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Trump Declares Open-Ended War in Afghanistan

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In his Monday night speech on the Afghan War, President Trump committed the US to an essentially open-ended escalation of the conflict without any specific limitations, while granting commanders broader authority to unilaterally target “the enemy.”

President Trump stressed that his first instinct was to withdraw. He added that “historically I like following my instincts.” However, he said that “decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk in the oval office.” He added that he’s committed to “an honorable and enduring outcome” worthy of the longest war in American history and the large number of dead.

What that outcome looks like, or how specifically he plans to get there are anyone’s guess. Fox News reported that White House sources told them before the speech that Trump was going to announce 4,000 more troops for Afghanistan.

But President Trump said that the US strategy would be secret, saying the US is removing any timetables for ending the war in Afghanistan. He said that he will not talk publicly about troop numbers in Afghanistan or plans for ongoing military activity there. While arguing that “America’s enemies must never know our plans.”

Trump's secrecy also means the American public will have no idea how the Afghan War is being prosecuted.

This mirrors the decision to make troop levels in Iraq and Syria officially secret, but is also a much broader commitment. He set the stage for general escalation of an Afghan war that, over the past 16 years, has shown itself to endure through more or less any escalation conceivable. In committing to continue that war until victory, Trump effectively made the war permanent.

Trump presented continuation as both about 9/11, and about how opposed he is to the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq, each presented as a reason not to withdraw, but seemingly each an excuse that's never going to not stand in the way of ending the war.

The broad message of Trump's speech seemed to be that the US wasn't aggressive enough in Afghanistan so far, criticizing President Obama for "micromanaging" the conflict. Trump said he believes that US military victories come from "judgement and expertise of wartime commanders."

Trump gave some lip-service to economic aid for Afghanistan, particularly pushing India to "do more." But he insisted that the US had abandoned nation-building, declaring "we are not nation-building again, we're killing terrorists."

This declaration also gives the impression of a permanent war, claiming 20 distinct terrorist organizations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and vowing to lift restrictions on "our warfighters." He vowed that "no place is out of the reach of American might."

Ultimately, an escalation of 4,000 troops and a re-commitment to the status quo likely would've been much milder than what Trump appears to be proposing. Trump's determination to keep troop levels secret leaves the door open to a series of endless escalations down the road, which the American public are liable to never hear about.