

Terrorism

War on terror — Round 3

By Andrew J Bacevich

Politically, a war that once occupied centre stage in national politics has slipped to the periphery, the American people moving on to other concerns and entertainments, with legal and moral questions raised by the war left dangling in midair. Is this progress?

WELL into the second decade of what the Pentagon calls an "era of persistent conflict," many Americans have lost the thread of a war that appears increasingly fragmented and diffuse.

On the one hand, the US military has withdrawn from Iraq without achieving victory, and it's trying to leave Afghanistan, where events seem equally unlikely to yield a happy outcome. On the other hand — in Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere — US forces have been busily opening new fronts. A widely noted *New York Times* story recently described plans for "thickening" the global presence of US special operations troops. Navy plans to convert an aging amphibious landing ship into an "afloat forward staging base" — a mobile launch platform for commando raids — reinforce the point, as does the "constellation of secret drone bases" reportedly being

built in the Horn of Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula.

Yet even as the troops continue marching hither and yon, the conflict's narrative has become increasingly difficult to discern.

Today's war on terror looks nothing like it did in Round 1. Back then, Secretary of Defence Donald H Rumsfeld, the war's primary architect and cheerleader, counted on speed and technology to carry the day, operating on the assumption that America's agile, high-tech fighting force would make victory a foregone conclusion. Yet in both Iraq and Afghanistan, Round 1 ended in disappointment.

Today's war likewise bears scant resemblance to Round 2, when Army Gen David H Petraeus promoted counter-insurgency as a way to bring order out of the anarchy that was Rumsfeld's legacy. The hope was that successive "surges" in Iraq and Afghanistan would restore some semblance of order, allowing the United States to claim victory of a sort. Yet now Petraeus, as the Round 2 leader, is gone, and so too is any lingering enthusiasm for his favourite tactic.

Round 3 inaugurates yet another approach and brings with it another emblematic figure.

This time it's Michael Vickers. Unlike Rumsfeld or Petraeus, Vickers — who carries

the title undersecretary of Defence for intelligence — has not achieved celebrity status. Nor is he likely to do so. Yet more than anyone else in or out of uniform, Vickers embodies the war on terror's latest phase.

With former Secretary of Defence Robert M Gatesgone, Vickers is the senior remaining holdover from George W Bush's Pentagon. His background is nothing if not eclectic. He previously served in the Army Special Forces and as

States could liberate or pacify the Islamic world. His preferred approach to combating terrorism is simplicity itself. "I just want to kill those guys," he likes to say, "those guys" referring to members of al Qaeda. Kill the people who want to kill Americans and don't stop until they are all dead: This defines the Vickers strategy, which has now become US strategy.

For Vickers, this means acting aggressively to eliminate would-be killers wherever they

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a CIA operative. In the 1980s he played a leading role in supporting the Afghan mujahedin in their war against Soviet occupiers. Subsequently, he worked in a Washington think tank and earned a doctorate in strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Even during the Bush era, Vickers never subscribed to expectations that the United

might be found, employing whatever means necessary. Vickers "tends to think like a gangster," one admiring former colleague comments. "He can understand trends, then change the rules of the game so they are advantageous for your side."

Round 3 is all about bending, breaking and reinventing rules in ways thought to be advan-

performance in everything from literacy to logistics. NATO is speeding up its transfer of fighting duties to the national police and army, and at the same time, the cash-pinched coalition intends to cut back substantially on plans for funding a long-term Afghan force strength of more than 350,000

readily at hand, what might otherwise be a small altercation can swiftly flare into a tragedy. An Afghan soldier from Balkh province in the north, who spoke on condition of anonymity after having deserted his unit last year, bitterly described being belittled by his German trainers for what he considered a minor infraction, though he con-

dozen others, some seriously.

Australia, another troop-contributing nation, was roiled early this month by a video on a Taliban-affiliated website that purported to show a fugitive Afghan soldier who had shot and seriously injured three Australian troops in southern Afghanistan in November boasting of his deed, and saying others in his unit had often spoken of their wish to carry out

tageous to the United States. Much as counter-insurgency supplanted "shock and awe," a broad-gauged programme of targeted assassination has now displaced counter-insurgency as the prevailing expression of the American way of war. The United States is finished with the business of sending large land armies to invade and occupy countries. Instead, it uses missile-firing drones along with hit-and-run attacks to eliminate anyone the president of the United States decides to eliminate (including the occasional US citizen).

