



Barack Obama's Warfare State

By: Malou Innocent – February 14, 2013

In his fifth State of the Union address, President Barack Obama hit all the main talking points that everyone expected he would. What he did not say, though, should concern many Americans. Numerous polls show that the majority of Americans want U.S. troops to out of Afghanistan "as soon as possible." Americans also say that their country does not have a responsibility to get involved in Syria and the broader Middle East, and they favor substantial cuts to record high military spending. On all three of these issues, however, Obama did not go far enough and even went in the opposite direction. Certainly, foreign policy should not always fluctuate with the prevailing political winds. But the interests of the American people undoubtedly deserve to be heard.

On Afghanistan, Obama pledged to cut America's presence in half by bringing 34,000 troops home by this time next year. Of course, he failed to specify how many troops will remain thereafter. Last May, he and President Hamid Karzai signed a long-term strategic partnership agreement that committed America to Afghanistan's military and economic security—*until 2024*. Absent a status of forces agreement, and a resolution to the issue of whether U.S. troops will be immune from the Afghan judicial system, the exact size of America's residual presence remains murky.

Nevertheless, the commander-in-chief could have clarified why the United States should dwell in Central Asia for another decade. He should have explained what vital American interests are being served and what aspect of America's national security would be at stake once we leave. With foreign-policy planners continuing to press for an open-ended commitment, claiming the war will end in 2014 was flagrantly disingenuous.

On future U.S. military interventions, the president was correct to state that "We don't need to send tens of thousands of our sons and daughters abroad or occupy other nations." But his following promise to "help countries like Yemen, Libya, and Somalia provide for their own security" was ill-defined and dangerous. The reason: Obama failed to lay out what set of conditions would warrant America's "help," at a time when the country should be more selective about where it chooses to intervene.

Put simply, if Yemen, why not Pakistan? If Somalia, why not Haiti? If Libya, why not Zimbabwe, or the dozens of other countries across Africa? What Obama did not articulate was a limiting principle for when and where America would *not* commit its scarce resources. Americans deserve to know what conditions would merit U.S. assistance, and what the president is prepared to sacrifice to provide it.

Finally, with sequestration just a few weeks away, the president failed to propose a substantive alternative to across the board cuts. Indeed, he largely avoided any criticism of military spending, and claimed that "sudden, harsh, arbitrary cuts would jeopardize our military readiness." The reality, though, is that even with sequestration, the Pentagon's base budget will remain well above the post-Cold War average, and merely

sink to 2007 spending levels. Furthermore, if Obama had his way, we would see either fewer cuts to the Pentagon than called for under sequestration, or added taxation to cover the difference. With the military accounting for nearly 20 percent of total federal spending, Americans are right to demand that such figures be reduced. The United States accounts for about half of global military spending and spends more on its military than all other advanced industrial economies. Last year alone, Americans spent \$729 billion on military and international security, and nearly \$930 billion including the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security. Spending close to a trillion dollars a year will not help safeguard our country's financial security, ostensibly a main thrust of Obama's address.

Unfortunately, politicians on both sides of the aisle seem to believe that spending reflects an accurate measure of military effectiveness, whereas Americans intuitively understand that strength is not a function of how much we spend. It is time for politicians to revisit how America engages with the world, and recognize that there are more peaceful, more effective, and less costly ways to project America's power and influence abroad and meet our security objectives.

Commentators praised Obama for waxing eloquent on everything from combating climate change and reducing gun violence to creating jobs and raising the minimum wage. What they neglected was the warfare state—the elephant in the room. Americans seek to restrain their leaders' boundless ambition to resolve every foreign civil conflict and maintain historically high military spending levels. Having endured over a decade of permanent war and near financial collapse, Americans have time and again voiced their opposition to the status quo. They deserve to be heard.