

# **HERMIT HERALD**

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### **QUOTE FOR THE DAY**

**“Afghanistan, where empires go to die.” Mike Mallory.**

### **HOW SO?**

**Dating back to Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan very few invaders have been able to survive more than a couple of decades in Afghanistan. They always depart worse for the experience.**

**Some good background information from Robert McNamara, former Secretary of Defense brings us into more recent Afghan history with his, “Britain’s disastrous retreat from Kabul.” Your scribe will attempt to take our readers on a historic trip from 1839 to 2021.**

## **THE FIRST ANGLO-AFGHAN WAR**

**In 1837, the British, always fearful that Russia would use Afghanistan as a gateway to invade British held India, allied with the Afghan leader, Dost Mohammed. That was great for less than a year when the British became aware that he was becoming friendly with the Russians.**

**The remedy for that undesirable friendship was for the British, in late 1838, to invade Afghanistan with 20,000 British and Indian forces. Dost was toppled and pro British, Shah Shujo was installed. His hold on the populace was considered shaky so a very large contingent of the invading force had to remain in Kabul, the capital. The Afghans deeply resented the presence of the British and in November of 1841 an insurrection broke out.**

**Sir Alexander Burnes, the senior British diplomat in Kabul, was murdered by the mob. Badly outnumbered, the Brits arranged a truce that would enable them to safely depart Kabul.**

**Nevertheless, tensions continued to escalate as the son of Dost Mohammed, Mahammad Akbar Khan, took a harder line, insisting that the invaders leave immediately in the midst of an extremely harsh winter. The British objective was to march to Jalalabad, 90 miles away, and on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1842, 16,000 people (soldiers and Afghan adherents) began the trek. Many died from exposure, but despite the treaty they were attacked in the mountain pass of Khurd Kabul and ALL of them were massacred, except for one, Dr. William Brydon, a British Army surgeon, who, it was presumed, was allowed to survive and get to Jalalabad to tell the story of the massacre. He arrived on January 13<sup>th</sup>, both he and his horse, half dead.**

**This was a huge blow to British pride, with the British then evacuating all remaining troops in the country. In 1870, the artist, Elizabeth Thompson, painted a soldier, said to be Brydon, on a dying horse, titled, "Remnants of an army." (now in the Tate Gallery in London.)**

**THE SECOND ANGLO-AFGHAN WAR 1878-1880**

**Ever assuming that Russia's eventual goal was the seizure of Britain's prize possession, India, the British invaded again. Their strategy, "The Great Game" was to keep Russian influence out of the country. This time around the Brits sent in 40,000 troops. They were met with initial resistance, but by the spring of 1878 they controlled a large part of the country.**

**Major Louis Cavagnari, the top British envoy, met with the Afghan leader, Yakub Khan, and forged the Treaty of Grandamak, which supposedly ended the war, with the Afghans agreeing to the presence of a British, "mission" to defend the Afghans from foreign aggression. (read Russia)**

**Far from being received as conquering heroes, relations soured quickly and in September of 1879 a rebellion against the British broke out. One of the first casualties – Major Cavagnari – murdered in his house.**

**A column of soldiers under the command of General Frederick Roberts entered Kabul, crushed the rebellion, captured and hung many of the rebels in what became a reign of**

**terror. The General announced that Yakub Khan had abdicated and appointed himself as Military Governor of Afghanistan. In 1879 and 1880 there were substantial additional battles with the Afghans and, notably, in the spring of 1880, General Roberts marched 10,000 troops 300 miles in 20 days to save the British garrison in Kandahar.**

**Finally, in 1880, Abdul Rahman, as Amir of Afghanistan, became the country's leader and agreed to work with the British who were then able to gradually withdraw from the country. The Amir had a long reign and the feared Russian invasion never occurred.**

## **SOVIET INVASION 1979-1989**

**Well, never say never! On April 27, 1978 Soviet supported members of the Afghan military overthrew and executed president Mahammed Daoud Khan, a leftist progressive, but not a communist. The Soviets quickly endorsed the new Communist Peoples Democratic Party of which Nur Taraki became Chairman. Taraki's regime targeted Islamic Mullahs and land owners in the country side.**

