



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on June 23, 2011

Obama Troop Withdrawal Will Leave 70,000 Soldiers in Afghanistan

The President's announcement disappointed many congressional leaders. Even House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi criticized the decision, [stressing](#) "it has been the hope of many in Congress and across the country that the full drawdown of U.S. forces would happen sooner than the President laid out — and we will continue to press for a better outcome."



When the announced troop withdrawal is complete, just before the 2012 U.S. Presidential election, the troop levels will be about 70,000, more than twice the level of soldiers in Afghanistan at the beginning of 2008. According to the *Washington Post*, [nearly three-quarters](#) of the American people support withdrawing soldiers from Afghanistan.

Obama [noted](#) that he planned to have U.S. soldiers deployed in combat in Afghanistan for at least another three years: "This is the beginning — but not the end — of our effort to wind down this war. We'll have to do the hard work of keeping the gains that we've made, while we draw down our forces and transition responsibility for security to the Afghan government. And next May, in Chicago, we will host a summit with our NATO allies and partners to shape the next phase of this transition."

The theme of Obama's speech was less an announcement of troop withdrawals than an attempt to conflate genuine national defense with nation-building. First, he began with an argument for staying in Afghanistan upon national defense grounds, decrying nation-building:

The goal that we seek is achievable, and can be expressed simply: No safe haven from which al Qaeda or its affiliates can launch attacks against our homeland or our allies. We won't try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely.

But Obama quickly went on to [state](#) "we are meeting our goals" and then defining the next mission as nation-building in Afghanistan:

After this initial reduction, our troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead. Our mission will change from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security.

After 2014, U.S. soldiers deployed to Afghanistan would be in that "support" role. Obama then [tried to chart](#) what he called a "centered course" between legitimate national defense and interventionist approach to going abroad with soldiers to solve every humanitarian crisis in the world:



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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-extended, confronting every evil that can be found abroad.

We must chart a more centered course. Like generations before, we must embrace America's singular role in the course of human events. But we must be as pragmatic as we are passionate; as strategic as we are resolute. When threatened, we must respond with force — but when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies overseas. When innocents are being slaughtered and global security endangered, we don't have to choose between standing idly by or acting on our own. Instead, we must rally international action, which we're doing in Libya, where we do not have a single soldier on the ground, but are supporting allies in protecting the Libyan people and giving them the chance to determine their own destiny.

The takeaway from Obama's speech is that the President is fundamentally an interventionist, and is willing to use the U.S. military like an empire's foreign legion. He's willing trade away the lives of American soldiers entrusted to him if he thinks he can save a larger number of foreigners, and will call that a good trade, even if the intervention has no relation to U.S. national security. But Obama's interventionism is fundamentally internationalist rather than nationalist; whenever possible he seeks to deploy troops under the flag of the United Nations (or one of its [regional alliances, such as NATO](#)) rather than under the Stars and Stripes.

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