

Ending War in Afghanistan

A Q&A with Matthew Hoh, first U.S. official to resign in protest over the Afghan war

Matthew Hoh didn't mean to make headlines when he resigned from his position as a political officer in the U.S. Foreign Service. Hoh was the senior civilian representative of the American government in Afghanistan; he was also a former Marine Corps captain, a State Department representative and a man who describes the military as the best job he ever had. In September 2009, Hoh became the first U.S. official to publicly resign in protest over the Afghan war. He will be speaking in Eugene June 28 (see details below).

He writes in his four-page, single-spaced letter of resignation, which was published on the front page of the *Washington Post*: "The dead return in bodily form only to be received by families who must be reassured their dead have sacrificed for a purpose worthy of futures lost, love vanished, and promised dreams unkept. I have lost confidence that such reassurances can anymore be made. As such, I submit my resignation."

Tell me a little about your background.

I served in the Marine Corps for 10 years both active and reserve. I served in Iraq twice — once on a State Department team as member in Iraq in 2004-2005 and then as a Marine Corp reservist. I was in Iraq from 2006 to 2007 as a company commander; both times I was in Sunni areas. I've worked in the State Department as a consultant on Iraq issues and also worked for the Department of Defense as a contractor on suicide bomber technology and IEDs. In 2009 I took a position with the State Department in Afghanistan as a political officer serving on a provincial reconstruction team in both the east and the south of the country, and I was there for five months before I resigned.

What was different about Afghanistan that led you to resign?

It wasn't so much different as it was similar. The policies that we had in Afghanistan reminded me so very much of policies in Iraq. Policies that we had that pushed people to support the insurgency, because they were policies that marginalized or disenfranchised part of the population, were the same policies that we were pursuing in Afghanistan.

Additionally, just like in Iraq, where our troops were dying for no good reason and it wasn't making the U.S. safer, the same was now true in Afghanistan. Whereas in 2001 it was the right thing to do to go into Afghanistan and to destroy al-Qaeda's base of operations and scatter them, in

2009 al-Qaeda had long since left Afghanistan and more importantly had devolved into an organization that wasn't going to be affected by American troops fighting and dying in Afghan valleys or villages. It's a disparate, devolved, decentralized, flat organization that operates across the world so they don't really need a safe haven in Afghanistan as maybe they once did.

So it was that — this idea that American families were losing their sons in Afghanistan for no good cause just as lots of families lost sons and daughters in Iraq for no good reason. It was a combination of this makes no sense, guys are dying for no good reason and the policy is making this conflict worse. The U.S. does have an interest in making that part of the world stable, but our policies there were making it less stable. The war effort and our policies were counterproductive.

It got to the point where I had been there after five months, speaking about this with people I worked with and worked for, and after seeing we were going to escalate the conflict again ... this idea that we were going to militarily win there was not possible, it was counterproductive, it was going to make the situation worse. A year and a half later looking back — that's exactly what happened.

It was a combination of a moral disagreement with this conflict as well as just a professional view of someone who's done this kind of stuff, who studied it most of his life. It was just an unfounded, counterproductive policy.

Was it difficult to go from being a part of the military to disagreeing with what the military was sent to do?

It wasn't a disagreement with the military; it was a disagreement with the policies, a disagreement with our political leadership as well as our military leadership. ... In Afghanistan you had military leaders who either failed to recognize the nature of the insurgency, failed to recognize what the problem is. Or it's not in their interests. There are policies that better suit them so they don't advance or put forth more honest assessments.



But then, too, it's the civilian leadership as well that I disagree with. There has been almost no oversight of the war by Congress. You saw the way President Obama was treated in 2009; he was given almost no alternative to the war in Afghanistan by his staff, by his people, other than to escalate. I don't have a problem with the military; I have a problem with the policies that the military has been asked to enact.


You resigned publicly, and your letter was in the Washington Post.

I struggled with that a bit, with what to do ... People were telling me, "If you do this it will be a big deal," but I didn't really think much of it. One I wasn't going to speak to the press while still on the State Department payroll. Then it took me four weeks to get out of the State Department just because of the bureaucracy ... Finally when I got out, I decided because of the tenor of what I see in the debate of Afghanistan right now — and this was in the fall of 2009 and the debate on the troop surge was going on — the tenor of it, the depth of it. I didn't see it was adequately or honestly being portrayed.

So I called the *Washington Post* because I just wanted a chance to write an op ed and say this is why I don't think we should escalate in Afghanistan and this is why I think we should be getting out of Afghanistan. So it wound up being front page on the *Post*.

If I had to do it over again, in terms of resigning, I would have done it. It's a weird thing to me still. Before that *Washington Post* article, the last time I had been in the newspaper it was my senior year in high school for track. I had no interest in being a public persona but I am happy to be talking about this because I think it's important.

Matthew Hoh is now a Senior Fellow at the Center for International Policy and the Director of the Afghanistan Study Group. His writings appear in the Huffington Post and his letter of resignation in full can be found at <http://wkly.ws/12o> Hoh will speak with Lewis & Clark professor Zaher Wahab on "Afghanistan: How Do We End America's Longest War?" at 7 pm Tuesday, June 28, Harris Hall, 125 E. 8th Ave. FREE. For more info contact the Community Alliance of Lane County at 485-1755.



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