**This led to a major insurgency against the government from tribal factions aided by Pashtun Guerillas from Pakistan. Over the course of 1979, the insurgents controlled 75% of the country.**

**It was all downhill from there. Taraki invited his chief rival, Hafizullah Amin to a meeting at the palace. It was planned as an assassination, but Amin was tipped off. Instead Amin showed up with a military contingent and placed Taraki under arrest. Within a month he was dead – smothered by a pillow.**

**That got the Russian's attention. On 12/27/79 Russian troops killed Amin and, along with hundreds of airlifts into the country and 30,000 troops, the invasion was on. (with thanks to Kallie Szczepanski, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan").**

**By February of 1980, the Soviets controlled all the major cities, but 80% of the rest of the country was controlled by the Islamic insurgents, known as the Mujahideen.**

**Throughout a good portion of the 80s there was little the Mujahideen could do against the Russians other than hit and run – guerilla type actions, and it was looking like the Russians were on their way to a total conquest of the country. A primary reason for their success was their absolute uncontested control of the air space, with their Hind helicopter warships.**

**Enter U.S. Congressman, Charlie Wilson ( the book, “ Charlie Wilsons War” is just a fabulous read – a true story, stranger than fiction.) Charlie Wilson was a larger than life, heavy drinking politician. In violation of laws, he was heavily lobbied by Gust Avrakotos of the CIA. Gust knew what the Mujahideen needed to level the playing field- weaponry to shoot down Russian aircraft. Joined by prominent philanthropist and diplomat, Joanne King Herring, the three of them were able to get the Administration’s attention, and super secret, “Operation Cyclone” was started. So it was that a \$300 million program was initiated to assist the Mujahideen in their fight against the Russians. The crown jewel in the project was the U.S. providing shoulder mounted, heat seeking stinger missiles. No Marksmanship**

**needed here, just aim in the general direction, it seeks the exhaust heat of the aircraft and Kaboom!! Hundreds of Russian aircraft were subsequently blown out of the sky with our weapons, along with the lives of hundreds of Russian airmen – It's called a proxy war. Isn't it ironic that, currently, we (the United States) are outraged by the unproven rumor that the Russians are giving the Taliban cash rewards for killing Americans. In any event, so successful were the Mujahideen in negating the Russian air superiority that the result was a humiliating withdrawal by the Russians in 1989.**

**Like all wars, the cost, in human lives and, for the survivors, was incalculable. Some 600,000 Russians served in the war, 14,500 killed, 54,000 wounded and 416,000 became ill with typhoid, hepatitis and other diseases. An estimated 850,000 to 1.5 million civilians died in the war and 5 to 10 million fled as refugees.**

## **U.S. – AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT 2001- TODAY**

**The Mujahideen were vicious, take no enemy type fighters, but by and large they were like**



**marauding bandits. Unsalariated and undisciplined, they robbed, pillaged and raped their way around the country. That gave rise to the rapid growth of a group of highly religious oriented students, many of whom had been educated in Pakistan, to fight against the Mujahideen in the name of Islam. The Taliban, meaning, “the students”, emerged victorious and are the ones we face today.**

**Interestingly, while extremely strict in following the dictates of Sharia law, where girls and women have few rights, crimes are punishable by extreme penalties and entertainment is not permitted – no sock hops on Saturday night, the Taliban are well organized and establish sound local government where they hold sway. It is said they take good care of their people, while much of the Afghan government is viewed as corrupt, uncaring and incompetent.**

**So let’s take a short trip down memory lane.  
10/7/01: U.S. begins air campaign on Taliban and Al Qaeda forces predicated on the fact that Osama Bin Laden had plotted the attacks of**

**9/11 while in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban.**

**11/13/01: U.S. Northern alliance bombs cave complex at Tora Bora where Bin Laden was said to be hiding. He escapes to Pakistan.**

