

AFGHANISTAN
Endless War, Tribes & Warlords, & Imperialism
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Intro

- When we use “endless war” to describe Afghanistan, we usually mean the 20 years we’ve been fighting there. To Afghans, that’s nothing. They are in the 183rd year of an endless war that began in 1838. And it is being fought there, not here; it’s their country that has been destroyed and people who have been slaughtered.
- A 183-year war shapes a culture. After all, we’re still discovering the ways that the Civil War, which began 13 years after the Afghan wars, is shaping our culture.
- I’m going to focus a lot on that war and its effects on Afghanistan’s culture. I may say a lot that you already know. In fact, I hope I do. But I hope to provide a something of a framework that gives a different perspective and adds some new details and understandings.
- So first, Endless War, then tribes and war lords, and finally, are Afghans trying to say “no” to war.

Endless War

- The Afghan war has been an anti-imperialist war. First against the British, then the Soviet Union, then the US. These three powers cared little about the Afghans; they wanted to control the territory, either directly or by installing a friendly Afghan government. It isn’t even about resources, like oil in the Middle East; Afghanistan has no resources. In the 19th century, the British called this the “Great Game,” one empire controlling territory so another empire can’t. Neither cared about the people who actually lived there, no matter what language of “bringing civilization” or “modernizing” was used. If you want to see the unvarnished face of imperialism, study the history of Afghanistan.
- When we think about Afghanistan, its culture, its armed resistance, we must include the context of imperialism. Yes, the Taliban are as repressive as they are reported. They are also anti-imperialist. They are part of the Muslim Deobandi Movement that began in India in 1866. After the failure of the Indian Rebellion of 1857-58, Muslims started a seminary in Deoband, India, to build a school of Islamic practice that could resist British rule. The Deobandi movement said that Muslims

must return to a pure form of Islam, based in their particular interpretation of Muslim law. Some Deobandi believed in a Hindu-Muslim state, some were Muslim separatists. Some believed in nonviolence, some in armed resistance. It is a broad, multifaceted movement. The Taliban are the latest of a long legacy of Deobandi-based organizations that are aggressively anti-imperialist.

- There have been a few interruptions in the 183-year war, usually marked by internal Afghan strife. The major interruption was 1919-1978, which began with Afghanistan becoming independent after defeating Great Britain in the third Anglo-Afghan war. It was marred by the assassination of one king, the abdication of another and a civil war, all encouraged by British manipulation.
- There are two important developments worth highlighting in this period.
- First, Amanullah Khan, who won the war and proclaimed himself King in 1926, was a modernizer who studied Western democracies and was influenced particularly by Kemal Ataturk. He promulgated a constitution that included a selected parliament, universal education (that is, for women as well as men), outlawed women wearing the burqa, and gave women the right to work outside the home. Ever since Afghans gained their freedom, there has been a movement for women's rights embraced by educated Afghans, men, and women. The slow movement on implementing women's rights has been about internal resistance, and poverty and the lack of resources that made any modernization efforts slow and gradual. Western intervention did not introduce women's rights to the agenda of Afghans. It was a home-grown desire for women's freedom from the beginning. Western support has, sometimes, made advances possible because of funding, awareness and publicity that came with it.
- Second, in the 60's and 70's, Afghanistan wasn't engaged in active war, but it was a major battleground in the Cold War. The Afghan government, first as a monarchy and then as a republic, was "friendly" to the Soviet Union. But the government also welcomed US investment and involvement and Afghanistan became a focus for the Peace Corps and government investment. The Cold War was a facet of imperialism that was good for Afghanistan. Then US and the Soviet Union competed to build roads, hospitals, industry, airports, schools, water resources, and sent many Afghans to study in the US and the Soviet Union.
- But 1979 brought the worst of the endless war. In 1978 the Afghan Communist Party seized power and began a progressive reform

