

WHO LOST AFGHANISTAN?

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INTERIOR OF THE PALACE OF SHAH SHUJAAN GUL HUKM, LATE KING OF KABUL.

Beyond the mere personalities involved, the fault lies with the hubris that has dogged us from our political beginning—the idea that we could or should remake the world in our own perfect image.

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The horrific scenes from the fall of Kabul to the Taliban could not help but rekindle memories of the fall of Saigon in 1975 (which this writer remembers) and that of Mainland China to the Communists in 1949 (which he does not). After both catastrophes there were endless bouts of accusations as to on whom in the American political establishment responsibility for the given debacle could be pinned. In the second case, we had in several ways pulled the rug out from under Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalists; in the first, it might well be argued that the stage had been set for final defeat over a decade earlier when President Kennedy green-lighted the overthrow and murder of President Diem. His own murder later in the same month did little to alter the situation: subsequent South Vietnamese leaders would be hard-pressed to present themselves as more than American puppets—especially to potential Viet Cong recruits.

So it is and shall be with Afghanistan, whose mishandling alongside Iraq by four successive presidential administrations was highlighted by the tragic sacrifice of thousands of American and allied—including Afghan and Iraqi—troops in the “Forever War.” This sea of blood was accompanied by enormous expenditures that cannot be recouped. One may blame Biden for the idiotic way in which the last few months were handled. His supporters might poke the finger at Trump, who began the drawdown—forgetting that for the most part, it was the children of Trump's supporters who were providing the combat personnel doing the dying (as a rule, the children of politicians, media-folk, and academics no longer go into the all-volunteer forces). Trump's partisans might in turn accuse Barack Obama of simply letting the pot boil pointlessly

during his eight years in America's most prominent government job. There is no doubt some justice in all of the charges that shall be made—and some injustice. But in this writer's opinion, the War had been ultimately lost in 2002, by none other than the second George Bush who initiated the mess.

Mohammed Zahir Shah (center) with U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon (r) in a 1953 photograph.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE U.S. NATIONAL ARCHIVES VIA PICRYL.

This might be considered a bold accusation, since he did after all preside successfully over both invasions that began the seemingly-endless conflicts now concluding. But the tragic truth is that in pursuing his “global democratic revolution,” he ensured not only the fall of Kabul, but the earlier rise of first an Al Qaeda-offshoot and then Islamic State (IS) in Iraq with their concurrent atrocities. When, in 2002, the *Loya Jirga*—Afghanistan's traditional “estates general” so-to-speak—was poised to restore the country's deposed King, Mohammed Zahir Shah, the move was very publicly vetoed by Bush's envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad.

So too with Iraq. In 2003, when the shock and awe subsided and American forces were masters of Mesopotamia, a wonderful opportunity presented itself: to withdraw quickly. When Saddam's Chief of Staff, General Ibrahim Ahmad Abd al-Sattar was arrested on May 15 of that year, he made a very telling comment; he declared that Iraq had not had a legitimate government since 1958. The general was referring to the bloody revolution in that year that overthrew the country's Monarchy and ended in the murder of the young King, Faisal II. With the Hashemite dynasty—cousins of the same family that rule in neighbouring Jordan—also fell the country's constitution, which among other things made a place for minorities in the country's Senate (one of whom was the Chaldean Catholic patriarch). As many experts at the time opined, a solution was in reach: the victorious Americans could simply declare that constitution restored and place one of the two

claimants to the throne at the head of the existing state apparatus. Honour satisfied and order secured (for the moment, at least), the Americans could then withdraw. Instead, inspired by the example of our postwar reconstruction of Germany, Bush opted to dismantle the apparatus and start from scratch—thus creating the vacuum from whence in time came IS.

Tempting as it would be to blame Bush solely for these two fiascos, it must be admitted that the American compulsion to terraform foreign societies is not really the doing of any individual or of either party. It is in the DNA of American diplomacy, alongside the crazy system that apports the major embassies to whomever has put the most financial slop inside the successful candidate's trough during a presidential election. Regardless of how talented a young diplomat may be, without being a major contributor, being our man in Togo is the best he can hope for. This has been disastrous and ensures that our brightest and best are given every reason to stay away from careers in the State Department—and our foreign policy suffers thereby. But the inborn anti-Monarchism from which we suffer has done us even worse.

Bush's predecessor, Bill Clinton, engaged these United States in the Balkan quagmire, which for better or worse Bush Senior had avoided. Ethnic cleansing and the rest showed that Serb strongman Milosevic was not a nice person. But when it was pointed out to Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, that the largest opposition to Milosevic were the Monarchists and that assisting locals to restore their Monarch would be far less bloody and cheaper than the military exploit being panned, she responded with an airy, "We don't do kings." Of course, in this she was at least following in the footsteps of Bush Senior, whose administration vetoed restorations of Romania's Michael and Bulgaria's Simeon II—moves that benefited no one, least of all the citizens of those countries whose emotional and economic recovery from Communism it would have aided.

