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President Obama's Afghanistan strategy isn't working. So said a parade of Afghanistan watchers during the flap over war commander General Stanley McChrystal's firing. But what does that phrase, so often in the media these days, really mean? And if the strategy really isn't working, just how can you tell?

The answers to these questions raise even more important ones, including: Why, when President Obama fires an insubordinate and failing general, does he cling to his [failing war policy](#) [2]? And if our strategy isn't working, what about the enemy's? And if nothing much is working, why does it still go on nonstop this way? Let's take these one at a time.

1. *What do you mean by "it's not working"?*

"It" is counterinsurgency or COIN, which, in fact, is really less of a strategy than a set of tactics in pursuit of a strategy. Counterinsurgency doctrine, originally designed by empires intending to squat on their colonies forever, calls for elevating the principle of "protecting the population" above pursuing the bad guys at all cost. Implementing such a strategy quickly becomes a tricky, even schizophrenic, balancing act, as I recently was reminded.

I just spent some time embedded with the US Army at a forward operating base near the Pakistan border where, despite daily "sig acts"—significant activity of a hostile nature—virtually every "lethal" American soldier is matched by a "nonlethal" counterpart whose job it is, in one way or another, to soften up those civilians for "protection."

General McChrystal himself played both roles. As the US commander, he was responsible for killing what he termed, at one point, " [an amazing number of people](#) [3]" who were not threats,

but he also regularly showed up at Afghan President Hamid Karzai's palace to say, "Sorry." Karzai praised him publicly for his frequent apologies (each, of course, reflecting an American act or acts that killed civilians), though angry Afghans were less impressed.

The part of the lethal activity that often goes awry is supposed to be counterbalanced by the "sorry" part, which may be as simple as dispatching US officers to drink humble tea with local "key leaders." Often enough, though, it comes in the form of large, unsustainable gifts. The formula, which is basic COIN, goes something like this: kill some civilians in the hunt for the bad guys and you have to make up for it by building a road. This trade-off explains why, as you travel parts of the country, interminable (and often empty) strips of black asphalt now traverse Afghanistan's vast expanses of sand and rock, but it doesn't explain why Afghans, thus compensated, are angrier than ever.

Many Afghans, of course, are angry because they haven't been compensated at all, not even with a road to nowhere. Worse yet, more often than not, they've been promised things that never materialize. (If you were to summarize the history of the country as a whole in these last years, it might go like this: big men—both Afghan and American—make out like the Beltway Bandits many of them are, while ordinary Afghans in the countryside still wish their kids had shoes.)

And don't forget the majority of Afghans in the countryside who have scarcely been consulted at all: [women](#) [4]. To protect Afghan women from foreign fighters, Afghan men lock them up—the women, that is. American military leaders slip easily into the all-male comfort zone, probably relieved perhaps to try to win the "hearts and minds" of something less than half "the population."

It's only in the last year or two that the Marines and the Army started pulling a few American women off their full-time non-combat jobs and sending them out as [Female Engagement Teams](#) [5] (FETs) to meet and greet village women. As with so many innovative new plans in our counterinsurgency war, this one was cobbled together in a thoughtless way that risked lives and almost guaranteed failure.

Commanders have casually sent noncombatant American women soldiers—supply clerks and radio operators—outside the wire, usually with little training, no clear mission and no follow up. Predictably, like their male counterparts, they have left a trail of good intentions and broken

promises behind. So when I went out to meet village women near the Pakistan border last week with a brand-new Army FET-in-training, we faced the fury of Pashto women still waiting for a promised delivery of vegetable seeds.

Imagine. This is hardly a big item like the "[government in a box](#) [6]" that General McChrystal [promised](#)

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and

[failed to deliver](#)

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in Marja. It's just seeds. How hard could that be?

Our visit did, however, open a window into a world military and political policymakers have ignored for all too long. It turns out that the women of Afghanistan, whom George W. Bush claimed to have liberated so many years ago, are still mostly oppressed, impoverished, malnourished, uneducated, short of seeds and mad as hell.

Count them among a plentiful crew of angry Afghans who are living proof that "it's not working" at all. Afghans, it seems, know the difference between genuine apologies and bribes, true commitment and false promises, generosity and self-interest. And since the whole point of COIN is to gain the hearts and minds of "the population," those angry Afghans are a bad omen for the US military and President Obama.

