



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 2, 2010

Pentagon Seeks Permanent U.S. Presence in Afghanistan

President Barack Obama may have publicly stated that U.S. troops will begin withdrawing from Afghanistan in July 2011, but according to reporter Bob Woodward, both Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Gen. David Petraeus have other ideas. The Huffington Post reports that Woodward's new book, *Obama's Wars*, portrays Gates and Petraeus as anticipating — in Gates's case, perhaps even desiring — a long-term U.S. presence in the "graveyard of empires."



Huffington Post writer Marcus Baram recounts a recent incident that Woodward describes in his book:

During a dinner hosted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for Afghan President Hamid Karzai in May, Gates reminded the group that he still feels guilty for his role in the first President Bush's decision to pull out of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, according to [Woodward]. And to express his commitment to not letting down the country again, he emphasized:

"We're not leaving Afghanistan prematurely," Gates finally said. "In fact, we're not ever leaving at all."

Woodward notes that the group was shocked by the blunt comment: "At least one stunned participant put down his fork. Another wrote it down, verbatim, in his notes."

Even though the communist threat to the Afghans had abated by 1989, Gates just couldn't bear the thought of leaving the Afghans to run their own country. Now that he's in charge of the Defense Department, he has another opportunity to prevent a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and he apparently intends to take advantage of it. Baram notes that Gates "could be referring to that small contingency force" that Obama supposedly wants to leave behind after the rest of the troops have been withdrawn; but even if that is what he means by "we're not leaving at all," it's still an indication that the U.S. government intends to be intervening in Afghanistan indefinitely. No wonder Gates was held over from the George W. Bush administration: He's a perfect point man for the U.S. imperium beloved of both major political parties.

Petraeus, commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, has also gone on the record with his belief that the Afghanistan occupation could last at least another decade, UPI [reported](#) on September 14. Woodward, Baram reports, quotes Petraeus, speaking of a multigenerational occupation: "You have to recognize that I don't think you win this war. I think you keep fighting. You have to stay after it. This is the kind of fight we're in for the rest of our lives and probably our kids' lives."

The Pentagon, then, is clearly on the side of a very long-term, if not permanent, commitment of U.S. forces to Afghanistan, and Obama seems unwilling to assert his authority as commander-in-chief to prevent such a commitment. Whether this is a result of his belief in the interventionist project, his indecisiveness, or a cold political calculation is hard to say; quite possibly it is some of each.



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During his presidential campaign Obama [referred](#) to Afghanistan as “the right battlefield” in the Global War on Terror (as opposed to Iraq) and pledged to send more troops to that country, which he did shortly after assuming office. Yet, as *The New American* [reported](#) on September 22, Woodward recounts a 2009 meeting on Afghanistan in which Obama flatly stated, “I’m not doing 10 years. I’m not doing long-term nation-building. I am not spending a trillion dollars.” Obama would later, according to Woodward, insist that “there is no wiggle room” when it comes to withdrawing from Afghanistan. At the same time, his reasons for desiring a quick withdrawal appear to be more political than principled. Baram writes that when Senator Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) asked Obama about his July 2011 deadline to begin withdrawing from Afghanistan, Obama, according to Woodward, replied: “Well, if you’d asked me that question, what I would say is, ‘We’re going to start leaving.’ I have to say that. I can’t let this be a war without end, and I can’t lose the whole Democratic Party.... And people at home don’t want to hear we’re going to be there for ten years.”

The upshot of all this is that while Obama dithers about what to do in Afghanistan, trying to figure out what his own position is and which way the political winds are blowing, the military gains the upper hand, or at least an equal hand. Justin Raimondo of [Antiwar.com](#) [described](#) this as “the rise of the generals as an almost co-equal force with the President,” which he termed “the most ominous development ... of the post-9/11 political atmosphere.” Indeed, history demonstrates that when the military gains primacy in any political system, little good follows. There is a reason the Founding Fathers put the U.S. military under civilian control.

With the military having largely loosed itself from the President’s, as well as Congress’s, control, what is to prevent Gates and Petraeus from having their way? The United States may very well be stuck in Afghanistan for decades, just as she still has troops in Korea, Japan, and Germany long after the conflicts involving those countries have passed. Empire has been the downfall of many formerly free republics; [Gibbon](#) would have recognized 2010 America all too well.

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