

# Permaculture in Practice

## When crisis happens, use it

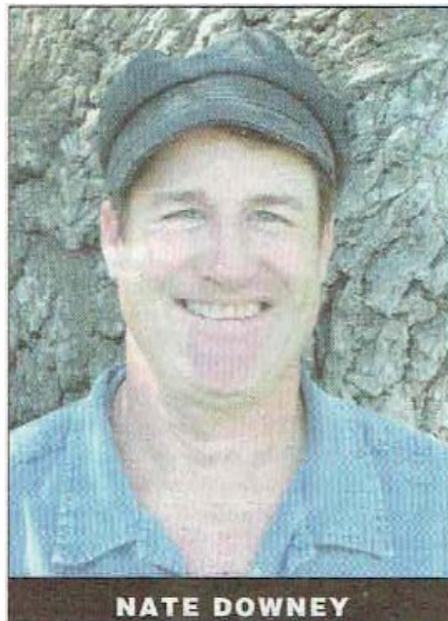
Facing a quagmire like the one in Afghanistan, the easy path for any new commanders-in-chief would be to send troops as requested. You'd waste countless resources and be responsible for continued pain, death, and destruction, but you'd avoid the possibility of getting blamed for a messy retreat.

Fortunately, we've gone to war with the president we have. In fact, I predict President Obama will shortly announce a timetable for the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Here's why: first, he was elected on a wave of change. Second, his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, strongly believes that crisis creates opportunity. Third, Afghanistan is currently sandwiched by a major electoral crisis. According to Emanuel's own theory, there may never be a better time to bring our sons and daughters home.

In permacultural philosophy, we also recognize the relationship between crisis and opportunity. Toning down the semantics slightly, we usually speak of problems providing solutions. As an ecological landscape designer living in an arid environment, I see water-supply solutions in every problematic arroyo and I appreciate the increased resources that come with each precipitation event.

During our brief monsoon season, my company gets a deluge of calls from people who have lost large chunks of driveway in a single storm. Sometimes parts of their property are sinking, and other times they're nearly buried in mud. Most of the time, they're merely trying to build enough healthy soil to keep plants and trees alive.

The most permacultural solutions to these types of erosion problems are often the same: start at the source of the runoff, and slow it down as immediately as possible. Avoid fixing symptoms and remain open-minded as to the potential causes of any problem. Redirect energy whenever beneficial, and try to stop water only if you do the math first. Use local materials whenever you can, and build structures that respect people while simultaneously cooperating with the watershed. If you can do these things, the yield of your system is limited by your creativity rather than by outside forces beyond your control.



Along the same lines for an Afghanistan exit, I'd suggest starting with the electoral crisis, which means announcing a timetable as far ahead of the Nov. 7 runoff as possible; be open-minded as to the cause of the withdrawal and avoid burning, eradicating, or poisoning any fields on the way out; do your best not to shoot any civilians; cover your buddies; and watch your backs.

Relatively speaking, healing the land is not terribly hard to do. More than anything it takes a patient, yield-based approach. Forgetting the \$400/gallon fuel costs reported by The Hill last month, leaving Afghanistan will be complicated, and many people will probably die in the process. But how many more will die if we stay for another eight years?

Now is a truly historic moment. If we do not create an opportunity in this window of crisis, we will soon start sinking deeper into the morass. We will be less able to leave on our own terms and probably completely bankrupt our already struggling nation.

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