

Bringing Them Home

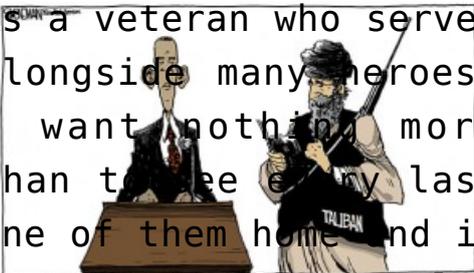


by Nate
Winkler

On Wednesday, June 22nd, President Obama addressed the nation, unveiling his drawdown plan for U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Although it seemed to be overshadowed in this area by the capture of notorious Boston mob boss James “Whitey” Bulger, this is a big story that has far reaching implications.

Not surprisingly, in today’s partisan political world, it has been difficult to find anyone who whole-heartedly agrees with the plan. Most Democrats believe that the President’s plan isn’t aggressive enough, and the troops should be coming home in larger numbers at a greater frequency. Most Republicans believe it is very risky to take fighting troops out of the hands of the generals on the ground, and withdrawing too much too soon could undermine all the progress that has been made in the region over the last decade. My opinion lies somewhere in between.

As a veteran who served alongside many heroes, I want nothing more than to see every last one of them home and in one piece. Conversely, if we leave before the job is done, and instability returns to the region, then a decade’s worth of



blood, sweat, and sacrifice is seemingly in vain, and history will not look kindly on what “Imperialist America” so arrogantly tried to accomplish. I believe President Obama had a very difficult task of juggling those objectives, and the plan he put forth shows balance and resolve.

Before we can fully appreciate where we are going, let's take a quick look at where we came from. Everyone has the memory of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 seared into their minds. I was a Marine on active duty at Marine Corps Auxiliary Landing Field Bogue, a small airstrip between Cherry Point & Camp Lejeune on the coast of North Carolina. Even as the 2nd plane hit, we were preparing for war; before the sun set that night, we were

patrolling our base with the use of deadly force authorized for the first time in my military career. Although I didn't personally know anyone who tragically perished in the attacks, I never remember feeling more sorrow than I did over those coming days. I don't remember ever feeling more patriotic and unified, either.

Fast forward a couple of weeks to October 7th, 2001, and Operation Enduring Freedom officially begins. The original intent of the invasion was to Find Osama Bin Laden & other Al Qaeda leaders and bring them to justice, as well as remove the Taliban from power. The coalition air campaign led to the quick ouster of the Taliban from Kabul, but the subsequent insurgency has led to many ups and downs in the decade since.



Many believe the cost of the war in Afghanistan is too high.

Afghanistan took a backseat to the war in Iraq for a couple of years, and it wasn't until the controversial troop surge, initiated by President Obama in December 2009, that enough progress was made to consider an exit strategy that didn't include tails between legs.

The raid in Pakistan that led to the death of Osama Bin Laden gave the American public the sense that victory was within reach, and all indications are that the demise of the iconic leader has crippled the terrorist

organization. That brings us to where we are now, with the big red circle on the calendar for 2014, and the hope that the next time we talk to one of our brothers, sisters, sons, or daughters who serve in the military, the question, 'When do you have to go back?' doesn't even enter our minds.

So now let's take a look at Obama's plan to withdraw troops. Over 10,000 troops will be home before the end of this year, and another 23,000 by the end of the summer of 2012. That seems fairly aggressive, over a 30% reduction in essentially a year's time. This brings us back to a pre-surge troop number, after which we will begin a transition from combat to support. Afghan security forces must be ready

to shoulder the load at this point. If the region remains stable politically, which is the big wild card, the drawdown will continue over the next two years until we have essentially completely withdrawn. Many would argue that even if there is instability at that point, we must cut our losses and as the President put it, "...focus on nation building here at home". With billions of dollars being spent in Afghanistan every day, and the myriad social and economic problems going on within our borders, it's hard to disagree with that.



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Afghanistan, so I

can't speak first hand on to what is really going on there. I was in Iraq in 2003, and I didn't necessarily agree with my being there, but I did what I had to do in order to get home safely, and I genuinely think the world is a better place thanks to what we did there. Hopefully in a few years, we will feel the same way about our role in Afghanistan.

To draw a parallel between the two countries, it is my belief that you cannot force uncivilized people to be civilized. It's just not that easy to convince a guy that uses his left hand as a Charmin substitute that he needs democracy. We've stayed the course for what will be 13 years if the plan unfolds as expected, which

will go down as the longest continuous conflict in the history of the United States. It is safe to say at this point, we, as a nation, can look ourselves in the mirror and say we did everything we could to make Afghanistan and the world a safer place. But let's not forget, the reason we are there in the first place is to make the United States of America a safer place. Everything else is, and should be, secondary.

**This article is not meant to be a historical recollection of Operation Enduring Freedom, but the author's opinion on the feasibility of the troop withdrawal proposal.*