movement based on women's rights, education, land reform, and ending opium production. They implemented it in ruthless Stalinist fashion, which created widespread opposition and resistance from Afghans. The Soviet Union intervened, not to support the government, but to replace it with a more moderate Communist leadership that would go slow on reform and placate the local resistance. They expected to be in and out in 6 months. But they succeeded in alienating everyone and humiliatingly withdrew after 10 years. The 10-year conflict between the Soviet Union and Islamic guerrilla groups, which were created, trained, and funded by the US, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan destroyed Afghanistan. Between 600,000 and 2,000,000 Afghans were killed (up to 10% of the population). That does not count those who were wounded, internally displaced, or made refugees. Every city and virtually every institution (schools, hospitals, etc.) were destroyed. After the Soviet withdrawal, infighting among the guerilla factions continued the destruction until the Taliban seized control in 1996.

- The Taliban were not part of the brutal war against the Soviet Union. They formed (with the help of Pakistan) when the guerrilla groups brought more destruction and corruption from 1989 to 1996. The Taliban created order in their own ruthless fashion. But they took control of a country where all the gains that they had made since 1919 were swept away and the Taliban, denied any outside funding, had no resources to rebuild. This is the Afghanistan that the US found when it occupied the country after 9/11. It wasn't "backwards," or "underdeveloped," the Soviet Union, the US and its guerrilla groups, and the Taliban had destroyed it.
- The US rebuilt much of the country and its institutions in our 20-year occupation. But only after we helped destroy it. This is the face of imperialism that Afghans see from us: we rebuild, but only after destruction, occupation, and installing a corrupt government that we want to control. And we wonder why the Taliban won?

War Makes Warlords, Not the Other Way Around

- We hear a lot about War Lords. And the Afghan regional leaders *are* War Lords, and as importantly, Drug Lords who control opium production. But we say War Lords as if that's natural to the culture.
- War Lords have become "ingrained" in Afghan culture, but as a result of the endless war, particularly in the 40 years since the Soviet invasion. This is not "natural" to the culture, it's "inflicted on" on the culture.

- Afghanistan is a tribal society with 13 officially recognized ethnic groups, each consisting of many tribes. The largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, consist of 60 tribes and speak several dialects of Pashto and Dari, the two major languages of Afghanistan. Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara, the other 3 major ethnic groups are similarly diverse.
- Combined with mountainous terrain, poor transportation and communication, Afghan society is fragmented and decentralized. Traditionally tribes provided local organization and leadership in each isolated valley--food and land distribution, security, social support, dispute settlement within the tribe and between tribes, all through local councils working through consensus, headed by a sheikh chosen from a leading family. A good sheikh had a limited role, listening to his council, resolving disputes, and looking to the welfare of the tribe. Tribes were instruments for preserving peace, not conducting war. When fighting did occur, the sheikh would raise a temporary militia, and fighting was limited and local.
- Endless war gradually changed the nature of the tribes and their leadership. Constant fighting required a permanent militia. A central authority, an emir or king, organized fighting on a national scale. Long enlistments took the best men away from field and family and impoverished the tribe. It changed the role of the sheikh into being a military leader, responsible to outside authorities. The sheikh had to find money to pay his militia. So they set up tax systems, solicited bribes, and expanded and controlled the opium trade, since the opium poppy is Afghanistan's only "cash crop." This is how War Lords and Drug Lords are born.
- Both the Soviet and American occupations of Afghanistan greatly enhanced the power of the War Lords. They were central to resisting the Soviet occupation, gaining autonomy and armament and funding from the US and Saudi Arabia. The US-backed government has relied on them to control their "areas", funded them, and facilitated their opium control by killing off their competitors. Opium production increased 10-fold during the US occupation.
- The Taliban, on the other hand, are anti-Warlord (and anti-tribal). Their version of Islam calls for transcending tribal factionalism for Islamic unity and purity. Only then can Muslims stand successfully against imperialism.
- The Taliban tried to end poppy production the first time they were in power because it went against their principles. But, since they were

international pariahs with no access to outside funds, they discovered they needed the revenue from opium production to survive. They decided that, since the US and Europe bought the opium, it was OK to produce and sell it to us, as long as it was illegal in Afghanistan itself. You can decide whose bargain with the devil is worse. We don't know what the Taliban will decide this time, but whether we provide assistance to Afghanistan will be a factor. If we provide assistance to the Taliban, it's less likely the opium trade will increase. Whatever decision the Taliban make, it will undercut the power of the War Lords.

