



## **Demand an Afghanistan Exit Strategy**

posted by **KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL** on 04/26/2010 @ 11:11am

Democratic Congressman Jim McGovern, Republican Congressman Walter Jones, and Democratic Senator Russ Feingold have introduced legislation demanding an exit strategy and timetable for withdrawal from Afghanistan. The bill reads, "Military operations in Afghanistan have cost American taxpayers more than \$200,000,000,000 in deficit spending since 2001." Over 1000 American soldiers have been killed and more than 5,600 wounded. In 2009 alone, **2400 Afghan civilians were killed** according to the UN, and **tens of thousands** have lost their lives since the war began.

The Senate and House bills--**S. 3197** and **HR 5015**, respectively--would require President Obama to provide a plan and a timetable for withdrawal of all US forces and military contractors, and identify any contingencies that might require changes to that timetable. It would demand an exit strategy--long overdue--from a war that has already cost us too much in treasure and lives, and isn't in the interest of US national security.

"Basically, what the bill is is a rejection of an open-ended military commitment in Afghanistan," said Rep. McGovern, on a conference call with NGOs, activists, and media organized by **Peace Action** last week. "This bill is a signal to the President that we want him to come up with an exit strategy, and we want the details."

Last year, McGovern introduced a similar amendment to an Afghanistan war-funding bill that also called for an exit strategy. It garnered more than 100 cosponsors and received 138 votes. He hopes the current legislation will be attached to an upcoming Afghanistan supplemental--within as soon as two weeks--and that it will hopefully receive even greater support. The House bill already has 36 cosponsors, including Republican Congressmen Jones, John Duncan of Tennessee, and Tim Johnson of Illinois; also Financial Services Committee Chairman Barney Frank, and Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Filner.

"This is an incredibly important time," said McGovern. "The more cosponsors we can get in the next couple of weeks--the more we're going to be able to exert some pressure when the supplemental comes up, [and] the more we're going to send a signal to the Administration that they need to pay attention to those of us who are saying that we need to rethink Afghanistan. What we want to make clear is that the concern about our involvement in Afghanistan is increasing, that it is deep, that a lot of people and members of Congress from all the over country--have a concern about this. So, it's important that all of us work to try to **get members of**

## **Congress as cosponsors."**

While McGovern notes that Obama has said he will begin redeploying troops in July of next year--a statement which immediately received some pushback from Defense Secretary Gates--that's insufficient.

"It's not only important to know when the first soldier is to be redeployed or brought home," he said, "it's important to know when the last soldier is as well."

McGovern--who served as a staffer to Congressman Joe Moakley for 14 years prior to his election to Congress in 1997--said that phone calls, emails, and letters are all important to members.

"I have to tell you as a former staffer and as a member of Congress-- pressure works, grassroots pressure works. It really makes a difference here," he said. "And when many people do it it's a movement. And what we need to create here in a very short period of time is a movement to try to change course on Afghanistan."

He suggested that people ask their representatives for a written response to "force them to think about what you discuss with them and see whether you can influence their position."

For McGovern, the reasons we need to withdraw from Afghanistan are clear. And it begins with the mission itself.

"This mission--whatever it is--is not clear," he said. "And I don't think by any measure it is something that we should be investing so much in terms of human life and American taxpayer dollars."

He noted that the war began as a response to those responsible for 9-11, but those perpetrators are no longer there. Al Qaeda, too, is establishing itself in other parts of the world like Yemen, **not in Afghanistan**. In fact, focusing so many resources on Afghanistan hinders our ability to fight Al Qaeda.

"Now we're engaged in this prolonged nation-building--get rid of the Taliban mission--that is not clearly defined, and quite frankly, is not working," he said. "If you go to war, you should have a clearly defined mission--a beginning, middle, transition period, and an end. I don't know what that is here. I can't tell you what success in Afghanistan means. I don't think the Administration can either."

McGovern says one of the biggest obstacles advocates for this bill face is the "fear" legislators have that they will be vulnerable to the charge that they are "soft" on terrorism. But he argues that this war isn't making the country safer.

"I believe it's having the opposite effect," he said. "We're draining our Treasury. We're putting our young men and women in uniform's lives at risk defending a corrupt leader. With each civilian casualty, more and more resentment grows towards the American forces and the Allied Forces that are there."

The Congressman spoke of his August visit to Afghanistan and the "widespread outrage" among

US government representatives on the ground who were "horrified over the way Karzai conducted the election."

"But that outrage did not translate to our policy makers here in Washington," he said. "Basically we've given Karzai a pass. Supporting corrupt, incompetent governments--that's not the way US policy should proceed. I've seen this movie before--and you have too--it doesn't have a happy ending."

But McGovern is also quick to point out that he isn't advocating that the US abandon Afghanistan, "nor should anybody." He said some of most successful development in Afghanistan has occurred without a significant military footprint.

"Maybe we should learn from that," he said. "The cost of one American soldier for one year in Afghanistan is equal to the cost of building thirty schools in Afghanistan. If you want to win the hearts and minds I think thirty schools is a pretty big deal. Helping the people of Afghanistan--in a way that makes a real difference to them--is a fraction of the cost of what we're doing right now."

And that cost of continuing this war isn't lost on McGovern or other advocates of this legislation. (In fact, if this legislation shortens the war in Afghanistan by a year, that would pay the two-year cost of the **Local Jobs for America Act** .

"The hundreds of billions of dollars we spend over there on war.... All that--mostly borrowed money--means that we're not investing at home. It means our roads and our bridges aren't being fixed. It means our schools aren't being fixed. It means we're not investing in healthcare, and a whole range of other things that we need to do to get our economy back on track," he said. "When we talk about national security, that definition needs to be enhanced to include jobs, and the quality of education that we offer our people, and healthcare, and infrastructure, and roads and bridges, and the purity of our environment. All those things are a part of our national security."

McGovern also draws from history to inform his thinking--something too rare among our representatives. Referring to *Time of Illusion*, by *The Nation's* peace and disarmament correspondent Jonathan Schell, he said: "[Schell] talked about this doctrine of credibility where policymakers in the 1960s all agreed that this Vietnam War was a loser, that our policy was wrong, but they were all worried about saving face. So they continued the war for several years before they ended it, probably on the same terms they could have ended it in the 1960s. But it was all about saving face and all about credibility.... I don't want to here 10 years from now, having this conversation, and having all of us say 'We could have done this ten years ago.'"

History also serves as a guide when it comes to the challenge we face in trying to get Congress and this Administration to rethink Afghanistan and change course.

"Lyndon Johnson had a great line after he left the White House," said McGovern. "He said, 'It's easy to get into war. It's hard as hell to get out of war.' Even when you know that war is wrong, or we need to readjust our policy. This is not an easy thing for this Administration to do. The only way things are going to change is through grassroots pressure--people working their members of Congress, **getting him or her on HR 5015** , and making the case that they take a leadership

role in trying to change our policy."

McGovern called the task at hand "politically delicate", but that "at some point I think doing what's right has to prevail."

This is the time for all of us to do what's right. A vote could come up in the next two weeks.

**Contact your Representative and Senators**--whether Democrat or Republican--and tell them now is the time for them to cosponsor this bill.

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