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The Unchanging Imperial Paradigm

by Sheldon Richman
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Despite President Obama's trumpeted force drawdown in Afghanistan, by the end of next summer more than twice as many U.S. troops will be fighting in that country's civil war as there were when he became president in 2009. His soothing words notwithstanding, a force of about 70,000 will remain there at least until the end of 2014. We can be sure, however, that that won't stop the president from campaigning for reelection on a peace platform.

Obama's speech the other night was mostly show, a spectacle to make the war- and deficit-weary public think he's taking substantial steps toward disengagement. He did something similar in Iraq, though 50,000 troops remain and are still taking casualties.

It is easy for a president to manipulate public opinion, especially in foreign affairs and most especially when the mainstream media — conservative and "liberal" — are so compliant. The war will go on, but probably under the radar more than before, just as the war in Iraq does. The public and mainstream media attitude will be, "The president said the war is ending, so there's no need to pay attention."

One problem: Not much is changing.

In the coming months, politicians and pundits will debate whether Obama's drawdown is too slow or too fast. The president explicitly took a middle position between those who wanted merely a token withdrawal, such as the top military brass and Sen. John McCain, and those who want an immediate exit, such as Reps. Dennis Kucinich and Ron Paul.

But the pace, though not insignificant, is hardly the main issue. The main issue is the empire. If all combat troops were removed from Afghanistan tomorrow, the U.S. government would continue to treat that country like a protectorate, ready to send troops back if events are not to the policy elite's liking. It's the paradigm of empire that must be rejected. But Obama's drawdown and disavowal of empire notwithstanding, the U.S. policy elite have no intention of reconsidering America's hegemonic role in the world. To be sure, fiscal difficulties have forced a reconsideration of tactics, but the imperial framework remains. It was compactly summed up by President George H.W. Bush in 1991 as he prepared to move against Iraq's Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait: "What we say goes."

Empires always require myths, and the U.S. empire is no different. In the days before Obama's speech, McCain and others campaigned for no more than token drawdown by asserting that Afghanistan would become a threat to the American people if the U.S. military disengaged, just as it did — supposedly — after the Soviets withdrew in 1989. "We withdrew from Afghanistan one time," McCain said. "We withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban came, eventually followed by al-Qaeda, followed by the attacks on the United States of America."

That is empire-serving nonsense. The policymakers did not abandon Afghanistan; they tried to micromanage it in defiance of Afghan history and culture. As Michael Scheuer, who once ran the CIA's bin Laden unit, wrote in 2009, "In the immediate post-Soviet years, then, Washington spent tens of millions of dollars to try to form exactly the same type of strong and centralized Afghan government — the type of regime that historically causes war in Afghanistan — it is trying to form today.... The Afghans wanted no part of the secularism the U.S.-led West insisted on then...." Instead of letting the conflicting Afghan factions find some way to peace after a decade of brutal Soviet intrusion, American policymakers fanned the flames of civil war.

In any event, it was neither neglect of Afghanistan nor intervention there that prompted al-Qaeda's attacks on 9/11. Rather it was half a century of U.S. support for brutality in the Muslim and Arab world, from Israel's oppression of the Palestinians, to the corrupt monarchy in Saudi Arabia, to the torturous secular dictatorships in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries.

Regardless of what Obama does in Afghanistan, as long as the U.S. government eyes the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia the way an imperial power eyes its colonies, there will be threats to contend with. The path to American security lies in renouncing a foreign policy designed to rule the world.