

Washington discovers Islamabad

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The American political scientist, the late [Nelson Polsby](#) [1], once pointed out to an Oxford seminar how far better informed the American government had become since the early days of the cold war. It is true. In the [state department](#) [2], the Central Intelligence Agency and the other components of the "intelligence community" and in the military, as well as on congressional staffs, there are thousands of men and women who have lived all over the world, sometimes for years, who speak foreign languages and in many cases have studied aspects of foreign countries to doctoral standard.

The trouble is twofold: first, that the expertise of these dedicated professionals is not heard and often not even sought; and second, that the United States government all too often goes through a solemn farce of deceiving its own news media about what it knows.

Official Washington, and in particular the White House, has always resembled a lighthouse. Its beam slowly revolves around the world. From time to time one particular region is brilliantly illuminated. Usually this is either because a issue affecting that region is thought to affect American domestic politics, or because it arouses some powerful American domestic interest Suddenly, a region that has been thought obscure or boring becomes the topic of excited discussion. Even snippets of information about it become tradable assets in the Washington market.

At such moments, the knowledge that the All-Highest and his acolytes are at last interested in Korea, or Colombia, or the Horn of Africa, or Iran, galvanises the government.

Desk men who have laboured for years without the slightest hope that their learned disquisitions would ever reach the corridors of power are suddenly asked to summarise their [hard-earned](#) [16] understanding. Retired diplomats or intelligence officers are invited to conferences or even hired as consultants. Columnists are briefed, and compete to display their newly gleaned, second-hand knowledge.

Sooner or later, the dogs bark, and the caravan moves on. The lighthouse- beam rotates, leaving last week's subject of

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He reported the presidential elections of 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976 for various British and American media, and was co-author (with Lewis Chester and Bruce Page) of the best-selling account of the 1968 campaign, [An American Melodrama](#) [4] (Viking Press, 1969).

Among his other books are [The World Turned Right Side Up: a history of the conservative ascendancy in America](#) [5] (Houghton Mifflin, 1996); [The Gentleman from New York: Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan](#) [6] (Houghton Mifflin, 2000); [More Equal Than Others: America from](#)

obsession in darkness [17], and throwing a new landscape into sharp focus.

Expertise vs loyalty

Now it is Pakistan that is in the spotlight [18]. On the weekend of 24-25 November 2007, every self-respecting newspaper in the US carried two, three or four erudite articles about the crucial place [19] of Pakistan in the American empire. Readers were reminded that Pakistan occupies a strategic location next to Afghanistan and Iran, close to Russia and China (I remembered with pleasure the occasion when Christopher Hitchens [20], in a television studio, told an American general he refused to discuss a country with a man who did not know where it was!)

We were reminded that Pakistan is a "nuclear power" (not that this is thought in Washington to justify sympathetic attention to the views of, for example, France); that the "bad guys" responsible for 9/11, even probably the baddest of the bad, Osama himself, are almost certainly resident on Pakistani soil; that the United States has given \$10 billion in aid [21] to Pakistan; and that consequently general-president Pervez Musharraf is a very important [22] person.

So important is he, indeed, that for a moment he merited the attention of no less a proconsul than John Negroponte [23], the hardest of the hard. Negroponte occupies a position in imperial affairs today comparable to that of John J McCloy [24] or Averell Harriman [25] at the height of the cold war.

He is now Condoleezza Rice's deputy at the state department. Before that, he occupied a special position, created for him, as director of national intelligence, where his writ [26] ran over all the competing spook bureaucracies of the Washington suburbs.

When he was sent to be the American ambassador at the United Nations his appointment was taken as a signal that "the Bush administration will not be bound by diplomatic niceties as it conducts its foreign policy." A knowledgeable journalist explained that "giving him this job is a way of telling the UN: 'We hate you'." A similar message, after all, was sent by the later appointment of John Bolton [27].

Negroponte was the first American proconsul in post-Saddam Iraq. But he made his reputation [28] a quarter of a century earlier in a less visible post. As Ronald Reagan's ambassador to Honduras, he turned [29] that hapless country into a base for overthrowing the leftist Sandinista government in neighbouring Nicaragua, and he was none too squeamish in the way he went about it. The *Washington Post*, under the Freedom of Information Act, obtained cables that made it plain that Negroponte was utterly unconcerned by the Honduran government's human-rights abuses.

Now Negroponte is hurried off to Islamabad. What did he say [30] to Pervez Musharraf during his 16-18 November visit? Did he chide the military-political dictator for the imposition of virtual martial law? Is he the man to remind the general that the United States has forever stood firm to defend human rights, that the US constitution prohibits "cruel and unusual punishment", that Washington will not tolerate any departure from constitutional propriety and the spirit of democracy, whatever the supposed justification?

Hardly. If that was the message Washington wanted to convey, even the George W Bush administration could have chosen many more plausible champions of the democratic tradition.

Bush, with his rich experience of international diplomacy and his deep understanding of all manner of men, decided, soon after 2001, that Musharraf, like Vladimir Putin, was the sort of regular fellow he could do business with. So that was that. Forget the experts, the

Urdu-speakers, the army colonels who had taught their Pakistani opposite numbers about counterinsurgency and explained the subordination of military to civilian power.

The fate of Pakistan was seen, as foreign affairs are all too often seen in Washington, not as complex and sensitive matters requiring knowledge, expertise and patience, but as yet another political crisis [31], to be handled with a loyal heart, a closed mind and a high hand. Send for Negroponte!

Power vs openness

Washington is at long last appearing to side with those who want general-president Musharraf to complete the transition [32] from military dictator to civilian leader, as he is scheduled to do when he takes the oath for a second five-year term as president on 29 November.

But when will the Bush White House listen to those who can explain that this is impossible [33], that they have been pouring money into - whatever the outward forms of governance - a military state within a state? That the Pakistan government has been in the hands of military dictators for most of the last forty years: since the days of Field-Marshal Ayub Khan [34], his successor Yahya Khan [35], and Zia ul-Haq?

More to the point, there are those in Washington who know a great deal about Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). This is a body that operates large financial and industrial institutions, manipulates Pakistan's party politics, and has (since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979) been deeply implicated in its foreign policy as well. ISI is mixed up in Afghan politics, in Islamic extremism, including that of the Taliban, in AQ Khan's marketing [36] of nuclear technology, in terrorism, and almost certainly in the rise of al-Qaida. Its methods are murky [37] and if necessary murderous, and its commitment to democracy invisible.

All this John Negroponte certainly knows.

Did he speak frankly [38] to general-president Musharraf about the Pakistan government's failure to root out anti-Indian and anti-western terrorist groups in its country? Did he go through the drawing-room farce of pretending that Musharraf does not know where the *jihadis* and their training-camps are to be found?

Negroponte must know better than anyone that the reason the Pakistan government has failed to extirpate the terrorists is because it is deeply involved with them and has been for at least a decade. When will the American public, in other words, be told something of what the American government must already know?

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