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**September 15, 2009**  
**Categories: Afghanistan**

**Realists warn on Afghan war**

A group of "realist" scholars and activists have written President Obama urging him to reconsider America's commitment in Afghanistan.

"During your campaign for the Presidency, Americans around the country appreciated your skepticism of the rationales for the Iraq war. In 2002, you had warned that such an endeavor would yield 'a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, and with unintended consequences.' You pointed out the dangers of fighting such a war 'without a clear rationale and without strong international support.' As scholars of international relations and U.S. foreign policy, many of us issued similar warnings before the war, unfortunately to little avail," says the letter, being circulated by the [Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy](#), which formed in 2003 to coordinate opposition from realists, right and left, to the Iraq War.

"Today, we are concerned that the war in Afghanistan is growing increasingly detached from considerations of length, cost, and consequences. Its rationale is becoming murkier and both domestic and international support for it is waning. Respectfully, we urge you to focus U.S. strategy more clearly on al Qaeda instead of expanding the mission into an ambitious experiment in state building," the letter says.

The signers include the New America Foundation's Steve Clemons and the Cato Institute's Christopher Preble, political scientists Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, and author David Rieff.

The missive follows a [letter to Obama](#) from leading conservative and neo-conservative thinkers backing a more muscular American presence in Afghanistan, and urging him to heed the council of military officials calling for more troops. And the realists take a jab at the signers of the earlier letter.

"Many of those urging you to deepen U.S. involvement in that country are the same people who promised we would encounter few difficulties in Iraq and that that war would solve our problems in the Middle East, neither of which proved to be the case," they write.

The full letter is after the jump.

The Honorable Barack Obama  
 President of the United States  
 The White House  
 Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President:

During your campaign for the Presidency, Americans around the country appreciated your skepticism of the rationales for the Iraq war. In 2002, you had warned that such an endeavor would yield "a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, and with unintended consequences." You pointed out the dangers of fighting such a war "without a clear rationale and without strong international support." As scholars of international relations and U.S. foreign policy, many of us issued similar warnings before the war, unfortunately to little avail.

Today, we are concerned that the war in Afghanistan is growing increasingly detached from considerations of length, cost, and consequences. Its rationale is becoming murkier and both domestic and international support for it is waning. Respectfully, we urge you to focus U.S. strategy more clearly on al Qaeda instead of expanding the mission into an ambitious experiment in state building.

First, our objectives in that country have grown overly ambitious. The current strategy centers on assembling a viable, compliant, modern state in Afghanistan--something that has never before existed. The history of U.S. state-building endeavors is not encouraging, and Afghanistan poses particular challenges. Engaging in competitive governance with the Taliban is a counterproductive strategy, pushing the Taliban and al Qaeda together instead of driving them apart. If we cannot leave Afghanistan until we have created an effective central government, we are likely to be there for decades, with no guarantee of success.

Second, the rationale of expanding the mission in order to prevent "safe havens" for al Qaeda from emerging is appealing but flawed. Afghanistan, even excluding the non-Pashto areas, is a large, geographically imposing country where it is probably impossible to ensure that no safe havens could exist. Searching for certainty that there are not and will not be safe havens in Afghanistan is quixotic and likely to be extremely costly. Even if some massive effort in that country were somehow able to prevent a safe haven there, dozens of other countries could easily serve the same purpose. Even well-governed modern democracies like Germany have inadvertently provided staging grounds for terrorists. A better strategy would focus on negotiations with moderate Taliban elements, regional diplomacy, and disrupting any large-scale al Qaeda operations that may emerge. Those are achievable goals.

Third, an expanded mission fails a simple cost/benefit test. In order to markedly improve our chances of victory--which Ambassador Richard Holbrooke can only promise "we'll know it when we see it"--we would need to make a decades-long commitment to creating a state in Afghanistan, and even in that case, success would be far from certain. As with all foreign policies, this enormous effort must be weighed against the opportunity costs. Money, troops, and other resources would be poured into Afghanistan at the expense of other national priorities, both foreign and domestic.

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By Ben Smith 01:52 PM

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First, do 'Realists' and 'Afghan War' belong in the same sentence? If you think about it, I guess they do. At least as much as 'Dreamers' and 'Afghan Peace' do.

**Posted By:** Tom Doff | September 15, 2009 at 01:57 PM [REPORT ABUSE](#)

A coupla thousand years from now, when the latest edition of 'The Afghan War; Up-To-Date' is published, I wonder if it'll be as big a seller as The Bible? It'll certainly be as much a figment.

**Posted By:** Tom Doff | September 15, 2009 at 01:59 PM [REPORT ABUSE](#)

get out of iraq and afghanistan immediately, we can not afford these wars. there are greater dangers at home..

**Posted By:** desertdude | September 15, 2009 at 02:00 PM [REPORT ABUSE](#)

if someone drew a plan up of how to bring the usa to it's knees, they would be hard pressed to do better then what is going on right now.....or did someone draw up a plan?

**Posted By:** yeah sure | September 15, 2009 at 02:02 PM [REPORT ABUSE](#)

Funny, in Kabul, this little contretemps is referred to as 'The US Occupation', not 'The Afghan War'. I wonder, when 'The Afghan War' becomes the biggest selling-video game in the US, will the Afghanis get royalties? Or will they all go to the Afghan Government, The Taliban?

