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How quickly will the US leave Afghanistan?

The American "withdrawal" regularly mentioned in the media doesn't really mean "withdrawal", writes Engelhardt.

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On paper at least, for years to come the US will "partially occupy a country that has a history of loathing foreigners who won't leave (and making them pay for it)" [EPA]

In the wake of several deaths among its contingent of troops in a previously peaceful province in Afghanistan, New Zealand (like **France** and **South Korea**) is now **expediting** the departure of its 140 soldiers. That's not exactly headline-making news here in the US. If you're an American, you probably didn't even know that New Zealand was playing a small part in our Afghan War. In fact, you may hardly have known about the part Americans are playing in a war that, over the last decade-plus, has **repeatedly** been labelled "**the forgotten**"

war".

Still, maybe it's time to take notice. Maybe the flight of those Kiwis should be thought of as a small omen, even if they are departing as decorously, quietly and flightlessly as possible. Because here's the thing: once the November election is over, "expedited departure" could well become an American term and the US, as it slips ignominiously out of Afghanistan, could turn out to be the New Zealand of superpowers.

You undoubtedly know the phrase: the best laid plans of mice and men. It couldn't be more apt when it comes to the American project in Afghanistan. Washington's plans have indeed been carefully drawn up. By the end of 2014, US "combat troops" are to be withdrawn, but **left behind** on the giant bases the Pentagon has built will be thousands of **US trainers** and advisers, as well as **special operations forces** to go after al-Qaeda remnants (and other "militants") and undoubtedly, the air power to back them all up.

Their job will officially be to continue to "stand up" the humongous security force that no Afghan government in that thoroughly impoverished country will ever be able to pay for. Thanks to a 10-year Strategic Partnership Agreement that President Obama **flew to Kabul** to seal with Afghan President Hamid Karzai as May began, there they are to remain until 2020 or beyond.

In other words, it being Afghanistan, we need a translator. The American "withdrawal" regularly mentioned in the media doesn't really mean "withdrawal". On paper at least, for years to come the US will partially occupy a country that has a history of loathing foreigners who won't leave (and making them pay for it).

Tea boys and old men

Plans are one thing, reality another. After all, when invading US troops triumphantly arrived in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, in April 2003, the White House and the Pentagon were already planning to stay forever and a day - and they instantly began building permanent bases (though they preferred to speak of "**permanent access**" via "**enduring camps**") as a token of their intent.

Only a couple of years later, in a gesture that couldn't have been more emphatic in planning terms, they **constructed** the largest (and possibly most expensive) embassy on the planet as a regional command centre in Baghdad. Yet somehow, those perfectly laid plans went desperately awry and only a few years later, with American leaders **still looking for ways** to **garrison** the country into the distant future, Washington found itself out on its ear. But that's reality for you, isn't it?

Right now, evidence on the ground - in the form of dead American bodies **piling up** - indicates that even the Afghans **closest to us** don't exactly second the Obama administration's plans for a 20-year occupation. In fact, news from the deep-sixed war in that forgotten land, often considered the **longest conflict** in American history, has suddenly burst onto the front

pages of our newspapers and to the top of the TV news.

And there's just one reason for that: despite the copious plans of the planet's last superpower, the poor, backward, illiterate, hapless, corrupt Afghans - whose security forces, despite unending American financial support and mentoring, have **never effectively "stood up"** - made it happen. They have been sending a stark message, written in blood, to Washington's planners.

A 15-year-old **"tea boy"** at a US base opened fire on Marine special forces trainers exercising at a gym, killing three of them and seriously wounding another; a **60- or 70-year-old** farmer, who volunteered to become a member of a village security force, turned the first gun his American special forces trainers gave him at an **"inauguration ceremony"** back on them, killing two; a police officer who, his father **claims**, joined the force four years earlier, invited Marine Special Operations advisers to a meal and **gunned down** three of them, wounding a fourth, before fleeing, perhaps to the Taliban.

About other "allies" involved in similar incidents - recently, there were **at least 9** "green-on-blue" attacks in an 11-day span in which 10 Americans died - we know almost nothing, except that they were Afghan policemen or soldiers their American trainers and mentors were trying to "stand up" to fight the Taliban. Some were promptly shot to death. At least one may have escaped.

