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Bipartisan Stupidity on Afghanistan

by Ted Rall

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NEW YORK - As I pack for my return trip to Afghanistan next month, many people are asking me: Why are we losing? What should we do there?

The short answer is simple: Afghan resistance forces live there. We don't. Sooner or later, U.S. troops will depart. All the Afghan resistance has to do is wear us down and wait us out. As I have pointed out before, no nation has successfully invaded and occupied any other nation since the 19th century. All occupations ultimately fail.

For those who prefer their punditry longwinded, here's a longer answer.

Even taking historical precedent into account, America's post-9/11 occupation of Afghanistan--its longest war ever--has been notably disastrous. Wonder why? Everything you need to know was contained in this week's war of words between the chairmen of the two major political parties.

The Afghan War kerfuffle that revealed the boundless stupidity of our national political leadership began on July 1st. Republican National Committee chairman Michael Steele told GOP donors in Connecticut that the war in Afghanistan could not be won and should never have been fought: "If [Obama is] such a student of history, has he not understood that, you know, that's the one thing you don't do is engage in a land war in Afghanistan? All right? Because everyone who's tried, over a thousand years of history, has failed," Steele said.

Steele's main point is beyond dispute. There's a reason Afghanistan is known as "the graveyard of empires," as opposed to as, say, the "number one producer of tasty, nutritious pomegranates."

Steele's all too typical a historicity is in the details. Which he gets wrong.

Would-be conquerors have had trouble with Afghanistan not for over 1,000 years, but for 2,000 years. Alexander the Great sent supplies through the Khyber Pass in 327 BCE in an attempt to subjugate the Konar Valley. Characteristically, the locals waged a ferocious resistance. The Macedonian conqueror, nearly killed by an Afghan arrow, beat a retreat to the Indus River and withdrew.

But it's Steele's "land war" qualifier that really gets me. According to the GOP chairman, the British Army might have spared itself total annihilation in 1842 if it had conducted an air war instead. Using what--hot air balloons?

Then things got really weird.

"This was a war of Obama's choosing," Steele said.

Huh?

True, Obama made the Afghan war his own by sending in more troops. But Bush started this mess. Doesn't Steele remember that? Or--this thought is even more frightening--does he really think WE forgot?

"This is not something the United States has actively prosecuted or wanted to engage in," he continued. This surely comes as welcome news to the tens of thousands of Afghans killed by tens of thousands of American bombs. Chin up. Imagine how many more would have died if the U.S. had "actively prosecuted" this fiasco!

Not to be outdone in the moronitude department, Democratic National Committee spokesman Brad Woodhouse retorted that "we are there because we were attacked by terrorists on 9-11."

Um...We were attacked by Saudis and Egyptians. Who were trained and funded by Pakistanis. None of the major figures linked to 9/11--including Osama bin Laden--were in Afghanistan on 9/11. (Bin Laden was in a Pakistani military hospital in Islamabad.) By 9/11, both Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan had been closed. Al Qaeda's operations were based entirely in Pakistan.

Afghanistan had nothing to do with 9/11.

Nothing.

None of the Afghans I interviewed in November and December of 2001 had even heard

of 9/11. None had heard of Al Qaeda. Other journalists reported the same thing.

As far as I can tell, we attacked Afghanistan for fun. To disrupt Iran and India. To test weapons that would be used against Iraq. To test the resolve of the American antiwar movement. And to build an oil and gas pipeline between Central and South Asia.

Not because of 9/11.

Woodhouse continued: "It's simply unconscionable that Michael Steele would undermine the morale of our troops when what they need is our support and encouragement. Michael Steele would do well to remember that we are not in Afghanistan by our own choosing, that we were attacked and that his words have consequences."

Dubya--is that you?

Can we even tell which party is which anymore?

No wonder we're losing. The parties have forgotten what they stand for--and they never learned the history of the countries they invade.