

[The Drawdown Debate](#)

Jon Huntsman may have been a no-show at the first 2012 GOP debate, but his comments about the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan made the most news. FP asked three Afghanistan experts to weigh in.

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Christopher Preble: **Huntsman's Right: Bring 'em Home**

Jon Huntsman is on the right track with his call for a much smaller U.S. military presence and a more focused mission in Afghanistan. His suggestion makes sense for at least three reasons. First, the current nation-building mission is far too costly relative to realistic alternatives, particularly at a time when Americans are looking for ways to shrink the size of government. Second, nation-building in Afghanistan is unnecessary. We can advance our national security interests without crafting a functioning nation-state in the Hindu

Kush. And third, the current mission is deeply unconservative, succumbing to the same errors that trip up other ambitious government-run projects that conservatives routinely reject here at home.

Huntsman is hardly alone. Most Americans, and even many conservatives, have been questioning the known costs and the anticipated benefits of the Afghan mission for months. Last week's [report](#) by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee showing that our efforts have not merely failed, but have arguably made many of the problems in Afghanistan even worse, has merely confirmed many people's worst fears. The World Bank [estimates](#) that foreign military and development aid constitutes 97 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product.

It is true that the Afghan mission isn't the sole source of our fiscal distress; ending the mission tomorrow would not close the budget gap. But the resources that we have already plowed into Afghanistan, and those that would be required in the medium to long term, could be better spent elsewhere.

Too many analysts and defense officials falsely believe that we need to maintain a large military presence in Afghanistan to fight terrorism. They wrongly assume that a host of worst-case scenarios are likely to transpire if we reduce our footprint there. The conventional wisdom holds that weak and failing states are a breeding ground for violent extremism; thus we must build up the capacity of weak states and rebuild those that have failed. Such notions ignore the inconvenient truth that most weak and failing states are not major sources of terrorism, and a number of healthy states have been.

In fact, effective counterterrorism does not require the U.S. military to engage in armed social work in dozens of weak and failing states. It involves timely intelligence, close cooperation with locals, and, on rare occasions, targeted military operations. These might look like the special operations raid that killed Osama bin Laden, or drone or missile strikes against suspected terrorists. Large numbers of troops stationed in foreign lands are usually irrelevant to such operations, and are often counterproductive: Driving out the foreign occupying army becomes a rallying cry for individuals and groups who would otherwise struggle to attract supporters and recruits.

Alas, although many rank and file Republicans agree with Huntsman, many GOP leaders do not. Perhaps that will change when they realize that, at least in this instance, good policy and good politics go hand in hand. We should bring most of our troops home, and focus the attention of the few thousand who remain on hunting al Qaeda. The United States does not need to transform a deeply divided, poverty-stricken, tribal-based society into a self-sufficient, cohesive, and stable electoral democracy, and we should stop pretending that we can.

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