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It's Time to Leave Afghanistan

By Rep. Ron Paul

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Statement before the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee on December 10, 2009.

Mr. Speaker thank you for holding these important hearings on US policy in Afghanistan. I would like to welcome the witnesses, Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry and General Stanley A. McChrystal, and thank them for appearing before this Committee.

I have serious concerns, however, about the president's decision to add some 30,000 troops and an as yet undisclosed number of civilian personnel to escalate our Afghan operation. This "surge" will bring US troop levels to approximately those of the Soviets when they occupied Afghanistan with disastrous result back in the 1980s. I fear the US military occupation of Afghanistan may end up similarly unsuccessful.

In late 1986 Soviet armed forces commander, Marshal Sergei Akhromeev, told then-Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, "Military actions in Afghanistan will soon be seven years old. There is no single piece of land in this country which has not been occupied by a Soviet soldier. Nonetheless, the majority of the territory remains in the hands of rebels." Soon Gorbachev began the Soviet withdrawal from its Afghan misadventure. Thousands were dead on both sides, yet the occupation failed to produce a stable national Afghan government.

Eight years into our own war in Afghanistan the Soviet commander's words ring eerily familiar. Part of the problem stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation.

It is our presence as occupiers that feeds the insurgency. As would be the case if we were invaded and occupied, diverse groups have put aside their disagreements to unify against foreign occupation. Adding more US troops will only assist those who recruit fighters to attack our soldiers and who use the US occupation to convince villages to side with the Taliban.

Proponents of the president's Afghanistan escalation cite the successful "surge" in Iraq as evidence that this second surge will have similar results. I fear they might be correct about the similar result, but I dispute the success propaganda about Iraq. In fact, the violence in Iraq only temporarily subsided with the completion of the ethnic cleansing of Shi'ites from Sunni neighborhoods and vice versa – and all neighborhoods of Christians. Those Sunni fighters who remained were easily turned against the foreign al-Qaeda presence when offered US money and weapons. We are increasingly seeing this "success" breaking down: sectarian violence is flaring up and this time the various groups are better armed with US-provided weapons. Similarly, the insurgents paid by the US to stop their attacks are increasingly restive now that the Iraqi government is no longer paying bribes on a regular basis. So I am skeptical about reports on the success of the Iraqi surge.

Likewise, we are told that we have to "win" in Afghanistan so that al-Qaeda cannot use Afghan territory to plan further attacks against the US. We need to remember that the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, was, according to the 9/11 Commission Report, largely planned in the United States (and Germany) by terrorists who were in our country legally. According to the logic of those who endorse military action against Afghanistan because al-Qaeda was physically present, one could argue in favor of US airstrikes against several US states and Germany! It makes no sense. The Taliban allowed al-Qaeda to remain in Afghanistan because both had been engaged, with US assistance, in the insurgency against the Soviet occupation.

Nevertheless, the president's National Security Advisor, Gen. James Jones, USMC (Ret.), said in a recent interview that less than 100 al-Qaeda remain in Afghanistan and that the chance they would reconstitute a significant presence there was slim. Are we to believe that 30,000 more troops are needed to defeat 100 al-Qaeda fighters? I fear that there will be increasing pressure for the US to invade Pakistan, to where many Taliban and al-Qaeda have escaped. Already CIA drone attacks on Pakistan have destabilized that country and have killed scores of innocents, producing strong anti-American feelings and calls for revenge. I do not see how that contributes to our national security.

The president's top advisor for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, said recently, "I would say this about defining success in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the simplest sense, the Supreme Court test for another issue, we'll know it when we see it." That does not inspire much confidence.

Supporters of this surge argue that we must train an Afghan national army to take over and strengthen the rule and authority of Kabul. But experts have noted that the ranks of the Afghan national army are increasingly being filled by the Tajik minority at the

expense of the Pashtun plurality. US diplomat Matthew Hoh, who resigned as Senior Civilian Representative for the U.S. Government in Zabul Province, noted in his resignation letter that he "fail[s] to see the value or the worth in continued U.S. casualties or expenditures of resources in support of the Afghan government in what is, truly, a 35-year old civil war." Mr. Hoh went on to write that "[L]ike the Soviets, we continue to secure and bolster a failing state, while encouraging an ideology and system of government unknown and unwanted by [the Afghan] people."

I have always opposed nation-building as unconstitutional and ineffective. Afghanistan is no different. Without a real strategy in Afghanistan, without a vision of what victory will look like, we are left with the empty rhetoric of the last administration that "when the Afghan people stand up, the US will stand down." I am afraid the only solution to the Afghanistan quagmire is a rapid and complete US withdrawal from that country and the region. We cannot afford to maintain this empire and our occupation of these foreign lands is not making us any safer. It is time to leave Afghanistan.