The drawdown of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, announced by President Barack Obama on June 22, is fraught with uncertainty and risk. In a country where armed conflict has persisted for decades, the dangers of renewed civil war are everywhere evident. Military disengagement must be carefully calibrated and staged gradually. To work, it will require a series of political, security, and economic agreements in Afghanistan, continued regional cooperation against Al Qaeda, sustained support for locally based civilian development programs, and an interim alternative security force.

At particular risk in this transition is the progress Afghan women have made since 2001. While improving the status of women is not the reason U.S. forces intervened in Afghanistan, it has become an important concern as our military begins to withdraw. A *Time* magazine cover article (August 9, 2010) portrayed the shocking image of an Afghan woman whose nose had been cut off by her husband. The headline said the image represented “What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan.” To search for an answer to such questions, my colleague Sarah Smiles Persinger and I wrote *Afghan Women Speak*. It is based on more than fifty interviews conducted last year in Kabul with policymakers, diplomats, military officers, and

Already this decade of war has caused many to question the nature of America’s engagement around the world. Some would have America retreat from our responsibility as an anchor of global security, and embrace an isolation that ignores the very real threats that we face. Others would have America over-extend ourselves, confronting every evil that can be found abroad. We must chart a more centered course.

If the president can redefine the center to include the large numbers of Americans uneasy about the financial, moral, and human costs of our post–Cold War expansionism, it would be a significant gain for progressives and a significant political challenge to Republicans. That explains why some Republican observers were quick to label Obama’s speech isolationist. In a blog post titled “The President’s Isolationist Turn,” Noam Neusner, once a speechwriter for George W. Bush, quoted Obama’s statement that, following a decade of expensive war, we “must invest in America’s greatest resource—our people” and focus on restoring the economy. “Those words,” Neusner wrote, “could have been written by an isolationist of the early twentieth century.” Look for more charges like that in the future if Obama continues to press what should be the obvious truth: it is time to focus on nation building here at home.

Gregory Metzger received a master’s degree in international relations from Boston University. His work has appeared in the *Christian Century, Books & Culture,* and *Touchstone.*

**David Cortright**

**Exit Strategy**

**THE PLAGUE OF AFGHAN WOMEN**

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Not to be forgotten
Afghan women, including parliamentarians, activists, health professionals, and NGO workers.

The women we interviewed were clearly ambivalent. They desperately wanted to see an end to the war and felt they could not make further progress in a militarized environment. They did not want to see the Taliban return to power, but favored reconciliation with them and with other insurgent groups. Yet they did not want peace purchased at the expense of women’s advancement. Already they had seen some of their recent gains erode as the influence of the warlords and the Taliban became more widespread. They were worried about what would happen when foreign forces depart.

Over the past ten years, Western governments and donor agencies have poured billions of dollars into programs that improve the conditions of Afghan women and seek to guarantee their political rights. These efforts have produced significant improvements:

- Across the country, clinics and hospitals have been constructed or rebuilt and more health workers have been trained. Access to health services has increased dramatically. Immunization rates have increased, and infant and child mortality rates have started to decline. Obstetric care units have been opened in many districts, accompanied by information campaigns on hygiene and maternal care.
- During the Taliban era, midwifery schools were shut down, and few trained attendants and health professionals were available. Since 2001, thousands of women have been trained as midwives and birth attendants, and the percentage of births attended by skilled caregivers has started to climb.
- Progress has been achieved in providing economic opportunities for women, primarily through microcredit access and community-development grants, providing more than 1.5 million loans to mostly female recipients.
- Enrollment numbers for primary school have increased from approximately 900,000 in 2001 to more than 7 million today. Girls could not attend school during the Taliban era. They now make up 37 percent of the student population.
- Since 2001, Afghan women have gained significant political rights. The Taliban excluded women from political participation, but the 2004 Afghan Constitution establishes a 25-percent reserve quota for women in parliament. Since 2001 women have been free to vote and participate in elections, with women accounting for approximately 44 percent of voters in the 2005 parliamentary election.

