OPINION

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Opposing view: Time to leave

Obama's nation-building project in Afghanistan is a costly folly.

By Christopher Preble

With his latest escalation, President Obama will more than double the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan compared with when he took office. The president is saying, in effect, that a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign there is necessary to keep Americans safe from terrorism.

This is a dubious proposition at best. As Obama's national security adviser, Gen. James Jones, noted in October, "The al-Qaeda presence (in Afghanistan) is very diminished. The maximum estimate is less than 100 operating in the country, no bases, no ability to launch attacks on either us or our allies." We don't need 100,000 soldiers in Afghanistan chasing down 100 al-Qaeda fighters.

The real problem is that over the past eight years, the U.S. mission has shifted far beyond the original goal of degrading al-Qaeda's ability to cause harm. Our troops are now chasing after an extremely broad set of objectives, including: promoting "a more capable, accountable and effective" government; cracking down on the cultivation of illegal narcotics; and providing economic assistance in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. What we have seen over the past eight years is a classic case of mission creep. And that mission has a name: nation-building.

The U.S. should have gotten out of the nation-building business a long time ago. Most such projects fail. The prospects in Afghanistan — a country notoriously suspicious of outsiders and lacking central authority — are worse.

The president contends that the mission isn't open-ended, but his objectives do not lend themselves to an early exit — or, indeed, any exit. Obama's escalation places the burdens of police work, governance and economic development on the backs of U.S. troops and taxpayers, when Washington should be forcing Afghans to take the lead by drawing down our military presence there.

Our social-engineering project in Afghanistan is a costly folly, one we could have avoided by heeding the proper lessons from the disastrous wars in Vietnam and Iraq. The president's decision to double-down in Afghanistan parallels the Bush's administration's notion that unstable areas such as Afghanistan must be made "safe for democracy" or they will inevitably threaten U.S. national security.

The U.S. need not maintain more than 100,000 troops in Afghanistan in order to keep Americans reasonably safe and secure. Committing more troops in one particularly inhospitable place harms our best interests by pulling us deeper into a bloody guerilla war with no end in sight.

We should be looking for ways to leave Afghanistan, not excuses to dig a deeper hole.

Christopher Preble is the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and the author of The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous and Less Free.

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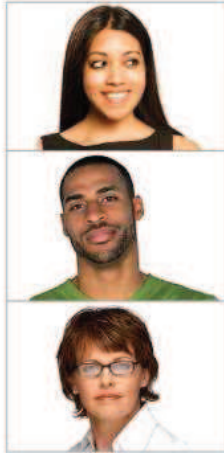Submit   f ☐ Post this comment to Facebook?

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