

"Is Afghanistan Next?"

Everyone knows that the United States has lost the war in Iraq. The politics of Washington, DC today is simply a series of maneuvers between Republicans and Democrats to position themselves so that the other party pays the electoral price for the fiasco. Will Afghanistan be the next defeat? Six years ago, Osama bin Laden predicted that the United States would suffer the same defeat as the Soviet Union. Was he right?

After September 11, 2001, the United States (and Great Britain) targeted the Afghan regime of the Taliban for regime change - a decision we now know had already been taken by the United States in July 2001, two months before 9/11. The main public argument was that the regime harbored Al-Qaeda's leaders and training camps. President Bush gave the Taliban an ultimatum on September 21, which they rejected, and on October 7 the U.S.-British forces went in.

At the time, almost the whole world was on the side of the invaders. The Taliban were the very model of a terrible and terrifying regime. They not only harbored Al-Qaeda (and proudly so) but they enforced an extreme version of Muslim Sharia law and were particularly harsh on women - denying them work, education, and the possibility to leave their homes except covered by a very extensive burqa and accompanied by an adult male relative. So when the United States invaded, most of the world applauded - not merely the Western allies of the United States, but also (let us remember) Russia and Iran. About the only resistance came from Pakistan.

Of course these reactions were not surprising. Russia had long been supporting an anti-Taliban group called the Northern Alliance, composed of ethnic groups different from the majority Pashtun who were the base of the Taliban forces. Iran similarly had been supporting an anti-Taliban group with whom they had ethnic ties. As for Pakistan, the Taliban were their proteges and the Pakistani intelligence agency (ISI) was the Taliban's principal supporter. Ousting the Taliban from power meant ousting Pakistan from its sphere of influence (a void into which the Indians hastened to rush).

To understand what has happened since 2001, we have to take the story back at least thirty years. Afghanistan in the nineteenth century was contested terrain between Russia and Great Britain. In the post-1945 period, it became contested terrain between the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1978, the (Communist) People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew the monarch - against Moscow's wishes. Since the PDPA was composed of two strongly competing factions (divided in part along ethnic lines), there followed a period of internal strife among the Communists, into which the Soviet Union was drawn. Finally in December 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan to try to stabilize the situation.

Zbigniew Brzezinski revealed years later that the United States did everything to draw the Soviet Union into Afghanistan, anticipating that it would become their "Vietnam." The United States (and Pakistan) meanwhile supported very actively the training and arming of Islamic *mujahidin* who sought to overthrow the Communist regime. Osama bin Laden was one of those whose military training was a gift of the United States. The Communist regime was no idyll, but at least it both was secular and offered very extensive rights to women, neither of which has been true of any subsequent regime.

The Soviet invasion did turn out to be a Vietnam-like experience for the Soviet Union - costly in lives, money, and popular support at home, and under Gorbachev they began to withdraw. Civil strife did not however cease. Indeed it expanded. For now there were competing groups of *ex-mujahidin* seeking to install themselves in power in Kabul.

After years of a debilitating and destructive civil war, a group of "students" called the Taliban, and supported by the Pakistan army, swept the country, occupied Kabul, and to widespread relief established some kind of order. It soon turned out however that the "order" the Taliban had established was not to the taste of everyone. The Pashtun were the largest ethnic group but not the only one of importance, by any means. And the others felt excluded. In addition, the Taliban became more and more loudly Islamist, including the destruction of one of the archaeological wonders of Afghanistan - two enormous Buddhist statues. And the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, established a close relationship to Osama bin Laden. Hence the United States invasion in 2001.

At this point, the competing groups that the Taliban had ousted came back. And initially, a new order was established, with the military aid of the United States and the diplomatic intervention of the United Nations. A national government under Hamid Karzai was created, and established its authority - in Kabul, but not really in the rest of the country. Order deteriorated once again and in 2003 the military resurgence of the Taliban began, with the tacit tolerance of Pakistan.

Since the United States was now embroiled in Iraq, it appealed to NATO to help out. In January 2006, security was taken over by the NATO International Security Assistance Force (NISAF), with units from a large number of countries - Great Britain, Canada, Netherlands, Denmark, Australia, Estonia, Norway, France, Italy, New Zealand. However, most of these countries were skittish about the use of their troops - each establishing different rules of engagement and insisting on particular locations for them (often preferring Kabul, the safest place to be). And now in virtually each of these countries, there is active political debate about whether to maintain the troops there.

So, the Taliban are back, and in force. NISAF may not survive much longer. And it is unlikely that the secular modernizers who were the Communists could reemerge. Do we really think some angel is looking down upon the Western world, and saying "job well done"?

by Immanuel Wallerstein