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# Obama's strategic retreat in Afghanistan

By **Jeremi Suri**, Special to CNN  
updated 11:19 AM EDT, Wed May 2, 2012

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President Barack Obama pledged to continue U.S. support for a sovereign, peaceful state in Afghanistan.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Jeremi Suri: Obama's speech represents start of rapid withdrawal from Afghan war

Suri says the strategic retreat makes sense in the short run

Suri says it leaves Afghanistan as a state with a corrupt government, Taliban threat

In the long term, the risks for the U.S. and Afghanistan could increase, he says

**Editor's note:** *Jeremi Suri holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Global Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a professor in the Department of History and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. He has written numerous books, most recently: "Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama."*

**(CNN)** -- President Barack Obama's surprise visit to Afghanistan on Tuesday included an extraordinary admission: "Our goal is not to build a country in America's image, or to eradicate every vestige of the Taliban. These objectives would require many more years, many more dollars and many more American lives."

Obama pledged to continue American support for a sovereign, peaceful state in Afghanistan. He also committed to withdraw all American combat soldiers by 2014 and diminish direct American efforts at nation-building. The president declared that the defeat of al Qaeda was "within reach," but he did not promise any specific political outcomes in the country where Americans have fought for more than 10 years.

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The speech and the strategic partnership agreement that the president signed begin the rapid withdrawal of American forces from the region. The White House has given little public attention to Afghanistan in the last two years, and it has continually lowered expectations.



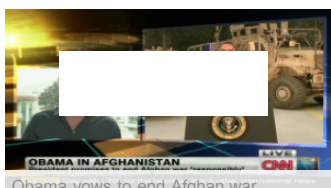
Jeremi Suri

A recent upsurge in violence, homicidal acts allegedly by an American soldier and the offensive burning of Qurans in Afghanistan have turned whatever hope some might have had for the future of the region into despondence.

The Obama administration has clearly determined that it cannot succeed in bringing security and stability to Afghanistan. The United States will leave as quickly as it can, providing vague and limited assurances of support for Hamid Karzai's government and new national institutions.

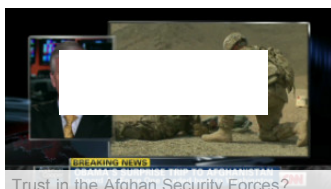
This is not a victory or a vindication for American efforts. It is not an admission of defeat either.

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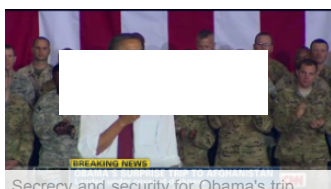
Obama vows to end Afghan war

Obama is indeed correct that al Qaeda's capabilities in Afghanistan are largely diminished, thanks in part to vastly expanded American drone strikes in the last three years. The president is also accurate when he explains that some Afghan institutions, especially the Afghan Security Forces, are more effective than they were before 2009.



Trust in the Afghan Security Forces?

Direct American talks with members of the Taliban have shown, according to the president, that some former supporters of that horrible regime now see a future for themselves in the new pro-Western government. These are all conditions that make Afghanistan far less threatening to its neighbors and the United States than it had been a decade earlier. Washington has accomplished that limited goal.



Secrecy and security for Obama's trip

Protecting this modest accomplishment while withdrawing American forces will drive policy in the next few months. Obama's speech signals that he wants to assert that he has done enough and now must focus on other strategic priorities, including the weak U.S. economy. He will continue to try and keep Afghanistan out of the news, and he will quickly seek to reallocate precious financial and military resources from the region to other locations, especially East Asia and the Persian Gulf.



Bergen: Obama trip 'important milestone'

The White House is rebalancing away from Central Asia. The promising opportunities for the United States are in the Arab world (now dominated by the Arab Spring), not Afghanistan. This strategy will work to keep the United

States safe from another major terrorist attack planned and executed on Afghan territory. American efforts will not, however, bring peace and stability to the region.

Karzai will remain the president of Afghanistan, running a corrupt and incompetent government. Local warlords will continue to dominate politics outside Kabul, siphoning capital from productive uses to their personal enrichment. The Taliban will maintain its low-level insurgency, with support and shelter from Pakistan. In all of

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updated 5:11 PM EDT, Tue May 1, 2012



Patrick Cronin: A series of moves, including transfer of 9,000 troops from Okinawa, rebalances the U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

**Obama's strategic retreat in Afghanistan**

updated 11:19 AM EDT, Wed May 2, 2012



Jeremi Suri says the policy makes sense in the short term but will eventually increase risks for Afghans and Americans

**Why Romney seems tone deaf on his success**

updated 6:04 PM EDT, Tue May 1, 2012



Ilyse Hogue says Americans do admire success, but Romney's gaffes show he simply doesn't understand the lives of average Americans.

