

[AFGHANISTAN]

WHEN DID WE BECOME THE SOVIETS?

In January, AfPak was all the foreign-policy rage. America's real enemies, al-Qaeda and the Taliban, were still out there, plotting away in the borderlands of Waziristan and Balochistan, averred the incoming administration's spokesmen. The new commander in chief could not only pronounce the place names—he had the terrorists in his sights. Another surge, and we'd win.

That enthusiasm has faded. With the body count rising—43 allied troops in the first half of July alone, which debunks the counterinsurgency counterlogic that more troops means fewer dead—and the country falling apart, victory appears impossible.

Chaos is winning instead. As *TAC* went to press, President Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's leader since 2001, was widely expected to triumph in the elections of Aug. 20, despite being widely reviled by his people as a puppet of the West. His success comes not from popularity but from bribes and coercion, carried out through intricately arranged alliances with regional warlords. After a grossly rigged election, experts fear that Afghans could rise up against their president and turn on the Western forces in their midst.

America and her allies face a farcically awkward situation. Having stormed Afghanistan eight years ago in order to remove the theocratic tyranny of the Taliban, they find themselves propping up an increasingly squalid, unpopular, and oppressive regime in Kabul. Canada has had enough and has announced plans to pull out.

Even President Obama is now making noises about "reassessing" the AfPak situation in light of the elections. But it is becoming harder and harder to recognize the bad guys amid the mess. They might just be us.



[TECHNOLOGY]

COGS OF WAR

War would be so much nicer if it weren't for all those dead bodies. Thankfully, Robotic Technology Inc. has found an eco-friendly way to tidy up. The Maryland-based Pentagon contractor is developing a robot that "can find, ingest, and extract energy from biomass in the environment (and other organically-based energy sources)." Don't be fooled by the earthy advertising: these beasts are carnivores. As Fox helpfully points out, "animal and human corpses contain plenty of energy, and they'd be plentiful in a war zone."

But wait, there's more. "The robot would be extremely flexible ... and could roam on its own for months, even years," blurbs the cable channel that launched a thousand drones. This "essentially benign artificial creature ... fills its belly through foraging, despite the obvious military purpose."

Granted, it can be tricky to distinguish between a dead *jihadi* and a live child. But dated notions like "humanity" and "morality" shouldn't stand in the way of progress. Why settle for dogs of war when you can have bloodthirsty androids prowling the countryside for years to come?

[POLITICS]

CZAR GAZING

Forget nanny state—think *nyanya* state. With nearly two dozen new czars, President Obama has set a new record for cooks in a Kitchen Cabinet.

The White House-based policy coordinators became prominent in the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush used them to prosecute the failed War on Drugs, with Bill Bennett one of the first to hold the imperial title. Bill Clinton added czars for healthcare and AIDS, while George W. Bush expanded the czardom to include cybersecurity and national intelligence.

These days the president has czars to run all facets of the empire—the car industry, stimulus accountability, domestic violence, even the Great Lakes. Some of the czars are relative commoners crowned from obscurity. Others are luminaries who can't be troubled with running a large bureaucratic apparatus while whispering in the president's ear: Czar of the Economy Paul Volcker, Czar of Regulation Cass Sunstein, and Czar of Executive Pay Kenneth Feinberg, the former Special Master of 9/11 compensation.

As with special foreign envoys, these off-the-flowchart appointments enjoy easy access, working among the inner circle of courtiers known as the Executive Office of the President. Many are not subject to Senate confirmation and may consequently qualify for executive privilege immunity, which can be invoked to refuse requests to testify before Congress.

The menacing tone of the term should illustrate the dangerous precedent set by these unaccountable members of the executive branch. The appointment of czars began as a tool for temporary

coordination on a front-burner issues. Now they are a way for the president to unilaterally add federal tentacles by signing an executive order, no doubt hastily drafted alongside the press release touting the latest superhero to join the team.

[JUSTICE]

PRECARIOUS BALANCE

Barack Obama's nomination of a *soi disant* "wise Latina woman" to the Supreme Court looked for a moment as if it might prompt a national debate on the racial spoils system euphemistically known as "affirmative action." At issue was less whether Sonia Sotomayor herself had advanced—to the top of her class at Princeton, no less—through reverse discrimination than her support for the policy from the bench. Unluckily for her, while her confirmation was pending, the Supreme Court overturned her Appeals Court ruling in *Ricci v. DeStefano*, the case of a white Connecticut firefighter denied promotion because of his race.

A debate about affirmation action was the most that might have been hoped for in Sotomayor's confirmation hearings since her eventual success was in little doubt. With a filibuster-proof 60 Democrats in the Senate, Republicans had slim chances of derailing her—and many GOP senators were not even inclined to put up a fight. Lindsey Graham soothed Judge Sotomayor, "Unless you have a complete meltdown, you're going to get confirmed."

