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# Q&A

BY CAMILLA MORTENSEN

## Nation Building at Home

A Q&A with Sen. Jeff Merkley on Afghanistan

**B**efore President Obama made his June 22 announcement of a troop drawdown in Afghanistan — the White House goal is to withdraw 33,000 troops from Afghanistan by September 2012 — Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley was agitating for a new strategy in that country. Merkley and 26 other senators sent a letter to the president on June 15 expressing “our strong support for a shift in strategy and the beginning of a sizable and sustained reduction of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, beginning in July 2011.” The letter is available at <http://wkly.ws/12t>



**Does such a resolution have an effect higher up the political spectrum?**

I think it does. It captures a notion that we need to do less nation building abroad and more nation building at home, and it does so with people on the frontlines across America who are seeing the impact of devastated budgets.

The \$100 billion a year, if you were just taking that and creating a work-jobs program, thinning our overgrown second-growth forests and so on, you could create with that money five million \$20,000 jobs or subsidize jobs that pay far more. When you think about the impact of five million jobs being created in America, that's a huge impact. In Oregon we have 1 percent of the nation's population. That would be like 50,000 jobs created overnight in Oregon. Nothing else we've done would come close to that sort of economic impact, getting people back on track with having employment and a financial foundation for their family

We are barely able to maintain, sometimes not able to maintain, the infrastructure that we have built, let alone build new infrastructure. What the mayors are capturing is a point I keep raising because I think it needs to be a national debate, which is we are spending way too much on foreign wars and foreign bases and not nearly enough on infrastructure.

**Is there any disconnect between your support for building the drone testing industry in Oregon — much of it would be funded by the military — while calling to remove troops from Afghanistan?**

No, actually they are quite different questions. Regardless of whether or not we are overseas, you are going to have basic infrastructure that continues to be developed here in the U.S. If Oregon has the opportunity to create jobs and industry here rather than in some other state because we have the appropriate space, then that needs to be thoroughly explored. **EW**

A longer version of this interview can be found at [www.eugeneweekly.com](http://www.eugeneweekly.com)

**Did the letter have an effect on Obama's decision to start pulling troops out?**

We went into Afghanistan with three goals: One was taking out the Taliban, one was taking out the al-Qaeda training camps — and when I say ‘take out the Taliban’ I mean their role as the government of Afghanistan — and the third was to hunt down the perpetrators of 9/11. Those goals are essentially completed, but along the way we adopted this nation-building strategy or objective. And by all estimates that I can put my hands on, this is a mistake.

Essentially, trying to create a strong central government in a nation that has no tradition of a strong central government, trying to do so by pouring funds into Afghanistan, feeds the corruption which makes the various institutions that we are trying to build incompetent and even an affliction to their people because people start buying positions.

This nation-building strategy doesn't make sense. And it was with that background that I was really pushing for the president to undertake a sizable and sustained withdrawal with the goal of getting all of our regular combat forces out of Afghanistan.

I think the letter did have an impact. I think it did help say to the administration, that this isn't some crazy idea that one or two people are advocating for, this is something that is absolutely resonating across America that we are on the wrong track and to seize this moment to change tracks.

The president did not go nearly far enough fast enough as far as I'm concerned. But I think he went much further than he might have had we not been working to express our viewpoints.

**Mayor Kitty Piercy sponsored a resolution before the U.S. Conference of Mayors urging Congress and Obama to bring home U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, and allow billions in war spending to be redirected to U.S. cities struggling with budget cuts.**

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