

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Administration Bait and Switch in Afghanistan?

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U.S. combat troops are leaving Afghanistan in 2014. That was the consistent message which I received on my NATO-organized visit two months ago to a country now defined by war. The American and European governments have promised to provide long-term financial assistance and combat training, but they plan on shifting the actual fighting to Kabul's hands.

Maybe not, it now seems. The U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Ryan Crocker, said America might just stick around and continue the war. Reported the *New York Times* [3]:

The ambassador, Ryan C. Crocker, speaking at a roundtable event with a small group of journalists, said that if the Afghan government wanted American troops to stay longer, the withdrawal could be slowed. "They would have to ask for it," he said. "I could certainly see us saying, 'Yeah, makes sense.' "

The ambassador's standard is whether the Afghan government asked the United States to stay. It would make more sense to ask the American people what they think.

The argument that it's time for Washington to go, but to go in a manner which attempts to preserve something positive has appeal, though there are plenty of reasons to doubt that it is feasible. President Hamid Karzai & Friends appeared to be neither more competent nor better loved than when I visited last year. I don't expect much improvement next year. Nevertheless, the case for a phased withdrawal deserves to be treated seriously.

But leave the United States must. Had President George W. Bush announced in 2001 that he was embarking on a long-term mission to transform Afghanistan by

turning it into a Western-style liberal democracy with a strong central government in Kabul, he would have been laughed out of Washington. The American people would have unceremoniously tossed him out of office in 2004.

Yet remake Afghanistan is what the U.S. government now is attempting to do. When I asked what justified this expensive attempt at nation-building, Afghans and Americans alike warned that al Qaeda could reemerge. I assume no one really believed that. At least, I hope no one really believed that.

After all, al Qaeda is in sharp decline. Intelligence officials say that al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan is minimal. The likelihood of revival seems small.

Moreover, terrorists have demonstrated an ability to operate all over the world. Of course, Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan. There are plenty of other potential sanctuaries available in failed and semi-failed states. Indeed, the biggest Islamic terrorist threat these days appears to come from local groups which identify with, but are not controlled by, al Qaeda. Afghanistan is irrelevant to the latter's operation and impact, and of no interest to other terrorists.

There's also strong humanitarian appeal in staying, but that can't justify endless war in Central Asia. Washington would never have intervened to make Afghanistan a more humane place. American troops have been fighting there for ten years—as long as World Wars I and II combined.

If the president plans on keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond the promised 2014, he should 'fess up. Then the American people can make their views known. And, more important, they can take appropriate action in next year's presidential election.