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Exit Afghanistan and Leave Iran Alone

by Sheldon Richman

The Obama administration's quest to control the health-insurance industry has dominated the headlines for months, but finally — with the news out of Iran and Afghanistan — foreign policy has again asserted itself. It was almost easy to forget that the United States maintains a worldwide empire, but the reminders came leaping off the front pages and the television screens.

Word that the U.S. commander in Afghanistan wants 40,000 more troops and that Iran has a hitherto undisclosed uranium-enrichment facility gave the empire enthusiasts something to get excited about. The advocates of Pax Americana tell us that we must “win” in Afghanistan and be ready to bomb Iran if the leaders there don't prostrate themselves to the U.S. government forthwith.

For Afghanistan President Obama is deciding between a stepped-up war on the surging Taliban or a smaller-scale campaign against al Qaeda. In Iran he refused to take military action off the table while he gives the Iranians a chance to come clean in head-to-head talks.

Few voices can be found in the mainstream media criticizing the continuation of the Afghan occupation or the rush to confront Iran. Virtually everyone thinks it is America's duty to police the world and mete out punishment whenever it decides it is justified in doing so.

Some contrarian thoughts are in order. The United States has occupied Afghanistan for eight years. What does it have to show for it? It's backing a corrupt central government that has almost no legitimacy, while warlords and the deposed Taliban rule beyond the capital. The integrity of the last election is widely doubted. The violence intensifies.

Who's surprised? Don't they call Afghanistan the “graveyard of empires”? Didn't the Soviets, British, Mongols, and many others meet nasty fates there? Do “our leaders” learn nothing from history? Don't be fooled by the line that Afghanistan is a big enough threat to justify the United States tempting fate. The Bush administration erred in not treating the 9/11 attacks as crimes instead of as acts of war. Invasion, regime change, occupation, and nation-building were absurd responses, especially when you consider that we can best protect ourselves from terrorism

by not behaving like an empire. Terrorism is the tactic the weak uses against the strong, particularly imperial forces. Forswearing empire is a far better way to prevent future attacks.

Adding an attack on Iran to the list of U.S. provocations would be crazy. Even with a nuclear arsenal, Iran is not going to attack the United States or Israel (a nuclear state that unlike Iran has not signed the Nonproliferation Treaty). Why would it want a nuke? It might have something to do with the fact that U.S. presidents have threatened Iran in word and deed repeatedly since 1979, when the Islamic revolution dumped the U.S.-backed dictator the Eisenhower administration installed in power a quarter-century earlier. Since the revolution U.S. governments have tried to subvert the Iranian regime, conducted threatening war exercises off its shores, and helped Saddam Hussein — yes, the same one — when Iraq launched a war against Iran in the 1980s. Now the United States occupies Muslim countries to the east and west of Iran.

Now why would Iran wish to have a military deterrent?

Obama and others say that if diplomacy doesn't tame Iran, stiff sanctions would be the next step. Under international law that is an act of war. Sanctions harm — even kill — innocent people in the targeted nation. And they provoke others to attack the perpetrators, that is, terrorism. Do we really need reminding that Osama bin Laden specified the decade-long embargo against Iraq as one of the reasons for the 9/11 attacks? That embargo killed hundreds of thousands of children by prohibiting the importation of needed sanitation equipment and other vital goods. But it did not drive Saddam Hussein from power.

So if the United States spearheads sanctions against Iran, let's not be surprised when some Iranian sympathizer attacks Americans "out of the blue." We'll have the Obama administration to thank.

And when sanctions fail, will war follow? It should be needless to say that bombing Iran would destroy many innocent lives while strengthening the Iranian regime, putting us into another quagmire, and further bankrupting ourselves. Will we ever learn that imperial foreign policy is self-defeating?

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