**5/2/03: U.S. declares end to major combat, but not really, in Afghanistan as U.S. prepares to invade Iraq.**

**2/17/09: President Obama orders 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan to tackle Taliban insurgency, reinforcing 38,000 troops who have been gradually added since 2004, plus 38,000 troops from NATO allies.**

**5/1/11: Bin Laden killed in Pakistan.**

**2011: U.S. troop strength at about 100,000.**

**12/2011: U.S. reveals secret talks with Taliban.**

**12/18/14: U.S. combat mission officially concluded (again?) Transition to an Afghan-led war. 10,000 U.S. troops/"advisors" stay on.**

**8/2/17: Trump says, “ U.S. must seek an honorable and enduring outcome.”**

**Translation – just get us out of there**

**9/14/18: U.S. diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. special envoy seeks negotiations with Taliban.**

**10/10/18: Taliban agree to “talks about talks.”**

**2/29/20: As a result of talks, U.S. agrees to withdrawal of all U.S. troops by 5/1/2021 providing Taliban agree to cease armed involvement against U.S. troops in the interim. Afghan forces not included in these restrictions, so the Taliban attacks against the Afghans continue. As part of the peace proposal the Taliban are to agree not to support or allow the existence of terrorist groups like Al Qaeda or ISIS in the country. Lastly there was to be a prisoner exchange, with a list of 5,000 demanded by the Taliban.**

**4/9/20: The Afghan government releases first 100 of the 5,000 and then, gradually, all but the 400 deemed to have committed the worst crimes. Taliban continue to insist on their release before talks can progress.**

**8/9/20: Afghan president Ghani agrees to release the final 400 prisoners paving the way to finalizing the peace negotiations in Doha Qatar.**

**EVERYTHING LOOKING PRETTY GOOD, RIGHT?**

**Wrong! Fast forward to 2/24/21, Senator Jack Reed, Chairman of Armed Services Committee added his voice to a number of national security specialists who argue for abandoning the May 1 timetable for withdrawal of our last 2,500 troops, saying that the Taliban, “have not met the conditions for a U.S. withdrawal as set by the trump administration last February.” Supporters say an extension of the May 1 date would buy time for the new administration to bolster talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The Taliban have already rejected such a delay and have threatened to resume attacks on Americans and NATO forces if the U.S. delays the withdrawals.**

**Then on 3/1/21 columnist William Ruger rejects Senator Reed’s view that withdrawing**

**our remaining troops will compromise our counterterrorism efforts and undermine the wobbly Afghan government, pointing out that a delay puts our troops back in the Taliban cross hairs in an unwinnable war that has already cost more than \$2 Trillion and 2,400 American lives. I would add to that, what are we going to do with 2,500 troops when we couldn't get the job done with 100,000?**

**Ruger does go on to say, with which I disagree, "We can further protect ourselves by making it unmistakably clear that if they allow transnational terrorists to operate from their soil against us, they will have to face overwhelming American force?" Come on – sounds like another Obama "line in the sand" comment. We're going to send in another 100,000 troops or send in B 52s to bomb them, or even try to find them with drones in their myriad encampments throughout the country? I don't think so.**

**Along comes our new Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, prepared to muddle the entire existing process, changing horses in the middle of the stream as it were. His grand**

**vision is to now have meetings – a United Nations led conference would be held in Turkey, which would include the U.S., China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran and India, “to discuss a unified approach to supporting peace in Afghanistan.” Other ideas Blinken has consist of prohibiting the Taliban from having their military structures and officers in other countries such as Pakistan- a non starter for both the Taliban and the Pakistanis. And then, there is the grand idea to have the Taliban and the Afgan administration govern together (think oil and water) But, meetings, meetings, meetings that’s what we really need.**

**One of our readers, Ian Bennett, sent this quote by the economist, John Kenneth Galbraith. “Meetings are indispensable when you don’t want to do anything.”**

**I have followed this situation for many years and repeat what I have said in several previous issues; whether its in six months or six years, the Taliban are going to have continuing control over large parts of Afghanistan, if not the entire country. Indeed, “Afghanistan is where empires go to die.”**

**Your faithful scribe, PB**