

Afghanistan Dilemma

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The United States is just one more great power to leave Afghanistan after twenty years of trying to fix it. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has never been fixable, even before it became an actual country. It has a problem that was perfectly illustrated in a political cartoon on the Santa Cruz Sentinel: a map of Afghanistan divided equally into two parts: the west in the 21st century, the east in the 15th. It is two countries, and a third country, Pakistan, helping the 15th century part. How can we fix that?

The geography tells us something. The country lies amid a high mountain range that starts in Iran (once Persia) and runs through India, and ends at China. It is remote, and until modern times, was only reachable by the hardiest of travelers. But even its remoteness is divided. The mostly high desert on Russia's border, was part of the "silk route," a trade road linking Persia and China from antiquity.

A number of beautiful cities along that road grew, hosting caravans bringing tea, silk, and rice to Persia, and taking pistachios, almonds, melons, carpets, peaches and apricots (dried into fruit leather) to China. Afghanistan was then not a country; it was the "wild east" of Persia, divided among fierce tribes and sophisticated trade cities.

Alexander the Great, on his way to India, traveled through the wild Afghan tribal areas. He even married a tribal princess, thinking that would get him recognized as king. When he died young, his successors tried to keep the rule going, but failed.

The next empire, the Mongols, invaded on their way to Persia and then on to Europe, slaughtering as they rode. They succeeded only in setting up military protection of the Silk Road so that trade could travel safely. Marco Polo experienced that. The tribes didn't dare interfere with merchant trade, but the Mongols never managed to rule the tribes.

In the 19th century, the British and Russian empires were rivals for who would rule India. In the middle of the 19th century, they together cut Persia in half: the northern provinces going to Russia (the Caucasus) and the eastern half to Britain, which then created a new country, Afghanistan, with a king they thought they controlled. The tribes, of course, showed them otherwise. One punitive British force tried to rein in the tribes, and in one battle, only one British soldier was left alive to tell the world.

After World War I, when empires were dismantled and modern values introduced, modernization took on religious opposition. Turkey's modernizing first president, Ataturk, freed women from veiling and seclusion. Turks muttered, but Ataturk prevailed. Next door in modernizing Iran (formerly Persia), the Shah freed women from veiling and seclusion. He had to put down a revolt, but prevailed. Next door in Afghanistan, the modernizing King tried to free women from veiling and seclusion. The tribes killed him.

The next try was by Communist Russia. They might have succeeded because they were so brutal that even the tribes did not dislodge them. The western part modernized. Kabul, the capital, emancipated women, open coffee houses, theaters, cinemas, and Afghanistan was on its way to modernization, but, of course, not self-government.

Russia might have fixed Afghanistan's backwardness, except for the US intervention: a covert arming of the tribes, who then drove the Russians out. Afghanistan cost too many lives, even for the USSR.

What followed the departure of Russia was tribal warlords, going at each other with modern weapons. The worst of them, the Taliban, won. They then plunged the whole country into the darkest interpretations of Islam and hosted Osama Bin Laden.

America invaded, and indeed bettered the lives of woman in western Afghanistan. The east is still horrible and tribal. We do not want 20 years more of this. It has cost us too much. But we can do two things: use modern technology to constrain the Taliban (even they are starting to modernize), and provide sanctuary in the US to all women and men who helped us whose lives are endangered by the Taliban.

Dividing the country in two would help.

685 words

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