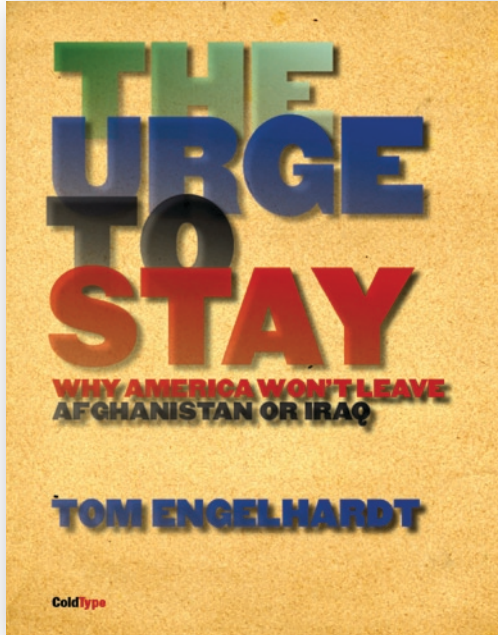


**THE
URGE
TO
STAY**

**WHY AMERICA WON'T LEAVE
AFGHANISTAN OR IRAQ**

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THE URGE TO STAY

Yes, we could. No kidding. We really could withdraw our massive armies, now close to 200,000 troops combined, from Afghanistan and Iraq (and that's not even counting our similarly large stealth army of private contractors, which helps keep the true size of our double occupations in the shadows). We could undoubtedly withdraw them all reasonably quickly and reasonably painlessly.

Not that you would know it from listening to the debates in Washington or catching the mainstream news. There, withdrawal, when discussed at all, seems like an undertaking beyond the waking imagination. In Iraq alone, all those bases to dismantle and millions of pieces of equipment to send home in a draw-down operation worthy of years of intensive effort, the sort of thing that makes the desperate British evacuation from Dunkirk in World War II look like a Sunday stroll



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in the park. And that's only the technical side of the matter.

Then there's the conviction that anything but a withdrawal that would make molasses in January look like the hare of Aesopian fable – at least two years in Iraq, five to ten in Afghanistan – would endanger the planet itself, or at least its most important country: us. Without our eternally steadying hand, the Iraqis and Afghans, it's taken for granted, would be lost. Without the help of U.S. forces, for example, would the Maliki government ever have been able to announce the death of the head of al-Qaeda in Iraq? Not likely, whereas the U.S. has knocked off its leadership twice, first in 2006, and again, evidently, last month.

Of course, before our troops entered Baghdad in 2003 and the American occupation of that country began, there was no al-Qaeda in Iraq. But that's a distant past not worth bringing up. And forget as well the fact that our invasions and

wars have proven thunderously destructive, bringing chaos, misery, and death in their wake, and turning, for instance, the health care system of Iraq, once considered an advanced country in the Arab world, into a disaster zone (that – it goes without saying – only we Americans are now equipped to properly fix).

Similarly, while regularly knocking off Afghan civilians at checkpoints on their roads and in their homes, at their celebrations and at work, we ignore the fact that our invasion and occupation opened the way for the transformation of Afghanistan into the first all-drug-crop agricultural nation and so the planet's premier narco-nation. It's not just that the country now has an almost total monopoly on growing opium poppies (hence heroin), but according to the latest U.N. report, it's now cornering the hashish market as well. That's diversification for you.

It's a record to stand on and, evidently, to stay on, even to expand on. We're like the famed guest who came to dinner, broke a leg, wouldn't leave, and promptly took over the lives of the entire household. Only in our case, we arrived, broke someone else's leg, and then insisted we had to stay and break many more legs, lest the world become a far more terrible place.

It's known and accepted in Washington that, if we were to leave Afghanistan precipitously, the Taliban would take over, al-Qaeda would be back big time in no time, and then more of our giant buildings would obviously bite the dust. And yet, the longer we've stayed and the more we've surged, the more resurgent the Taliban has become, the more territory this minority insurgency has spread into. If we stay long enough, we may, in fact, create the majority insurgency we



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claim to fear.

It's common wisdom in the U.S. that, before we pull our military out, Afghanistan, like Iraq, must be secured as a stable enough ally, as well as at least a fragile junior democracy, which consigns real departure to some distant horizon. And that sense of time may help explain the desire of U.S. officials to hinder Afghan President Hamid Karzai's attempts to negotiate with the Taliban and other rebel factions now. Washington, it seems, favors a "reconciliation process" that will last years and only begin after the U.S. military seizes the high ground on the battlefield.

The reality that dare not speak its name in Washington is this: no matter what might happen in an Afghanistan that lacked us – whether (as in the 1990s) the various factions there leaped for each other's throats, or the Taliban established significant control, though (as in the 1990s) not over the whole country – the stakes for Americans would be minor in nature. Not that anyone of significance here would say such a thing.