**Obama should listen to Bill Clinton**

updated 4:16 PM EDT, Tue May 1, 2012



Michael Takiff says that despite a cool relationship in the past, the president needs the former president's help in his reelection campaign.

**Why 'Hope and Change' is dead, 'Forward' lives**

these ways, and others, Afghanistan will remain a failed state.

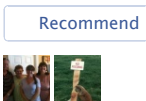
Soon it will become a failed and ignored state, as it was in the years before September 11, 2001.

A failed Afghan state that does not threaten the United States marks neither a victory nor a defeat for the Obama administration. The president correctly avoided the use of either word. As with other issues, Obama has found a pragmatic middle ground that protects core strategic needs, reduces risks and appeals to war-weary voters. He has placed safety for Americans above other worthy goals: democracy, human rights and development.

Afghanistan will continue to suffer from violence, disunity, corruption and governmental collapse. These sources of instability will spread to other countries, especially neighboring Pakistan, and they will undermine long-term American interests.

For the next year or so, however, the United States can withdraw and solidify some security gains. That is enough for Obama. It might not look like nearly enough a few years on. A strategic retreat in Afghanistan makes sense, but Afghans and Americans will pay a price.

*The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Jeremi Suri.*



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updated 9:28 AM EDT, Wed May 2, 2012



LZ Granderson says there are good reasons President Obama has downscaled his campaign slogan for 2012.

### Should Obama tout his success on bin Laden?

updated 12:31 PM EDT, Tue May 1, 2012



Larry Sabato says that Obama's reelection campaign is smart to capitalize on a major achievement in the president's first term.

### Bin Laden was a delusional leader

updated 8:19 AM EDT, Tue May 1, 2012



A treasure trove of documents seized from his hideout reveals his true state of mind, writes Peter Bergen.

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**Gutsy333**

Why nobody is replying to my posts; not even democrats?

2 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply



**twophad**

Too many? Too many caps? The "Repukes" thing? You are mostly right in the things you've said about Republican obstructionism, the creation of paranoia about a President who's doing a good job under incredibly difficult circumstances, the idiocy of people like Peter12, who spout FOX NEWS "facts" (I call them facts because they are a wonderful presentation of fiction as fact). Just remember to vote in November. I always vote.

9 minutes ago in reply to Gutsy333

Like



**Templar77**

I pray that you don't have a manifesto that you want printed!

52 minutes ago in reply to Gutsy333

Like



**Django7304**

All caps is annoying?

1 hour ago in reply to Gutsy333

Like



**Peter12Co**

what do you think of President Obama's budget? The one that increases our long term debt to 22,000,000,000,000 dollars in 6 years? I care about our own economy. Name me a country in the world that has ever prospered through high taxes and large federal govt? Pls do your homework because the answer is -0-.

The U.S needs to reform its tax laws, both parties admit to this, but yet our President has yet to recommend this. How abt entitlements that if not changed will make Greece like fiscally conservative.

You can rag on the Tea party all you want, but you are looking at trees vs the forest. Get over the terms, there are good Dem and Rep, regret President Obama is governing basis his base and not for the good of country.

2 hours ago in reply to Gutsy333

Like



**Gutsy333**

JOEHILL1923: YOU DO NOT HAVE TO APOLOGIZE. HATE IS LIKE DISLIKING FOOD THAT IS BADLY COOKED, IT HAPPENS.RATHER YOUR WAY OF FEELING IS ENERGY, THAT WOULD BE USED BETTER TO WORK TO RE-ELECT PRESIDENT OBAMA! IT IS BETTER TO LISTEN TO FAVORITE MUSIC, LET GO AND WORK POSITIVELY :) HATRED SOMEBODY USES TO JUSTIFY THEIR ACCUSSATIONS (WHAT THE REPUKES ETC. ARE DOING HERE, SHOWS THEIR POSTS ARE DIRTY TOILET PAPER TO BE THROWN AND FLUSHED. :) TAKE CARE

2 hours ago

Like Reply



**dmfarooq**

President Obama announced last night a long term agreement with president Karzai of Afghanistan . In the last ten years president Karzai has not been able to



establish his government 's control beyond Kabul . There has been wide spread desertion in Afghanistan 's security forces . President Obama 's visit to Afghanistan has raised a few major issues , for rest of the election year : a) An obvious controversy and significance for the election year politics . b) Recent national opinion polls have shown that 72 percent of the people favor speedy withdrawal and bringing troops home , sooner than later. c) President Obama would face continuing challenges and questions from both the GOP leaders and progressive / liberal wing of his own party in this regard .

2 hours ago

Like Reply

**twophad**

And who would YOU negotiate with, oh wise one?

7 minutes ago in reply to dmfarooq

Like

**Gutsy333**

TO REPUBLICAN POSTERS AND TEA PARTY POSTERS: HATE OF YOU? NOT HERE, RATHER SPIRE AND ANGER FOR ALL THE DAMAGE YOU HAVE DELIBERATIVELY DONE TO AMERICA, ITS ECONOMY AND REGULAR CITIZENS.