Her addition will not tip the balance of the court, at least in conventional Left-Right terms. She replaces Justice David Souter, a reliable liberal and supporter of *Roe*. But Sotomayor might change the court in other, equally important ways. Souter, for all his faults, was one of the court's stronger critics of executive-branch aggrandizement in cases such as *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*,

where he rejected presidential power to detain American citizens indefinitely without trial. Sotomayor's views on the proper limits of the executive office are less well attested, though Cato Institute scholar Gene Healy sees "some reason to be cautiously optimistic that she won't roll over on claims of broad presidential power when it comes to national security issues."

The balance of the court might not be at stake in Sotomayor's nomination, but the balance of government might well be. Yet Republicans and Democrats alike would rather talk about anything—even abortion or affirmative action—other than the executive branch's steady usurpation of the Constitution.

[2012]

GOP IDENTITY CRISIS

No one could have predicted that two of the Republican Party's rising stars would flame out so spectacularly. First came Mark Sanford, plodding and parochial, suddenly waxing sappy about his Latina "soulmate." Then there was gritty Sarah Palin, all pitbull jokes and Arctic vim, turned violet shrunk by the media glare. Within days of each other, this pair of presidential hopefuls assembled the cameras and delivered political suicide notes.

There could be no more obvious proof of the GOP's unseriousness. One contender was more preoccupied with "five days crying in Argentina" than crafting a vision and proving trustworthiness to lead. The other was more interested in making a name than doing a job.

We've had a Republican president who wanted to be The Decider but hadn't a clue what to do. Indeed, we have a whole party that craves power but has only a glancing interest in principle. Perhaps it's just as well that these two governors incapable of governing their own appetites disqualified themselves early on. ■

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United Colors of Democracy

That revolution looks great on you

By Ted Galen Carpenter

AMERICANS HAVE A LONG, depressing history of idealizing foreign political movements and revolutions. Even some followers of Thomas Jefferson fawned over the French Revolution, mistaking it for an ideological cousin of America's own campaign for liberty. It was not until the onset of the Terror and its over-time use of the guillotine that admirers in the United States belatedly recoiled in horror.

Now we have two new examples of Americans projecting democratic values onto murky foreign upheavals. One occurred in Honduras, where the military ousted left-wing President Manuel Zelaya and sent him into exile. American opinion leaders immediately took sides. The Obama administration stressed that Zelaya was democratically elected and demanded that he be restored to office. Conservatives asserted that Zelaya's opponents were the real democrats. This was not an old-fashioned Latin American coup, they insisted, noting that the army chiefs acted only after both the Honduran supreme court and national legislature urged them to do so. Zelaya, American critics charged, was a Hugo Chavez clone who unconstitutionally sought to extend his term and create a dictatorship.

Both American factions deserve awards for naïveté. Given the long history of military coups in Central America, it strains credulity to believe that the Honduran military acted merely at the behest of civilian judges and legislators. And one should not assume that those civilian factions were spurred by pure

motives rather than engaging in a mundane power struggle.

The Obama administration's attitude was even more obtuse. The president's position was reminiscent of Bill Clinton's Haitian policy in the mid-1990s, when the U.S. threatened to invade if the military junta didn't restore elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Never mind that Aristide was both erratic and autocratic. Never mind that his followers routinely tortured and murdered political opponents. Never mind that his corrupt economic policies made the situation in a desperately poor country even worse. The fact that he won an election seemed to be all that mattered to his hero worshipers in the United States. Obama administration officials appear to regard the Honduran situation in much the same way, conveniently ignoring Zelaya's abuses.

While there was a split along ideological fault lines in the United States regarding the Honduran turmoil, there was pervasive enthusiasm about the anti-government demonstrations in Iran. Here were pro-Western democratic reformers struggling against religious zealots who blatantly stole a presidential election.

As is often the case, the narrative contained a kernel of truth. Iran's regime is certainly one of the more stifling on the planet, and there seemed little doubt that the hardline clerics maneuvered to keep Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power. (The announcement of final results barely four hours after the polls closed, when 40 million paper ballots were cast,

was compelling evidence of fraud, as was Ahmadinejad's startling ability to carry long-standing reformist strongholds.)

Yet the many Americans cheering the demonstrators who took to the streets to challenge the results painfully oversimplified the situation. To start, the "reformist" presidential candidate, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was not exactly a secular democrat. During the 1980s, he served as Ayatollah Khomeini's prime minister and ordered the imprisonment or execution of thousands of regime critics. In the recent political struggle, Mousavi and many of his followers appeared moderate only when compared to Ahmadinejad and other Islamic fire-breathers.

Republicans who pressed President Obama to endorse the demonstrations predictably equated the Iranian opposition with Eastern Europeans who resisted the Soviet occupation of their countries during the Cold War. But Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, and most other prominent dissidents were genuine democrats, albeit often with rather left-leaning economic views. The political makeup of the Iranian opposition was decidedly cloudier. Key players who backed Mousavi included former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, as well as approximately 40 percent of the Guardian Council, the assembly of senior mullahs. Virtually none of those individuals could be mistaken for committed democrats. On balance, the tumult was at least as much a split within the clerical hierarchy as a true