Tell me, what kind of a stake could Americans really have in one of the most impoverished lands on the planet, about as distant from us as could be imagined, geographically, culturally, and religiously? Yet, as if to defy commonsense, we've been fighting there – by proxy and directly – on and off for 30 years now with no end in sight.

Most Americans evidently remain convinced that "safe haven" there was the key to al-Qaeda's success, and that Afghanistan was the only place in which that organization could conceivably have planned 9/11, even though perfectly real planning also took place in Hamburg, Germany, which we neither bombed nor invaded.

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In a future in which our surging armies actually succeeded in controlling Afghanistan and denying it to al-Qaeda, what about Somalia, Yemen, or, for that matter, England? It's now conveniently forgotten that the first, nearly successful attempt to take down one of the World Trade Center towers in 1993 was planned in the wilds of New Jersey. Had the Bush administration been paying the slightest attention on September 10, 2001, or had reasonable precautions been taken, including locking the doors of airplane cockpits, 9/11 and so the invasion of Afghanistan would have been relegated to the far-fetched plot of some Tom Clancy novel.

Vietnam and Afghanistan

Have you noticed, by the way, that there's always some obstacle in the path of withdrawal? Right now, in Iraq, it's the aftermath of the March 7th election, hailed as proof that we brought democracy to the Middle East and so, whatever our missteps, did the right thing. As it happens, the election, as many predicted at the time, has led to a potentially explosive gridlock and has yet to come close to resulting in a new governing coalition. With violence on the rise, we're told, the planned drawdown of American troops to the 50,000 level by August is imperiled. Already, the process, despite repeated assurances, seems to be proceeding slowly.

And yet, the thought that an American withdrawal should be held hostage to events among Iraqis all these years later, seems curious. There's always some reason to hesitate – and it never has to do with us. Withdrawal would undoubtedly be far less of a brain-twister if Washington simply committed itself wholeheartedly to getting out, and if it stopped convincing itself that the presence of the U.S.



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military in distant lands was essential to a better world (and, of course, to a controlling position on planet Earth).

The annals of history are well stocked with countries which invaded and occupied other lands and then left, often ingloriously and under intense pressure. But they did it.

It's worth remembering that, in 1975, when the South Vietnamese Army collapsed and we essentially fled the country, we abandoned staggering amounts of equipment there. Helicopters were pushed over the sides of aircraft carriers to make space; barrels of money were burned at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon; military bases as large as anything we've built in Iraq or Afghanistan fell into North Vietnamese hands; and South Vietnamese allies were deserted in the panic of the moment. Nonetheless, when there was no choice, we got out. Not elegantly, not nicely, not thoughtfully, not helpfully, but out.

Keep in mind that, then too, disaster was predicted for the planet, should we withdraw precipitously – including rolling communist takeovers of country after country, the loss of “credibility” for the American superpower, and a murderous bloodbath in Vietnam itself. All were not only predicted by Washington's Cassandra, but endlessly cited in the war years as reasons not to leave. And yet here was the shock that somehow never registered among all the so-called lessons of Vietnam: nothing of that sort happened afterwards.

Today, Vietnam is a reasonably prosperous land with friendly relations with its former enemy, the United States. After Vietnam, no other “dominos” fell and there was no bloodbath in that country. Of course, it could have been different – and elsewhere, sometimes, it has been.

But even when local skies darken, the world doesn't end.

And here's the truth of the matter: the world won't end, not in Iraq, not in Afghanistan, not in the United States, if we end our wars and withdraw. The sky won't fall, even if the U.S. gets out reasonably quickly, even if subsequently blood is spilled and things don't go well in either country.

We got our troops there remarkably quickly. We're quite capable of removing them at a similar pace. We could, that is, leave. There are, undoubtedly, better and worse ways of doing this, ways that would further penalize the societies we've invaded, and ways that might be of some use to them, but either way we could go.

A Brief History of American Withdrawal

Of course, there's a small problem here. All evidence indicates that Washington doesn't want to withdraw – not really, not from either region. It has no interest in divesting itself of the global control-and-influence business, or of the military-power racket. That's hardly surprising since we're talking about a great imperial power and control (or at least imagined control) over the planet's strategic oil lands.

And then there's another factor to consider: habit. Over the decades, Washington has gotten used to staying. The U.S. has long been big on arriving, but not much for departure. After all, 65 years later, striking numbers of American forces are still garrisoning the two major defeated nations of World War II, Germany and Japan. We still have about three dozen military bases on the modest-sized Japanese island of Okinawa, and are at



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this very moment fighting tooth and nail, diplomatically speaking, not to be forced to abandon one of them. The Korean War was suspended in an armistice 57 years ago and, again, striking numbers of American troops still garrison South Korea.

