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Two Years after Afghan Fiasco, There's a Key Question We Still Aren't Asking



Photo by Staff Sgt. Kylee Gardner – Public Domain

Two years ago this week Americans were shocked and dismayed at the incredibly rapid collapse of the US-backed government in Afghanistan. This despite the fact that over a 20-year period the US had suffered upwards of 40,000 casualties and spent \$2.3 trillion dollars to support the government and to supply the Afghan National Security Forces with some of the best weapons and training available anywhere in the world.

General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that in August 2021, “the vast majority of the Afghan units put their weapons down and surrendered without a fight. Kabul was taken with a couple hundred

guys on motorcycles and not a shot fired...How is it an army that size, trained, manned, equipped...just collapsed?"

Biden blames Trump and Trump blames Biden, while national security experts proffer a variety of explanations for this costly fiasco.

General Frank McKenzie, former Commander, United States Central Command, blames the February 2020 Doha Agreement between the Taliban and the US, explaining that, among other problems, Doha led to the US losing all cognizance of the actual conditions in the Afghan Army "because our advisers were no longer down there with those units."

Others place the blame earlier, criticizing the Afghan government for backing and/or making generous accommodations with various warlords. Conversely, University of Pittsburgh associate professor Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili argues that the warlords were comparatively effective at delivering services for their people, and that the real problem was the ineffectual central government, particularly Ashraf Ghani, who led the Afghan government for the last seven years of its existence.

Most agree that widespread corruption—largely inspired by the massive infusion of foreign cash coming into Afghanistan—was a major problem, as was donors' desire for quick fixes. In *No Good Men Among the Living*, American journalist Anand Gopal places blame on US actions soon after the US first took over Afghanistan in 2001. As the US attempted to govern a country it didn't understand, Afghans who the Americans perceived as allies often falsely accused their political opponents of having connections to terrorists. US forces antagonized many Afghans by accepting these accusations as good coin and acting upon them.

Gopal, one of the few Western journalists to have embedded with the Taliban, argues that after the American invasion the Taliban was demoralized and weak, but the US unnecessarily provoked Taliban leaders into taking up arms.

There is a legitimate basis for all these explanations and more, yet there's a key question which the experts are not asking but should: why did the allegedly despised Soviet-backed Afghan government survive for three years after the withdrawal of the Soviet army, while the US-backed Afghan government forces collapsed so quickly? Why were so many Afghan men—and women—willing to risk their lives for the leftist regime, yet so few were willing to do so for the American-backed government?

On top of this, the US-backed Afghan forces had a tremendous material advantage over the Taliban, whereas the US, Saudi Arabia, and others provided abundant aid and

advanced weaponry to the forces fighting the Soviet-backed government long after the USSR departed from Afghanistan.

From the beginning the American government and media misled the American people about the Soviet “invasion” of Afghanistan. The legacy and mindset of the anti-Soviet outcry whipped up by both the Carter and Reagan administrations during the 1980s still serve as blinders on American thinking. The truth is that the Soviet-backed regime, for all its faults, had done much to earn the support of the urban population of Afghanistan, particularly its educated people and women.

The left-wing People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan came to power in 1978 in the Saur Revolution. The PDPA soon expanded women’s rights by banning forced marriages and child marriages, and by reducing the oppressive bride price to a nominal fee. Facing an exceptionally low female literacy rate, they made education compulsory for girls.

In one Helmand province village in 1979, Gopal explains, “Communists seized power in Kabul and tried to launch a female-literacy program in Helmand—a province the size of West Virginia, with few girls’ schools. Tribal elders and landlords refused. In the villagers’ retelling, the traditional way of life in Sangin was smashed overnight, because outsiders insisted on bringing women’s rights to the valley...a rebellion erupted, led by armed men calling themselves the mujahideen. In their first operation, they kidnapped all the schoolteachers in the valley, many of whom supported girls’ education, and slit their throats.”

In the cities, which were controlled by the Soviet-backed leftist government, Gopal notes “Girls enrolled in schools and universities in record numbers, and by the early eighties women held parliamentary seats and even the office of Vice-President.”

According to feminist scholar and author Valentine Moghadam, “Human rights reports have had to concede that women had higher status and more opportunities” under the PDPA government. In 1985, women accounted for 65% of the 7,000 students at Kabul University – unthinkable in previous times.

Moghadam observed in Afghanistan in 1989 that women had taken up prominent positions in urban areas and in the PDPA government, as well as becoming “chief surgeons in military hospitals, and construction workers and electrical engineers who often supervised male staff.”

According to the Los Angeles Times, “Women in Afghan cities probably enjoyed their greatest freedom during the Soviet-backed regime that ruled in Kabul from 1979 to 1992.”

