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Ending America's Forever Wars



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

There was a time, almost two decades ago, when America was not at war throughout the greater Middle East. Events in November 2020 boosted the hope that such a time might return sooner rather than later. That was when Trump installed a group of officials in the defense department who are apparently more responsive to his decision to wind down U.S. forever wars. He appointed Chris Miller as secretary of defense. He also named Col. Douglas Macgregor, Kash Patel and Ezra Cohen to high-level positions. Macgregor's appointment stands out, because of his history of outspoken opposition to America's military adventures in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. His antiwar views have not won him friends in the Pentagon. Meanwhile, he has alienated potential allies outside it with his intolerant views on immigrants. But those views are simply not relevant to his abilities regarding ending U.S. wars.

A November 2006, CounterPunch article by Macgregor was headlined, “[There’s Only One Option Left: Leave](#).” He depicted the Bush regime’s Iraq war strategy as fundamentally flawed, noting that “occupying and governing it directly with thousands of conventional U.S. combat troops under generals whose only strategy was brute force was even more disastrous...disengaging from Iraq would seem imperative.” In the ensuing years, he wrote and published regularly against America’s wars in the Middle East, calling the U.S. military policy in that region the unmitigated calamity that it was.

The disaster continues. The antiwar vote may very well have put Trump over the top in 2016 – but then he waited, four long years, to reduce the number of U.S. soldiers in the Middle East. In fact, early in his tenure, he *increased* the number of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. And he has added soldiers in Iraq. He also dropped more bombs on the Middle East than Obama did, if such is imaginable. According to some calculations, Trump dropped a bomb every 12 minutes, surpassing Obama’s record of one every half hour. Trump did attempt to disengage from Syria, but managed to stab the Kurds in the back in the process, greenlighting ethnic cleansing by Turks and thus causing thousands of Kurdish deaths. Besides, regarding exiting Syria, his generals and the defense department weren’t having it. So the whole thing was bloodily, criminally botched from the start.

Now, having lost the 2020 election, lame-duck President Trump has “decapitated” defense department leadership – apparently, at last, to bring troops home. The initial reason for believing this was that he hired Macgregor, who advised Obama in a 2016 article “to tell the American people the truth: America’s military interventions in the Middle East and Southwest Asia are festering sores, bottomless pits for American blood and treasure...Americans in uniform cannot and will not ‘fix’ the Middle East.”

The Pentagon was scheduled to reduce U.S. troops in Afghanistan to 4500 in November. That’s troops – it doesn’t even touch contractors, and more American contractors have died in that country, 24,202 of them, than soldiers. According to National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien in an October announcement, U.S. troops in Afghanistan “will go down to 2500” by early 2021. Others in the Pentagon object, citing spiking violence in the country. But the argument can be made that there will always be spiking violence in Afghanistan, and if U.S. troops stay there until absolute peace breaks out, they will be there for generations. Indeed, some in the military have referred to the U.S. war in Afghanistan as generational. We’ve been there 20 years. That’s almost a generation. One generation is enough.

Meanwhile a new war looms like the grim reaper on the horizon, a war with Iran. Ping-ponging between theatrical roles as peacemaker one minute and warlord the next, Trump announces troop cuts in Afghanistan, only to follow this up with the lousy idea of dispatching Mike Pompeo to Saudi Arabia for secret consultations, presumably on assaulting Iran. Immediately afterward, there’s a provocation – the assassination of a nuclear physicist – and the chances of catastrophic regional war, which would also ensnare the U.S., skyrocket. Who

knows? Iran's formidable allies, Russia and China could even be dragged in. That's unlikely, but not impossible. So what's wrong with this picture – the war with Iran picture? Everything.

Trump's Iran policy has been one blunder after another, starting with busting up the nuclear treaty, one of Obama's few decent, intelligent accomplishments in the Middle East. If Trump thinks bequeathing the world a new war in that region means exiting with glory, he is mistaken. An attack on Iran would be a massive war crime – not exactly the way to burnish a presidential legacy. Not incidentally, everyone would take such a move as that of a deranged sore loser, fixated on exacting revenge on somebody, anybody for his electoral defeat. Trump would do well to stick with what brought him success with voters in 2016 – ending the forever wars, not starting them. For that he will have to cut U.S. troops in the Middle East as close to zero as possible. And this needs to happen fast.

Why? So it's harder to reverse. Because unfortunately, one of President-elect Joe Biden's most favored defense secretary candidates, Michele Flournoy, does not appear interested in a speedy troop drawdown. In fact, according to *Progressive Realism*, her cv includes support of Bush's doctrine of preemptive war, authoring a report that urged sending weapons to Ukraine, advocating arming Al Qaeda-linked rebels in Syria to topple Assad and backing that move with airpower, and more military deterrence aimed at Iran. *Progressive Realism* adds that Flournoy wrote that the current Pentagon budget “may well be insufficient to deter or defeat Chinese aggression in the future.” This last opinion is colossally dangerous. The Pentagon budget is humongous, and war with China is an abysmal idea, one Trump put on the table and which civilian and military bigwigs, no matter how hostile to him, will fight like crazy to keep there.

Flournoy has decried a “precipitous” withdrawal from Afghanistan. This contrasts with current defense chief Chris Miller's view, expressed on November 13 that “we are not in a state of perpetual war – it is the antithesis of everything for which we stand and for which our ancestors fought. All wars must end.” If Trump, Miller and Macgregor really want all troops out of Afghanistan, they better move swiftly. Again, the longer they wait, the tougher the job. If U.S. troops don't exit till mid-January, a new secretary of defense could just turn around and send them back in. The longer we're out, the more legitimate and irreversible the withdrawal.

But so far little has happened. No total departure from Afghanistan and Iraq. Leaving Syria is trickier, because it must be done, somehow, without further harming U.S. allies, the Kurds. CNN reported on November 16 that commanders had received a “warning order” to “drawdown the number of troops in Afghanistan to 2500 troops and 2500 in Iraq by January 15.” According to the *New York Times*, almost all U.S. troops would leave Somalia. As for Syria – no reductions for the several hundred U.S. soldiers stationed there. But enthusiastic

war-mongers everywhere can rejoice: U.S. forces will remain in Kenya and Djibouti, where American drones that carry out airstrikes in Somalia are based, the *Times* reported.

Even this partial exit drew immediate fire from everybody – the media, congress, other government officials, assorted think tankers. No less a pooh-bah than Mitch “democracy’s grave-digger” McConnell weighed in, blasting any attempt finally to return U.S. soldiers home. *The Hill* quoted him as observing that a “premature exit...would be reminiscent of the humiliating American departure from Saigon in 1975.” Needless to say, overall, the entire defense department except for Trump’s new appointees regards leaving Afghanistan now, after 20 years, as “precipitous.”

When the U.S. military comes, it stays. Vietnam was the exception that proves the rule. Seventy-five years after World War II, the U.S. military is still in Germany and Japan. It’s still in Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan. The U.S. globe-spanning empire includes over 800 military bases in 70 countries. That’s called conquest. And when the U.S. military conquers territory, that’s it. It stays. But for those who oppose this global conquest, for foreigners alarmed for their countries’ sovereignty or for U.S. citizens opposed to war and convinced the empire is strangling what little remains of their democracy, there is an alternative worthy of support, namely, an orderly retreat from foreign adventures, followed by systematic closure of military bases in other people’s countries. Otherwise the capitalist empire will suffer the fate of all empires – dangerous, violent, torturously drawn-out and possibly fascist collapse. Wouldn’t a more modest, secure, sovereign republic, with a democracy and a mixed economy that benefits its citizens, be better?

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