This is America's new MO Paraphrasing a threat issued by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, a *Washington Post* dispatch succinctly summarised what this implies: "The United States reserved the right to attack anyone who it determined posed a direct threat to US national security, anywhere in the world."

Furthermore, the president exercises this supposed right without warning, without regard to claims of national sovereignty, without congressional authorisation and without consulting anyone other than Vickers and a few other members of the national security apparatus.

The role allotted to the American people is to applaud, if and when notified that a successful assassination has occurred. And applaud we do; for example, when members of SEAL Team Six secretly enter Pakistan to dispatch of grievance.

"From the 'safe' parts of the country, we can take almost anyone," said Col Mohammad Akbar Stanikzai of the Afghan national recruitment command. "But from the places where there are security problems, we would maybe take five or six out of 20 who applied."

Also worrisome to some local Afghan officials are plans to turn a number of particularly dangerous areas over to Afghan control sooner than initially planned. Several district leaders in areas to be handed over in coming months expressed strong misgivings about whether police and army units could confront the insurgents without Western help.

The No 2 commander of the NATO force, US Army Lt Gen Curtis Scaparotti, acknowledged to reporters at the Pentagon this month that among American troops, there is a widespread negative view of the Afghans whom

the dominant language in Kabul, he asked one of the visitors to read it to him.

These days, Afghanistan's armed forces are under pressure as never before to dramatically step up their performance in everything from literacy to logistics. NATO is speeding up its transfer of fighting duties to the national police and army, and at the same time, the cash-pinched coalition intends to cut back substantially on plans for funding a long-term Afghan force strength of more than 350,000.

Even as senior allied commanders proclaim that a leaner, better-trained Afghan force will be capable of taking over most fighting duties from Western troops by the end of next year, the problems that have long plagued the Afghan police and army — repeated turmoiled shootings aimed at Western mentors, drug use,

When Davis asked whether he and his men, knowing the insurgents' position, intended to counterattack, "the captain's head wheeled around, looking first at the interpreter and turning to me with an incredulous expression.... 'No! We don't go after them,' he said. 'That would be dangerous!'"

The combination of proximity and cultural differences sometimes produces a volatile atmosphere between Afghan and Western troops who live and work together on joint bases, according to more than a dozen current and former junior officers in the NATO force and their Afghan counterparts who were interviewed about training practices.

Western military public-affairs officers may constantly highlight success stories arising from the training programme, particularly the measurable improvement in the abilities of

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Osama bin Laden with two neatly placed kill shots. Vengeance long deferred renders it unnecessary to consider what second-order political complications might ensue.

How Round 3 will end is difficult to forecast. The best we can say is that it's unlikely to end soon or well. As Israel has discovered, once targeted assassination becomes your game, the list of targets has a way of getting longer and longer.

So what tentative judgments can we offer regarding the ongoing "era of persistent conflict"? Operationally, a war launched by the conventionally minded has progressively fallen under the purview of those who inhabit what Dick Cheney once called "the dark side," with implications that few seem willing to explore.

Strategically, a war informed at the outset by utopian expectations continues today with no concretely stated expectations whatsoever, the forward momentum of events displacing serious consideration of purpose. Politically, a war that once occupied centre stage in national politics has slipped to the periphery, the American people moving on to other concerns and entertainments, with legal and moral questions raised by the war left dangling in midair. Is this progress? COURTESY LOS ANGELES TIMES

who might bear a grudge against the Afghan government if what they had believed would be a steady long-term job came to a premature end.

A report this month by Anthony Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies contends that the Western military command "sharply downplays" structural problems, including a shortfall of trainers, rushed development, corrupt leadership and fealty to warlord figures.

Although Afghan army recruiters accumulate a voluminous paper file on each applicant, they appear to make little meaningful effort to assess the likelihood that a given man might eventually prove a danger to Western troops.

Col Stanikzai, the recruiting official, acknowledged that basic questions go unasked, such as how potential recruits feel