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How US Hubris Baited Afghan Trap

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Exclusive: Despite what Official Washington thinks it knows, the real error on Afghan policy after the Soviets left in 1989 was not the abrupt cutoff of U.S. aid but nearly the opposite, continued CIA support for the Islamist mujahedeen and rejection of peace overtures from Moscow, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

President Barack Obama's decision to extend the U.S.-Afghan strategic relationship through 2024 was driven, in part, by one of Official Washington's most cherished myths – that the United States abruptly abandoned Afghanistan in 1989 and must not make that mistake again.

This myth is repeated by policymakers and pundits alike. On Tuesday, for instance, MSNBC's Chris Matthews asked if his guests had seen the movie, "Charlie Wilson's War." He apparently viewed the Tom Hanks film as a documentary when it was really a fictional account, both on the innocence of the Afghan mujahedeen and the callowness of Congress in supposedly pulling the plug once the Soviet Army withdrew.

But Matthews is far from alone in believing this mythology. The New York Times' lead editorial on Wednesday criticized Obama for not explaining how he would prevent Afghanistan from imploding after the scheduled U.S. troop withdrawal in 2014, though the Times added that the

plan's "longer-term commitment [of aid] sends an important message to Afghans that Washington will not abandon them as it did after the Soviets were driven out."

The abandonment myth also has been cited by senior Obama administration officials, including the current Ambassador [Ryan Crocker](#) and former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as a way to explain the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and al-Qaeda's use of Afghanistan for plotting the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

In late 2009, Defense Secretary Gates reprised the phony conventional wisdom, telling reporters: "We will not repeat the mistakes of 1989, when we abandoned the country only to see it descend into civil war and into Taliban hands."

Yet, Gates knew the real history since he was deputy national security adviser in 1989 when the key decisions were made to continue covert U.S. aid, not cut it off. Still, the fictional version from the movie, "Charlie Wilson's War," apparently proved too tempting as an excuse for an open-ended occupation of Afghanistan.

In the movie, Tom Hanks played the late Rep. Charlie Wilson, D-Texas, who was a key figure in financing the mujahedeen war against the Soviets in the 1980s. In one scene – after the Soviet withdrawal on Feb. 15, 1989 – Hanks begs a congressional committee for additional money but gets turned down.

The truth, however, is that the end game in Afghanistan surrounding the Soviet departure was messed up not because the United States cut the mujahedeen off but because Washington pressed for a clear-cut victory, rebuffing peaceful options.

And we know that Gates knows this reality because he recounted it in his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows*.

The Real History

Here's what that history actually shows: In 1988, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev promised to remove Soviet troops from Afghanistan and sought a negotiated settlement. He hoped for a unity government that would include elements of Najibullah's Soviet-backed regime in Kabul and the CIA-backed Islamic fundamentalist rebels.

Gates, who was then deputy CIA director, opposed Gorbachev's plan, disbelieving that the Soviets would really depart and insisting that – if they did – the CIA's mujahedeen could quickly defeat Najibullah's army.

Inside the Reagan administration, Gates's judgment was opposed by State Department analysts who foresaw a drawn-out struggle. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead and the department's intelligence chief Morton Abramowitz warned that Najibullah's army might hold on longer than the CIA expected.

But Gates prevailed in the policy debates, pushing the CIA's faith in its mujahedeen clients and expecting a rapid Najibullah collapse if the Soviets left. In the memoir, Gates recalled briefing Secretary of State George Shultz and his senior aides on the CIA's predictions prior to Shultz flying to Moscow in February 1988.

"I told them that most [CIA] analysts did not believe Najibullah's government could last without active Soviet military support," wrote Gates.

After the Soviets did withdraw in February 1989 – proving Gates wrong on that point – some U.S. officials felt Washington's geostrategic aims had been achieved and a move toward peace was in order. There also was mounting concern about the Afghan mujahedeen, especially their tendencies toward brutality, heroin trafficking and fundamentalist religious policies.