Similarly, to skip a few decades, after the Serbian air campaign of the late 1990s, the U.S. built-up the enormous Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo with its seven-mile perimeter, and we're still there. After Gulf War I, the U.S. either built or built up military bases and other facilities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, as well as the British island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. And it's never stopped building up its facilities throughout the Gulf region. In this sense, leaving Iraq, to the extent we do, is not quite as significant a matter as sometimes imagined, strategically speaking. It's not as if the U.S. military were taking off for Dubuque.

A history of American withdrawal would prove a brief book indeed. Other than Vietnam, the U.S. military withdrew from the Philippines under the pressure of "people power" (and a local volcano) in the early 1990s, and from Saudi Arabia, in part under the pressure of Osama bin Laden. In both countries, however, it has retained or regained a foothold in recent years. President Ronald Reagan pulled American troops out of Lebanon after a devastating 1983 suicide truck bombing of a Marines barracks there, and the president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, functionally expelled the U.S. from Manta Air Base in 2008 when he refused to renew its lease. ("We'll renew the base on one condition: that they let us put a base in Miami – an Ecuadorian base," he said slyly.) And there were a few places like the island of Grenada, invaded in

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1983, that simply mattered too little to Washington to stay.

Unfortunately, whatever the administration, the urge to stay has seemed a constant. It's evidently written into Washington's DNA and embedded deep in domestic politics where sure-to-come "cut and run" charges and blame for "losing" Iraq or Afghanistan would cow any administration. Not surprisingly, when you look behind the main news stories in both Iraq and Afghanistan, you can see signs of the urge to stay everywhere.

In Iraq, while President Obama has committed himself to the withdrawal of American troops by the end of 2011, plenty of wiggle room remains. Already, the *New York Times* reports, General Ray Odierno, commander of U.S. forces in that country, is lobbying Washington to establish "an Office of Military Cooperation within the American Embassy in Baghdad to sustain the relationship after... Dec. 31, 2011." ("We have to stay committed to this past 2011," Odierno is quoted as saying. "I believe the administration knows that. I believe that they have to do that in order to see this through to the end. It's important to recognize that just because U.S. soldiers leave, Iraq is not finished.")

If you want a true gauge of American withdrawal, keep your eye on the megabases the Pentagon has built in Iraq since 2003, especially gigantic Balad Air Base (since the Iraqis will not, by the end of 2011, have a real air force of their own), and perhaps Camp Victory, the vast, ill-named U.S. base and command center abutting Baghdad International Airport on the outskirts of the capital. Keep an eye as well on the 104-acre U.S. embassy built along the Tigris River in downtown Baghdad. At present, it's the largest "embassy" on the planet and represents something new in "diplomacy," being es-



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entially a military-base-cum-command-and-control-center for the region. It is clearly going nowhere, withdrawal or not.

In fact, recent reports indicate that in the near future "embassy" personnel, including police trainers, military officials connected to that Office of Coordination, spies, U.S. advisors attached to various Iraqi ministries, and the like, may be more than doubled from the present staggering staff level of 1,400 to 3,000 or above. (The embassy, by the way, has requested \$1,875 billion for its operations in fiscal year 2011, and that was assuming a staffing level of only 1,400.) Realistically, as long as such an embassy remains at Ground Zero Iraq, we will not have withdrawn from that country.

Similarly, we have a giant U.S. embassy in Kabul (being expanded) and another mega-embassy being built in the Pakistani capital Islamabad. These are not, rest assured, signs of departure. Nor is the fact that in Afghanistan and Pakistan, everything war-connected seems to be surging, even if in ways often not noticed here. President Obama's surge decision has been described largely in terms of those 30,000-odd extra troops he's sending in, not in terms of the shadow army of 30,000 or more extra private contractors taking on various military roles (and dying off the books in striking numbers); nor the extra contingent of CIA types and the escalating drone war they are overseeing in the Pakistani tribal borderlands; nor the quiet doubling of Special Operations units assigned to hunt down the Taliban leadership; nor the extra State department officials for the "civilian surge"; nor, for instance, the special \$10 million "pool" of funds that up to 120 U.S. Special Operations forces, already in those borderlands training the paramili-

tary Pakistani Frontier Corps, may soon have available to spend “winning hearts and minds.”

Perhaps it’s historically accurate to say that great powers generally leave home, head elsewhere armed to the teeth, and then experience the urge to stay. With our trillion-dollar-plus wars and yearly trillion-dollar-plus national-security budget, there’s a lot at stake in staying, and undoubtedly in fighting two, three, many Afghanistans (and Iraqs) in the years to come.

Sooner or later, we will leave both Iraq



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and Afghanistan. It’s too late in the history of this planet to occupy them forever and a day. Better sooner.

Note of thanks: I found a brief commentary TomDispatch regular Michael Schwartz sent around of particular interest in thinking about this piece. Let me just add that the offhand comments of my friend Jim Peck often bear fruit in pieces like this, and the daily news summaries and updates from Antiwar.com’s Jason Ditz are a constant help. A bow to all three of them.

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