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History Repeats Itself In Unhappy Afghanistan

By Georgie Anne Geyer
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Earlier this year, I was talking with an old Arab friend in one of the most dependably pro-American countries in the Middle East, when the talk turned -- as it so often does, unfortunately -- to Afghanistan. But his response, while critical, was different from most of the responses one hears over there these days.

"Eight years!" he spouted, almost with derision. "Eight years!" I knew immediately what he was driving at. This American-educated man thought we had stayed way too long; he was close to contemptuous that the "greatest power on Earth" could not settle a war in a country as unblessed by history as Afghanistan. And, of course, there was always Iraq.

Hiding in the side curtains of this historic stage is the fact that the neocons of the Bush administration's would-be "new American Empire" thought nothing in 2003 of detouring to such an enormously complicated country instead of going directly after the perpetrators of 9/11. As with so many real empires across history, a United States overloaded with ego and ambition tried to go after everybody at once. It's happened before.

Thinking back to that recent morning in the Middle East, I found a lot of truth to apply to the problems we're having with governance in Afghanistan now. When something goes on too long, it gives too many people time to act out. Things they would never have dared

do in the beginning, they now do with cynical and bored alacrity, while confidence in an apparently incapable "empire" grows frail and contemptuous.

In the last week, our chosen instrument for governing Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai, has been striking out viciously at the U.S. and at the West. First he gave a speech complaining that the West wanted his government as "puppets," had worked in the last elections to defeat him and would make the Taliban and al-Qaida insurgencies into a legitimate "national resistance."

This, followed by a cozy, makeup phone call with Secretary of State Clinton, was capped by another fit of rage. This time, meeting with parliament, he berated the lawmakers for rejecting his proposed new election law and then said, according to anonymous witnesses, "If you and the international community pressure me more, I swear that I am going to join the Taliban."

These words in turn were followed by the flamboyant, cape-wearing Karzai deliberately and publically reaching out to both Iran and China to let the Americans know what he really felt. The visit to Kabul by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, just before President Obama made his own surprise visit there, was no accident.

This type of response from foreign leaders in the developing world that the U.S. has, to one degree or another, put in power, is not unusual. In Vietnam, Washington even doomed the government it backed by encouraging the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem while President Kennedy was in power. But, if anything, such developments are more serious today, when the U.S. faces such disastrous financial problems and when the new American president has just sent thousands of extra troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and al-Qaida -- and, by the way, to bolster Karzai's government.

Moreover, there are signs from our best correspondents on the scene that Karzai, emboldened by his ego and by all the things he has gotten away with with his American tutors, is beginning to inflate his role in history. The New York Times reported after a recent lunch in Kabul that Karzai "believes that America is trying to dominate the region, and that he is the only one who can stand up to them."

This is not an easy situation. True, we can simply pack up our soldiers, tents and bases and come home, but history and many of our true friends would never forgive us. Forget the morality, "assassination a la Diem" has never worked. Karzai, no less than any man or woman, can be persuasively threatened, but at the same time we need a reputable partner to politically and socially carry Afghanistan out of this mess. Probably the best threat is one that could reach any thinking man: "Fine, go ahead and join the Taliban. In fact, we'll turn you over to them next Tuesday at midnight on the road to Kandahar. We'll just bet they'll take care of you, and it won't be to make you chief!"

One can pause and sigh with yearning for the days when there truly WERE puppets that great powers could put in charge and manipulate from behind the scenes. The only problem is, when you look at those years the Brits, the Germans, the Russians, the

Moguls and just about everybody else in the area were fighting over the wilderness that is Afghanistan, you see that every single one of them was driven out, with their puppets and everybody else.

Meanwhile, the new Afghan "surge" in the south, driven by the thousands of new American troops, is not going well. The New York Times reported Sunday that the Taliban is posing as usual Afghans, taking tens of thousands of dollars from American troops for work supposedly done. And, indeed, how could foreigners ever tell a Taliban from another Afghan? That has always been the problem.

To me, there remains only one lesson from these kinds of situations, which keep popping up and hitting me in the eye: We should not get into these kinds of bedeviled local situations! Of course, we had to repel the 9/11 al-Qaida, but this could have/should have been done through special forces and cooperation with local police and intelligence forces across the world. Once again, we're learning the hard way.