These green-on-blue incidents, which the Pentagon recently re-labelled "insider attacks", have been escalating for months. Now, they seem to have reached a critical mass and so are finally causing a public stir in official circles in Washington. A "deeply concerned" President Obama **commented** to reporters on the phenomenon ("We've got to make sure that we're on top of this...") and **said** he was planning to "reach out" to Afghan President Karzai on the matter. In the meantime, Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta did so, **pressing Karzai** to take tougher steps in the vetting of recruits for the Afghan security forces. (Karzai and his aides **promptly blamed** the attacks on the Iranian and Pakistani intelligence agencies.)

General Martin Dempsey, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, flew to Afghanistan to consult with his counterparts on what to make of these incidents (and had his plane shelled on a runway at Bagram Airfield - "a lucky shot," **claimed** a NATO spokesman - for his effort). US Afghan War commander General John Allen **convened a meeting** of more than 40 generals to discuss how to stop the attacks, even as he insisted "the campaign remains on track". There are now **rumblings** in Congress about hearings on the subject.

Struggling with the message

Worry about such devastating attacks and their implications for the American mission, slow to rise, is now widespread. But much of this is reported in our media as if in a kind of code. Take for example the way Laura King put the threat in a **front-page** *Los Angeles Times* piece (and she was hardly alone). Reflecting Washington's wisdom on the subject, she wrote that the attacks "could threaten a linchpin of the Western exit strategy: training Afghan security forces in preparation for handing over most fighting duties to them by 2014". It almost sounds as if,

thanks to these incidents, our combat troops might *not* be able to make it out of there **on schedule**.

No less striking is the reported general puzzlement over what lies behind these Afghan actions. In most cases, the motivation for them, writes King, "remains opaque". There are, it seems, many theories within the US military about why Afghans are turning their guns on Americans, including personal pique, individual grudges, cultural touchiness, "heat-of-the-moment disputes in a society where arguments are often settled with a Kalashnikov", and in a minority of cases - about a tenth of them, according to a recent military study, though one top commander **suggested** the number could range up to a quarter - actual infiltration or "coercion" by the Taliban.

General Allen even **suggested** recently that some insider attacks might be traced to religious fasting for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, combined with unseasonable summer heat, leaving Afghans hungry, tetchy and prone to impulsive acts, guns in hand. According to the *Washington Post*, however, "Allen acknowledged that US and Afghan officials have struggled to determine what's behind the rise in attacks".

"American officials are still struggling," **wrote** the *New York Times* in an editorial on the subject, "to understand the forces at work." And in that the editorial, writers like the general reflected the basic way these acts are registering here - as a remarkable Afghan mystery. In other words, in Washington's version of the blame game, the quirky, unpredictable Afghans from Hamid Karzai on down are in the crosshairs. What *is* the matter with them?

In the midst of all this, few say the obvious. Undoubtedly, a chasm of potential misunderstanding lies between Afghan trainees and their American trainers; Afghans may indeed feel insulted by any number of culturally inapt, inept, or hostile acts by their mentors. They may have been on edge from fasting for Ramadan. They may be holding grudges. None of the various explanations being offered, that is, may in themselves be wrong. The problem is that none of them allow an observer to grasp what's actually going on. On that, there really should be few "misunderstandings" and, though you won't hear it in Washington, right now Americans are actually the ones in the crosshairs and not just in the literal sense either.

While the motives of any individual Afghan turning his gun on an American may be beyond our knowing - just what made him plan it, just what made him snap - history should tell us something about the more general motives of Afghans (and perhaps the rest of us as well). After all, the United States was founded after colonial settlers grew tired of an occupying army and power in their midst.

Whatever the individual insults Afghans feel, the deeper insult almost 11 years after the US military, crony corporations, hire-a-gun outfits, contractors, **advisers and aid types** arrived on the scene en masse with all their money, equipment and promises is that things are going truly badly; that the westerners are still around; that the Americans are still trying to stand up those Afghan forces (when the Taliban has no problem standing its forces up and fighting effectively without foreign trainers); that the defeated Taliban, one of the less popular movements of modern history, is again on the rise; that the country is a sea of corruption; that

more than 30 years after the first Afghan War against the Soviets began, the country is still a morass of violence, suffering and death.

