

The Long Withdrawal: The Defeated Leave Afghanistan

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Global Research, October 29, 2014

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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"The problem of Islamic extremism was there before we went into Afghanistan and is going to be with us for a long time." (Michael Fallon, UK Defence Secretary, The Telegraph, Oct 26, 2014)

The flags of two powers – that of the United States and Britain – have been lowered at the Bastion-Leatherneck military complex in Helmand Province. Both have had a history with Afghanistan its soldiers would rather forget, along with soldiers of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). It was a history that they need never have had.

The transfer of such bases has been written off as yet another milestone. Milestones are always a sure reminder that a program is going terribly wrong, halting in its own tracks. When the wheels are falling off, the apologists attempt to find fictitious goals of achievement to prop up the collapsing vehicle. Take the comments of Tim Craig, writing in the *Washington Post* (Oct 26). "The transfer of Camp Leatherneck and Camp Bastion, the hub for coalition forces in southwestern Afghanistan, is the most dramatic signal to date that the 13-year-old war is drawing to a close." [1]

US Army Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson could call it a "truly historic day", one which concluded the coalition mission after years "of continuous combat, countless hours of sunbaked patrols and numerous casualties". Such comments hardly count for votes of confidence, and historic days can be ones of momentous defeat as well as those of victory.

When the analysts take their scalpels out to examine the mission, the sober ones – at least those who haven't drunk of that vile urn that is patriotism – see very little to cheer about. "America's long war in Afghanistan isn't likely to end well," wrote Stephen M. Walt in *Foreign Policy* earlier this year, "and the American people seem to know it." [2] They were not, he ventured, as "gullible" as all that.

Walt proceeded to go through the "top 10 mistakes" that were made during the conflict. There was that howler of unilateralism, a costly failing of the Bush administration. Go it alone, and to hell with the rest. There was bumbling over the issue of capturing Osama bin Laden, though Walt can't resist speculating that killing or capturing Bin Laden at Tora Bora would have prevented al-Qaeda from morphing "into a global franchise". The 2004 Afghan Constitution took the step of over centralising at the expense of regional distinctness, something that would only have been possible with a stable, functioning civil service. The US political establishment, all in all, lost the vote in never finding the lasting rationale.

Even British Defence Secretary Michael Fallon would find himself conceding to Andrew Marr

on the BBC that, "Mistakes were made militarily, mistakes were made by politicians at the time, and this goes back 10, 13 years, some time now." The fall-back position, as it always tends to be, is to focus on "what has been achieved".[3]

Such a position is happily taken by British conservative politician Afzal Amin, the current candidate for Dudley North, who flounders in trying to justify the efforts even as the obvious stares at him. All the insurgents needed to do, be there the Taliban, the Haqqani Network or Hekmatyar's Hizbi-Islami, was "survive". "This is what has happened" (*The Guardian*, Oct 29). Failure arose, in other words, because NATO's institutions "were not fit for the task of counter-insurgency."

Best, then, to be positive. "Afghanistan remains a decentralised and rural society so there is ample data across this rich and varied land to support either a conclusion of failure or one of tentative success."

That said, Fallon drew something of a cordon around the Afghan mission, signposting it with unequivocal warning. The mission was both said and done. British troops would not "under any circumstances" be deployed again to the country, despite the almost guaranteed spike in insurgency attacks. So much to be said, then, for the mission that its own orchestrators could barely justify.

Much of the talk surrounding the withdrawal, which is by every other name a concerted defeat, is disingenuous waffle. While British and US forces making their bloodied exit, there is always care in noting on the part of any relevant official that NATO's involvement will continue to some degree. In Fallon's words, there will be "training and liaison and helping with intelligence and surveillance and counter-terrorism where necessary."

Then there is the necessary overconfidence, a strained effort on the part of the Afghan leadership to be brave in the face of imminent slaughter and collapse. Its finest representative was surely Major-General Saeed Malouk, who could answer questions about whether peace and prosperity had been achieved with a ham quality confidence. "Of course, that is why they are leaving right now because there is peace and prosperity." [4]

To claim that a conflict has closed is to assume some sense of its beginning. It may have ended for certain combat personnel, but the war remains very much an open-ended one that has done nothing to, whatever Fallon thinks, eliminate "safe havens" for terrorism. Afghanistan is the country of perennial conflict, a state that has never been entirely weaned off the teat of war.

Much of that has not been the making of its own people, who have become the modern era's stoics in the face of cruel circumstance. Invading states have shown themselves to be inept pupils with misguided leaderships, and the only constant in this are the recycled battles and encounters that prevent the country from developing. Afghanistan remains a country empires go to die.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-coalition-hands-over-2-major-bases-to-afghan-->

military/2014/10/26/95bb2538-5cf5-11e4-a94b-0c00d037c1dc_story.html

[2] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/03/the_top_ten_mistakes_made_in_the_afghan_war

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/11188538/British-troops-will-never-be-sent-back-to-Afghanistan-under-any-circumstances-Michael-Fallon-says-as-Camp-Bastion-is-handed-over.html>

[4] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/28/camp-bastion-helmand-uk-troops-hand-over-afghanistan>

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