

AFGHANISTAN – WHY SHOULD ANYONE CARE?

The decision to help Afghanistan began with the premise that no nation should topple another's government, without engaging in the reconstruction that follows. Destruction without reconstruction is simply wrong.

Afghanistan appears to some as merely another “needy” country, distributing large quantities of opium, ruled in many areas by drug lords and warlords. So, why should Americans care? The answer lies in the contribution we've made to present conditions in Afghanistan and in the fact that the media reports less than half the story. “Good news” often lands on the cutting room floor.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 marked the beginning of the United States' first significant commitment in Afghanistan. The United States became heavily invested in Afghanistan's destiny after the invasion. Why and how?

Anyone interested in the history of Afghanistan should read “Charlie Wilson's War”, written by George Crile. The book chronicles what the author describes as the Central Intelligence Agency's largest, most expensive and successful clandestine operation in history. The objectives of the operation were simple. Supply weapons to the mujahideen (“freedom fighters”) in support of their “jihad” (holy war) against the Soviet “infidels” and thereby “turn Afghanistan into the Soviet Union's Vietnam”. Charlie Wilson, a congressman from Texas, and Gus Avraktos, a CIA operative nicknamed “Dr. Dirty”, were credited as the architects of a multinational effort that turned an “army of primitive tribesmen into techno-holy warriors”.

The United States along with other nations supplied billions of dollars of weapons to the warlords and mujahideen through Pakistan. Afghanistan became a checkerboard in the “cold war” upon which men chosen and trained by Pakistan waged war against the Soviets. By the time the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan in January, 1989, the mujahideen were well trained, seasoned fighters, “armed to the hilt” with modern weaponry, and beholden to no external control. As many as 30,000 “holy warriors” traveled from other countries to join in the war.

Nine months after the Soviet Union was driven out of Afghanistan, the Berlin Wall “came down”. By December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. While historians may disagree on the extent, all recognize the impact the war in Afghanistan had on the outcome of the “cold war”. The toll to Afghanistan included 1,500,000 deaths and the creation of 5,000,000 Afghan refugees.

“Holy warriors” from around the world had found a “holy cause” around which they could unite and a country within which they could organize. By 1993, they were well trained, armed, and ready to respond to a further calling. As George Crile observed, “the more dangerous legacy of the Afghan war is found in the minds and convictions of Muslims around the world. To them the miracle victory over the Soviets was the work of Allah. We set in motion the spirit of jihad and the belief in our surrogate soldiers that, having brought down one superpower they could just as easily take on another...” The United States “washed its hands of any responsibility” in Afghanistan as of 1993. “There were no roads, no schools, just a destroyed country”. Warlords, Islamic extremists, drug lords, and defenseless Afghans

fought over what little remained. Afghanistan became a perfect haven for Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda. Afghanistan became a breeding ground for militant Islamists.

The Taliban rose to power in 1995, rescuing Afghans from the warlords and mujahideen. The euphoria first enjoyed by the takeover soon faded. The Taliban's interpretation of the Koran led them to conclude that women should not be allowed to work, or read, that there should be no music, art, dancing, or kite flying. Soccer fields were used for public executions, books were banned, and women were publicly flogged by "morality police" for walking in a suggestive manner. In some areas laughing in public was forbidden. These "militant young Muslims", most of whom were not Afghans by birth, assumed total authority over the daily lives of all Afghans.

On October 21, 2001 the United States invaded Afghanistan, following the tragic events of September 11, to search for "Osama" and Al Qaeda. Seven months earlier the United States provided the Taliban with \$41 million in financial aid. Why? The oppressive theology of the Taliban was well known at the time.

US Special Forces removed the Taliban from power within two months. Success came quickly through the use of guided bombs, fewer than 1,000 heroic American soldiers, and by enlisting the aid of former warlords and mujahideen. The United States was back. So also, were many of the mujahideen and some warlords.

Given the choice between governance by the Taliban or the mujahideen, there are Afghans who prefer the Taliban. Sarah Chayes provided one answer as to why the Taliban might be the oppressors of choice. Under Taliban rule violence was predictable. If one abided by the rules, one could survive below the radar. The mujahideen on the other hand, engaged in multiple acts of random violence. Predictable violence is preferable to random. Removing the Taliban and replacing them with mujahideen was not in and of itself liberating. Whether we will ultimately be judged as liberators, will depend upon the success of the reconstruction efforts.

Fortunately, Afghans need not choose between the Taliban and the mujahideen. Millions of Afghans are struggling to be free. Refugees and expatriates are returning by the millions to rejoin their families in an effort to rebuild "their country". They are not alone. Multinational troops, including over 15,000 American soldiers, are "on the ground" willing, along with Afghans, to promote and protect the most basic of freedoms.

The war is being waged on so many fronts that it's easy to be concerned that winning the war is hopeless. Buried beneath the "bad news" are thousands of small struggles being won each day going unreported. These victories, while individually small, are collectively framing a nation eager to rid itself of oppressors and totalitarian rule.

Our role in Afghanistan is clear, join in the reconstruction effort. We are limited only by our imagination and resolve. History has favored Americans with an opportunity to join with Afghans in remedying the unintended consequences of "Charlie Wilson's War". Afghanistan has asked the world for help. We cannot reverse history. But, we can certainly embrace the role we have been invited to play. Under the circumstances, the least that we would want to do is try.