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The Myth of Withdrawal from Afghanistan

by Sheldon Richman

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Despite Barack Obama's trumpeted force draw-down in Afghanistan, by the end of next summer more than twice as many U.S. troops will be fighting in that country's civil war as there were when he became president in 2009. His soothing words notwithstanding, a force of about 70,000 will remain there at least until the end of 2014. We can be sure, however, that that won't stop the president from campaigning for reelection on a peace platform. As Election Day 2012 approaches, we'll be treated to lots of footage of withdrawing soldiers.

Yet Obama's speech in June was mostly show, a spectacle to make the war- and deficit-weary public think he's taking substantial steps toward disengagement. He did something similar in Iraq, though 50,000 troops remain and are still taking casualties.

It is easy for a president to manipulate public opinion, especially in foreign affairs and most especially when the mainstream media — conservative and "liberal" — are so compliant. The war will go on, but probably under the radar more than before, just as the war in Iraq does. The public and mainstream media attitude will be, "The president said the war is ending, so there's no need to pay attention."

One problem: Not much is changing.

Politicians and pundits still debate whether Obama's drawdown is too slow or too fast. The president explicitly took a middle position between those who wanted merely a token withdrawal, such as the top military brass and Sen. John McCain, and those who want an immediate exit, such as Reps. Dennis Kucinich and Ron Paul.

But the pace, though not insignificant, is hardly the main issue. The main issue is the empire. If all combat troops were removed from Afghanistan tomorrow, the U.S. government would continue to treat that country like a protectorate, ready to send troops and aircraft back if events are not to the policy elite's liking. The Obama administration still operates killer aerial drones over Pakistan seeking to kill Afghans who oppose U.S. occupation. (Its drones also assault Yemen and Libya.)

It's the paradigm of empire that must be rejected. But Obama's drawdown and disavowal of empire notwithstanding, the U.S. policy elite have no intention of reconsidering America's hegemonic role in the world. To be sure, fiscal difficulties have forced a reconsideration of tactics — empires are bloody expensive — but the imperial framework remains. It was compactly summed up by George H.W. Bush in 1991 as he prepared to move against Iraq's Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait: "What we say goes."

Empires always require myths, and the U.S. empire is no different. In the days before Obama's speech, McCain and others campaigned for no more than a token drawdown by asserting that Afghanistan would become a threat to the American people if the U.S. military disengaged, just as it did — supposedly — after the Soviets withdrew in 1989. "We withdrew from Afghanistan one time," McCain said. "We withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban came, eventually followed by al-Qaeda, followed by the attacks on the United States of America."

This is the establishment line: We cannot withdraw from Afghanistan and leave that collection of tribes and warlords alone because we tried that once and look what happened. Withdrawal would surely mean another attack on the American homeland. Therefore, continued occupation — either in the form of counter-insurgency or counterterrorism — is necessary for our national security. (Sometimes the policy-makers forget their own story and speak as though the U.S. presence is a favor to the Afghans. When President Hamid Karzai referred to the U.S. forces as "occupiers," American hawks in Congress and the media called him "ungrateful.")

That supposed history lesson is empire-serving nonsense. Contrary to McCain and the others, America's policymakers did not abandon Afghanistan. Rather, they took an active role in trying to shape Afghan society. A little history: The Soviet army rolled into Afghanistan in 1979, largely because the secular communist leader it had formerly backed was so radical he provoked widespread and disruptive Muslim resistance.

Manipulating the Soviets

Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, later boasted that, contrary to accepted accounts, the Carter administration started aiding the mujahideen — religiously motivated fighters — *before* the Soviet invasion: "According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the mujahideen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979," Brzezinski told *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1998.

But the reality ... is completely otherwise: Indeed, it was July 3, 1979, that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.

The interviewer wondered whether Brzezinski had any regrets about the policy.

Regret what? That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter, essentially: We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. Indeed, for almost 10 years, Moscow had to carry on a war unsupportable by the government, a conflict that brought about the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire. [The latter claim is weak, to say the least. — SR]

Question: And neither do you regret having supported the Islamic fundamentalists, having given arms and advice to future terrorists?

Brzezinski: What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?

As noted, that was in 1998, more than three years before the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon — attacks that prompted the U.S. government's own invasion of Afghanistan, a war that has lasted longer than America's war in Vietnam.

U.S. “neglect”

What happened when the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989? Did the U.S. government walk away, allowing the Taliban to take over and enabling al-Qaeda? Hardly, according to investigative journalist Robert Parry and George Crile, author of *Charlie Wilson's War* (later made into a movie).

“There was no immediate cutoff of funds for the Afghan mujahedeen in 1989. Indeed, hundreds of millions of dollars in covert CIA funding continued to flow to the rebels for several years as the U.S. government sought a clear-cut victory over the left-behind communist leader Najibullah, who was holed up in Kabul,” Parry writes.

... Crile describes how [U.S. Rep. Charlie] Wilson kept the funding spigot open for the Afghan rebels after the Soviet departure, despite a growing U.S. awareness that the mujahedeen were brutal, reactionary and corrupt, a reality that Washington had chosen to ignore when these Islamic warlords were being hailed as anti-Soviet ‘freedom fighters’ in the 1980s.

The Soviets hoped to work with the U.S. government to prevent radical Islamists from taking power on their southern border, and Wilson discussed this with a Soviet official. “Upon returning to Washington, however, Wilson's openness to Moscow's overtures brought a stern rebuke from his hard-line friends in the CIA who wanted to see an unambiguous victory of the CIA-backed

mujahideen over the Soviet clients in Kabul,” Parry writes. “Wilson decided to side with his old allies in the CIA and the Saudi royal family, who were matching the CIA’s huge contributions dollar for dollar.”

In 1991, with the Soviet Union undergoing liquidation and its former puppet still clinging to power, Congress approved \$200 billion more for the mujahideen, who were also fighting among themselves. “They found themselves with not only a \$400 million budget [half from the Saudis] but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen,” Crile wrote.

That doesn’t sound like neglect.

For the record, Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA’s bin Laden unit, has a different version of continued U.S. intervention after the Soviet withdrawal. Scheuer wrote in 2009,

In the immediate post-Soviet years, then, Washington spent tens of millions of dollars to try to form exactly the same type of strong and centralized Afghan government — the type of regime that historically causes war in Afghanistan — it is trying to form today....

... The Afghans wanted no part of the secularism the U.S.-led West insisted on then....

In any event, it was neither neglect of Afghanistan nor intervention there that prompted al-Qaeda’s attacks on 9/11. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri sought revenge against the United States before they set up headquarters in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Their grievance? A half-century of U.S. support for brutality in the Muslim and Arab world, from Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians, to the corrupt monarchy in Saudi Arabia, to the torturous secular dictatorships in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries, to the child-killing embargo on Iraq.

Regardless of what Obama does in Afghanistan, as long as the U.S. government eyes the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia the way an imperial power eyes its colonies, there will be threats to contend with. The path to American security lies in renouncing a foreign policy designed to rule the world.