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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Game That's Not So Great

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By MAUREEN DOWD
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KIRKUK, Iraq



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Maureen Dowd

Puppets just aren't what they used to be.

Or maybe a trillion dollars doesn't buy the same felicitous level of obsequiousness it once did.

Visiting Afghanistan and Iraq in an attempt to shore up our wobbly wards, Bob Gates could not seem to get the respect due the man running the world's best military, a force that has been protecting and propping up our two occupied territories for most of this decade.

At a joint press conference Tuesday at the presidential palace in Kabul, Hamid Karzai surprised the usually unflappable Gates when he knocked down President Obama's attempt to get out of Dodge.

Needling his American sugar daddy, the Afghan peacock observed: "For another 15 to 20 years, Afghanistan will not be able to sustain a force of that nature and capability with its own resources."

Gates and Obama may have wanted to "light a fire," as Gates put it, under the corrupt Afghan president and warn that the A.T.M. is closing, but Karzai called their bluff. He knows, as do the leaders in Iraq and Pakistan, that America is stuck bailing them out with billions every year, even when they dawdle, disappoint and deceive.

Gates and his generals in Afghanistan talked a lot last week about "partnering" with and "mentoring" the Afghan Army and police. But given the Flintstones nature of the country, it's more basic. Americans have to teach the vast majority of Afghan recruits to read and write before they can get to security training. It's hard to arrest people if you can't read them their rights and take names.

It seems late to realize this, but Gates told reporters he had only recently learned the "eye-opener" that the Taliban were able to attract so many fighters because they paid more. Generals in Afghanistan said the Taliban dole out \$250 to \$300 a month, while the Afghan Army paid about \$120. So Gates has made sure that recruits get a raise to \$240.

The American solution is always to throw more money at a problem; now we're in a bidding war with the Taliban, which doesn't bode well for the democracy manqué.

Gates promised that America would not leave until the Afghan and Iraqi forces stand up

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