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How to leave a strong Afghanistan

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An Afghan high school student reads a textbook at the Lycee Malalai in Kabul on September 26.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Jeremi Suri: When we leave Afghanistan, 10 years of progress could be lost

Suri: We must not hand over power to a strongman, like Karzai, which discredits U.S.

We must insist Pakistan fights extremism within its borders and without, Suri writes

We must invest in institutions, public works, he says, and especially schools

Editor's note: *Jeremi Suri is the Mack Brown Distinguished Professor for Global Leadership, History, and Public Policy at the University of Texas at Austin, and author of the new book, "Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama" (Free Press).*

(CNN) -- The first CIA agents landed in Afghanistan on September 26, 2001, beginning direct American efforts to overthrow the Taliban. Ten years later, the United States is still fighting the Taliban, and the recent assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, leader of Afghanistan's High Peace Council, shows that we are far from total victory.

The terrorist training camps are gone and al Qaeda's top leaders are dead or on the run. Nonetheless, Afghanistan remains riddled with violence, corruption and hatred. The citizens of Afghanistan continue to suffer from crushing poverty, immobility and intimidation.

President Obama in June made it clear that the United States would not continue to fight indefinitely in Afghanistan. The president

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announced that he would withdraw about one-third of the roughly 100,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan by summer 2012. He also pledged a fuller disengagement by 2014, when "the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security." Subsequent discussions revealed that the White House expected to keep no more than 25,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, about half the U.S. deployment in Germany.

After 10 long years, American withdrawal from Afghanistan is wise and necessary. An open-ended commitment is unsustainable in the face of global recession, excessive U.S. government debt and pressing political challenges in Libya, Egypt, Syria and Iran -- just to name a few crucial countries. The United States must disengage from Afghanistan and focus its resources elsewhere.



Jeremi Suri

The real question is how the United States should withdraw and what it should leave behind. How can we make sure the sacrifices of the last 10 years are not betrayed after we leave? How can we help ensure against a reversion to the conditions in Afghanistan that allowed the 9/11 terrorists to train and take refuge?

The United States has extensive experience with these questions, from our difficult interventions over the last century. In the Philippines, Germany, Japan, and to a certain extent, Iraq, American investments in nationwide elections, in a multiparty legislature and in a respected judiciary have brought some legitimacy to the government. This is a very mixed history with few "victories," but some insights that might help with our withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Hedge your bets. American leaders have a tendency to invest heavily in friendly strongmen, like Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, Shah Reza Pahlavi in Iran and Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan. These figures initially look reliable and morally attractive as courageous leaders of anti-communist and anti-Taliban efforts. Extensive American support, however, becomes corrupting, increasing the isolation and dictatorial qualities of Washington's chosen allies. In the end, dependence on strongmen discredits American power.

As American soldiers leave Afghanistan, they must not "hand over" power to Karzai or any similar figure. Instead, the United States must work hard in the next year to build deeper ties with diverse local leaders, many of whom oppose both the Taliban and Karzai at the same time. The United States should encourage power-sharing between groups, and it should avoid dependence on Karzai for security after 2012. Afghanistan needs more federalism across regions and less centralization in Kabul.

Build institutions. America's long history of foreign interventions proves that local insurgents can outlast our soldiers. As in Afghanistan, the United States will eventually bring its troops home, but the insurgents have nowhere to go. They can stay under cover, re-group and re-emerge after the Americans leave. That is precisely the dynamic with the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

If American soldiers cannot outlast the insurgents, American-supported institutions can. In the Philippines, Germany, Japan, and to a certain extent, Iraq, where American investments in nationwide elections, in a multiparty legislature and in a respected judiciary have brought some legitimacy to the Iraqi government. It is the joint businesses, the public works and especially the schools that

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changed society in the most enduring and beneficial ways. These institutions are also the most likely to draw local participation and popular endorsement. Money devoted to infrastructure and schools is well spent, especially as foreign military forces are reduced.

Nurture regional stability. American efforts in Afghanistan are threatened most by the extremism and violence in Pakistan. Although an official ally of the United States, Pakistan has provided sanctuary for terrorists, including Osama bin Laden, and the leaders of the Taliban. Pakistan has contributed to the corruption and intimidation in Afghanistan that oppress citizens seeking a better way of life.

The United States must put more pressure on Pakistan to play a productive role in the region. We must insist that the billions of dollars we send to Islamabad are not diverted to meddling in Afghanistan. Instead, the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies must work to apprehend terrorists, especially on their own soil, and they must enforce a cessation of violence on the key trade and communications routes into and out of Afghanistan. We cannot ask the Pakistanis to abandon their sympathies for some extreme Islamic parties, including elements of the Taliban, but we can insist that they help to maintain order, stability, and openness in the region.