The PDPA also moved to promote and uplift some of Afghanistan's ethnic minorities, distributed land to the poor, albeit clumsily, and restrained the power of the Muslim clergy, who responded by rallying the peasantry against the government's reforms.

In February 1980, the New York Times' James Sterba explained:

“Land reform attempts undermined their village chiefs. Portraits of Lenin threatened their religious leaders. But it was the Kabul revolutionary Government's granting of new rights to women that pushed orthodox Moslem men in the Pashtoon villages of eastern Afghanistan into picking up their guns.”

While the regime was unpopular in the countryside, its urban supporters, many of whom had been educated in the USSR, had seen that, in the adjoining Muslim-majority regions of the Soviet Union, there had been tremendous progress in eliminating illiteracy, reducing infant mortality, improving living standards and life expectancy, and uplifting women.

Marianne Kamp, a Central Eurasian Studies professor at Indiana University Bloomington, explains:

“Measured against conditions for women in neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China in the late 1980s, Central Asian women in the Soviet era were living the dream, with high literacy rates, universal education through middle school levels, free basic healthcare, the same (limited) political rights as men, and high levels of participation in a state directed workforce that received pensions, insurance, and maternity and childcare benefits.”

Women had come to make up a significant percentage of the doctors, engineers, and teachers in Soviet Central Asia. Many urban Afghans saw the USSR, for all its flaws, as a model of progress for their country to follow.

After the Saur Revolution the US covertly armed the Afghan rural opposition, believing that the Soviets, faced with the possibility of a Muslim extremist regime on their border, would intervene. Over the next 14 years the US and Saudi Arabia dispensed between \$6 and \$12 billion to the various anti-PDPA groups, which were known collectively as the Mujahideen.

Many of America's later enemies came from the Mujahideen, including al-Qaida founder Osama bin Laden, Taliban leader Mullah Omar, 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and the “Butcher of Fallujah,” Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

The PDPA, struggling to survive, repressed opposition, often brutally, and repeatedly asked the USSR to intervene. Eventually the reluctant USSR agreed, sending in 80,000 troops in December 1979. The US government and media then manufactured an uproar, portraying it as the beginning of an aggressive Soviet campaign to take over the Middle

East instead of what it clearly was—a defensive effort to prevent a hostile Muslim fundamentalist regime from forming on the USSR’s southern border. The US instituted draft registration, which continues to this day, sharply increased military spending, and decreed a US boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow

During the Soviet-Afghan War, American media and leaders vilified the USSR for the fact that several million Afghans left the country, mostly going to Pakistan or Iran. While the US portrayed these refugees as fleeing the Soviets and their air power, this is only partly true. Some of the refugees were fleeing the fighting in general or Mujahideen atrocities. Others fled because the Soviet-backed government tried to force their female children to go to school or to conscript young men into the national army.

National Geographic explains that some “left in response to a call for hijra [flight]... [which] required an Afghan to leave his or her country because it had been taken over by people who were not followers of Islam. The new government of Afghanistan and its Soviet supporters separated church and state.”

In part because of the mujahideen’s use of American-supplied surface-to-air missiles, the war became costly for the USSR, which at the time was facing an economic crisis. In 1988, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who had labeled the war a “bleeding wound,” began removing Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

It was widely predicted in the Western press that, without the Soviet army, the Afghan regime would quickly collapse. It didn’t happen. Three weeks after the last Soviet troops left, the Mujahideen launched a large-scale offensive at Jalalabad, and Afghan Army men, alongside women in volunteer militias, stunned the world by dealing the Mujahideen a humiliating defeat.

Pakistani Brigadier-General Mohammed Yousaf, an intelligence officer involved in the assault, said, “the jihad never recovered from Jalalabad.”

Luckily for the Mujahideen, the USSR collapsed in 1991, and crucial Soviet aid—most importantly, replacement parts, fuel, and weapons—was cut off. The PDPA held out until 1992, when the Mujahideen finally seized Kabul.

Gopal explains that soon afterwards:

“Mujahideen leaders—who had received generous amounts of U.S. funding—issued a decree declaring that ‘women are not to leave their homes at all, unless absolutely necessary, in which case they are to cover themselves completely.’ Women were likewise banned from ‘walking gracefully or with pride.’ Religious police began roaming the city’s streets, arresting women and burning audio- and videocassettes on pyres.”

Some Mujahideen, along with Afghan refugees from Pakistan, came together to form the Taliban, who took over most of Afghanistan in 1996.

The Soviet-Afghan War was a brutal conflict with atrocities on all sides, but the Soviet-backed regime, for all its faults, sought to build a comparatively modern, egalitarian society. The men (and women) of the PDPA forces fought very effectively, in large part because they believed they had something to fight for. In the end, the US-backed Afghan forces collapsed because they didn't.

Glenn Sacks teaches social studies at James Monroe High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He was recently recognized by LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner for "exceptional levels of performance."

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