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The Afghan Disaster (1 of 2)

In August, the Taliban government in Afghanistan celebrated its one-year anniversary of their recapture of the country. It was a celebration that no women celebrated. Instead, women bravely staged a protest, which the Taliban disbursed with guns shot over their heads. The Taliban now runs a country with a ruined economy, a brain drain of every competent person who could manage to escape, and a country saved from famine only by the US and UN.

How did such a thing happen? How could the US, which invaded 20 years ago in response to the Afghan government's refusal to hand over Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, be compelled to flee in haste? What was this war for, why did so many Americans, American allies, and Afghans themselves die, only to have the loathed Taliban triumph?

Historians will be chewing on this one for years to come. There were so many well-intentioned American mistakes, so much misunderstanding of the scope of what we were trying to do, and so much mischief by America's enemies, Russia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan's own corrupt officials, that failure was inevitable.

Geography.

Afghanistan is a country, sort of, which was artificially created in the mid-19th century during the British and Russian empires waged a long-term war. The Russians were in the process of expanding their empire across Asia and the British were trying to protect their imperial crown jewel, India. The area now called Afghanistan was then the "far east" of the Persian Empire, a wild tribal area that had long been divided into sophisticated Silk Route cities (trade route between the Persian and Chinese empires) and primitive, miserable tribal villages. We can still see this today.

The Russians lopped off a large chunk of the Persian empire, taking the Caucasus region into their realm---because they could. It was part of its expansion. The British lopped off the Persian Wild East and created a new country, Afghanistan, named for one of its larger tribes---because they could. They needed a base to repel Russia and protect the route to India.

Afghanistan, however, was not obliging. The British fought three wars there and lost them all, including the last one, when only one soldier was left alive to creep into India, a disaster for Britain. When the Russian invaded in the 20th century, they lost that war too. The Russians had managed to modernize the large cities, but the tribal areas remained as they always were: ignorant, violent, and fanatically Muslim. (Doesn't that sound like the Taliban?)

Now the Americans have lost a war that had looked so easy. They, like the Russians, supported the modernization of Kabul and the other cities, but absolutely failed with the tribal villages.

The Pashtoon Tribe.

Some time in the Middle Ages, a tribe, the Pashtoons, converted into a repressive form of Islam and migrated into the Persian tribal region. (They still harbor the fantasy that they were one of the lost tribes of Israel.) They were ferocious and proliferated, becoming the predominant force in the eastern region, which today is divided by an artificial border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Note that this is one reason why they are impossible to defeat, because they can and do run into Pakistan where they are protected by our supposed ally, Pakistan.

Warlords.

While the rest of the world has chosen, more or less, rule of law and modern states, half of Afghanistan lives under an older system: tribes ruled over by warlords. The warlords have become rich, with thuggish foot soldiers extracting all wealth from the villagers through protection rackets, bribery, and taxation. They run complex drug cartels (opium poppies grow well in Afghanistan), and fight other warlords when challenged. Bribery is a basic element of Afghan economy.

The Pashtoon warlords who run the Taliban are now like the dog that caught the car: what to do with it! Educated and competent Afghans have fled the country, leaving Afghanistan with a horrific brain drain. The well-intentioned but inept Americans

also share a large part of the blame, which will be next week's topic.

681 words

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