Although Americans must withdraw from Afghanistan, they must do so in a way that supports positive changes. We must give Afghans the chance to run a functioning nation-state of their own. For all the difficulties of the last 10 years, there are real achievements -- including the establishment of political stability in the Northern provinces and the reduction in country-wide poverty -- to build on. Progress in withdrawal is possible and it will not cost very much. It will certainly come at less expense than a reversion of Afghanistan to the terrorist haven it was in September 2001.

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

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feholder



Suri accurately write on his WS "scholarship cannot substitute for real-lived experience." This article demonstrates that quote and little practical knowledge of a country that will simply revert back to tribal strife upon our departure - as it has for centuries. "Nuture regional stability" - real... [more](#)

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Brewtus77

Pakistan is no ally of America. Pakistan is only an ally of American tax dollars. As soon as that spigot is closed (not soon enough) those state sponsors of terror will just take China's & Iran's money openly instead of behind the scenes as it is now to kill American soldiers.

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Keith1952

It doesn't matter how we leave, just leave!

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SteveChicago

On the way out, nuke the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. That will stop militants from crossing over.

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Gameplay

Lots of good idea here in Jeremi comments. Now please tell us that you will support higher taxes on the rich to support your position.

That's the problem with Republicans, they want war only if they can put it on the US tax payer credit card.

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robert937

The real question is how the United States should withdraw and what it should leave behind. How can we make sure the sacrifices of the last 10 years are not betrayed after we leave? How can we help ensure against a reversion to the conditions in Afghanistan that allowed the 9/11 terrorists to train ... [more](#)

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US1776

We can't fight the 12th Century !!

GET OUT NOW !!

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calimafia

So, can we get a refund before we leave?

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Logiczilla

How to leave a strong Afghanistan?

Give free burqas to the ladies, free canes to the men and handover Afghanistan to Pakistan

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PPJr

With USA not saying clearly to Pakistan to stay away, I can't see how it can leave Afghanistan strong.

I just can't believe, what Pakistan is doing is effectively an undeclared war on USA. And yet USA is still acting as nothing really happened.

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BGRBryan

I don't care if we leave a "strong" Afghanistan or a weak one. Let's just leave.

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rexedie

sadly...the american macho attitude of war and victory...will be our downfall... we never give up until its finished.... in this situation though...it will never be finished... look at all the other countries that have tried and failed in afghanistan..... we will go broke trying... more ... more

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amitson

Tribal extremist leaders also need arrested and punished and put into isolation and all their funding source to be cut off immediately.

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chinesefox

No such thing. Afghanistan is more like a collection of warring tribes than a cohesive, modern nation.

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Wastrel

"The terrorist training camps are gone and al Qaeda's top leaders are dead or on the run." Dream on. Al-Qaeda finds new leaders whenever one is killed. The terrorists are still there, and so are their training camps. Why does this article want us to believe that we have won? Trying to make us c... more

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RalphinFL

Have you ever tried digging yourself out of a hole? The money and lives spent on Afghanistan were wasted. The US should cut its losses and move on.

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Willie12345

20 minutes after we're gone the drug lords and Taliban will be back in control. Let's not deceive ourselves.

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Logiczilla

20 minutes is too long

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• *fight4libert*

Wonder how many people on here have been to Afghanistan, or have talked to our troops that have. Everyone that I have talked to that has been there want to go back, including a number of amputees.

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• *FreedomFried*

Leave? You mean run awaySo usa

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• *MindLikeWarp*

Afghanistan is Dr. Evil's island. We can't leave it strong, it would bankrupt the U.S,

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• *Denverdriver*

SFE is right, there is no way to prevent Afghanistan from reverting to what it was before we stumbled in. Jeremy Suri overlooks some basics about Afghanistan--It has always been tribal and corrupt and always will be. And Afghan men lack the high morals of dogs. They leave the widows and children ... [more](#)

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• *calimafia*

UUUhhhhhhhhh, excuse me. Can we get our money back before we go?..... The show wasn't all that good.

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• *SFE*

here is an image for ya: Afghanistan is like a bucket of water. The USmilitary is like a hand thrust in that bucket...it causes ripples initially then the water becomes still. As the hand is removed some ripples and things goback to how they were before the hand was ever inserted. IN a nut shell: whe... [more](#)

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