

Afghanistan Post Mortem

The Russians may have been dealt a setback, but the lessons of the Afghan conflict afford little cause for cheer

by Robert Kaplan

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THE SCENERY EVOKED the past, near and distant. As I rode the paved highway into the southern Afghan city of Qandahar, the rusted carcasses of Soviet tanks lined the way for over a mile. The wreckage of more tanks, and of armored personnel carriers and transport trucks, was strewn for quite some distance out along the dust-packed, gravelly waste on both sides of the road. The scene conjured up visions of the Afrika Korps and the Six-Day War. At the same time, the Afghan *mujahideen*, with their turbans, bandoliers, and Lee-Enfield rifles, called to mind a very different conflict: the nineteenth-century British-Afghan wars. And Qandahar itself, when I glimpsed it from atop a cliff, brought me face-to-face with antiquity. Stuck in the Central Asian outback, Qandahar probably carries the only Greek place-name to have survived in Afghanistan. The name is widely thought to derive from *Iskandar*, the Arabic form of Alexander; Alexander the Great led his army through here in 329 B.C. By late 1988, after years of Soviet aerial bombardment, Qandahar had been reduced to a rubble of collapsed stone walls and archways. It looked similar to any number of ancient Hellenistic sites in the Near East.

The significance of what has happened in Afghanistan remains largely concealed by an overlay of the exotic and by the richness of ready-made historical associations. The relatively few journalists reporting from the scene have mainly looked backward. The Soviet invasion was explained as the continuation of a Kiplingesque Great Game for the control of India. Soviet troops, when they were not likened to the Americans in Vietnam, were likened to the nineteenth-century British, who had also tried unsuccessfully to subdue the Afghans. Such comparisons gave Americans a contextual framework. But they obscured a reality that diplomats and military analysts have begun to perceive with horrifying clarity: Afghanistan may evoke the military past, but its importance is as a preview of the battleground of the future.

ACCORDING TO MOST military experts, a comparison between the war in Afghanistan and the Vietnam War is most useful as a point of departure. The "Vietnam" phase of the Afghan war ended in mid-1980, six months after the December 24, 1979, Soviet invasion.

When it became clear that the Afghan *mujahideen* were not going to be easily crushed, the Soviets stretched the definition of counterinsurgency to a degree that the Americans in Vietnam were barely able to conceive

of. Whereas American air strikes over North Vietnam were tightly controlled, the Soviets engaged in indiscriminate carpet-bombing of urban areas and populated farmland. (No major city in Vietnam was damaged to the extent that Qandahar has been.) Whereas the American military tended to use helicopters to attack specific targets or to insert troops, the Soviets used their flying battleships to demolish whole villages. And whereas the Americans carefully mapped their minefields and deployed mines mainly on the perimeters of their bases and positions, the Soviets kept few maps and sowed literally millions of mines throughout the entire Afghan countryside. "By the standards of Vietnam, Afghanistan was much more savage," says David Isby, a Washington-based military analyst and the author of several technical books about Soviet weaponry and the war in Afghanistan. "Civilian massacres like the one at My Lai were the norm rather than the aberration. Rather than being condemned, they were routinely tolerated, and sometimes encouraged."

Isby calls the kind of war the Soviets fought "cheap and nasty," and others have characterized it similarly. Weapons like mines and mortars were unleashed on such a scale as to obliterate much of the population upon which the guerrillas depended, severely restricting the need for actual battle. Estimates of the number of unexploded Soviet mines now in Afghanistan range up to 30 million. (In Qandahar my driver kept to well-rutted tracks; walking even a few feet off the road is considered hazardous.) The Soviets lost between 12,000 and 50,000 men in Afghanistan, significantly fewer than the 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam. Yet the number of Afghan civilians who were killed during the war—estimated at more than a million—is more than the number of civilians killed in Vietnam, a country that had two and a half times as many people as Afghanistan. The Soviets achieved the effect of a nuclear strike without actually having to deliver one. Still, from the Soviet perspective, it was a limited war. "They could have done even more damage than they did," says Zalmay Khalilzad, an expert on Afghanistan who worked for the State Department before taking his current job, at the Rand Corporation. The Soviet strategy, he says, was "almost—not quite—genocidal."

History offers few examples of comparable nationwide slaughter. Yet not only did the Afghans not surrender; they refused to compromise or negotiate. It would be incomprehensible for a modern industrialized society to pay such an awful price for freedom. Thomas E Gouttierre, the director of the world's only center for Afghan studies, at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, says that because the Afghans lack the material wealth that people in the West are terrified of losing, they were psychologically able to go on fighting and suffering.

