

## A highly logical approach

**Meacham:** The theme here is what you've learned. What's the hardest thing you've had to do?

**The President:** Order 17,000 additional troops into Afghanistan. There is a sobriety that comes with a decision like that because you have to expect that some of those young men and women are going to be harmed in the theater of war. And making sure that you have thought through every angle and have put together the best possible strategy, but still understanding that in a situation like Afghanistan the task is extraordinarily difficult and there are no guarantees, that makes it a very complicated and difficult decision.

**Can anything get you ready to be a war president?**

Well, I think that it certainly helps to know the broader strategic issues involved. I think that's more important than understanding the tactics involved because there are just some extraordinary commanders on the ground and a lot of good advisers who I have a lot of confidence in, but the president has to make a decision: will the application of military force in this circumstance meet the broader national-security goals of the United States? And you can't do that without understanding, let's say in Afghanistan, how that connects to Pakistan and what the nature of the insurgency there is, and what the history of the Soviet invasion was. So having some context, I think, is critical.

The other thing that's critical, I think, is having spent a couple of years on the campaign trail and then a number of years as a senator, meeting with young men and women who've served, and their families, and the families of soldiers who never came back, and knowing the price that's being paid by those who you're sending.

**Can you talk about how you reached the surge decision?**

I think the starting point was a recognition that the existing trajectory was not working, that the Taliban had made advances, that our presence in Afghanistan was declining in popularity, that the instability along the border region was destabilising Pakistan as well. So that was the starting point of the decision.

We then embarked on a strategic review that involved every aspect of our government's involvement -- Defense, State Department, intelligence operations, aid operations. Once that strategic review had been completed, then I sat in a room with the principals and argued about it, and listened to various perspectives, saw a range of options in terms of how we could move forward; asked them to go back and rework their numbers and reconsider certain positions based on the fact that some of the questions I asked could not be answered. And when I finally felt that every approach -- every possible approach -- had been aired, that all the questions had either been answered or were unanswerable, at that point I had to make a decision and I did.

**Was the change-in-command decision that was made this week [Gen. David McKiernan was relieved as commander of the forces in Afghanistan] part of the ongoing reaction to facts on the ground?** That is, I think, a reflection of a broader recognition that we have to apply some fresh eyes to the problem. General McKiernan has done an outstanding job; he's an outstanding military commander and has served his country with great distinction. But I have an obligation to make certain that we are giving ourselves the best possible opportunity to succeed, and at this moment there was a strong recommendation from the secretary as well as [Joint Chiefs of Staff] Chairman [Adm. Mike] Mullen that the team that we're now putting in place is best equipped to succeed.

**Are you open to sending more troops in if this particular number can't make the progress you need to make?**

I think it's premature to talk about additional troops. My strong view is that we are not going to succeed simply by piling on more and more troops. The Soviets tried that; it didn't work out too well for them. The British tried it; it didn't work. We have to see our military action in the context of a broader effort to stabilise security in the country, allow national elections to take place in Afghanistan and then provide the space for the vital development work that's needed so that a tolerant and open, democratically elected government is considered far more legitimate than a Taliban alternative. And the military component is critical to accomplishing that goal, but it is not a sufficient element by itself.

**Moving to Pakistan, would you be willing to keep the option alive to have American troops secure those nuclear weapons if the country gets less stable?**

I don't want to engage in hypotheticals around Pakistan, other than to say we have confidence that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is safe; that the Pakistani military is equipped to prevent extremists from taking over those arsenals. As commander in chief, I have to consider all options, but I think that Pakistan's sovereignty has to be respected. We are trying to strengthen them as a partner, and one of the encouraging things is, over the last several weeks we've seen a decided shift in the Pakistan army's recognition that

the threat from extremism is a much more immediate and serious one than the threat from India that they've traditionally focused on.

**Several of the folks around you have said that the situation with Senator Daschle [the former Senate Democratic leader**

the time to listen. They might not, at the end of it, agree with me, but having seen how I'm thinking about a problem, having a sense of how I'm making decisions, that I understand their point of view, that I can actually make their argument for them, and that that's part of the decision-

istration, and I think it resulted in a series of very bad decisions. I think what's interesting is that, in some ways, Dick Cheney actually lost these arguments inside the Bush administration.

