only Nobel Peace Prize ever awarded for making speeches. So I am going to tell you how I really feel about Afghanistan. Which is: *steamed*.

I want to accomplish three goals tonight without naming them.

First, to let those know-it-alls, Generals Petraeus and McChrystal, know one more thing: This is the last big troop increase you get, so make it work.

I am not going down the incrementalist road that wrecked Lyndon Johnson's presidency. This is not July 1965, when Westmoreland jumped the shark of escalation in Vietnam and then never stopped asking for more troops. For all the trouble he has been, Dick Holbrooke helped by recalling that history in the shadowboxing that dominated my long war council meetings.

Joe Biden has been good in there, too. He's been willing, though not happy, to be characterized in the media as being ready to bug out now. This helped us push back against McChrystal's effort to box me in at 40,000 additional U.S. soldiers.

Denis McDonough, my strategic communications man, sold Biden-as-dove brilliantly. Wasn't somebody just saying I should promote Denis? Maybe it was Denis?

Never mind. That tactic won me room to maneuver toward a more realistic number of, say, 23,000 new combat troops, 5,000 additional trainers and a "NATO surge" of 5,000 foreign troops.

That's my second unspoken goal: to come out of this buildup speech without losing the left of the Democratic Party -- while being able to refute John McCain's charges that I ignored my own generals. Triangulation lives. Bush put the generals in the limelight to sell the Iraq surge after he lost all credibility, and David Petraeus's performance was dazzling. Which presents two big problems. Petraeus is the only person who could get the Republican nomination in 2012 and make a serious run against me. (I get paid to think ahead.)

And if the generals box me in, civilian control of the military in this country becomes a mockery. Clinton was afraid of the military; Bush was deep in hock to it. I've got to get the right balance back.

That's why I need Bob Gates and Jim Jones. Those who scoffed at my keeping on Bush's defense secretary, and then making a retired Marine four-star I hardly knew my NSC guy, were not thinking that moments like this would come. I already was.

Gates has maneuvered flawlessly through my waterboarding-by-leaks on Afghanistan. He will sell my final number to the uniforms as the "floor" for U.S. troops that Petraeus argues we need for three years. But Gates knows I will make it a ceiling.

We can't afford an open-ended commitment. I put Peter Orszag, as good a budget overseer as you can find, front and center for the photographers in that last war council. Many missed it, but NBC's Andrea Mitchell got it right away. No wonder she's married to Alan Greenspan.

I will bet that Stan McChrystal never drew up a budget in his life.

Jones tells me these Special Operations commanders are used to getting whatever they ask for, especially since September 11th. Nobody on the Hill will deny them anything.

Jones is also squeezing the Europeans to join the battle and is getting results, even from the Germans. What is it Jones says? Maybe the worst thing of all would be to be perceived to lose in Afghanistan and then have the Europeans say: Well, you never asked for more help at the crucial time. Makes sense to me.

We have sent NATO members the numbers we think they can and should provide, country by country. That new secretary general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, is pulling out the stops, visiting the capitals to get commitments.

"Say it now, pay it later," we tell the Europeans. They have until mid-2010 to deploy their new units. But I need pledges now so I can get across tonight that this is NATO's war, not Obama's war. That's unspoken-goal number three.

So I have frontloaded the speech with allusions to this being about an exit strategy, without boxing myself in on timing, and am presenting the "civilian surge" as being as essential as the troop buildup. That helps set up my Oslo speech. And who knows? It may even work out that way. If God blesses us all.