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## Graveyard of Empires

by Eric Margolis

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In his majestic poem "Recessional," Rudyard Kipling was writing of the fading British Empire, but his words are as vivid and pertinent today as a century ago:

*Far-called our navies melt away –*

*n dune and headland sinks the fire –*

*Lo, all our pomp of yesterday*

*Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!*

The objective of war is to achieve political objectives, not to kill enemies.

Politically, the US has achieved nothing in Afghanistan after ten years of desultory, destruction, and titanic expenditure.

So in this sense, the United States has already lost the Afghan conflict, its longest war. Militarily its forces have been stalemated, meaning that it has lost the all-important military initiative and is now on the strategic defensive. We have seen this before – in Vietnam.

Once more, Afghanistan fulfills its grim title as "graveyard of empires."

The US has failed to install an obedient regime in Kabul that controls Afghanistan. It has made bitter foes of the nation's Pashtun majority, and, in pursuing this war, gravely undermined Pakistan. Claims that US forces were only in Afghanistan to hunt the late Osama bin Laden were widely disbelieved.

Last Wednesday, President Barack Obama bowed to public opinion, approaching elections, military reality and financial woes by announcing he would withdraw a third of the 100,000 US troops from Afghanistan by the end of next summer. Pentagon brass growled open opposition. Obama should have smacked them down, but did not, adding to the growing belief that he is weak and overawed by the military chiefs.

US allies France and Germany announced similar troops reductions. All foreign troops are supposed to quit Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

This staggered withdrawal will take the US garrison roughly back to the size it was before President Obama sent 30,000 reinforcements to Afghanistan. This means enough soldiers to hold the main urban centers and connecting roads, but not enough to defeat Taliban guerillas in the field, or to block the Afghan-Pakistan border.

Washington currently spends at least \$10 billion monthly on the Afghan war, not counting "black" payments, CIA and NSA operations. The US has poured \$18.8 billion in development aid into Afghanistan since 2001 with nothing to show for the effort. Pakistan has been given \$20 billion to support the Afghan War. Each US soldier in Afghanistan costs \$1 million per annum, not counting full support costs.

None of these costs are covered by taxes; all are piled onto the gargantuan national debt.

The US deficit is heading over \$1.4 trillion. The national debt, when unfunded pensions and benefits are added, is likely \$100 trillion, according to the chief of PIMCO, the world's largest bond trader. This means America, top-heavy with unsustainable debt, risks capsizing financially.

Forty-four million Americans now receive food stamps; the national infrastructure of roads, airports, bridges and schools is crumbling from neglect. Unemployment, officially at 9.5%, is probably closer to 20%.

The cry is being heard: "Rebuild America, not Afghanistan."

In spite of intense pro-war propaganda, over half of Americans now oppose the Afghan War. Even US-installed Afghan president Hamid Karzai calls it, "ineffective, apart from causing civilian casualties."

So will the US really pull out of Afghanistan? That remains to be seen. There are many contradictory signs.

Mid-level talks between the US and Taliban have been conducted for over a year. Washington's plan was to try to split Taliban through such talks.

US Afghan supremo Gen. David Petraeus tried to buy off Afghan resistance in the same manner he had bribed Iraq's Sunni tribes into quiescence. This gambit did not work with Taliban's hardened warriors, for whom honor holds as much value as money.

The US will probably keep a sizeable number of its remaining 66,000 soldiers in Afghanistan after 2014, rebranding them training troops. The huge US bases at Kandahar and Bagram will be retained as permanent US fortified enclaves.

Billions more will be spent on the Afghan government army and police. They have so far proved ineffective because most are composed of Tajik and Uzbek mercenaries who are hated and distrusted by the Pashtun.

A similar process is underway in Iraq where "withdrawal" means keeping combat brigades in Iraq, renamed "training units" and "counter-terrorism units," thousands of mercenaries, and mobile US combat forces in neighboring Kuwait and the Gulf.

New US embassies in Baghdad and Kabul – huge, fortified complexes with their own mercenary combat forces – will be the world's biggest. Kabul will have a staff of 1,000 US personnel. Bin Laden called them "crusader fortresses." Fortified US consulates are under construction in other parts of Afghanistan.

In addition, the US will still arm and finance allied Tajik and Uzbek militias in Afghanistan, and CIA-run mercenary forces. Financing Pakistan's US-backed regimes and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan must also continue at around \$3 billion yearly. What political concessions the US is giving Moscow to allow passage of war supplies through its territory remains a secret.

The US appears to be going and staying at the same time. By contrast, Taliban's position is clear and simple: it will continue fighting until all foreign troops are withdrawn. US special forces, drones and hit squads have been unable to assassinate enough Taliban commanders to make the mujahidin stop fighting.

Americans never study history, not even their own. We don't recall founding father, the great Benjamin Franklin, who said, "there is no good war, and no bad peace." Or that the Pashtun Taliban and its allies are dedicated, undefeated warriors who fight where they live, and have all the time in the world.

I've been in combat with Pashtun fighters and remain in awe of their courage and love of combat. The Pashtun mujahidin will keep fighting as long as their ammunition lasts.

America, for all its B-1 heavy bombers, strike fighters, missiles, helicopter gunships and drones, armor, super electronics, spies in the sky and all the other high tech weapons of modern war has failed to defeat some 30,000 tribal fighters armed with nothing more than light weapons and legendary valor.

The US has lost the political war in Afghanistan. It may linger there, but it cannot win.