

Stealth surge

by *Oliver_North*

WASHINGTON — The economy is stuck on "meltdown." The Cabinet still has vacancies. The ruling political party on Capitol Hill is obsessed with pork, and the mainstream media are fixated on Ottawa's Obama-mania. When nothing else seems to work, dial 911 at the Pentagon and call for those who get things done: soldiers, sailors, airmen, guardsmen and Marines. And just to be different, send them on a stealth surge.

That's what happened Tuesday, when Mr. Obama decided that "urgent security needs" require the deployment of a Marine Expeditionary Brigade and an Army Stryker Brigade to Afghanistan. Rather than making the announcement in a televised address to the nation, as his predecessor did with the surge in Iraq, this commander in chief had his press secretary hand out a piece of paper. No Oval Office. No questions from the press. Just a sheet of paper.

This deployment — about 8,000 additional Marines, 4,000 more soldiers and 5,000 "support personnel" — does not come as a surprise. During the presidential campaign, Mr. Obama made it clear that he saw Afghanistan as the "central front" of what he called "the war on terror." He also has said repeatedly that he wants increased U.S. combat power to take on the Taliban and al-Qaida. The surprise is in the timing and the way he has decided to do it.

Last week, the administration announced a full-blown, 60-day, interagency, multinational, quadraphonic, star-studded, strategic review of "every aspect of our Afghanistan policy." Our European allies were informed that Afghanistan is at the "top of the agenda" for the NATO summit in March. On Sunday, Afghan President Hamid Karzai announced that he, too, would be participating in the strategic review. And then Tuesday at 5:30 p.m., too late for much besides a headline on the evening news, the one-page deployment order, which has troops from Camp Lejeune, N.C., to Fort Lewis, Wash. — and countless points in between — packing their kits for the Hindu Kush. So much for having a strategy before committing what's needed to implement it.

The deployment announcement apparently didn't impress our "allies" in Pakistan. White House "special envoy" Richard Holbrooke has been in Islamabad and Kabul — ostensibly on a "fact-finding mission." His plane was barely off the ground before the government in Islamabad announced that offensive military operations against the Taliban will cease in the Malakand region of northwestern Pakistan and that henceforth, the area will be governed in accord with Shariah, or Islamic law. So much for persuading Pakistan — through which we send more than 80 percent of our supplies — to crack down on radical Islamic terror.

Holbrooke didn't fare much better in Kabul, where he acceded to Afghan demands for "coordinating all military operations with Afghan forces." On Sunday, he and Karzai held a testy joint news conference. Afterward, Holbrooke apparently convinced someone at the White House that the two presidents needed to have a little chat — something that, strangely enough, there just hadn't been time for since the inaugural.

If the various spokesmen are telling the truth, the Obama-Karzai conversation finally came Tuesday, after Obama issued his one-page deployment order. The next day, Karzai, who is running for re-election in August, said, "If foreign troops do not listen to us, we will call a (grand council), and we will also include the Taliban to decide whether foreign troops should stay in Afghanistan."

While none of this sounds particularly encouraging, it must be noted that Karzai also said, "The tension the Afghan government had with the U.S. government is now over." That should make everyone feel better.

Unfortunately, timing and diplomacy aren't the only problems with this deployment announcement. There is also the matter of what's in it and what's not. Last year, Gen. David McKiernan asked for 30,000 additional combat troops to reinforce the 49,000 from NATO and the 32,000 U.S. personnel he has on the ground. But that's not what he's getting.

Tuesday's presidential order authorized sending 17,000 troops. Yet the Pentagon only identified the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, which has "approximately 8,000 Marines" and is due to deploy in late spring 2009, and the 5th Stryker Brigade, which has "approximately 4,000 soldiers" and is due to deploy in midsummer 2009. It then adds, "Approximately 5,000 additional troops to support these combat forces will receive deployment orders at a later date." In short, Gen. McKiernan is getting less than half of what he asked for.

Finally, there is the issue of presidential style. In the final paragraph of his one-page order, Mr. Obama notes, "This increase is necessary to stabilize a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan." All true. But then he goes on to whine, "Which has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires." That is a gratuitous and unseemly swipe at his predecessor. Perhaps that is why Mr. Obama decided this has to be a stealth surge.

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