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Obama's Afghan-Ignorant Policy Guide

Posted By Michael Scheuer

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With much ballyhooing, Bruce Riedel led a team that conducted the Obama administration's "review" of Afghan policy. As is known, the team's deliberations produced a wonder of either naiveté or stupidity, or perhaps both: 21,000 more U.S. troops to control a country the size of Texas, and a logistical system running vital U.S.-NATO resupply lines through hostile territory in Pakistan and – with Russia's gleeful support for keeping America bleeding in Afghanistan – the Commonwealth of Independent States. The question must be asked how a man as intelligent as Riedel came up with a plan that amounts to massively reinforcing failure.

The answer lies, I fear, in Riedel's eagerness to please Obama with a new plan and a deep faith in the rightness of U.S. interventionism. Trying to please the president is a trait so common in some former senior CIA officials jockeying for political sinecures that it hardly comes as a surprise; Riedel very effectively managed analysis on several Middle East issues during his Agency career.

What does surprise me, however, is Riedel's clear ignorance of his Obama-assigned task, Afghanistan. Writing on the Brookings Institution Web site on April 30, 2009, Riedel bemoans the fact that America has not intervened more fully and aggressively in Afghanistan. In an article titled "[Afghanistan: What Is at Stake?](#)" Riedel writes,

"Twice in the last quarter century the United States has squandered great victories achieved in Afghanistan by failing to follow up battlefield success with an enduring and resourced commitment to helping to build a stable government in Afghanistan."

One wonders what Riedel is talking about. The United States has never won a war in Afghanistan. The war against the Red Army and the Afghan communists (1979-1992) was won by the Afghans – period. U.S. arms supplies helped them kill Russians more quickly and

effectively, but they, not we, won the war. In the war that commenced in October 2001, we won one battle – that for control of the Afghan cities – but since late March 2002, we have been losing every step of the way. To his credit, Riedel says we are losing the current war. He also says "it is not yet lost." He is wrong; we have lost.

Another, more important point on which Riedel is dead wrong is in his repetition of the exceedingly durable but completely incorrect urban legend that Washington and the West abandoned Afghanistan after the Red Army withdrew. In the late 1980s, Riedel claims,

"U.S.-supported Afghan mujahedin defeated the Soviet 40th Red Army [sic]. ... The mujahedin were badly divided, however, and quickly fell into civil war. The United States could have led an international effort to restore order and rallied key players like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to try to end the conflict. Instead, Afghanistan got virtually no attention from the White House or the Congress."

Riedel's ignorance of what happened after the Red Army's withdrawal is almost breathtaking, but such a misrepresentation of reality is politically requisite if anyone is to believe the new-but-doomed Afghan policy approved by Obama has a chance to succeed. One might have hoped that Riedel – who worked on Iraq in the years he is writing about – would have consulted one or more of his Afghan-experienced former colleagues for some factual background before taking up his pen. But then again, the facts would get in the way of justifying more U.S. intervention in Afghanistan.

Riedel argues that a viable post-Soviet Afghan government failed because the "mujahedin were badly divided," Western governments lost interest, and Washington did not seek Saudi and Pakistani involvement. This is palpable nonsense. The mujahedin were, are, and always will be "badly divided," but they still beat the Soviet superpower – as they are on the verge of beating the American superpower – and there is no doubt they eventually would have worked out governing arrangements compatible with Afghan history and society. The West tends to forget that the Afghans have been running their country for 2,000 years and have a bit more experience than we do in managing their tribal and ethnically diverse society.

From the perspective of Washington and its allies, the real post-Soviet trouble was that whatever regime the mujahedin built would not be the one we wanted; namely, one that included none of the Afghans who actually fought and bled to drive out the Soviets. Sadly, therefore, the U.S. government, many of its European allies (especially the UK, France, and Germany), and various UN organizations intervened fully and dictatorially in post-Soviet Afghan politics, thereby preventing any sort of genuine Afghan attempt at self-determination. And as they are today, the Saudis and Pakistanis were also fully involved in telling the Afghans what to do, and, just as today, their recommendations ran exactly counter to U.S. interests.

Notwithstanding Riedel's assertions, in the late 1980s and early 1990s U.S., Western, and UN diplomats consistently tried to dictate to the Afghans what kind of government they should have. That troika wanted to staff the new secular and centralized Kabul regime with Afghan technocrats; secular Afghans who, like Hamid Karzai, spent the war safely in India, America, or Europe; "Gucci" mujahedin who were nominally Islamic, received wartime aid, but did no fighting; and even former members of the Afghan communist regime. In other words, all were welcome to join the new Western-mandated Afghan government except those who wore beards, carried AK-47s, were devoted Islamists, and fought to expel the Soviets.

In the immediate post-Soviet years, then, Washington spent tens of millions of dollars to try to form exactly the same type of strong and centralized Afghan government – the type of regime that historically causes war in Afghanistan – it is trying to form today. And in a lethally ironic case of déjà vu, the father of current Afghan President Karzai – a far more honorable and competent man than his son – was one of the West's favorites, and he was guided by Zalmay Khalilzad, the same U.S. diplomat who has brought us the recent disasters in Kabul and Baghdad. In addition, the talented U.S. ambassadors Robert and Phyllis Oakley and Peter Tomsen led numbers of U.S. and UK bureaucrats, contractors, and NGOs into the country to teach Afghans the West's democratic ways, as well as how to organize and administer national budgets, establish the rule of law, and create a strong central regime. This wildly misplaced intervention went so far as to bring in teams of American lawyers and judges to teach the Afghans a Westernized judicial system to replace what we knew was all that silly old Islamic and tribal stuff.

In the end, the U.S.-led, late-1980s democracy-building intervention in Afghanistan was all for naught, just as Obama's new Afghan policy will be. The Afghans wanted no part of the secularism the U.S.-led West insisted on then, and they want none of what the U.S.-led coalition has on offer now. While the Afghans will accept medical aid for their kids, electrical generators, and tools for increasing potable water supplies, they will utterly reject and fight measures aimed at eliminating the traditional role of tribalism and Islam in their society in the name of secular democracy. Afghans, like all Muslims, make a clear distinction between the terms modernization and Westernization; they are eager for the former but will fight the latter to the death. For our future relations with the Islamic world, it is a fatal liability that we are so cocksure the two terms are synonyms.

One final point. Riedel is a senior fellow at the aggressively pro-Israel Brookings Institution. Is it just a coincidence that his very misleading article about the "need" for more and longer U.S. intervention in Afghanistan appears just a week after [Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman identified Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq as the three main threats to Israel](#)? I think not, and that is why America will either be defeated or still fighting, bleeding, and losing in Afghanistan and Iraq by Inauguration Day 2013.