

Welcome to TimesPeople
Get Started

TimesPeople Lets You Share and Discover the Best of NYTimes.com

6:44 AM

Recommend

My Account | Welcome, 75200 | Log Out | Help

HOME PAGE | TODAY'S PAPER | VIDEO | MOST POPULAR | TIMES TOPICS

The New York Times

Opinion

Search All NYTimes.com

Go



WORLD | U.S. | N.Y. / REGION | BUSINESS | TECHNOLOGY | SCIENCE | HEALTH | SPORTS | OPINION | ARTS | STYLE | TRAVEL | JOBS | REAL ESTATE | AUTOS

EDITORIALS | COLUMNISTS | CONTRIBUTORS | LETTERS | THE PUBLIC EDITOR | GLOBAL OPINION

Read our **100% Broadband** by 2014 Proposal. [CLICK HERE](#)

REPLAY

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Afghanistan on Main Street

By ROGER COHEN
Published: December 7, 2009

The most important line in President Obama's Afghan speech was not about Afpak policy (so named by the White House) but about the U.S. domestic situation: "Our troop commitment in Afghanistan cannot be open-ended — because the nation that I am most interested in building is our own."



Earl Wilson/The New York Times
Roger Cohen

As military strategy for winning a war the speech made little sense. You don't need to be von Clausewitz to know that the commitment of 30,000 troops combined with the establishment of proximate date for the start of their withdrawal is not going to break the will of an enemy or destroy its center of gravity.

But as a political statement and as an acknowledgment of the limits of American power after the first decade of the 21st century, the speech was adroit.

[Go to Columnist Page »](#)

Saying troop drawdown will begin in July 2011, without saying at what rate or to what extent, is not a bad way to pressure President Hamid Karzai to get with the program

while leaving needed U.S. options open for averting the worst in an area with an estimated 80 to 100 Pakistani nuclear warheads.

Those warheads and the virulence of anti-Western political Islam in "Afpakistan" mean U.S. wagons will not be pulling out completely for a long time. Exit ramps are really easing ramps and political signals. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates said after the speech, "We must not repeat the mistake of 1989 and turn our backs on these folks."

But nor can America turn its back on itself.

It cannot forever languish in a la-la land where the great global security underwriter and the great global debtor never encounter each other, dishing out billions for far-flung fights with one hand and condemning the next generation of Americans with the other. The Jekyll-and-Hyde years have to end.

The Taliban may never go away but they do sleep. Debt doesn't.

So, as the delirious decade draws to a close — a period in which America was upended by

[More Articles in Opinion »](#)

- [SIGN IN TO RECOMMEND](#)
- [TWITTER](#)
- [COMMENTS](#)
- [E-MAIL](#)
- [SEND TO PHONE](#)
- [PRINT](#)
- [SHARE](#)
- [CLOSE](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY



MOST POPULAR

[E-MAILED](#) | [BLOGGED](#) | [SEARCHED](#)

1. [Frugal Traveler: Going Deep for the Cheap in New York](#)
2. [A Senator's Gift to the Jews, Nonreturnable](#)
3. [Thomas L. Friedman: Going Cheney on Climate](#)
4. [Cable Freedom Is a Click Away](#)
5. [At Hanukkah, Chefs Make Kitchen Conversions](#)
6. [Married \(Happily\) With Issues](#)
7. [Nicholas D. Kristof: Cancer From the Kitchen?](#)
8. [Op-Ed Contributors: Catch of the Freezer](#)
9. [Well: Phys Ed: What Causes Early Arthritis in Knees?](#)
10. [Sous Vide Moves From Avant-Garde to the Countertop](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)



Cate Blanchett's new role

ALSO IN THEATER »

Tickets for every taste
Cheap seats: holiday shows

nytimes.com

THEATER

9/11 and close to one trillion dollars was spent on the Afghan and Iraq wars — the realism of Obama is welcome. It takes getting used to — idealism propelled him after all. The three presidential C's (cool, controlled, cerebral) can get to people; they've gotten to me at times. Still, Obama is right; America needs a heavy dose of nation-building that's incompatible with ever escalating military commitments.

