

When Foreign Policy Gets It Wrong: Afghanistan  
Posted On: December 31, 1969

How the United States deals with the rest of the world is determined by our foreign policy. Centuries before we became a country, foreign policy was the business of kings, who had relationships with other kings, and diplomats who were dispatched abroad with the dual purpose of representing their kings and collecting data on the foreign country (spying).

A diplomat representing England's Queen Elizabeth I, was in France where he witnessed an organized slaughter of French Protestants ordered by the Catholic French King. He returned to England and reported this to the Queen, with the warning that the Catholics (France and the Pope) were out to assassinate her if possible, and return Protestant England to the Catholic fold.

His earned his keep as a diplomat, and saved England (and Western civilization) by setting up an effective spy system. England's subsequent Enlightenment and the separation of church and state evolved.

Elizabeth's British diplomats to France (and later, American diplomats: Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin) all spoke French and did not find the cultures very different from their home bases. Foreign policy becomes a much more difficult enterprise when the two countries have very different cultures and languages. Afghanistan has been one of the most difficult cultures to penetrate and understand even before the region became a "country," in the 19th century.

Persia (today's Iran) has had a national identity since 500 BC. It was a huge empire, extending from Egypt to China, at the height of its ancient power. The eastern part of Persia was their "wild east," the equivalent of our "wild west," a land of high mountains, high deserts, trade towns, and fruitful oases. Tribal people lived there, many of them already Persian speakers, and some Turkic or Mongolian tribes left over from the Mongol invasions. How does one rule over or deal with tribes whose main activity is warfare and warlordism?

The Persians ultimately lost that chunk of their territory when the Russian and British empires began their conflict over who would control Asia. The British created a new country out of that wild region: Afghanistan, and named an Afghan tribal chief king. But creating Afghanistan did not mean the British could keep it.

In a war to tame the tribes, the British army went in, and to everyone's horror, only one soldier survived, left to stumble out and report on the massacre of the rest.

That was in the 19th century. In the 20th, it was Communist Russia's turn. They took over Afghanistan and began the process of modernizing it and freeing its cities from repressive Muslim tradition. The Russians were ruthless enough to stamp out the tribes, until the United States began to arm the tribes to repel the Russians. It was a Cold War battlefield. The Russians got their comeuppance and were driven out, a military disaster that ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and a lingering problem of drug addicted veterans of the Afghan war.

America's comeuppance was next. We had weighed in on supporting the Muslim fanatics rather than the modern communists, and because of our help, a poisonous version of Militant Islam was strengthened and emboldened. They attacked us on 9/11/2001, which propelled us into ongoing and endless wars, the longest of which is our attempt to pacify Afghanistan and enable the country to modernize with liberal democratic institutions. It has not gone well, and we are desperate to find an out from that responsibility.

Afghanistan is the best example for foreign policy specialists to understand. It represents the most difficult of issues for us: the need for really good history specialists, linguists who can speak at least a few of Afghanistan's languages (Persian and Pashtoon), military historians who can understand the logistical difficulties (terrain, distance from the US, cooperative relationships with Afghanistan's neighbors), and clear national goals.

Wise foreign policy depends on a good State Department, National Security, Intelligence, a competent President, capable Congress, and informed public input and support.

The missing elements today are a wise and honorable President, a bipartisan Congress, and an informed public. Our next election must remedy this.

684 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of *God's Law or Man's Law*. You may contact her at [Lfarhat102@aol.com](mailto:Lfarhat102@aol.com) or [www.globalthink.net](http://www.globalthink.net).