Moreover, it's not working for a significant subgroup of Americans in Afghanistan either: combat soldiers. I've heard infantrymen place the blame for a buddy's combat injury or death on the strict rules of engagement ("[courageous restraint](#) [9]," as it's called) imposed by General McChrystal's version of COIN strategy. Taking a page from Vietnam, they claim their hands are tied, while the enemy plays by its own rules. Rightly or wrongly, this opinion is

[spreading fast](#)

[10]

among grieving soldiers as

[casualties mount](#)

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It's also clear that even the lethal part of counterinsurgency isn't working. Consider all those

civilian deaths and injuries, so often the result of false information fed to Americans to entice them to settle local scores. To give just one example: American troops recently pitched hand grenades into a house in Logar Province which they'd been told was used by terrorists. Another case of false information. It held a young Afghan, a relative of an Afghan agricultural expert who happens to be an acquaintance of mine. The young man had just completed his religious education and returned to the village to become its sole *maulawi*, or religious teacher. The villagers, very upset, turned out to vouch for him, and the Army hospitalized him with profuse apologies. Luckily, he survived, but such routine mistakes

[regularly leave](#)

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dead or wounded civilians and a thickening residue of rage behind.

Reports coming in from observers and colleagues in areas of the Pashtun south, once scheduled to be demonstration sites for McChrystal's cleared, held, built, and better-governed Afghanistan, are generally grim. Before his resignation, the general himself was already referring to Marja—the farming area (initially [trumpeted](#) [13] as a "city of 80,000 people") where he launched his first offensive—as "

[a bleeding ulcer](#)

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." He also delayed the highly publicized advance into Kandahar, the country's second largest city, supposedly to gain more time to bring around the opposing populace, which includes President Karzai. Meanwhile, humanitarian NGOs based in Kandahar complain that they can't do their routine work assisting the city's inhabitants while the area lies under threat of combat. Without assistance, Kandaharis grow—you guessed it—angrier.

From Kandahar province, where American soldiers mass for the well-advertised securing of Kandahar, come reports that the Afghan National Army (ANA) is stealing equipment—right down to bottled drinking water—from the US military and selling it to the Taliban. US commanders can't do much about it because the official American script calls for the ANA to take over responsibility for national defense.

NATO soldiers have complained all along about the ill-trained, uninterested troops of the ANA, but the animosity between them seems to have grown deadly in some quarters. American soldiers in Kandahar report that, for their own security, they don't tell their ANA colleagues when and where they're going on patrol. Back in the 1980s, in the anti-Soviet jihad we supported, we trained Afghan jihadists who have [today become](#) [15] our worst enemies, and now we may be doing it again.

Factor in accounts of what General McChrystal did best: taking out bad guys. Reportedly, he was vigorously directing [Special Forces' assassinations](#) [16] of high and mid-level Taliban leaders in preparation for "peeling off" the "good" Taliban—that is, those impoverished fighters only in it for the money. According to his thinking, they would later be won over to the government through internationally subsidized jobs. But assassinating the ideological leaders, the true believers and organizers—or those we call the bad Taliban—actually leaves behind leaderless, undisciplined gangs of armed rent-a-guns more interested in living off the population we're supposed to protect than being peeled off into abject Afghan poverty. From the point of view of ordinary Afghans in the countryside, our "good Taliban" are the worst of all.

I could go on. If you spend time in Afghanistan, evidence of failure is all around you, including those millions of American taxpayer dollars that are paid to Afghan security contractors (and Karzai relatives) and then [handed over to insurgents](#) [17] to buy protection for US supply convoys traveling on US built, but Taliban-controlled, roads. Strategy doesn't get much worse than that: financing both sides, and [every brigand in between](#) [18], in hopes of a happier ending someday.

□ 2. *So why does Obama stick to this failed policy?*

Go figure. Maybe he's been persuaded by Pentagon hype. [Replacing General McChrystal](#) [19] with Centcom commander General David Petraeus brought a media golden-oldies replay of Petraeus's greatest hits: his authorship of the Army's counterinsurgency manual, updated (some say plagiarized) from a Vietnam-era edition, and of Bush's 2007 "surge" in Iraq, an exercise in sectarian cleansing now routinely called a "success." If you can apply the word "success" to any operation in Iraq, you're surely capable of clinging to the hope that Petraeus can find it again in Afghanistan.

