

# THE AMERICAN

AEI The Online Magazine of the American Enterprise Institute

## ***Whither Afghanistan after this weekend's shooting and the Koran burning?***

By **The Editors**

March 15, 2012, 1:39 pm

• A A A

*In the wake of this weekend's shootings by a U.S. soldier and the recent Koran burning incident, many in the United States—including leading GOP presidential candidates—are calling for the United States to accelerate its withdrawal from Afghanistan. What is the way forward for the U.S. in Afghanistan? We asked a number of experts and policymakers what the next steps for America should be:*

### **U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham**

Further accelerating the withdrawal from Afghanistan based on politics and not successes on the ground will dramatically compromise our ability to leave behind a secure and stable Afghanistan.

General Allen's strategy for fighting the war is the right way to go and keeps our national security interests intact. Under his plan, we continue turning over control to the Afghans who will be responsible for their own security, establish a lasting counter-terrorism capability to ensure Al Qaeda never comes back and the Taliban never wins, and withdraw the vast majority of American troops by the end of 2014. No one has suggested to me that his plan is militarily irresponsible. I know his plan is sound and I have confidence in the general based upon my multiple visits to Afghanistan.

American national security interests, in the region and throughout the world, will be determined by how we transition control and draw down our troops in Afghanistan. It's a critical time, and the idea that we are contemplating further accelerating an additional reduction in force—ahead of those previously announced—sends the wrong message to both our friends and enemies. Any strategy that is not solely focused on tactical successes puts the lives of our soldiers and sailors at risk and sacrifices their ability to accomplish their mission.

Americans are rightfully war-weary, but I fear that those motivated by short-term politics, whether they are Republicans or Democrats, are doing the country a great disservice.

We will come home under General Allen's plan and will do so in a sound, responsible manner. How we conclude the war in Afghanistan is incredibly important and will have a serious impact on our long-term national security interests for years to come.

**Lieutenant General David Barno, USA (Ret.), senior adviser and senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and former commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan**

The cumulative effect of a recent spate of shocking incidents in Afghanistan is worrying. Growing numbers of U.S. and allied officials and citizens are beginning to question both the legitimacy and prospects for success of the entire ten-year international effort. From the inadvertent burnings of the Koran to U.S. Marines urinating on Taliban dead, from the "green-on-blue" murders of U.S. troops by their Afghan counterparts to the shocking killing of Afghan civilians by a rogue American soldier, the last 60 days have been a kaleidoscopic whirl of one catastrophe after another. Yet within this surge of troubles, the bigger picture is often missed: the United States and our allies are in Afghanistan, and will remain there with some levels of force, *because of our vital interests*.

Two principal long-term interests drive the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, and must shape our ultimate residual force. First, we must prevent future terrorist attacks on the United States or our allies from this part of the world. Second, we must prevent nuclear weapons and materials located in the region from being used or falling into the hands of terrorists or other rogue actors. In both cases, a principal worry is the insecurity of Pakistan. And in truth, only a long-term U.S. military presence next door in Afghanistan can credibly help defend both of these vital interests. It cannot be done from offshore (as the 1990s demonstrated), and unlike in the Persian Gulf region, there are no U.S. military bases readily available outside of Afghanistan to support the vigilance required. Maintaining positive U.S. influence and watchful eyes in the region requires American boots on the ground, even if quite modest in number.

The American end game in Afghanistan is all about securing vital U.S. interests in the region beyond 2014. We can do that with a relatively small force of mostly special operators focused on counter-terrorism and advisory support. If we fail to protect our long-term regional interests, all of the sacrifice in blood and treasure over the last ten years will add up to a tragic and unredeemed loss. An enduring—if limited—presence in Afghanistan is fundamental to the long-term interests of the United States in this volatile part of the world. The tragic events of the last few weeks should not be allowed to obscure that central fact.

**Dr. Liam Fox, member of Parliament and former UK secretary of state for defense**

Recent events in Afghanistan, with the rioting following the accidental burning of copies of the Koran and the more recent killing of civilians by an American soldier, have dismayed us all.

It is always tempting to respond to short-term political pressures with a change of direction, especially when the issue is one where lives are being lost and a war-weary public have become restless and disenchanted. Tempting, but usually wrong. We have a clear timetable for the transfer of authority to Afghan forces at the end of 2014 and we should stick to it. To put ourselves at a long-term strategic disadvantage for the sake of a perceived short-term tactical advantage would be to repeat an all-too-frequent historical failure. The reputation of the NATO alliance is on the line. A sudden rush for the exit would not only be disastrous for our future credibility but, in giving hope and encouragement to the Taliban, would be a betrayal of the sacrifices in life and limb made by so many of our servicemen and women. All conflicts have setbacks, and the path to success is seldom smooth and linear. There is nothing that the fundamentalists would like more than the triple win of coalition forces leaving, the impression that they had been forced out by Taliban activity, and the reputational damage we would suffer in the region and beyond.

The purpose of entering into conflict is to win, not to leave at the earliest possible moment. Western leaders deserve credit for sticking to the military plan already agreed upon by NATO. They deserve our support now if they stick to that timetable. Party political interests must play second fiddle to our national interests and our international obligations.