Afghanistan is one of the least-developed countries in the world, riven by high mountains, and lacking even the minimal cosmopolitan influences that might have been provided by all-weather roads and a national media, and so the Afghans had only their local tribal and religious values to fall back on. Those "inward-oriented" village values, as Zalmay Khalilzad describes them, had endured for many centuries and remained completely undiluted by the rationalism that pervades not only the West but also the more technologically developed cultures of the Third World. "The great cry in the West and elsewhere is 'Be reasonable,'" David Isby says. "The Afghans were never prepared to be reasonable to invaders." Khalilzad points out that the very underdevelopment of the Afghan economy made it difficult to destroy: "Subsistence agriculture allowed for survival without help from outside."

The Afghans were able to withstand a twentieth-century military onslaught by relying on nineteenth-century values and methods. In his book *The Face of Battle* the British military historian John Keegan observes, "Impersonality, coercion, deliberate cruelty, all deployed on a rising scale, make the fitness of modern man to sustain the stress of battle increasingly doubtful." There is an awful lesson here: even in conventional, non-nuclear warfare the future is so horrible that only the past may be capable of defeating it.

Total war, of which the war in Afghanistan may be the best example, is without identifiable battles, because battles imply limits. The Soviet air force carpet-bombed the Panjshir Valley, northeast of Kabul, for months at a time in the mid-1980s. There was little ebb and flow to the slaughter; mines killed or maimed about thirty people a day throughout the decade. The most that can be said is that in some years—1985 in particular—there were slightly more casualties than in other years. "Militarily nothing stood out," Isby says. "It was not dramatic. There was little for the media to focus on."

FROM THE STANDPOINT of a war correspondent, Afghanistan might as well have been a nuclear war: its totality made it too dangerous to cover, and there was little conventional fighting to see. A typical Afghan war story would be about a correspondent's visit to a village a few days or weeks after it had been incinerated by helicopter gunships. Beyond that, reporters focused on the political and diplomatic sideshows in Pakistan or elsewhere, and on the atmosphere in the city of Kabul in the last days of the Soviet occupation. Television, which demands proximity to an event as it happens—and an easy commute to satellite facilities—could do little with Afghanistan. To get from the war to the nearest transmitting station typically required at least several days, if not weeks, of hard travel by foot. Michael Malinowski, a U.S. diplomat who monitored the war from both the Communist-held capital of Kabul and the guerrilla rear base in Pakistan, recalls that what always struck him about the war was "how particularly difficult it was for television to report it."

The experience in Afghanistan fuels suspicion that modern communication technology, though bringing some parts of the world closer to us, has put other parts curiously out of reach. Had the Soviets invaded Afghanistan a generation ago, when television was in its infancy and proximity to a transmitting station was less important, the war might have attracted relatively more attention. The absence of journalists, especially American ones, in Afghanistan for most of these past nine years also suggests that owing to the worldwide profusion of satellites, computer modems, and hotels with modern phone and telex systems, war reporting is an increasingly domesticated activity. The hot spots of choice today are places like the West Bank, the Persian Gulf, and South Africa, where the violence is circumscribed and the life-support mechanism of luxury hotels is only a few minutes away. (One reason why the shifting fortunes of Iran and Iraq on the Basra front received so much ink and airplay is surely the existence of a Sheraton Hotel in Basra.) Wars will continue to take place, but if Afghanistan is an accurate indication, true war reporting is a slowly vanishing profession. The warfare that is most often videotaped and written about now is urban violence in societies that have attained a level of development sufficient to allow large groups of journalists to operate comfortably.

Afghanistan is an unsettling lesson in how news, particularly foreign news, has become increasingly divorced from current history—and not only for the reasons just cited. The media' s fondness for local (domestic) scandal and controversy often means that a foreign event, no matter how important, attracts little continuing attention until it sparks an attendant conflict back home. The war in Afghanistan was the first time that the Red Army went into combat since the Second World War. Liberals and conservatives were united behind President Reagan in support of the *mujahideen*. And thus, by the media' s definition, there seemed to be no story.

