

## This War Isn't Over

Washington, D.C., June 20, 2014

**P**RESIDENT Obama at the end of May outlined his path for ending US involvement in the war in Afghanistan. "We will bring America's longest war to a responsible end" by reducing the US military presence in Afghanistan from 30,000 troops today to roughly 10,000 at the end of the year.

The force level will be halved again in 2015, leaving 5,000 troops consolidated in Kabul and at Bagram Air Base. By the end of 2016, Obama said, the military presence will be strictly embassy protection and an Iraq-style security assistance force.

"I think Americans have learned that it's harder to end wars than it is to begin them," Obama said. "Yet this is how wars end in the 21st century—not through signing ceremonies but through decisive blows against our adversaries, transitions to elected governments, [and] security forces who take the lead and ultimately full responsibility."

A week later, Obama commented on the return of Army SSgt. Bowe Bergdahl, freed in exchange for five terrorists in US custody: "This is what happens at the end of wars," Obama declared. "That was true for George Washington; that was true for Abraham Lincoln; ... at some point, you make sure that you try to get your folks back."

The rhetoric about the end of the war sounded great, but reality intervened. As if on cue, terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq immediately showed that this war is not over, and wishful thinking cannot make it so.

A look at the news from the first half of June:

In Pakistan, "militants launched a brazen attack on Karachi's international airport [June 8], killing at least 18 people and seizing control of part of the airport in Pakistan's largest city for more than five hours," reported the *Washington Post*. "The well-coordinated attack involved 10 assailants who were armed with grenades, rocket launchers, and assault weapons. ... They battled Pakistani security forces through the night." Another attack, on a nearby facility, followed two days later. In all, 36 died, including the terrorists.

In Afghanistan, "five US troops were killed in an apparent friendly fire incident in southern Afghanistan" June 9, the *Wall Street Journal* reported. "After an operation, the troops were on the way back to their base when they were ambushed by the Taliban," the local governor's aide explained. "Tragically, there is the possibility that fratricide may have been involved," NATO's International Security Assistance Force confirmed.

In Iraq the same week, "so absolute was the rout of Iraq's army in Mosul

### Don't repeat the mistakes of Iraq in Afghanistan.

that soldiers stripped off their uniforms in the street and fled," *The Economist* read. "Roughly 1,500 jihadists from the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), outnumbered by more than 15-to-one, reportedly seized six Black Hawk helicopters as well as untold plunder from the vaults of Mosul's banks. ... As many as half a million refugees sought sanctuary."

Back in Afghanistan, "Defense Ministry spokesman Gen. Mohammad Zahir Azimi said there had actually been 506 attacks across the country" during June 14 elections, *Stars and Stripes* reported. "Thirty-three civilians were killed and 63 wounded across the country, four times the number of civilian deaths reported in the April election. ... In Herat province 11 voters had their fingers, stained with ink to prevent repeat voting, chopped off by insurgents as punishment for voting."

And back in Iraq, as insurgents neared Baghdad, DOD began a return. Rear Adm. John Kirby, Pentagon spokesman, said June 16 approximately 170 US personnel began arriving in Baghdad while DOD also "moved approximately 100 personnel into the region to provide airfield management, security, and logistics support, if required. ... All of these forces are trained to integrate with existing US Embassy security teams or operate as a stand-alone force as directed."

Despite all this, Obama determined "we cannot have US forces around the world in armed conflicts without

end," said White House spokesman Jay Carney.

Whether you want to call this the Global War on Terror, the Long War, or overseas contingency operations countering violent extremism—the US does not have the luxury of simply declaring victory.

Too many lives have been lost, too much money spent, and too many troops have been left with grievous injuries for the US to walk away, let the Middle East fend for itself, and hope for the best. June's attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are not other people's problems. As we should have learned from the attacks on the Air Force barracks at Khobar Towers in 1996, on the Navy destroyer *Cole* in 2000, and most especially in the terror attacks of 2001, violent extremism seeks out the United States.

Carney asked what he surely intended to be a rhetorical question: "Should American forces be occupying countries for decades, or should we take the approach that the President took when he ended the war in Iraq and established a relationship with the sovereign government of Iraq, through which we can provide the kind of assistance we provide?"

The question is a false one. For starters, the US has helped secure peace in places like Germany, South Korea, and Kuwait for decades. Would any of those nations seriously consider their state to be "occupied" by the US?

Meanwhile, our relationship with Iraq ended with no status of forces agreement, no enduring presence or real influence, and Iraqi defense forces that were clearly not up to their billing. We may have to fight again to stabilize Iraq and protect the Americans that remain there.

Let's not repeat our mistakes by running away from Afghanistan, too.

"Afghanistan will not be a perfect place, and it is not America's responsibility to make it one," the President noted back on May 27. "The future of Afghanistan must be decided by Afghans."

On this point, at least, we agree wholeheartedly. But a permanent US presence there will help ensure peace for both nations. ■