**Fred Kagan, resident scholar and director, AEI Critical Threats Project**

American interests in Afghanistan remain unchanged—create conditions that will prevent al Qaeda and its affiliates from re-establishing safe havens in that country even after the withdrawal of most international forces. The United States also has a substantial interest in maintaining bases in Afghanistan from which to observe and conduct operations, when necessary, into the tribal areas in Pakistan. The deterioration of U.S.-Pakistani relations means that Afghan bases are absolutely essential to that mission. But the United States cannot have bases in an Afghanistan that is in flames, and no Afghan president is likely to support continued American presence that does not help him retain control of his country. The only way for the United States to continue meaningful counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan is to succeed in the counter-insurgency operations now underway in Afghanistan.

The protests over the burning of the Korans at Bagram airfield and the horrific actions of an American soldier in Kandahar Province certainly make the task more challenging. But the protests have subsided and, so far, response to the massacre in Kandahar has been more muted. President Karzai, moreover, has reiterated his desire to establish a long-term security relationship with the United States, and other senior Afghan leaders of all ethnicities have been helping to quell the unrest rather than fueling it (as some of them, including Karzai, have done in previous such crises). The Afghan leadership clearly understands its need for the American presence and partnership and clearly does not see in these crises evidence that its people, still less its security forces, have turned fundamentally against the United States.

We are about to enter the most serious part of the Afghan fighting season—a fighting season that will be extended this year by the early dates of Ramadan (mid-July through mid-August), which will give the Taliban time to try to regain momentum at the end of this year, after American surge forces have left but before the hard winter sets in.

Now is not the time to be making decisions, still less announcements, about future force size or even mission in Afghanistan. Now is the time to support our commanders and troops as they take the fight to the enemy, in partnership with Afghan Security Forces, to clear important safe havens south of Kabul that are essential both for the success of the counter-insurgency effort and for the defeat of the insurgent groups most closely affiliated with al Qaeda.

**Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst, the CATO Institute**

It is safe to say that the Obama administration will not expedite or significantly reduce the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan before 2014. Washington has pinned its exit on building up the Afghan national security forces, an effort that only really began in 2009. But Afghans might not be ready by 2014, or many years after. The Obama administration must confront this reality. Sadly, this region has been in constant conflict for over a generation and will remain so whether or not we stay.

Despite quantifiable personnel gains, the Afghan National Police has developed a reputation for desertion and rapaciousness. Meanwhile, on top of logistical challenges, the performance and effectiveness of the Afghan National Army remains questionable. Furthermore, competing sub-national loyalties may preclude Afghan security forces from pledging allegiance to a tightly centralized government in Kabul, an entity that remains corrupt and grossly ineffective.

These problems persisted well before the recent spate of events became crippling P.R. disasters. Last summer, the Wall Street Journal reported on a classified military study that found the killings of American soldiers by Afghan troops were turning into a “growing systemic threat” that could undermine the entire war effort. It concluded that top commanders were ignoring a “crisis of trust” between Afghan forces and American soldiers.

Forgotten amid recent events is the issue of Pakistan, a major challenge that cannot be addressed by the fledgling Afghan security forces. By way of proxies, elements of Pakistan’s security establishment have extended their geopolitical reach into Afghanistan as a hedge against India. Washington has never been able to seriously address this issue. Pakistan’s reluctance to go after select militant groups, including some it has nurtured for more than 30 years, represents an enduring structural challenge to Afghanistan’s internal security situation.

We are told that establishing internal security will take two more years, but Americans have already sacrificed too much in blood and treasure. The current U.S. mission could press on well beyond 2014 and never achieve its goal.

**Ahmad K. Majidyar, senior research associate at the American Enterprise Institute**

The latest spate of violent episodes in Afghanistan—the weekend [killing](#) of 16 Afghan civilians by a deranged American soldier in Kandahar, the [murder](#) of U.S. servicemen by their Afghan counterparts, and anti-American [protests](#) after the accidental burning of Korans at the Bagram air base—appear to have empowered those in Washington who advocate for a quicker withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.

The New York Times [reports](#) that senior officials at the White House are discussing the drawdown of 20,000 troops in 2013, in addition to the 23,000 already scheduled to leave this summer. Support among the GOP presidential candidates is also [declining](#). While [Rick Santorum](#) and [Mitt Romney](#) said U.S. should “reassess” its role in Afghanistan, [Newt Gingrich](#) argued it was time “to back off that region.”

With eight months to go before the November election, promises of an early exit from Afghanistan may play well with war-weary voters. But it's a recipe for failure in Afghanistan.

The surge of 33,000 American troops over the past two years arrested the Taliban momentum and expelled the insurgents from their strongholds in the south. The Taliban failed to make a comeback in their spring and summer offensives last year. The surge also contributed to improving the quality and size of the Afghan security forces. But these gains are still fragile and reversible.

President Obama's politically-motivated deadlines have already [undercut](#) the effectiveness of the surge, emboldened the Taliban, strained ties with Kabul, provided a justification for NATO allies to withdraw their own troops at a faster pace, and encouraged Pakistan and Iran to continue support for the insurgency. A premature withdrawal, or further reduction in the number of troops before the transition of security responsibilities to the Afghans in 2014, will undo the gains of the past years and allow the Taliban and al Qaeda to reconstitute in Afghanistan.