And so he may have won early with Colin Powell and Condi Rice, but over the

problem. And I acknowledged this before I was sworn in. You've got a situation where, in some cases, individuals should not have been detained, but after having been detained for six years may not have a very friendly view towards the United States. You have some people who definitely

have an announcement about that in the coming months.

**Prime Minister Netanyahu is coming [to Washington this week]. How do you expect to talk to him about the possibility of Israeli military action against Iran? And some people have argued that we should not take [American military action] off the table.**

I've been very clear that I don't take any options off the table with respect to Iran. I don't take options off the table when it comes to US security, period. What I have said is that we want to offer Iran an opportunity to align itself with international norms and international rules. I think, ultimately, that will be better for the Iranian people. I think that there is the ability of an Islamic Republic of Iran to maintain its Islamic character while, at the same time, being a member in good standing of the international community and not a threat to its neighbours. And we are going to reach out to them and try to shift off of a pattern over the last 30 years that hasn't produced results in the region.

**Now, will it work? We don't know. And I assure you, I'm not naive about the difficulties of a process like this. If it doesn't work, the fact that we have tried will strengthen our position in mobilising the international community, and Iran will have isolated itself, as opposed to a perception that it seeks to advance that somehow it's being victimised by a US government that doesn't respect Iran's sovereignty.**

**And you would expect the Israelis, as an ally, to follow along with that and not take unilateral [military] action?**

No, look, I understand very clearly that Israel considers Iran an existential threat, and given some of the statements that have been made by President Ahmadinejad, you can understand why. So their calculation of costs and benefits are going to be more acute. They're right there in range and I don't think it's my place to determine for the Israelis what their security needs are.

I can make an argument to Israel as an ally that the approach we are taking is one that has to be given a chance and offers the prospect of security, not just for the United States but also for Israel, that is superior to some of the other alternatives. **Were you surprised at how quickly your family became part of the cultural iconography?**

You know, the nice thing is that, partly because of temperament, partly because of Michelle's unbelievable parenting skills, I've just got some happy, normal kids. And all that stuff that's going on around them, they just kind of miss. We have not seen any effects, any fishbowl effects, yet on them. Now, I worry about them when they're teenagers where, you know, you're already embarrassed about your parents and even more embarrassed on TV all the time. And dating I think will be an issue because I have men with guns surrounding them at all times [laughter], which I'm perfectly happy with, but they may feel differently about it.

**Did you consult any former presidents or celebrities about the fishbowl effect in raising the girls?**

Well, you know, the truth of the matter is that the campaign was the equivalent of me being the frog in the saucepan of water and the temperature slowly being turned up. By the time the inauguration had taken place, we had pretty much gotten accustomed to it.

**What are you reading?**

I'm reading this book called *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill. It's about after 9/11, a guy -- his family leaves him and he takes up cricket in New York. And it's fascinating. It's a wonderful book, although I know nothing about cricket.

**And as you divide up your time, when do you steal the time to do that?**

I'm a night owl. My usual day [is]: I work out in the morning; I get to the office around 9:30 a.m. to 9 a.m.; work till about 6:30 p.m.; have dinner with the family, hang out with the kids and put them to bed about 8:30 p.m. And then I'll probably read briefing papers or do paperwork or write stuff until about 11:30 p.m., and then I usually have about a half hour to read before I go to bed... about midnight, 12:30 a.m. -- sometimes a little later.

**Do you watch any cable news?**

I don't watch cable news at all. The only television I'm watching these days is sports.

**And the last movie you saw?**

Now, movies I've been doing OK [with] because it turns out we got this nice theater on the ground floor of my house. So Star Trek, we saw this weekend, which I thought was good. Everybody was saying I was Spock, so I figured I should check it out and -- [the president makes the Vulcan salute with his hand].

