

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 16, 2011 at 6:44am

The Worst Argument For Withdrawal From Afghanistan

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Distinctly Catholic

The killing of Osama bin Laden has caused many people, already skeptical of America's continued military engagement in Afghanistan, to start beating the drums for an accelerated withdrawal of U.S. troops from that country. After all, now that we have the man behind the attacks of 9/11, and reports indicate that there are only 100 or so Al-Qaeda terrorists left in Afghanistan, what are we doing there?

I do not know whether or not we should accelerate the planned drawdown of troops this summer. Certainly, the danger of Afghanistan turning into a failed state, or a state governed again by the medieval Taliban, is more than worrisome, and not only because either scenario would turn the country again into fertile ground for the raising and training of terrorists. I would grieve for the women of Afghanistan if the Taliban were to again take control of the country. But, I recognize that there are limits to what America can accomplish by military or other means in countries and cultures so different from our own. And, let's be honest: Unless you have access to the kind of information the President and very few others have, who knows whether or not it is in America's best interests to wind down the war or to keep the pressure on.

In recent weeks, however, one line of argument has emerged that is especially revolting. This is the argument that the American people are tired of the war, that the American people want to stop spending money in Afghanistan, that polls indicate the country is ready to bring this drawn out war to a swift conclusion. This argument has been made by, among others, Nancy Pelosi, Ron Paul and Jim Wallis, so it can well be said to span the ideological spectrum.

There is a two word response to this line of argument: Stanley Baldwin. Through most of the 1920s and early 1930s Baldwin was the Prime Minister of Great Britain, always in fact, sometimes in name only, serving as the power behind the throne of a national government headed by Ramsey MacDonald. In 1936,

after Hitler had introduced conscription, in violation of the Versailles Treaties ending World War I, and after he had re-taken the Rhineland, also in violation of those same treaties, and after the German Air Force had reached parity with that of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill challenged Baldwin's government with his typical wit: "The Government simply cannot make up their minds, or they cannot get the Prime Minister to make up his mind. So they go on in strange paradox, decided only to be undecided, resolved to be irresolute, adamant for drift, solid for fluidity, all-powerful to be impotent. So we go on preparing more months and year precious, perhaps vital, to the greatness of Britain for the locusts to eat." Not for nothing was Churchill the only statesman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature!

Baldwin's reply was stunning. After detailing the history of his divergence of opinion from Churchill, Baldwin said to the House of Commons: "You will remember the election at Fulham in the autumn of 1933, when a seat which the National Government held was lost by about seven thousand votes on no issue but the pacifist. My position as the leader of a great party was not altogether a comfortable one. I asked myself what chance was there when that feeling that was given expression to in Fulham was common throughout the country what chance was there within the next year or two of that feeling being so changed that the country would give a mandate for rearmament? Supposing I had gone to the country and said that Germany was rearming, and that we must rearm, does anybody think that this pacifist democracy would have rallied to that cry at that moment? I cannot think of anything that would have made the loss of the election from my point of view more certain."

Churchill rightly notes: "This was indeed appalling frankness. It carried naked truth about his motives into indecency. That a Prime Minister should avow that he had not done his duty in regard to national safety because he was afraid of losing the election was an incident without parallel in our parliamentary democracy." Churchill would go on to comment that he thought Baldwin was not motivated merely by the desire to stay in office, but by concern that his loss of office would turn the reins of government over to a Labour Party even more committed to pacifism than his own Government.

I wonder about Baldwin's motives, not about the motives of politicians today. Baldwin was stepping down a moral path filled with landmines: The idea that if I lose office, the country is doomed is an invitation not only to megalomania but to conflating the national interest with partisan interests. Today, in America, that moral path has been walked to the end, the landmines have exploded and deadened our senses, and politicians will do anything and say anything if they think it will keep them in office.

But, a politician does not only gain his or her office by democratic processes. He or she must also take an oath. Their conscience is involved, therefore, not only their pollster. And, that oath calls upon them to defend the United States and its Constitution. Shame upon any legislator who ignores that solemn obligation in order to curry favor with the electorate. It is base and beyond base.

I do not know whether the surge in Afghanistan is working and neither do you dear reader, unless you happen to work at the CIA or some such outfit. But, I know that last year, President Obama took a decision that put him at odds with most of his own party, a decision to send more troops to Afghanistan. It may have been the wrong strategic decision, and it may have been the right strategic decision, but it was not a political decision, that much is clear. Shame on any politician or pundit or preacher who cites polls when considering such a situation. If the American people today, like the British people in the 1930s, are so enamored of peace that they are led to make decisions that only promise war, it is the job of a politician to educate and convince the populace that their good intentions are leading them astray and to be willing to lose an election in the attempt.

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