

February 26, 2007 Hundreds of thousands of American troops already occupy Afghanistan and Iraq, a number that is rising as the military surge moves forward. The justification, given endlessly since September 11th, is that both support terrorism and thus pose a risk to the United States. Yet when we step back and examine the region as a whole, it's obvious that these two impoverished countries, neither of which has any real military, pose very little threat to American national security when compared to other Middle Eastern nations. The decision to attack them, while treating some of region's worst regimes as allies, shows the deadly hypocrisy of our foreign policy in the Middle East. Consider Saudi Arabia, the native home of most of the September 11th hijackers. The Saudis, unlike the Iraqis, have proven connections to al Qaeda. Saudi charities have funneled money to Islamic terrorist groups. Yet the administration insists on calling Saudi Arabia a "good partner in the war on terror." Why? Because the U.S. has a longstanding relationship with the Saudi royal family, and a long history of commercial interests relating to Saudi oil. So successive administrations continue to treat the Saudis as something they are not: a reliable and honest friend in the Middle East. The same is true of Pakistan, where General Musharaf seized power by force in a 1999 coup. The Clinton administration quickly accepted his new leadership as legitimate, to the dismay of India and many Muslim Pakistanis. Since 9/11, we have showered Pakistan with millions in foreign aid, ostensibly in exchange for Musharaf's allegiance against al Qaeda. Yet has our new ally rewarded our support? Hardly. The Pakistanis almost certainly have harbored bin Laden in their remote mountains, and show little interest in pursuing him or allowing anyone else to pursue him. Pakistan has signed peace agreements with Taliban leaders, and by some accounts bin Laden is a folk hero to many Pakistanis. Furthermore, more members of al Qaeda probably live within Pakistan than any other country today. North Korea developed its nuclear capability with technology sold to them by the Pakistanis. Yet somehow we remain friends with Pakistan, while Saddam Hussein, who had no connection to bin Laden and no friends in the Islamic fundamentalist world, was made a scapegoat. The tired assertion that America "supports democracy" in the Middle East is increasingly transparent. It was false 50 years ago, when we supported and funded the hated Shah of Iran to prevent nationalization of Iranian oil, and it's false today when we back an unelected military dictator in Pakistan- just to name two examples. If honest democratic elections were held throughout the Middle East tomorrow, many countries would elect religious fundamentalist leaders hostile to the United States. Cliché or not, the Arab Street really doesn't like America, so we should stop the charade about democracy and start pursuing a coherent foreign policy that serves America's long-term interests. A coherent foreign policy is based on the understanding that America is best served by not interfering in the deadly conflicts that define the Middle East. Yes, we need Middle Eastern oil, but we can reduce our need by exploring domestic sources. We should rid ourselves of the notion that we are at the mercy of the oil-producing countries- as the world's largest oil consumer, their wealth depends on our business. We should stop the endless game of playing faction against faction, and recognize that buying allies doesn't work. We should curtail the heavy militarization of the area by ending our disastrous foreign aid payments. We should stop propping up dictators and putting band-aids on festering problems. We should understand that our political and military involvement in the region creates far more problems that it solves. All Americans will benefit, both in terms of their safety and their pocketbooks, if we pursue a coherent, neutral foreign policy of non-interventionism, free trade, and self-determination in the Middle East.