**Very good.**

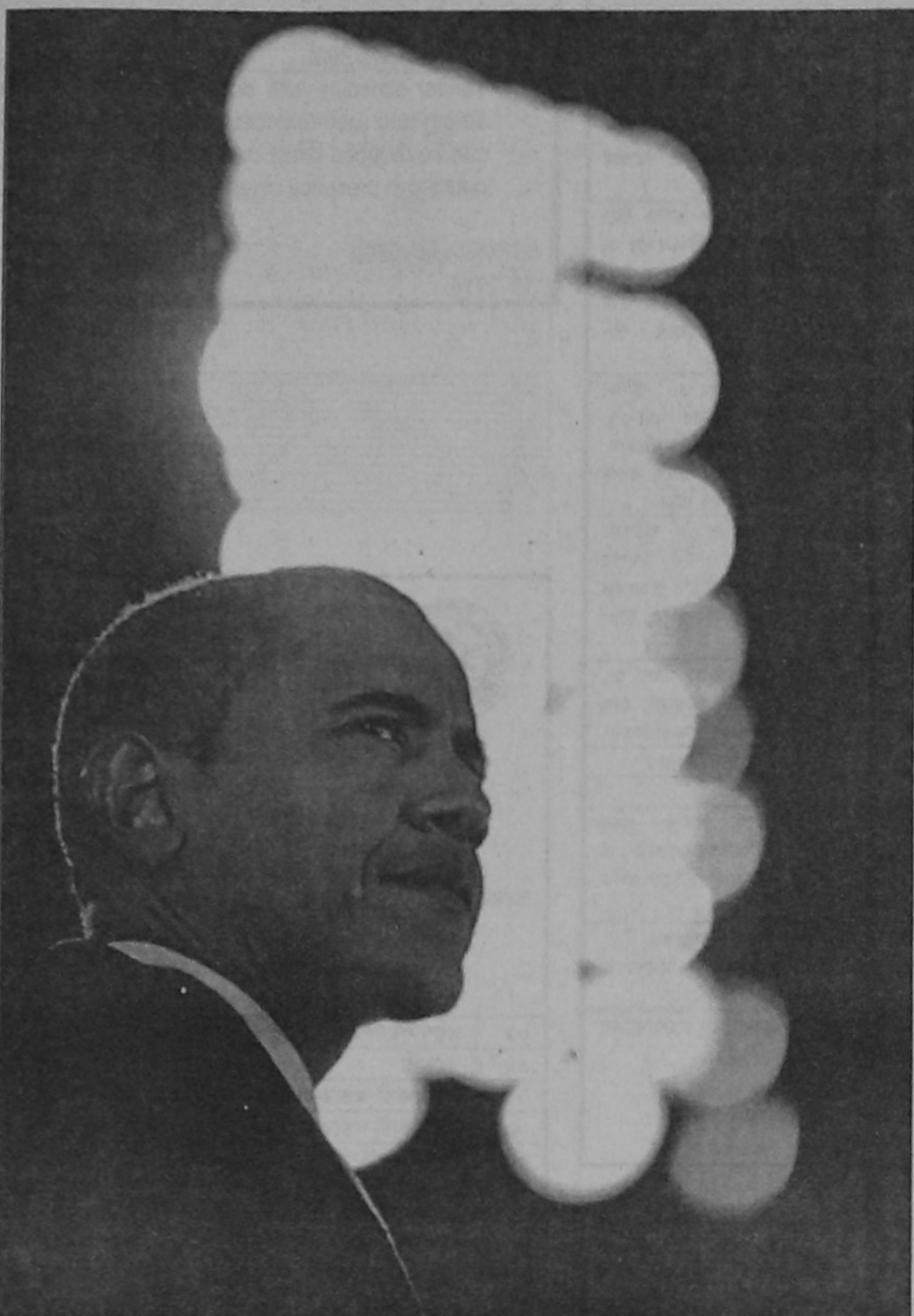
**Yes, absolutely.**

**Did you watch that when you were growing up?**

I used to love Star Trek. You know, Star Trek was ahead of its time. There was a whole -- the special effects weren't real good, but the storylines were always evocative, you know, there was a little commentary and a little pop philosophy for a 10-year-old to absorb.