YOUR SELFISH ANTI-TAX AVARICE HAS MADE US STRUGGLE TO EAT; HUNDREDS OF THOUSAND THAT SADLY FROZE TO DEATH, OR STARVED DOES PROVOKE IRE AGAINST YOU RUTHLESS POLICIES.

TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, NOW YOU LIE THROUGH YOUR FILTHY FAT NOSES. WHAT DO YOU EXPECT? YOU CHOSE YOUR NEGATIVITY AND BLOCKING EVERY POLICY PRESIDENT OBAMA PROPOSED THAT WOULD YIELD POSITIVE RESULTS AND ACCELERATE OUR RECOVERY.

INSTEAD OF ADMITTING WHAT YOU DID, YOU COME LYING AGAIN! WHAT DO YOU EXPECT:? THAT WE THE PEOPLE FALL FOR YOUR LIES, NO THANK YOU. TAKE YOUR FLIP FLOPPER RUIN ROMNEY AND STICK HIM TO WHERE THE SUN DOES NOT HITE YOU. HAHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

2 hours ago

Like Reply

**Gutsy333**

THIS STORY IS ABOUT AFGHANISTAN AND PRESIDENT OBAMA'S POLICY ABOUT IT :), NOT ANIMAL ISSUES!

YET SOME POSTERS DOWN BELOW GET INTO ANIMAL ABUSE, A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TOPIC! WHY DO THEY DO THIS? I AM NOT SURE.

ALTHOUGH, GIVEN THE HUMAN INTERPRETATION: ANIMALS ARE NOT AS INTELLIGENT AS HUMANS. OR RATHER, WHAT THE REPUKES HAVE BEEN DOING, HAS SHOWN LOWER THAN ANIMAL LEVEL INTELLIGENCE!

BECAUSE DOLPHINS, ELEPHANTS, DOGS AND TURTLES NOW SHOW MORE INTELLIGENCE THAN.....MOST REPUKES :)

LET US VOTE FOR LAZZY, THE TV DOG :) HE WAS REALLY SMART :)

3 hours ago

Like Reply

**tedon**

Obama's decision to withdraw from Afganistan is 4 years \$1 Trillion too late.

3 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply

**Joshua001**

To homardy and twophad: Thank you, for your great replies to my comment. It appears you are out here bashing everybody but you won't post your own comment for them to do the same. I apologize for not being an English major like yourselves. But, thank you. You're entitled to your opinion's and I know what I know.

4 hours ago

Like Reply



**twophad**

And actually, pal, that's 5th grade English that I'm giving you.

6 minutes ago in reply to Joshua001

Like



**twophad**

I post plenty of comments, and the plural of "opinion" (or anything else) does not take an apostrophe. You "know," unfortunately, what FOX NEWS has fabricated.

17 minutes ago in reply to Joshua001

Like



**teams33**

GOP Election in November for sure.

4 hours ago

Like Reply



**twophad**

Sad to say, you'll have to go back to Faux and Friends to hear that story...

18 minutes ago in reply to teams33

Like



**TwinforParts**

So we can invade Iran and NK?

2 hours ago in reply to teams33

Like



**tinwatchman**

teams33 - :smirk: Yeah, 'cause they're going to do a single damn thing differently... if they're smart.

3 hours ago in reply to teams33

Like



**RVenger**

Obama is the only President in American history to allow our "allies" (that'd be Afghanistan) to kill our troop with impunity. This year, more of our troops have been killed by Afghan soldiers than have been killed by the Taliban in Combat. That Obama allows this to continue without repercussion to Afghanistan is shameful, cowardly and a violation of the oath he took. He should resign.

4 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply



**twophad**

Which Faux News program did you get THAT from? Or did you make it up? If you did, congratulations--it's really, REALLY creative!!!

19 minutes ago in reply to RVenger

Like



**Paganguy**

To Tinwatchman: You are correct. About 4,500 platoon commanders were shot and killed by their own men. War is hell.

56 minutes ago in reply to RVenger

Like



**TwinforParts**

Having served there how is Obama allowing it? We ( the military) always have the right to self defense, it's in the UCMJ.

2 hours ago in reply to RVenger

Like



**tinwatchman**

RVenger - "The only President in history"? During Vietnam, our OWN soldiers used to kill their officers all the damned time.

3 hours ago in reply to RVenger 2 Likes

Like



**jjc9999**

It shouldn't amaze me, but it does, how many tough-guy, big-brave, right-wing cowardly heroes there are on these comment sections. It must be something to get paid by the P.A.C. to spend hours on the net making no point except to themselves. Unfortunately, I have to earn my income, so, unlike these "people", I have to work for a living..

5 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply



**TwinforParts**

I think the right term is CHICKEN-HAWKS!

2 hours ago in reply to jjc9999 2 Likes

Like

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