However, the new administration of George H.W. Bush – with Gates moving from the CIA to the White House as deputy national security adviser – rebuffed Gorbachev and chose to continue U.S. covert support for the mujahedeen, aid which was being funneled primarily through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI.

Back in Afghanistan, Najibullah's regime defied the CIA's expectation of a rapid collapse, using Soviet weapons and advisers to beat back a mujahedeen offensive in 1990. As Najibullah hung on, the war, the violence and the disorder continued.

Gates finally recognized that his CIA analysis had been wrong. In his memoir, he wrote: "As it turned out, Whitehead and Abramowitz were right" in their warning that Najibullah's regime might not fall quickly. Gates's memoir also acknowledged that the U.S. government did *not* abandon Afghanistan immediately after the Soviet departure.

"Najibullah would remain in power for another three years [after the Soviet pull-out], as the United States and the USSR continued to aid their respective sides," Gates wrote. Indeed, Moscow's and Washington's supplies continued to flow until several months after the Soviet Union collapsed in summer 1991, according to Gates.

"On Dec. 11, 1991, both Moscow and Washington cut off all assistance, and Najibullah's government fell four months later," Gates wrote. "He had outlasted both Gorbachev and the Soviet Union itself." In other words, Gates confirmed that covert U.S. military support to the Afghan rebels continued for almost three years after the Soviet Army left Afghanistan.

Criles's Account

And other U.S. assistance may have continued even longer, according to George Criles's 2003 book, *Charlie Wilson's War*, upon which the movie was loosely based. In the book, Crile described how Wilson kept the funding spigot open for the Afghan rebels not only after the Soviet departure in 1989 but even after the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

In the later years of the conflict, there was also much wider knowledge about the brutality and corruption of the mujahedeen, Crile noted, though few in Washington dared speak about the dark side of these supposed “freedom-fighters.”

Crile wrote: “Throughout the war, Wilson had always told his colleagues that Afghanistan was the one morally unambiguous cause that the United States had supported since World War II – and never once had any member of Congress stood up to protest or question the vast expenditures.

“But with the departure of the Soviets, the war was anything but morally unambiguous. By 1990, the Afghan freedom fighters had suddenly and frighteningly gone back to form, reemerging as nothing more than feuding warlords obsessed with settling generations-old scores.

“The difference was that they were now armed with hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of weapons and explosives of every conceivable type. The justification for the huge CIA operation had been to halt Soviet aggression, not to take sides in a tribal war – certainly not to transform the killing capacity of those warriors.”

Crile reported that at the end of that year, Wilson traveled to Moscow and listened to appeals for a settlement of the long-running conflict from Andre Koserov, a future Russian foreign minister. Koserov told Wilson that Moscow and Washington had a common interest in preventing the emergence of radical Islamic control of Afghanistan.

Upon returning to Washington, however, Wilson’s openness to Moscow’s overtures brought a stern rebuke from his hard-line friends in the CIA who wanted to see a clear-cut victory of the CIA-backed mujahedeen over the Soviet clients in Kabul.

“It was sad to see how quickly Wilson’s effort at statesmanship collapsed,” Crile reported. “He found that it wasn’t easy to stop what he had started.”

So, Wilson flipped back to the side of his old allies in the CIA and the Saudi royal family, which was matching the CIA’s huge contributions dollar for dollar.

“In the second year after the Soviet withdrawal, Wilson delivered another \$250 million for the CIA to keep its Afghan program intact,” Crile wrote. “With Saudi matching funds, the mujahedeen would receive another half billion dollars to wage war. The expectation was that they would join forces for a final push to throw out the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime, restore order, and begin the process of rebuilding.”

Afghan Slaughters

However, Najibullah’s forces continued to hold out and the mujahedeen broke down into internal bickering. They also showed their level of respect for human rights by slaughtering enemy prisoners.

Eventually, the mujahedeen did capture the strategic city of Khost, but turned it into a ghost town as civilians fled or faced the mujahedeen's fundamentalist fury. Western aid workers found themselves "following the liberators in a desperate attempt to persuade them not to murder and pillage," Crile wrote.