**Alot of U.N. stuff.**

**Yes, exactly, right.**



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**In a 30-minute interview aboard Air Force One en route from Washington to Phoenix last Wednesday, President Obama talked with Newsweek's Jon Meacham about Afghanistan, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, Dick Cheney -- and Star Trek. The Daily Star reprints the interview here by special arrangement.**

**who had to withdraw his nomination for secretary of health and human services because of a tax issue) early on was a learning experience for you. What was the lesson of that?**

Well, you know, Tom is a close friend and, I believe, an outstanding public servant -- somebody who I think would have served wonderfully as HHS secretary. There was a unique mix of talents that he possessed: understanding the Senate, understanding how Congress worked and being deeply passionate about health care.

What I realised, though, is that if we're going to set a higher bar on transparency, openness, ethics, then we have to apply it even when it's inconvenient, and that means we have to work harder and smarter. And I'm sorry that I did not face up to that realisation earlier so that Tom wasn't put in the position that he was in. An adviser of yours told us that you quickly came to realise that you had obtained the largest megaphone in the world. Has there been a moment when you've said something or mused out loud in a way that a senator or even a candidate could have done, but a president can't do?

You know, precisely because I realised it pretty quickly, I think that I've been fairly careful about how you use the microphone. I'm sure I have made remarks that, in retrospect, I would have polished up a little bit more, and I'm sure that there's more to come on the gaffe front.

But one of the things I've actually been encouraged by -- and I learned during the campaign -- was the American people, I think, not only have a tolerance but also a hunger for explanation and complexity, and a willingness to acknowledge hard problems. I think one of the biggest mistakes that is made in Washington is this notion you have to dumb things down for the public. I've always been struck by the fact that, if you can get me in a room with a group of people, even who disagree with me violently on an issue, they'll still take

making process, it gives them a sense, at least, that they've been heard, and I think clarifies -- well, it pushes us away from the dogmas and caricatures that I think get in the way of good policymaking and a more civil tone in our politics.

**What have you learned watching the Republican Party the past 15 days or so?** What I've learned, I think, [is] that the Republican Party, like the Democratic Party after Ronald Reagan's election, when it's been in power for a long time, has trouble making an adjustment -- not just to minority status but also to self-reflection. I think there's a certain period of time where you insist on talking only to your base instead of to the American people more broadly. And I suspect that they'll make an adjustment. There are some smart people over there and some good people who may disagree with me on specific policies but I think have sincere convictions and want to see the country succeed.

Right now they're sort of trapped in the pattern of having to appeal to the most ideologically pure wing of their party as opposed to thinking a little bit more practically. And that, I think, is putting a lot of Republicans who would like to work with us on specific, select issues -- they might disagree with us on one thing but want to work with us on another thing -- in an awkward position.

If you start marginalising too many of those people, sooner or later the party starts figuring out, "Well, you know what, this is probably not going to work for us long term," and the adjustment is made. But it's a painful process. As I said, the Democrats went through it, and I expect the Republicans will get through it as well. **What's your reaction to Dick Cheney's ongoing [criticism]? He's not quite twittering your administration [laughter] but he's coming fairly close.**

You know, Dick Cheney had a strong perspective about national security. It was tested in the early years of the Bush admin-

istration, and I think it resulted in a series of very bad decisions. I think what's interesting is that, in some ways, Dick Cheney actually lost these arguments inside the Bush administration.

And so it's interesting to me to see the

should have been detained and should have been immediately charged, but were not and, in some cases, because of the manner in which evidence was obtained, it makes -- it's going to be very difficult for us to prosecute them in Article III courts.

So this is a mess that we've got to clean up and it's not going to be neat. But what we're striving towards is a situation in which Guantánamo is no longer a recruitment tool for Al Qaeda; that we are following core principles of due process; that individuals who are dangerous are still



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vice president spending so much time trying to vindicate himself and re-litigate the last eight years when, as I said, I think, actually, a lot of these arguments were settled even before we took over the White House.

**On the subject of terrorism, the Austrian interior minister -- you may know this -- has said if the detainees are no longer dangerous, why don't they just stay in the US?**

Well, look, this is an example of a hard

detained, but they are detained and/or tried in some fashion that has international and national legitimacy and is consistent with our Constitution.

And so that's going to require some work and there are going to be instances where not everybody is happy with our decisions, but over time we're going to be able to work through this.

**On that specifically, are you expecting to continue some preventive detention?** We're still in the process of review. We'll



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