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History promises disaster in Afghanistan for blind America

By JOHN R. MacARTHUR

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Afghan tribal chiefs at the Khyber Pass during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80)

If President Obama has ever heard of William L. Shirer, chances are it's in connection with Nazi Germany. Nowadays, you can't make assumptions about what people under 50 know and don't know, but it's a safe bet Obama recalls Shirer's most famous book, "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich," even if he hasn't read it.

For most people, Shirer's chronicle of Hitler's ascent to power reinforces the argument that mad dictators must never be appeased. Whether this is universally true, you can't read Shirer's or any other standard account of Germany between the wars without concluding that, given stronger French and British political will, Hitler could have been stopped (and maybe even overthrown by an internal coup), either in March 1936, when he remilitarized the Rhineland in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, or at some other point before the Munich agreement in September 1938.

However, the other night I stumbled across a part of Shirer's outstanding reporting career that provided a different, urgently pertinent lesson and might convince Obama of another argument against appeasement — in this case, appeasement of mad Army generals, mad neo-colonialist State Department officers, and mad neo-conservatives, all of whom think that Afghan tribesmen can be brought to heel by an American military occupation employing the latest counterinsurgency techniques.

I hadn't known that Shirer visited Afghanistan in 1930 until I happened to pick up the second volume of his memoirs ("The Nightmare Years," published in 1984) and started reading the first chapter. I'm lucky I did because I've never seen the stupidity of America's current Afghan policy so clearly laid out.

But first let's restate the burning question: Why are we in Afghanistan? To start, we can dismiss the preposterous argument advanced by Obama's most aggressive advisers about defending our country against "terrorism" in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida is nothing if not decentralized, and its adherents are still perfectly capable of attacking the United States from Canada, Boston, Hamburg, or Fort Hood. Anyway, terrorism, as Timothy McVeigh demonstrated in Oklahoma City, can originate with the nice young white man next door who shops at the gun store around the corner. "Fighting terrorism" in Afghanistan "to prevent another 9/11" simply isn't a serious argument, and I suspect that even the deluded Gen. Stanley McChrystal understands that his men are shooting at indigenous Afghan rebels, not Osama bin Laden or his followers.

No, the more likely reason for killing all those people and wasting nearly \$3.4 billion a month is an ugly mixture of vanity, misplaced pride, crass politics, and liberal self-righteousness. The Army still wants to prove it can defeat a guerrilla army and erase the shame of Vietnam. The politicians, Obama included, want to look warlike and tough, so they can't be accused of being "soft on terror" in 2010. And then there are the civil servants and think-tank denizens known as "humanitarian interventionists" — now led by Hillary Clinton, who think that America's "civilizing" mission in the world includes not only establishing "democracy" but also "freeing" Afghan women from being required to wear the burqa.

All these foolish partisans of drone bombing and "human terrain teams" should read Shirer's account of slipping into war-ravaged Afghanistan from India as part of the entourage of Crown Prince Mohammed Zahir Khan, who was on his way to Kabul to rejoin his father, the newly proclaimed king known as Nadir Shah. The highly sophisticated son, only 16, "already missed" Paris, his exile home, and was grateful to be able to speak French with Shirer.

The British didn't like Shirer's reporting for the Chicago Tribune on Gandhi's civil-disobedience campaign in India, so they did their best to keep him from getting through the Khyber Pass. Moreover, "they did not intend now to allow me to poke my nose into a country where they, like the Russians, were conniving for control."

The British, of course, had notably failed to control the Afghan tribes, most recently in 1919, when Nadir Shah (then known as Nadir Khan) had commanded the Afghan forces against the colonial occupier. This survivor of Western realpolitik then ousted his latest Afghan rival from the throne, a Robin Hood figure named Bacha-i-Saqao. But in classic Afghan fashion, treachery took precedence over principle — “after promising to spare [Bacha-i-Saqao’s] life, [Nadir Khan] had him executed in a rather Afghan manner — by degrees: first stoning, then shooting, and finally hanging.” (Does this sound like an incubator for democracy?) To make matters even more sinister, it seemed that his majesty’s government had (in a rather British manner) secretly backed the power grab of its old enemy Nadir Khan in the hope of reasserting its influence by removing Bacha, who was Moscow’s favorite.

In our day, such cynical, great-power maneuvering sounds absurd and, ultimately, pointless. These are fantastic tales of the distant colonial past, when intriguing European foreign offices played games within games to enlarge their spheres of influence — bureaucratically at home and territorially abroad. America, we flatter ourselves, is mostly immune to this sort of nonsense. Indeed, Nadir Shah, like Ho Chi Minh 15 years later, naïvely believed in the United States as a potential honest broker with a less acquisitive interest in countries like his.

As Shirer wrote: “Shyly, he suggested that when I returned home I might call the attention of Washington to his nation’s existence, the opportunities for American development of Afghanistan’s vast, untouched natural resources and the desirability of diplomatic recognition. ‘You are the one great country in the world which has no political interests in Afghanistan. If we can establish commercial relations with you, why not diplomatic relations?’ ”

Shirer disabused the new king of his faith in American good will and logic by noting that Washington, in its “peculiar blindness,” still had not recognized the Soviet government fully 13 years after the Bolshevik revolution. But even worldly-wise Shirer, writing more than 50 years later, did not imagine Washington imposing itself on a “tribal society, primitive, savage, living off its flocks and barren fields . . . fighting off or attacking hostile tribes and government tax collectors, fearless of death in a way I envied, illiterate, uncivilized to a Westerner, but conscious of a long and continuous history handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation.”

Only the Soviets and the British could be that self-defeating, right?

At the end of his first chapter, Shirer takes stock of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 with nearly 100,000 troops. The Red Army, he wrote, was “reported to be meeting the usual reception which Afghans gave foreign invaders. ... To the surprise of no one who knew the land, the Russian troops apparently were having a more difficult time than Moscow had envisaged.”