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## Afghan retreat echoes of Vietnam defeat

By Finian Cunningham

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It didn't quite garner the same media highlight, but nevertheless there was the unmistakable comparison this week between the evacuation of American troops from southern Afghanistan and the Fall of Saigon, South Vietnam, in 1975.

Both events mark embarrassing retreats by a failing American empire whose hubris always manages to deny reality until the illusion of power finally comes crashing down.

This week thousands of US and British troops were hurriedly airlifted from the giant military base known as Camp Bastion in southern Helmand Province.

It was a huge logistical operation involving a fleet of transport planes and helicopters landing and taking off over a 24-hour period.

The scene of hasty imperial removal from Helmand reminded one of the classic photograph taken in 1975 by UPI photographer Hubert Van Es, which captured American Huey choppers lifting hundreds of desperate personnel from off the rooftop of the CIA headquarters in Saigon ahead of imminent defeat by Vietnamese insurgents.

This week in Helmand the evacuating troops were the last of the US-led NATO force that has occupied Afghanistan for the past 13 years. At its peak, there were 140,000 American troops in the country with the second biggest contingency being the British, along with soldiers from nearly 50 other nations.

Now Camp Bastion has been handed over to Afghan troops and police, who will take over the daunting task of maintaining security across the country against a deadly resurgence of Taliban militants.

Officially, the US-led international force is to wind down its operation in Afghanistan at the end of this year, but some 10,000 American military and CIA will remain in the country in a “support role” to national security forces under a deal signed between Washington and the new Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

Just like the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, in which thousands of American personnel were scrambled out the country ahead of the Vietnamese victory, the retreat from Afghanistan this week signals another humiliating defeat for the warmongers in Washington.

Not only a humiliating defeat, but the end of a long and bloody chronicle of futile war. Thirteen years ago, the Americans invaded Afghanistan allegedly to topple a fundamentalist Taliban regime and eradicate an international source of terrorism led by Saudi al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden.

Tens of thousands of deaths later, plus trillions of dollars billed to the American taxpayers, the US troops are clearing out from a country that is left in worst shape. The American-installed government can barely maintain security in the capital, Kabul, never mind the surrounding regions. What’s more terrorism of the Al-Qaeda brand has spread internationally eliciting the deployment of even more American militarism abroad, and the ramping up of state security powers within the US and its NATO allies.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban are resurgent not only in their southern heartlands, but have taken over large parts of the east, west and north of the country, where they previously had little presence. Schools and other civic administration in these areas are now reportedly run, not by the US-backed government in Kabul, but by the militants.

Cultivation of poppy for heroin production - a main source of finance for the Taliban warlords – has reached an all-time high with over 200,000 hectares under cultivation. Nearly half of all Afghan poppy is harvested in Helmand Province, where US President Obama launched his much-vaunted surge of 30,000 extra marines in 2009-2010. Despite Washington spending \$7.6 billion to curb poppy production, Afghanistan has emerged as the world's biggest source of heroin, while drug addiction in the US is reportedly soaring.

On security matters, between March and August this year, nearly 1,000 Afghan troops and 2,200 police officers were killed in militant attacks. That represents the worst casualty rate for local forces over the past 13 years.

With the last of the US-led foreign forces pulling out this week, there is an ominous sense of the security levee bursting across Afghanistan.

If anything, the prognosis for Afghanistan is a lot worse than it was for Iraq where US troops beat a similar hasty retreat three years ago.

By comparison, Afghanistan has a much more active insurgency raging even as the Americans are pulling out. Iraq has gone on to descend into chaos, so the portent for Afghanistan would seem a lot worse.

Reuters news agency reported the view of US Marine Staff Sergeant Kenneth Oswood, who participated in both the Iraq withdrawal and this week's evacuation from Afghanistan. He said: "It's a lot different this time. Closing out Iraq, when we got there, we were told there hadn't been a shot fired in anger at us in years. And then you come here and they are still shooting at us."

The US marine added: "It's almost like it's not over here, and we're just kind of handing it over to someone else to fight."

More like handing it over to someone else to do the dying.

The "exceptional" Americans in Washington like to refer to their foreign interventions as "nation building." Like Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, among dozens of other unfortunate countries to have hosted American "nation builders" over the past century, the people of these wretched lands have experienced Washington's reverse Midas Touch. Far from turning to gold, everything Washington touches brings death and destruction.

And in the end when the American destroyers finally pack up and run, it is the people that remain who must pick up the pieces and actually begin the real process of national development. How easier it would be if Washington just kept its imperialist, predatory hands off others.