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Previewing Obama's Afghanistan Speech

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[Christopher A. Preble](#) ^[2]



Tonight, President Obama will announce how many troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan over the next 18 months. *CNN.com* [reported](#) ^[3] that the president is expected to announce a plan that would bring all 30,000 “surge” troops home by the end of 2012. This would give them two more fighting seasons in Afghanistan. The *Los Angeles Times* [reported](#) ^[4] administration and Pentagon officials told them 10,000 troops will leave Afghanistan by the end of this year. In an effort to quell the leaks, White House officials told *Fox News* that Obama has not made a final decision and that the reporting is “all over the map.”

But we should not allow this speculation over troop numbers to distract us from the bigger picture. Even if by the end of 2012 the size of the U.S. military presence is reduced by 30,000 (and I’m not holding my breath), that would still leave more than twice as many troops as were there in January 2009 when Obama took office.

We won’t know for sure what the president intends until tonight. More importantly, we won’t know if the president’s intentions translate into actual troop withdrawals until our brave men and women are welcomed back home. There will always be those arguing that conditions on the ground do not allow for a U.S. withdrawal. Some are making that case with respect to Iraq, a

war that was supposedly won by David Petraeus and the surge back in 2008. For the U.S. military, it seems that every war is like the Eagles' Hotel California: we can check out, but we can never leave.

Regardless of the president's decision, the mission will not have changed. The military wants more time to put pressure on the Taliban. They believe that they have the Taliban on the run, and that continuing pressure will aid in negotiations on a political settlement. Meanwhile, the true believers of nation-building want to buy more time for the Karzai government to get its act together. They believe that if American troops and aid workers dig more wells, pave more roads, build more schools, and draft more legal standards, we will have achieved our essential goals. The public, and a growing number within the Congress, is skeptical.

And they should be. A nation-building mission is far too ambitious, and far too costly. Most importantly, it isn't necessary [5]. We could keep pressure on the Taliban, and deny al Qaeda a sanctuary, with perhaps as few as 10,000 troops in Afghanistan. If President Obama rejects that option, and declares instead that more than 60,000 U.S. troops will be in Afghanistan in 2013, he will have bowed to pressure from some within the Pentagon, at State, and a handful of think tankers, and ignored the clear wishes of the American people who want to turn their attention to building the United States, and allow the Afghans to build Afghanistan.

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[4] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-afghan-withdrawal-20110621,0,6964197.story>

[5] http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=13178