**Posted By:** Tom Doff | September 15, 2009 at 02:04 PM [REPORT ABUSE](#)

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**Wilson's wife: 'I said 'Joe, who's the nut'**

**Not closely enough?**

**AJC: 'Bad Politics'**

I collect with **vodpod**



Reality Check in everything we do from foreign policy to energy, climate change before and after health care. Especially suitable to my loudmouth friends in the GOP! LONDON ? A weakened United States could start retreating from the world stage without help from its allies abroad, an international strategic affairs think tank said Tuesday. The respected London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies said President Barack Obama will increasingly have to turn to others for help dealing with the world's problems ? in part because he has no alternative. "Domestically Obama may have campaigned on the theme 'yes we can'; internationally he may increasingly have to argue 'no we can't'," the institute said in its annual review of world affairs. The report said the U.S. struggles against insurgent groups in Iraq and Afghanistan had exposed the limits of the country's military muscle, while the near-collapse of the world financial markets sapped the economic base on which that muscle relied. The report also claimed that the U.S. had lost traction in its efforts to contain Iran's nuclear program and bring peace to the Middle East. "Clearly the U.S. share of 'global power,' however measured, is in decline," the report said. The head of another respected London think tank, Robin Niblett of Chatham House, said the rise in the relative power of China, India, Russia and the European Union has made it harder for the U.S. to exercise its influence. "America should apply changes in leadership style, but I wouldn't overplay the decline because decline is relative," said Niblett ? who was not involved in drawing up Tuesday's report. "One should not doubt that the U.S. remains the most powerful nation in the world, but it's difficult to use the power and to use it to influence others." In addition to a rise in regional powers, Niblett said the U.S. has long been viewed as being part of the problem rather than the solution on many issues ? including climate change, the financial crisis, and the failure of the Middle East peace process. "It's also carrying the baggage of failed policies and of a failed financial approach," Niblett said, referring to the Bush administration. "There's a lot of catching up to be done." The IISS report praised Obama, saying that he recognized there was only so much America could do "to impose its views on others." After years of often thorny relationships between the U.S. and its allies during Bush's administration, Obama has talked of the need to work with other nations on such issues as the financial meltdown, climate change and nuclear proliferation. "These are challenges that no single nation, no matter how powerful, can confront alone," Obama said in April after attending the G-20 summit in London. "The United States must lead the way," he said. "But our best chance to solve these unprecedented problems comes from acting in concert with other nations." The think tank's report said Obama could help restore the United States' standing by working with other nations to contain emerging threats to its position as the world's pre-eminent power. Controlling the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea would require help from regional allies, the report said. The same was true of Afghanistan, where the U.S. has had difficulty persuading its NATO partners to follow its lead in boosting the number of troops sent to fight a resurgent Taliban. "In the next year or two, the greatest demand on U.S. talents and power will be to persuade more to become like minded and adopt greater burdens," the report said. Niblett said Obama was moving in the right direction. "This administration is far more frank about the U.S. interdependence with rest of the world, and that's a good thing," Niblett said.

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**Posted By:** From your friends across the world | September 15, 2009 at 02:05 PM



No retreat until we have captured or killed Bin Laden! Forget these 'realists'. Where were they when Bush lead us into Iraq? We could have finished this thing by now if the resources poured into Iraq were committed to Afgan and Pakistan. Lets finish the fight!

**Posted By:** RJK | September 15, 2009 at 02:24 PM



Mr.Doff, there you waving the white flag again..Those who attacked this nation on 911 are in Afghanistan, and are plotting to do so again. President Obama is determined to take them out, just like he did the wanted terrorist in Somalia, yesterday..Now is not the time for weakness, now is the time for action and seeing the job through on every level, the economy, health care reform, defending the nation..Get some cajones, man, what is the matter with you...support those who are defending the nations, barely a few days after 8th anniversary of 911 and you are belly-aching, toughen up man!!!

**Posted By:** ruraledcomm | September 15, 2009 at 02:27 PM



MARCH 27TH, 2009

A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/03/27/A-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/> (snippet)

I've already ordered the deployment of 17,000 troops that had been requested by General McKiernan for many months. These soldiers and Marines will take the fight to the Taliban in the south and the east, and give us a greater capacity to partner with Afghan security forces and to go after insurgents along the border. This push will also help provide security in advance of the important presidential elections in Afghanistan in August.

At the same time, we will shift the emphasis of our mission to training and increasing the size of Afghan security forces, so that they can eventually take the lead in securing their country. That's how we will prepare Afghans to take responsibility for their security, and how we will ultimately be able to bring our own troops home.

**For three years, our commanders have been clear about the resources they need for training. And those resources have been denied because of the war in Iraq. Now, that will change. The additional troops that we deployed have already increased our training capacity. And later this spring we will deploy approximately 4,000 U.S. troops to train Afghan security forces. For the first time, this will truly resource our effort to train and support the Afghan army and police. Every American unit in Afghanistan will be partnered with an Afghan unit, and we will seek additional trainers from our NATO allies to ensure that every Afghan unit has a coalition partner. We will accelerate our efforts to build an Afghan army of 134,000 and a police force of 82,000 so that we can meet these goals by 2011 -- and increases in Afghan forces may very well be needed as our plans to turn over security responsibility to the Afghans go forward.**

**Posted By:** | September 15, 2009 at 02:31 PM



RJK at 2:24; it's no longer your fight my friend, regardless your disbelief and uneducated guess, even your friend George Will will provide you with his opinion on this!

**Posted By:** Disbelief in Ignorance | September 15, 2009 at 02:36 PM



To 2:31: even our generals are politicians at the level they operate, if not on a ship on the golf course discussing their next star and who will get it the other promotions. It is deliberate ignorance from the common people to think they have a vote on this. Too many rogues make decisions for us, more so in Coorporate America and the world, than the dark side of our government. We don't even punish those who have been responsible for the demise of the USA.

**Posted By:** to 2:32 | September 15, 2009 at 02:42 PM



The White House should just offer Steve Clemons the job of Afghan Czar and be done with it.

**Posted By:** | September 15, 2009 at 02:56 PM



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