U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley began to wonder who were the worse bad guys, the Soviet-backed communists or the U.S.-supported mujahedeen.

"It was the leaders of the Afghan puppet government who were saying all the right things, even paying lip service to democratic change," Crile reported. "The mujahideen, on the other hand, were committing unspeakable atrocities and couldn't even put aside their bickering and murderous thoughts long enough to capture Kabul."

In 1991, as the Soviet Union careened toward its final crackup, George H.W. Bush's administration had so many doubts about the nature of its erstwhile Afghan allies that it made no new request for money, and the Senate Intelligence Committee approved nothing for Afghanistan, Crile wrote.

"But no one could just turn off Charlie Wilson's war like that," Crile noted. "For Charlie Wilson, there was something fundamentally wrong with his war ending then and there. He didn't like the idea of the United States going out with a whimper."

Wilson made an impassioned appeal to the House Intelligence Committee and carried the day. The committee first considered a \$100 million annual appropriation, but Wilson got them to boost it to \$200 million, which – with the Saudi matching funds – totaled \$400 million, Crile reported.

"And so, as the mujahideen were poised for their thirteenth year of war, instead of being cut off, it turned out to be a banner year," Crile wrote. "They found themselves with not only a \$400 million budget but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen."

But even then the Afghan rebels needed an external event to prevail on the battlefield, the stunning disintegration of the Soviet Union in the latter half of 1991. Only then did Moscow cut off its aid to Najibullah. His government finally fell in 1992. But its collapse didn't stop the war – or the mujahedeen infighting.

The capital of Kabul came under the control of a relatively moderate rebel force led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Islamist but not a fanatic. However, Massoud, a Tajik, was not favored by Pakistan's ISI, which backed more extreme Pashtun elements of the mujahedeen.

Rival Afghan warlords battled with each other for another four years destroying much of Kabul. Finally, a disgusted Washington began to turn away. Crile reported that the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program, which was the only sustained U.S. program aimed at rebuilding Afghanistan, was cut off at the end of 1993, almost five years after the Soviets left.

Rise of the Taliban

While chaos continued to reign across Afghanistan, the ISI readied its own army of Islamic extremists drawn from Pashtun refugee camps inside Pakistan. This group, known as the Taliban, entered Afghanistan with the promise of restoring order.

The Taliban seized the capital of Kabul in September 1996, driving Massoud into a northward retreat. The ousted communist leader Najibullah, who had stayed in Kabul, sought shelter in the United Nations compound, but was captured. The Taliban tortured, castrated and killed him, his mutilated body hung from a light pole.

The triumphant Taliban imposed harsh Islamic law on Afghanistan. Their rule was especially cruel to women who had made gains toward equal rights under the communists, but were forced by the Taliban to live under highly restrictive rules, to cover themselves when in public, and to forgo schooling.

The Taliban also granted refuge to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, who had fought with the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s. Bin Laden then used Afghanistan as the base of operations for his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, setting the stage for the next Afghan War in 2001.

So, the real history is quite different and much more complex than the Hollywood version that Official Washington has embraced as its short-hand understanding of what happened after the Soviet Army withdrew in 1989.

One lesson that could come from the actual history is the futility of trying to impose a Western or military solution on Afghanistan and the value of negotiations even when dealing with unsavory foes.

If Gates had indeed been the “wise man” that he is now purported to be, he would have urged Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush to work with Soviet President Gorbachev on a compromise that might have involved a power-sharing arrangement, rather than to insist on total victory for the CIA-backed mujahedeen.

One also might conclude that it was not the mythical “abandonment” of Afghanistan in February 1989 that wrought the devastation of the past two decades, but rather the triumphalism of Gates and other war hawks who insisted on rubbing Moscow’s nose in its Afghan defeat rather than cooperating on a negotiated settlement.

That hubris set the stage for the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent Afghan War, America’s disastrous detour into Iraq and what’s now looks to be an even costlier commitment to Afghanistan, making the remote country a money pit that could drain the U.S. Treasury for another dozen years.

At minimum, Official Washington might want to get the history straight.