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Afghanistan – We Forgot History and We Repeated It

by Eric Margolis

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Santayana's famous dictum about those who forget history being condemned to relive it is nowhere better observed than in the mountains of Afghanistan.

One of my favorite artists was the superb Victorian painter Lady Elizabeth Butler who captured in oil the military triumphs and tragedies of the British Empire.

Her haunting painting, "The Retreat from Kabul (also known as "Remnants of an Army") shows the sole survivor of a British army of 16,500 during the first Anglo-Afghan War in 1842, Dr. William Brydon, struggling out of Afghanistan. All the rest of the British occupation force were killed by Afghan tribesmen after a futile attempt to garrison Kabul.



This gripping painting should have hung over the NATO summit meeting last week in Chicago to remind the US and its allies that Afghanistan remains "the graveyard of empires."

The western forces that occupied Afghanistan in 2001 have failed to achieve their military or political objectives and are now sounding the retreat.

All the empty oratory in Chicago about "transition," Afghan self-reliance, and growing security could not conceal the truth that the mighty US and its dragooned western allies have been bested in Afghanistan by a bunch of mountain warriors from the 12th Century.

The objective of war is to achieve political goals, not kill people. The US goal was to turn Afghanistan into a protectorate providing bases close to Caspian Basin oil, and to block China on a strategy level. After an eleven-year war costing \$1 trillion, this effort failed as dismally as the much ballyhooed "liberation" of Iraq.

The US dragged its NATO allies into a war in which they had no business and lacked any popular support. The result has been a serious weakening of the NATO alliance, raising questions about whose interests it really serves. The defeat in Afghanistan will undermine US geopolitical influence over Western Europe.

Claims made in Chicago that the US-installed Afghan regime will stand on its own with \$4 billion of aid from the west were pie in the sky. Once US support ends, the Karzai regime is unlikely to survive much longer than did Najibullah's Afghan Communist regime in Kabul after its Soviet sponsor withdrew in 1989. Or the US-run South Vietnamese regime that fell in 1975.

The current 350,000-man Afghan government army and police are mercenaries fighting for money supplied by the US and NATO. Many are ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks, blood foes of the majority Pashtun. Taliban and its allies are fighting for nationalism and faith. History tells us who will prevail.

All Afghans know the western powers have been defeated. Those with sense are already making deals with Taliban. Vengeance being a cherished Afghan custom, those who collaborated closely with the foreign forces can expect little mercy.

Air power is the key to US control of Afghanistan. Warplanes and helicopter gunships circle constantly overhead to defend western bases and supply routes. Reduce this hugely expensive deployment of air power, as will likely happen after 2014, and remaining US troops will be in peril. Pakistan's temporary closure of NATO land supply routes to Kabul and Kandahar provides a foretoken of what may occur. Currently, the US must rely on Russia for much of its heavy supplies.

Already there are worries about getting most US and NATO troops out of Afghanistan by the end of 2014. The US pullout from Iraq was deftly executed. But Afghanistan will be a greater challenge. Much will depend on the good or ill will of the angry mountain tribesmen who comprise Taliban and its nationalist allies.

France's new president, Francois Hollande, wisely reaffirmed his pledge to withdraw all French troops this year. French had become fed up with former President Nicholas Sarkozy's neoconservative ambitions and eagerness to please Washington. Other NATO members are wishing they could do the same.

No one wants to have their soldiers be the last to die in a futile war that everyone knows is lost.

To wage and sustain the Afghan War, the US has been forced to virtually occupy Pakistan, bribe its high officials, and force Islamabad to follow policies hated by 95% of its people, generating virulent anti-Americanism. The Afghan War must be ended before it tears apart Pakistan and plunges South Asia into crisis into which nuclear-armed India and Pakistan confront one another.

Washington intends to leave garrisons in Afghanistan after the 2014 announced pullout date, rebranding them "trainers" instead of combat troops. Their mission will be to keep the pro-US Afghan regime in power. But neither the US nor NATO will come up with the \$4 billion promised in Chicago.

Washington is encouraging India to get ever more deeply involved in Afghanistan – even to become its new colonial power. India, with 600,000 troops stuck in divided Kashmir battling a Muslim uprising, would be wise to keep its hands off.

The retreat from Kabul will not be easy, but hopefully not as fraught and bloody as that of the British in their Afghan wars.

It's high time for the great powers to let poor, ravage Afghanistan sink back into well-deserved obscurity.