But like David McKiernan, the general he ousted, McChrystal has already misapplied the "lessons" of Iraq to the decidedly different circumstances of Afghanistan and so producing a striking set of failures. A deal [to buy off](#) [20] the Shinwari Pashtuns, for instance, a tribe mistakenly thought to be the equivalent of the Anbar Sunnis in Iraq, ended in an uproar when they pocketed the money without firing a shot at a single Talib. Not so surprising, considering that the people they were paid to fight are not foreign invaders—that would be us—but their Pashtun cousins.

Moreover, the surge into the Afghan south seems only to have further alienated the folks who

live there, while increasing violence against local residents. It has also come at the expense of American troops in the east, the ones I was recently embedded with, who face an onslaught of hostile fighters moving across the border from Pakistan.

3. *What about the enemy strategy? How's that working?*

It seems the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and various hostile fighters in Afghanistan drew their own lessons from Petraeus's surge in Iraq: they learned to deal with a surge not by fading away before it, but by meeting it with a surge of their own. An American commander defending the eastern front told me that hostile forces recently wiped out five border posts. "They opened the gate," he said, but with the American high command focused on a future surge into Kandahar, who's paying attention? In fact, as the battle heats up in the east, another official told me, they are running short of helicopters to medevac out American casualties. In this way, so-called strategy easily morphs into a shell game played largely for an American audience at the expense of American soldiers.

And all the while America's "partner" in this strategy, the dubious President Karzai, consolidates his power, which is thoroughly grounded in the Pashtun south, the domain of his even more suspect half-brother, [Ahmed Wali](#) [21]. In the process, he studiously ignores the parliament, which lately has been staging a silent stop-work protest, occasionally banging on the desks for emphasis. He now evidently [bets his money](#) [22] (which used to be ours) on the failure of American forces, and [extends feelers](#) [23]

of reconciliation to Pakistan and [the Taliban](#) [24]

, the folks he now fondly calls his "angry brothers." As for the Afghan people, even the most resilient citizens of Kabul who, like Obama, remain hopeful, say: "This is our big problem." They're talking, of course, about Karzai and his government that the Americans put in place, pay for, prop up, and pretend to be "partners" with.

In fact, America's silent acceptance of President Karzai's [flagrantly fraudulent election](#) [25] last summer—all those stuffed ballot boxes—seems to have exploded whatever illusions many Afghans still had about an American commitment to democracy. They know now that matters will not be resolved at polling places or in jirga council tents. They probably won't be resolved in Afghanistan at all, but in secret locations in Washington, Riyadh, Islamabad and elsewhere. The American people, by the way, will have little more to say about the resolution of the

war—though it consumes our wealth and our soldiers, too—than the Afghans.

Think of what's happening in Afghanistan more generally as a creeping Talibanization, which Afghans say is working all too well. In Marja, in Kandahar, in the east, everywhere, the Taliban do what we can't and roll out their own (shadow) governments-in-a-box, ready to solve disputes, administer rough justice, collect taxes, and enforce "virtue." In Herat, the Ulema of the West issue a fatwa restricting the freedom of women to work and move about without a *mahram*, or male relative as escort. In Kabul, the police raid restaurants that serve alcohol, and the government shuts down reputable, secular international NGOs, charging them with proselytizing. Taliban influence creeps into parliament, into legislation restricting constitutional freedoms, into ministries and governmental contracts where corruption flourishes, and into the provisional peace jirga tent where delegates called for freedom for all imprisoned Taliban. Out of the jails, into the government, to sit side by side with warlords and war criminals, *mujahedeen* brothers under the skin. Embraced by President Karzai. Perhaps even welcomed one day by American strategists and President Obama himself as a way out.

4. *If it's so bad, why can't it be stopped?*

The threatening gloom of American policy is never the whole story. There are young progressive men and women running for Parliament in the coming September elections. There are women organizing to keep hold of the modest gains they've made, though how they will do that when the men seem so intent on negotiating them away remains a mystery. There are the valiant efforts of thoroughly devout Muslims who wish to live in the twenty-first century. When they look outward to more developed Islamic countries, however, they see that their homeland is a Muslim country like no other—and if the Taliban return, it will only be worse.