Plumb the mystery all you want, our Afghan allies couldn't be clearer as a collective group. They are sick of foreign occupying armies, even when, in some cases, they may have no sympathy for the Taliban. This should be a situation in which no translators are needed. The "insult" to Afghan ways is, after all, large indeed and should be easy enough for Americans to grasp.

Just try to reverse the situation with Chinese, Russian or Iranian armies heavily garrisoning the US, supporting political candidates and trying to stand us up for more than a decade and it may be easier to understand. Americans, after all, blow people away regularly over far less than that.

And keep in mind as well what history does tell us: that the Afghans have quite a record of getting disgusted with occupying armies and blowing them away. After all, they managed to eject the militaries of two of the most powerful empires of their moments, the British in the 1840s and the Russians in the 1980s. Why not a third great empire as well?

A contagion of killing

The message is certainly clear enough, however unprepared those in Washington and in the field are to hear it: forget our enemies; a rising number of those Afghans closest to us want us out in the worst way possible and their message on the subject has been horrifically blunt. As NBC correspondent Jim Miklaszewski **put it** recently, among Americans in Afghanistan there is now "a growing fear the armed Afghan soldier standing next to them may really be the enemy".

It's a situation that isn't likely to be rectified by quick fixes, including the eerily named Guardian Angel programme (which leaves an armed American with the sole job of watching out for trigger-happy Afghans in exchanges with his compatriots), or better "vetting" of Afghan recruits, or **putting** Afghan counter-intelligence officers in ever more units to watch over their own troops.

The question is: Why can't our leaders in Washington and in the US military stop "struggling" and see this for what it obviously is? Why can't anyone in the mainstream media write about it as it obviously is? After all, when almost 11 years after your arrival to "liberate" a country, orders **are issued** for every American soldier to carry a loaded weapon everywhere at all times, even on American bases, lest your allies blow you away, you should know that you've failed. When you can't train your allies to defend their own country without an armed **guardian angel** watching at all times, you should know that it's long past time to leave a distant country of **no strategic value** to the United States.

As is now regularly noted, the incidents of green-on-blue violence are rising rapidly. There have been **32 of them** reported so far this year, with 40 American or coalition members killed, compared to 21 reported in all of 2011, killing 35. The numbers have a chilling quality, a

sense of contagion, to them. They suggest that this may be an unravelling moment and don't think - though no one mentions this - that it couldn't get far worse.

To date, such incidents are essentially the work of lone wolf attackers, in a few cases of two Afghans, and in a single case of **three Afghans** plotting together. But no matter how many counter-intelligence agents are slipped into the ranks or guardian angels appointed, don't think there's something magical about the numbers one, two and three. While there's no way to foresee the future, there's no reason not to believe that what one or two Afghans are already doing couldn't in the end be done by four or five, by parts of squads, by small units. With a spirit of contagion, of copycat killings with a message, loose in the land, this could get far worse.

One thing seems ever more likely. If your plan is to stay and train a security force growing numbers of whom are focused on killing you, then you are, by definition, in an impossible situation and you should know that your days are numbered, that it's not likely you'll be there in 2020 or even maybe 2015. When training your allies to stand up means training them to do you in, it's long past time to go, whatever your plans may have been. After all, the British had "plans" for Afghanistan, as did the Russians. Little good it did them.

Imagine for a moment that you were in Kabul or Washington at the end of December 2001, after the Taliban had been crushed, after Osama bin Laden fled to Pakistan, and as the US was moving into "liberated" Afghanistan for the long haul.

Imagine as well that someone claiming to be a seer made this prediction: almost 11 years from then, despite endless tens of billions of dollars spent on Afghan "reconstruction", despite nearly **\$50 billion spent** on "standing up" an Afghan security force that could defend the country, and with **more than 700 bases** built for US troops and Afghan allies, local soldiers and police would be **deserting in droves**, the Taliban would be back in force, those being trained would be blowing their trainers away in record numbers, and by order of the Pentagon, an American soldier could not go to the bathroom unarmed on an American base for fear of being shot down by an Afghan "friend".

You would, of course, have been considered a first-class idiot, if not a madman, and yet this is exactly the US "hearts and minds" record in Afghanistan to date. Welcomed in 2001, we are being shown the door in the worst possible way in 2012. Washington is losing it. It's too late to exit gracefully, but exit in time we must.