Afghans Are Trying to Say “No” to War

- What I've said so far is bleak, but it's not the whole story. Unlikely as it may seem, I think Afghans are trying to say “no” to war. When a local leader negotiated the city of Herat's surrender to the Taliban, he said, “The only thing worse than the Taliban is chaos.”
- I think what he said incapsulated what most local leaders and people feel. They remember the utter destruction of the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the civil war/anti-Soviet war that ensued. They recognize the pattern of endless war/civil war/imperialist indifference & callousness of the past 183 years. They recognize their partial recovery in the last 20 years. And they ask, is it possible to not fall back into the path of destruction?
- Local leaders didn't simply surrender. They called on soldiers to lay down their arms and the Taliban to grant amnesty. They negotiated for their lives and for the future. They rejected the corruption and incompetence of the national government. They rejected the War Lords who had ruled their lives for the last 40 years. When the local leaders negotiated the surrender of Mazar-i-Sharif, they repudiated Abdul Rashid Dostum, their Uzbek ethnic leader and the most powerful and brutal Warlord in the country. The Uzbek militia, who were the fiercest opponents of the Taliban in 1989-96 civil war laid down their weapons. This is a repudiation of war.
- I don't think Afghans have any illusions about the Taliban, nor are most Afghans “pro-Taliban” for any number of reasons. But most see the Taliban as the better option. Abdul Ghani Baradar, one of the original Taliban leaders, tried to negotiate a Taliban surrender in 2002, and the Bush administration turned him down. He tried to open negotiations with the Obama administration in 2011, and we responded with “the surge.” He's still striving for international respectability. But the Taliban are deeply divided in their political, religious, and military leadership. Only time will tell if more moderate Taliban leadership can exert influence.

- And this leads to the two of the ultimate cruelties of imperialism. First, we have created a class of Afghans who served us in the war—soldiers, interpreters, drivers, etc.-- and a class who accepted and adopted our values—lawyers, media, university students, mostly women. But we built those classes on the rotten foundation of an incompetent and corrupt government and no real thought about keeping our promises. At the Kabul airport, we showed we are incapable of supporting them and content to walk away with a bit of handwringing. Second, we have created a group in the US who feel a deep personal obligation to Afghans, largely people in the military and the foreign aid community. They are victims of imperialism as much as the Afghans are. Individuals in the US can care deeply about Afghans, but imperialist institutions who make the decisions are careless.
- Does that mean an easy acceptance of Taliban rule? No. There is already significant resistance to their rule. It will continue and it will grow. Afghans have studied nonviolence and engaged in nonviolent protests. The works of Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Gandhi's Pashtun partner, MLK, Jr., and Gene Sharp's strategies have been translated into Dari and Pashto and distributed and studied.
- For me, the endless war that Afghanistan has fought, and the new phase of the struggle under/against Taliban rule is part of OUR anti-racist struggle. In 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B Dubois wrote, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the Islands of the Sea." The color line wasn't about the US, it was global. It referred to the ways in which people of European ancestry embraced White Supremacy to justify imperialism against people of color throughout the world. In 1954, Malcolm X recognized the connections between racism and imperialism at the Bandung Conference of Nonaligned Nations. In 1967 Stokely Carmichael laid out the typology of internal and external colonialism in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. Their analyses has been expanded and deepened over the years. But they named it.
- I'm not going to offer any solutions to the problem of Afghanistan. They will only come if we commit ourselves to struggling deeply with what we have wrought.
- The Afghan people will continue to struggle for liberation under the Taliban and after the Taliban. Part of our job is to support that resistance to the extent that we can. Part of our job is to support the Afghans who

relied on our promises and the veterans and aid workers who invested part of their lives in Afghanistan. And part of our job is to see that the struggle does not get coopted again by imperialism. These are big tasks. We will come up short. But we can at least try.