American development was supposed to have made it all so much better. But tales abound of small, successful projects in education or health care, funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and then dropped without a single visit from USAID monitors afraid to leave their Embassy fortress in Kabul. Regularly, USAID now hands over huge hunks of "aid" money to big, impossibly ambitious, quick-fix projects run by the [usual no-bid Beltway Bandit contractors](#)

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whose incompetence, wastefulness, unconscionable profits, and outright fraud should be a national scandal.

This, too, is a process everyone knows but can't speak about because it's not part of the official script in which the United States must be seen as developing backward Afghanistan, instead of sending it reeling into the darkest of ages. Despairing humanitarians recall that Hillary Clinton [promised](#)

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as secretary of state to clean house at USAID, which, she said, had become nothing but "a contracting shop." Well, here's a flash from Afghanistan: it's still a contracting shop, and the contracts are going to the same set of contractors who have been exposed again and again as venal, fraudulent, and criminal.

Just as Obama sends more troops and a new commander to fight a fraudulent war for a purpose that makes no sense to anyone—except perhaps the so-called defense intellectuals who live in an alternative Washington-based Afghanaland of their own creation—Clinton presides over a fraudulent aid program that functions chiefly to transfer American tax dollars from the national treasury to the pockets of already rich contractors and their congressional cronies. If you still believe, as I would like to, that Obama and Clinton actually meant to make change, then you have to ask: How does this state of affairs continue, and why do the members of the international community—the UN, all those international NGOs, and our fast-fading coalition allies—sign off on it?

You have only to look around in Kabul and elsewhere, as I did this month, to see that the more American military there is, the more insurgents there are; the more insurgent attacks, the more private security contractors; the more barriers and razor wire, the more restrictions on freedom of movement in the capital for Afghans and internationals alike; and the more security, the higher the danger pay for members of the international community who choose to stay and spend their time complaining about the way security prevents them from doing their useful work.

And so it goes round and round, this ill-oiled war machine, generating ever more incentives for almost everyone involved—except ordinary Afghans, of course—to keep on keeping on. There's a little something for quite a few: government officials in the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan, for-profit contractors, defense intellectuals, generals, spies, soldiers behind the lines, international aid workers and their Afghan employees, diplomats, members of the Afghan National Army, and the police, and the Taliban, and their various pals, and the whole array of camp followers that service warfare everywhere.

It goes round and round, this inexorable machine, this elaborate construction of corporate capitalism at war, generating immense sums of money for relatively small numbers of people, immense debt for our nation, immense sacrifice from our combat soldiers, and for ordinary

Afghans and those who have befriended them or been befriended by them, moments of promise and hope, moments of clarity and rage, and moments of dark laughter that sometimes cannot forestall the onset of despair.

Source URL: <http://www.thenation.com/article/36948/counterinsurgency-down-count-afghanistan>

Links:

[1] <http://www.tomdispatch.com/archive/175269/>

[2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/the-last-post-mcchrystals-bleak-outlook-2011730.html>

[3] http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2010/04/gen_mcchrystal_weve_shot_an_amazing_number_of_peop.php

[4] http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/174970/ann_jones_afghan_women_behind_closed_doors

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/world/asia/30marines.html>

[6] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/world/asia/13kabul.html>

[7] http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175209/tomgram:_engelhardt

[8] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghanistan-marja-20100625,0,4685352,print.story>

[9] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/barackobama/7852684/Gen-David-Petraeus-to-review-courageous-restraint.html>

[10] http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/17390/119236?RS_show_page=0

[11] <http://www.congresscheck.com/2010/06/24/june-deadliest-month-for-nato-troops-since-afghan-war-began/>

[12] <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2010/04/30-10>

[13] <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=50581>

[14] <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2010/05/24/94740/mcchrystal-calls-marjah-a-bleeding.html>

[15] http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175010/anand_gopal_who_are_the_taliban

[16] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/26/world/asia/26kandahar.html>

[17] <http://www.thenation.com/.../article/36493/congressional-investigation-confirms-us-military-funds-afghan-warlords>

[18] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/22/world/asia/22contractors.html>

[19] http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175266/tomgram:_robert_dreyfuss,_the_president_chooses_the_guru/#more

[20] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/09/AR2010050903257.html>

[21] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/12/AR2010061204133.html>

[22] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/12/world/asia/12karzai.html>

[23] <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/world/asia/27afghan.html>

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<http://www.juancole.com/2010/06/7-nato-troops-killed-karzai-said-to-dicker-with-insurgents-pane-tta-skeptical.html>

[25] <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,658988,00.html>

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