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## New York Times and Obama's Afghanistan Draw Down: Selling the Never-Ending War on Terror

By Steve Breyman

June 07, 2014

*Mark Landler's "US Troops to Leave Afghanistan by End of 2016" was the lead story in the New York Times on Wednesday, May 28. Landler reports President Obama's decision to reduce troop levels from the present 32,000 to 9,800 by the end of 2014 to half that by the end of 2015 to "a vestigial force" by the end of 2016. There are several reasons why one ought to be skeptical of these numbers (not least of which are that that Obama for years referred to Afghanistan as "a war of necessity," he ordered two troop surges during his first term, the number of US paid contractors to remain is not clear, and predictable events may upset the timetable). Landler expresses no such skepticism.*

But that's not among the main problems with the story. The article's flaws include Landler's belief that he has achieved 'balance' by noting Obama's "Republican critics in Congress," and by quoting retired Army General Jack Keane, Republican Congressman Buck McKeon, and retired career diplomat and defense official David Sedney. The only critical voices Landler rounds up are those unhappy with Obama's plans to draw down American forces on what they consider an overly brisk two-year schedule. Code Pink and the American Friends Service Committee—unhappy with the fact that the withdrawal is not immediate and complete—are not to be found in the piece.

The story fails on another basic level. Landler acts as amanuensis rather than journalist. He fails to ask a single follow up question of his sources. Landler and his editor let Keane get away with: “Just arbitrarily pulling those forces out absolutely risks successful completion of the mission.” Even a cub reporter and novice editor might have queried Keane as what mission he had in mind, what successful completion of it looked like, and when it might be accomplished.

Landler and his editor allow McKeon to opine: “Holding this mission to an arbitrary egg-timer doesn’t make a lick of sense.” A competent journalist might have asked McKeon when the egg-timer might ding, if not fifteen years after the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom. Further insulting his readers, Landler lets Keane add this jab: “Does the president seek to replicate his mistakes in Iraq, where he abandoned the region to chaos and failed to forge a real security partnership?” A conscientious reporter might have queried McKeon as to his dogged, unflagging support for the illegal and unjustifiable war over the years, as to the unsurprising Iraqi preference for an end to the nine year American occupation, and as to the fairness of blaming Obama for George Bush’s failed adventure.

Landler remarks that “even defenders of Mr. Obama,” including Michèle A. Flournoy, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy during his first term, express concern about “whether security gains made” are endangered by the pace of the draw down: “Time will tell whether we can meet that standard at this pace.” Landler does not recall that there was no war in Afghanistan, thus no need for the sort of security gains he has in mind, at time of the US invasion in October 2001.

Lazily—without apparent intervention of an editor—Landler employs an automatic, stock phrase to describe a primary activity of the shrinking US force over the next couple years; they are to “carry out operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda.” He does not inquire as to whether there’s a single al-Qaeda ‘member’ still on the loose in Afghanistan, and apparently forgot that David Petraeus admitted that al-Qaeda was no longer in the country as long ago as 2009.

Obama’s announced motivation for the draw down also goes unquestioned by Landler.

*“The president is clearly driven by a determination to shift the focus of his counterterrorism policy from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan to a more diffuse set of militant threats, some linked to Al Qaeda, that have sprung up from Syria to Nigeria.”*

The “militant threat” in Libya and its analogues in Mali and Chad—direct consequences of the President’s policy—go unmentioned. And the War on Terror continues indefinitely, into perpetuity.

Nowhere in the article does Landler wonder whether peace might break out following the drawn out draw down. We get this statement of Obama’s: “Americans have learned that it’s harder to end wars than it is to begin them. Yet this is how wars end in the 21st century.” It does not occur to Landler to ask an administration official why it’s so hard to end wars, or why peace does not ensue once wars end.

“Mr. Obama,” Landler tells us, “said the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan would free up resources to confront an emerging terrorist threat stretching from the Middle East to Africa.” Obama is unable to simply ‘end a war;’ the end of one war must segue smoothly into the escalation of others. And that appears perfectly reasonable to Mark Landler, and the New York Times.