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European Languages	زبان های اروپائی

Time for America to quit Iraq, Afghanistan wars

By Stephen Kinzer

December 17, 2014

AMERICANS ARE world champions of self-confidence. We like to believe that our wealth, ingenuity, and vast power are enough to achieve whatever we want in the world. To argue that some of our global projects are doomed to failure seems somehow un-American.

This sunny optimism is summed up in maxims like, "A quitter never wins, a winner never quits." But for nations as well as for individuals, quitting is often a good option. Some of America's best foreign policy choices were to abandon losing projects. Our great disasters have come from pressing ahead in hopeless causes. Each time we do it, we lose strategic power.

Today Americans are once again seeing how hard it is to accept defeat. Denial is a potent force in geopolitics, just as it is in the lives of individuals. It is painful to accept the reality of failure and quit in order to avoid worse losses. Our inbred optimism tempts us to double down on failed policies in the hope that fortune will somehow turn the tide. That is what keeps pulling us back to Afghanistan and Iraq.

America's first great postwar quitter was President Dwight Eisenhower. He was elected in part because his victory over the Nazi army in Europe led Americans to believe he would be able to defeat communist forces in Korea. After his election in 1952, he traveled to Korea to meet with

American commanders and plan a counterattack. His incoming secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, urged him to order a charge across the cease-fire line and not rest "until we have shown, before all of Asia, our clear superiority." But after several days of meetings in Korea, Eisenhower decided to do the opposite. He concluded that an attack would mean a long war with no certain outcome. So he decided to quit, accepting the cease-fire and allowing communists to remain in power in North Korea.

Many Americans were shocked by this decision. Some in Washington grumbled that if President Truman had surrendered so meekly, he would have been impeached. Only Eisenhower's sterling military record allowed him to get away with quitting this war.

In Korea, Eisenhower saw a losing hand and decided to fold. A couple of years later, however, he made a very different choice in Vietnam. After the French defeat there, European leaders reluctantly concluded that no outside power could defeat Ho Chi Minh's communist army. Eisenhower refused to accept that. He believed the United States could succeed where France failed and launched what became the Vietnam War. That brought us devastating defeat. Quitting in Korea was Eisenhower's best foreign policy decision. Refusing to quit in Vietnam was his worst.

Perhaps the most admirable quitter in modern presidential history was Ronald Reagan. The worst moment of his presidency came in 1983, when terrorists destroyed the US Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 American soldiers. Reagan vowed to retaliate, since retreating in the face of such an attack would "send a message to terrorists everywhere: They can gain by waging war against innocent people." Less than a week later, he reversed himself and announced that he had decided to withdraw American troops. Reagan realized that staying in Lebanon would drag the United States into a complex civil war with little prospect of success. By deciding to quit rather than fight back — he called it "redeployment" — Reagan saved the country from what might have become another Vietnam.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States has failed to achieve any of the goals we set when we first invaded. Both countries are consumed by violence and terror. This is the very definition of defeat. Yet even President Obama, who did not launch these wars, seems reluctant to end them by saying simply, "We can't win, so let's admit it and withdraw." Whatever the reality, Americans do not like admitting that we can lose at anything. Yet persisting in lost causes weakens us as a nation. Our enemies gleefully wear us down while our friends lament our shortsightedness.

In business, failure is often seen as a valuable way to learn lessons — and even a necessary precursor to success. Many of America's richest entrepreneurs failed repeatedly before hitting the jackpot. At home, Americans love the figure that loses but then wins. Our country also wins when it recognizes defeat instead of endlessly pursuing unwinnable wars.