ADVERTISEMENTS



The United States is buried in debt, personal and collective, after a decade in which median incomes for the average working stiff fell, and more Americans dropped below the poverty line, and the number of Americans without health insurance rose. Unemployment is above French levels without French welfare. Enough said.

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

A lot of Americans are worried sick. The friendly loan packagers who were doling out money like risk no longer existed have taken real exit ramps — they've vanished.

Leading by example has to mean something. If the U.S. government doesn't care what it spends, citizens aren't going to either — and the dollar's plunge will become irreversible. Just look at the record of the bomb-and-shop years since 2001.

Polonius had some good advice for Laertes in Hamlet:

Neither a borrower nor a lender be

For loan oft loses both itself and friend,

And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

This above all: to thine own self be true...

Or, as Proverbs 22:7 puts it in the Bible: "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender."

Everything from the nation's relationship with China to Americans' buying decisions in this holiday season is being affected by that venerable precept. President Obama cannot be impervious to it.

He especially cannot be impervious to it because the great bailout that has unfolded on his watch has salvaged Wall Street and its bonuses while doing little for Main Street and jobs. Paying for mistakes has been inequitably divided. The derivatives crowd is still golfing; the rivets crowd is wondering what happened to manufacturing. Obama's "truth to himself" demands that he do better.

That begins with risk-is-shared health care reform. It involves re-learning husbandry. It's going to take innovation, education and long-term thinking. And it's going to demand trade-offs.

In acknowledging these trade-offs, and putting the world on notice about America's future capacity as global security underwriter, Obama turned an Afghan speech into perhaps the most important domestic pronouncement of his presidency.

•

There are some things I want to correct and clear up about a column on Nov. 13, "[Of fruit flies and drones](#)." I suggested that research being done on fruit flies at the California Institute of Technology was done for military purposes.

The research does receive military funding, but the director of the laboratory, Michael H.

Dickinson, is a zoologist who studies insect neurobiology and neither he nor his lab contribute directly to the development of robots, drones or weapons. I did not speak to Professor Dickinson. A source I identified as a graduate student is in fact a former graduate student who works part-time as a technician in the lab. Finally, biomechanics refers to the application of mechanical principles to living organisms — not the application of living organisms to mechanisms.

[Sign in to Recommend](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on December 8, 2009, in The International Herald Tribune.

[More Articles in Opinion »](#)

| |
|--------------------------|
| COMMENTS |
| E-MAIL |
| PRINT |

Past Coverage

- [Pakistan Told to Ratchet Up Taliban Fight \(December 8, 2009\)](#)
- [Gates Calls July 2011 the Beginning, Not End, of Afghan Withdrawal \(December 7, 2009\)](#)
- [No Firm Plans for a U.S. Exit in Afghanistan \(December 7, 2009\)](#)
- [ON THE HILL; Obama's War, Democrats' Unease \(December 6, 2009\)](#)

Related Searches

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Afghanistan War (2001-) | Get E-Mail Alerts |
| Obama, Barack | Get E-Mail Alerts |
| United States Defense and Military Forces | Get E-Mail Alerts |
| United States Economy | Get E-Mail Alerts |

TRAVEL »



Now for Regular Skiers, the Ultra Terrain

MUSIC »



Cheers and Catcalls for 'Carmen'

HOME & GARDEN »



Renovating a Rental as if It Were Their Own

OPINION »

Bloggingheads: Global Climate Politics

Matthew Yglesias of the Center for American Progress and Ross Douthat of The Times debate the politics of climate change.

SPORTS »



Recounting One of U.S. Soccer's Finest Days

OPINION »



Letters: A Health Care Battle on Many Fronts