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The Permanent War System Rolls On

By Gareth Porter

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Two months ago, I wrote that the Obama administration and the U.S. command in Afghanistan faced an "Iraq 2006 moment" in the second half of 2010 – a collapse of domestic political support for a failed war paralleling the political crisis in Bush's Iraq War in 2006. Now comes Republican Congressman Frank Wolf to make that parallel with 2006 eerily precise.

Wolf published a letter to President Obama last week calling for the immediate establishment of an "Afghanistan-Pakistan Study Group." It would be the son of the Iraq Study Group. Wolf is the Congressman who authored the legislation in 2005 creating the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group to come up with fresh ideas for that failing war. The Wolf proposal came nearly a year after American public had turned against the war decisively in January 2005, when support for the war fell to 39 percent.

The U.S. public had withdrawn its support because it had become obvious that the war was a failure. The Bush administration had overthrown the Saddam Hussein regime only to unleash a violent Sunni-Shi'a sectarian power struggle that the U.S. military couldn't control. Even worse, the U.S. military presence was objectively supporting one side in that power struggle by building up a clearly sectarian military and police sector, even as it pretended to be the honest broker between Sunni and Shi'a.

By 2006 it had become apparent even to the political elite that the war was failing and that something had to be done. But for war supporters like Wolf, the idea was not to find a way out of a criminally stupid war but to tweak the war strategy so that the administration could rebuild public support for it.

The problem with the Baker-Hamilton group was not that it didn't have the information it needed to call for end to the U.S. war. Bob Woodward's *The War Within* reveals that the commander of all U.S. ground forces in Iraq, Pete Chiarelli, told the Iraq Study Group that the sectarian character of the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government was the primary problem. And the officer in charge of training the Iraqi army, Gen. Martin Dempsey, told the group that, without Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation, "[T]here are not enough troops in the world to provide security."

Elementary logic would have suggested that with Sunni-Sh'ia reconciliation there would be no need for U.S. troops and that without it, U.S. troops would be unable to change the situation. Either way, the U.S. military presence was irrelevant to the future of Iraq. After nearly four years of fighting, with enormous casualties on both sides, the U.S. military had succeeded only in helping Iran consolidate Shi'a rule in Iraq.

Nevertheless the Study Group's report went along with an indefinite continuation of the U.S. military role in Iraq.

Now we have the same nightmare of a stupid war that the political class can't bring itself to end.

Wolf says he's been talking with retired figures in the national security elite, who tell him that "our Afghanistan policy is adrift." And he warns of a "palpable shift in the nation's mood and in the halls of Congress" on the war. He notes that 62 percent of the American public in a July 2010 poll said the war is "going badly."

So now Wolf proposes the same kind of bipartisan study group that he says helped rebuild support for the Iraq war to come up with "fresh strategies" for the war in Afghanistan. Wolf makes no effort to hide his hope to "reinvigorate national confidence in how America can be successful" in Afghanistan.

Wolf is the poster child for the deep denial on U.S. wars practiced by a very large segment of the political elite. On one hand, his proposal is the clearest evidence of the desperation that has overtaken Washington about the palpable failure of Obama's war. But on the other hand, Wolf suggests that all we need is a group of "respected" war supporters to offer a new strategy for the Afghan War to be back on the road to victory again.

This refusal to face up to reality that the United States cannot succeed in Afghanistan, despite all the evidence to the contrary, suggests that something much deeper is going on here. Wolf and his fellow deniers in the political elite are not just refusing to give up on the specific war in Afghanistan. They are doing it because they are desperately clinging

to the broader system of global military hegemony which impels the U.S. national security state to continue that war.

In his latest book, *Washington Rules,* historian Andrew Bacevich points to this largely un-discussed aspect of recent U.S. wars. The "Washington rules" to which the title refers are the basic principles of U.S. global policy that have been required beliefs for entrance into the U.S. political elite ever since the United States became a superpower. The three rules are U.S. global military presence, global projection of U.S. military power and the use of that power in one conflict after another.

Bacevich suggests that personal and institutional interests bind the U.S. political elite and national security bureaucrats to that system of global military dominance. The politicians and bureaucrats will continue to insist on those principles, he writes, because they "deliver profit, power and privilege to a long list of beneficiaries: elected and appointed officials, corporate executives and corporate lobbyists, admirals and generals, functionaries staffing the national security apparatus, media personalities and policy intellectuals from universities and research organizations."

That description of the problem provides a key to understanding the otherwise puzzling serial denial by the political elite on Iraq and Afghanistan. It won't do much good for antiwar people to demand an end to the war in Afghanistan unless they are also demanding an end to the underlying system that has now produced quasi-permanent American war.