In 1979, Jimmy Carter "greased the skids" for the Shah of Iran, as Richard Nixon famously put it. Together with Gaddafi's coup against Idris II in Libya a decade earlier (which the United States initially welcomed), these overthrows have truly been the gift that has kept on giving, as far as damaging long-range effects upon American interests have been

concerned. So too was the CIA's support for the Egyptian officers' coup that toppled Farouk in 1952; of course, that was intertwined with our policy of stabbing our European allies in the back and co-sponsoring with the Soviets rebels in their respective colonies and/or post-colonies: the French alone in Indochina and Algeria, and teamed up with the British at Suez and in Biafra; the Dutch in Indonesia; the Belgians in the Congo; and the Portuguese wherever they were in Africa and Asia. Our occupation authorities helped with the rigged Italian referendum against the Italian Monarchy in 1946. To be fair, this was as bipartisan a policy as the Forever War and originated with FDR—who supported Tito against the Royalists and acquiesced to Soviet expansion at Yalta. Only MacArthur's great wisdom saved the Japanese Emperor—and he was no diplomat, as his later career would show.

A painting of President Woodrow Wilson with American soldiers in Europe by Stanley Dersh.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE WOODROW WILSON PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY VIA PICRYL.

The urge to remake the world in our own image long predated our actual ability to do so, however. After our victory over Spain in 1898, we did our best to transform the provinces we wrested from her—Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines—from Monarchical Hispanic Catholic lands into republican Anglophone Protestant ones. Although we would grant the latter two independence—the first sooner, the second later—our attempts to remake them left religious, cultural, and political scars from which they have since not recovered. But of course, in a far less determined and careful way, the United States government has attempted to similarly alter any part of Latin America we could affect, down to to-day's encouragement of abortion and gay marriage wherever the local American-educated elites can be persuaded to accept it.

In one sense the aim of our foreign policy has never really altered—to evangelise the globe with our unique gospel. But while that aim may have remained the same as always, the

contents of that teaching have radically changed. The Governor-General of the Philippines William Howard Taft (later president of the United States) used the threat of turning over the Catholic Church's confiscated properties to a schismatic group to strongarm the Holy See to replace the archipelago's Spanish bishops with Irish ones. In so doing, he thought to "improve" the local's beliefs by Protestantising or at the least "Americanising" them—but he had no quarrel with the basic tenets and morals of Christianity or of religion in general. The modern rulership wishes to make far deeper changes in our dependent populations' mores than ever did either Wilson or Teddy Roosevelt, big stick and all.

Indeed, much of wokerey is American exceptionalism turned in on itself, as Unitarianism is the flipside of Calvinism. Having decided that the principles under which the old American Imperialism functioned are evil, the current leadership have replaced them with their opposites—and intend to enforce them overseas quite as ruthlessly as did the Empires they endlessly moan about. Thus, Obama attempted to bully Kenya and other Third World countries into gay rights, and Hilary Clinton called Viktor Orbán a fascist. The old American Imperialists did indeed extirpate Yellow Fever from Panama and helped to smash (for a time) piracy in the South China Sea. The new version will never accomplish anything—save defeat and the undoing of whatever good their predecessors did accomplish.

It is, in any case, a strange paradox: if one wishes to hate America, let him merely study the history of our foreign policy. But if he wishes to love the United States, all he need do is take a long road trip through them. The dichotomy between those who rule the country and determine its policies and those who actually live there is huge—and always has been; this too has not changed. Most Americans are not really concerned about events overseas; however despised isolationism may always be among the various ruling elements, it is a general if unconscious attitude amongst most of us—as evidenced by the fact that only a small minority of us possess passports and that a minority of those who do actually use them. From the foundation of the republic, most of us have been content to allow our rulers to deal with foreign affairs, only really noticing something when called upon to die in one of their crusades. This has been a fatal flaw in our national character. If our two seas once kept the world at bay, they do so no longer.

So where does that put us? Who did lose Afghanistan? Beyond the mere personalities involved, it was the hubris that has dogged us from our political beginning—the idea that we could or should remake the world in our own perfect image. Worse still, now that the leadership have inverted that hubris into a weird self-hatred, they nevertheless insist on pushing overseas what they are poisoning us with at home. If anything, the chasm between the rulers and the ruled in America has become infinitely greater than the days when we were bid to go off and fight for freedom. But the new regime is corroding everything it touches and destroying our power to respond to real threats to our nationhood. If those in power continue as they are doing, the next great argument shall be “Who lost America?”