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Limping Out of Afghanistan

by Immanuel Wallerstein

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for the U.S. presidency seem to be trying to outshout each other concerning Iran, Syria, and Israel/Palestine. Each is claiming he is doing more to support the same objectives. Isn't it therefore strange that no similar verbal contest is going on at the moment concerning Afghanistan?

Not so long ago, we were witness to the same Democratic-Republican game about Afghanistan. Which party was the more macho? Remember the concept that a "surge" in troops would win the war, a concept embraced by President Obama in his speech to the U.S. Military Academy in December 2009. Now all of a sudden, since March 2012, it seems to have become a subject no one wants to espouse too loudly.

There are some simple explanations. In the longest war that the United States has ever waged, the war in Afghanistan, the United States has precious little to show for it. The designated enemy, the Taliban, constitute an ever-resilient force, particularly of course in the Pashtun areas, which constitute the largest single ethnic zone in the country.

The United States more or less single-handedly imposed Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun but not a Taliban, as president of Afghanistan. Karzai was not, is not, appreciated by the leaders of the various other ethnic zones in the north and west of the country, who have tried over the years to oust him. These other groups find support in some external powers: Russia, Iran, and India, all of which are as determined as the United States to prevent the return to power of the Taliban. But

the United States won't work with Iran, is doubtful about working with Russia, and doesn't seem to co-ordinate with India.

In February 2012, some Korans were burned by U.S. soldiers, which led to violent public protests in Afghanistan. Then 16 Afghan children, women, and men were massacred by a U.S. soldier. The United States apologized for both of these, but that hardly calmed the storm. On March 18, President Karzai denounced the Americans in Afghanistan as "demons" engaged in "Satanic acts." He said Afghanistan was beset by two demons - the Taliban and the Americans.

The New York Times cited an anonymous European diplomat as saying: "Never in history has any superpower spent so much money, sent so many troops to a country, and had so little influence over what its president says and does."

The United States, trying to salvage its position a little bit, started pulling back. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta had already said in February that the United States would step back from a combat role not in the end of 2014 as originally planned but by mid-2013. In early April, the United States went further. It announced that it was handing over control of special operations missions (for example, using drones and night raids) to Afghan forces. The U.S. troops would now play only a "supporting" role.

Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, Zalmay Rassoul, did not sound overly grateful. He announced that, once U.S. and NATO troops left in 2014, Afghanistan would not allow its territory to be a launching pad for drone attacks against Pakistan.

The Pakistanis then delivered a further jab at the United States. On April 12, the parliament approved "unanimously" a list of conditions for improving U.S.-Pakistan relations and reopening the NATO supply routes to Afghanistan. They included an end to drone attacks on Pakistani territory and an "unconditional apology" for killing 24 Pakistani troops in a NATO airstrike in November 2011. The United States is resisting these conditions. But given the now clear divergence of U.S. and Pakistani policy objectives in Afghanistan, it is not clear that the United States can prevail.

Then on April 4, Lawrence Korb, who had been Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, published an article with the headline "Time to let Karzai kick us out." Korb argued that the United States since 1945 has been "much better at starting wars than ending them satisfactorily." He pointed to what he considered the unnecessary loss of lives in the last two years of the Korean and Vietnam wars.

The exception, he argued, was Iraq, where the United States has withdrawn because "Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki left us no choice." He cheered: "In Iraq, the U.S. government got lucky." His conclusion: "Just as al-Maliki forced us to do the right thing, we should allow Karzai to take control of his country as soon as he wants." Korb is a conservative Republican analyst, who sees maximum advantage to the United States in being forced out of Afghanistan as soon as possible.

Korb is not alone. The Washington Post/ABC News poll, released on April 12, shows that, only

30% of the population say that the war has been worth fighting, and even more remarkably, for the first time, a majority of Republicans agree that it has not been worth it. Two things are happening in terms of U.S. public opinion. First, the Afghans do not seem to be cheering U.S. efforts or military losses. Quite the opposite. Machismo is yielding place in the United States to withdrawal after rebuff. And, secondly, the costs of the war in Afghanistan are astronomical at a moment when the United States, and most particularly conservative Republicans, is seeking to reduce expenditures drastically.