But as violence and the insurgency have worsened, women face renewed threats. The Taliban have regained control in some communities, and reactionary former warlords have increased their influence in the Kabul government. Opposition to continued Western military involvement has produced a backlash against women’s rights, which is seen by some Afghans as an alien imposition. Women who exercise leadership skills are often called anti-Islamic, Western agents, or prostitutes.
Amazed

Sometimes, entering her office and crossing from the door to her desk, or while at her desk pausing to look up from her work, she catches, instantly the whole space she knows so well, seeing it all, every item, and every story behind every item, how it got there and what it means; and how she got there through a sequence of left right turns and choices made as a younger woman leading to a half beast waiting at the core, with a strangeness she fully assimilated and made her own to become something she could never have imagined or trusted as the younger woman unfurling the frayed thread she had intended to retrace.

—Leonard A. Temme

Leonard A. Temme lives in Enterprise, Alabama. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in Commonweal, Emerald Coast Review, and Poet lore, and elsewhere.

Some have been subjected to intimidation and death threats, and several high-profile women have been assassinated. Hundreds of schools for girls have been closed, and girl students have been targeted for attack. Clinics have been closed and health-care workers have been abducted and murdered. Lack of security has limited women’s participation in public life, and electoral participation rates, for both women and men, have declined since the high point of 2005.

Despite all of this—or perhaps because of it—the majority of women we interviewed support a peace process. They know that women and girls are suffering from rising violence, and they can see their rights eroding as the armed conflict intensifies. Prolonging an increasingly destructive, unsustainable war will not benefit Afghan women. The best way to work for the rights of Afghan women is through political means—persuasion and patient dialogue—rather than through war or military coercion.

The withdrawal of foreign forces should be used as leverage to gain support for various security and social goals. Addressing the security situation is paramount. In our report, we recommended the deployment of an interim protection force. It would help avoid a security vacuum and protect civilians as Western forces depart. The proposed force would operate under the auspices of the United Nations, with a mission of monitoring the demobilization and providing protection for citizens. Indonesia and other neutral Muslim countries could be asked to lead such a force. Taliban leaders have supported the proposal for a Muslim-led peacekeeping force, which they have pledged not to attack.

The strategy to enhance security through demilitarization seems paradoxical. In conventional war, military force is considered the main form of leverage, but in the Afghanistan conflict the presence of foreign forces has been a major factor driving the insurgency. Military officials have assumed that the use of greater armed force would subdue the Taliban and cause them to yield. Instead, in certain areas the influence of the Taliban has spread and civilian casualties are on the rise.

The alternative strategy attempts to reverse this deadly dynamic. It reduces the foreign-military footprint as a way of diminishing the appeal of insurgency. It ties the scale and pace of the drawdown to specific political, security, and economic conditions. The withdrawal process can be slowed or accelerated depending on the degree of cooperation by Afghan parties in negotiating and implementing political, security, and economic agreements to end the war.

As U.S.-led forces cease operations and pull back to their bases in advance of withdrawal, the interim security force could be introduced. It would need to be paid for and equipped by the United States and its NATO allies. Remaining Western troops could help train it and Afghan security forces. The interim force would operate only for a specified period and with the consent of the Afghan government.

Any drawdown in foreign troops must also be accompanied by long-term investment in aid projects that support Afghan women and families. Because development funding has been linked to military objectives, and because aid money has been concentrated in areas with the most fighting, foreign governments will be tempted to reduce aid programs as they begin to withdraw their troops. This would be a tragic mistake that could jeopardize the gains of recent years.

One of the best ways to prevent a rollback in women’s gains is to ensure that women are fully represented in all peace discussions and forums. So far, Afghan women have had to fight to have their voices heard in the various discussions and peace jirgas. Only a handful of women are members of Afghanistan’s High Peace Council, which is responsible for guiding the reconciliation process with the Taliban. Western policymakers must encourage the Afghan government to ensure that women are included more meaningfully in high-level decision-making forums. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has shown strong leadership in advocating for Afghan women’s rights. Other U.S. and Western officials should follow her lead.

The ability of the United States to shape political events in Afghanistan is limited and will diminish over time, but this does not mean we should abandon our development and human-rights aims. Our withdrawal must include continued economic assistance and a commitment to sustain programs for public health, education, economic opportunity, and political rights, including those of women and children.

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