In fact there was a story, and one to which the U.S. government should have been forced to respond. Although a few articles were written about it, the subject failed to make much of an impression until the eve of the Soviet withdrawal. There were, of course, several different resistance groups fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The American and Pakistani intelligence establishments, it turns out, gave relatively little support to the ones that mattered most. The Pakistanis, with American acquiescence, gave a virtual blank check for arms and supplies to a radical fundamentalist *mujahideen* faction, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar' s Hizb-i-Islami (Party of Islam), even though it lacked grass-roots support inside Afghanistan. Other *mujahideen* parties that were less radical and had more men in the field got far less aid. Yet it was these groups that produced the war' s most celebrated commanders, did most of the fighting, and emerged with the most popular support. Despite a decade of largesse from Pakistan and the United States, Hekmatyar' s party would probably have crumbled—as the contras did in Nicaragua—had the flow of aid suddenly been cut off. Afghanistan demonstrates conclusively the futility of trying to create insurgent armies from outside. Articles by Jonathan Randal, of *The Washington Post*, and Edward Girardet, of *The Christian Science Monitor*, probed the issue in depth. These reports from Pakistan last summer helped to inflame a debate between the State Department (which, according to one authoritative source, wanted a more equitable distribution of arms among the various *mujahideen* groups) and the Central Intelligence Agency (which, sensitive to Pakistani military concerns, was hesitant to reduce aid to Hekmatyar).

ANOTHER OVERLOOKED lesson of the war is that the Soviets, despite the much-touted liberalization of their society under Mikhail Gorbachev, continue to rely on—and reliably be influenced by—the threat or use of force. Gorbachev' s attitude toward the wain Afghanistan was commonly misconstrued. The conventional wisdom was that faced with economic turmoil at home, Gorbachev regarded the Afghanistan invasion as a costly mistake by his predecessors and wanted nothing more than to extricate his country from the conflict. And yet, a painstakingly researched report commissioned by Swedish relief officials in Pakistan estimated that, during Gorbachev' s first year in power—1985—more than half the country' s peasants had their villages bombed. More than a quarter had their irrigation systems destroyed and their livestock killed by Communist soldiers. Under Gorbachev the war of terror against Pakistan escalated. In 1987, according to the State Department, fully a third of all the dead and half of all the wounded in terrorist incidents worldwide died or were wounded in Pakistan. The State Department blamed the Soviet-trained and Soviet-directed Afghan secret service, WAD, for most of the 127 terrorist attacks in Pakistan that year. Also under Gorbachev the frequency of Soviet and Afghan government violations of

Pakistani air space increased dramatically. All of this is quite aside from the suspicious crash in Pakistan last summer of the Lockheed C-130 transport plane carrying Pakistan's President, Zia ul-Haq, and the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Arnold Raphel—the blame for which some would ascribe to Moscow.

Gorbachev, when he assumed office, did not represent a more enlightened Soviet attitude toward Afghanistan. His first impulse was to determine whether the war could still be won by brute force. Only after the introduction, in 1986, of American Stinger anti-aircraft missiles—and, partly as a result, the deterioration of the Soviet military position in Afghanistan—did Gorbachev demonstrate a change of heart. "The discomfiture of the Soviet military caused by the success of the *mujahideen* had a clear effect on Gorbachev," Michael Malinowski says. David Isby says, "The basic assessment of the experts is not that the Soviets have changed their goals but that in this particular case they were compelled to reassess the utility of military force in achieving those goals."

E Although the Soviet Union is widely perceived as having suffered a blow in Afghanistan—and it did—the Soviet army and air force have been tempered by the war into tougher, more efficient fighting organizations than they were before. "Because of the war, the Soviets now fight better at night and are better trained for fighting in the mountains," observes Abdul Haq, a leading *mujahideen* commander in the Kabul region, whose underground network inside the capital was responsible for the 1983 kidnapping of a senior Soviet intelligence officer. "In their staff schools a meritocracy is beginning to replace the former system of personal connections. The enemy soldiers I encounter are much better than the ones I fought at the beginning of the war. The Russian military needed Afghanistan to get it back into shape. A lot of the problems they've had since the end of the Second World War have finally been resolved."

VEN BEFORE THE Soviets completed their withdrawal, Afghanistan was being forgotten. Though the horror of the war was always conceded, the reality of it remained abstract, registering only at the fringes of consciousness. The hideous details of the war's prosecution were never adequately factored into the ongoing appraisal of Soviet intentions. The war in Afghanistan—in addition to being difficult to report—happened too far away, to an alien people with few ethnic compatriots in America. While the Soviets killed upwards of a million civilians in Afghanistan, they did it in such a boring, mechanical, impersonal way as to deflect sustained attention. In the end what "worked" in Afghanistan was not reason or negotiation or the advent of *perestroika* but the Afghans' willingness to die.

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