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Afghanistan, a weak, backward remote mountain and desert state in a terrible neighborhood (Russia; Iran (once Persia); Pakistan; India; and the Central Asian former Soviet states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) is an unlikely candidate for a major great states headache. But it has been, and still is. It has hosted fanatical religious terrorists with weapons used to attack the United States and other countries throughout the world. The US has spent 20 years trying to fix this danger, but has largely failed, finally leaving in unseemly haste a year ago. Why did this happen?

Conflicting Agendas

Unlike the agendas of the great empire builders of the past (Britain, Russia, Aztec, Spain, China), the United States is not enthusiastic about empire building. We would much rather inspire by our own example, than sustain an empire. However, when we did stick a toe into empire, such as in the Philippines, a bloody conquest was followed by a great improvement over the empire that their Spanish masters ruled. Under Spain, there was no public school system. Catholicism was enforced. Only the elite benefitted by Spanish rule.

The Americans opened the country's first public schools, leaving a literate country; did not enforce religious conformity; and attempted to establish the American system of government. Furthermore, as World War II loomed, the US promised independence when the war ended, and we kept our promise.

Hawaii was taken over by stealth and muscle, but eventually became a state, no longer a colony.

Democracy or Thugocracy?

At the close of World War I, President Wilson declared a policy of "making the world safe for democracy." We did the same at the end of the Cold War, when former colonies or hostages of empires eagerly tried American style democracy, voting and rule of law. Both attempts largely failed within a decade after trying it. Today, dictatorship is on the rise.

During the Cold War with the USSR, both we and the Soviets had thuggish clients that we supported, holding our noses. That was no time to promote a messy democracy again. A thug is a known commodity and we had to deal with him (Marcos in the Philippines, and others). UN Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick explained the difference between our thugs and Russia's: a thug just uses his fist and has limited tenure. The Russians mess with their colonies' brains, making ideology much harder to overcome.

Conflicting Values

While we love participatory governance, sometimes economic issues trump them. We have dealt with unsavory dictatorships in the Middle East because of our need for oil. We still have that problem.

We believe in religious freedom, but what can we do about an authoritarian religion, such as Saudi Arabia's Islam? No other religion is permitted there and their version of Islam is primitive and hostile toward women. It certainly does not like democracy or voting either. But we avert our eyes and work with them.

Afghanistan.

Our invasion of Afghanistan was justified, but our intentions after our success were never logical. We wanted elections, but the candidates were all elite warlords who lived by corruption.

Rebuilding was an exemplary goal, but immediately became mired in our own corrupt contractors, who reaped enormous payments for their efforts. The flood of money then added to the already corrupt practices of Afghan elites, an offense noticed by the public.

Modernization and Human Rights

Our support of human rights and women's rights was embraced in the modernized cities, but not in the abysmal tribal areas. The already deep canyon between urban and rural deepened, and was then exploited by the Taliban.

If Afghanistan were ever to be modernized, it would take force, which the Russians

were willing to apply, but we were not. The Soviets probably could have at least made a modern state if they had been given time, but America's short-term goals mandated arming the worst religious factions to fight and drive the USSR out of the country. A Cold War goal thus trumped long-term benefit, and we were left with two wars to fight (Iraq, a mistake, and Afghanistan, a disaster).

The outcome was predictable.

683 words

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