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A lesson in imperial paranoia

By Juan Cole
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Despite being among the poorest people in the world, the inhabitants of the craggy northwest of what is now Pakistan have managed to throw a series of frights into distant Western capitals for more than a century. That's certainly one for the record books.

And it hasn't ended yet. Not by a long shot. Not with the headlines in the US papers about the depredations of the Pakistani Taliban, not with the Central Intelligence Agency's Predator drone aircraft striking gatherings in the Pakistani Waziristan tribal areas and elsewhere near the Afghan border. This spring, for instance, one counter-terrorism analyst stridently (and wholly implausibly) warned that "in one to six months" we could "see the collapse of the Pakistani state", at the hands of the bloodthirsty Taliban, while Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the situation in Pakistan a "mortal danger" to global security.

What most observers don't realize is that the doomsday rhetoric about this region at the top of the world is hardly new. It's at least 100 years old. During their campaigns in the northwest in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, British officers, journalists and editorialists sounded much like American strategists, analysts, and pundits of the present moment. They construed the Pashtun tribesmen who inhabited Waziristan as the new Normans, a dire menace to London that threatened to overturn the British Empire.

The young Winston S Churchill even wrote a book in 1898, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*, about a late-19th-century British campaign in Pashtun territory, based on his earlier journalism there. At that time, London ruled British India, comprising all of what is now India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, but the British hold on the mountainous northwestern region abutting Afghanistan and the Himalayas was tenuous.

In trying to puzzle out - like modern analysts - why the predecessors of the Pakistani

Taliban posed such a huge challenge to empire, Churchill singled out two reasons for the martial prowess of those Pashtun tribesmen. One was Islam, of which he wrote, "That religion, which above all others was founded and propagated by the sword - the tenets and principles of which are instinct with incentives to slaughter and which in three continents has produced fighting breeds of men - stimulates a wild and merciless fanaticism."

Churchill actually revealed his prejudices here. In fact, for the most part, Islam spread peacefully in what is now Pakistan, by the preaching and poetry of mystical Sufi leaders, and most Muslims have not been more warlike in history than, for example, Anglo-Saxons.

For his second reason, he settled on the environment in which those tribesmen were supposed to thrive. "The inhabitants of these wild but wealthy valleys" are, he explained, in "a continual state of feud and strife". In addition, he insisted, they were early adopters of military technology, so that their weapons were not as primitive as was common among other "races" at what he referred to as "their stage" of development.

"To the ferocity of the Zulu are added the craft of the Redskin and the marksmanship of the Boer," he warned.

In these tribesmen, he concluded, "the world is presented with that grim spectacle, the strength of civilization without its mercy". The Pashtun were, he added, excellent marksmen, who could fell the unwary Westerner with a state-of-the-art breech-loading rifle.

"His assailant, approaching, hacks him to death with the ferocity of a South Sea Islander. The weapons of the 19th century are in the hands of the savages of the Stone Age."

Ironically, given Churchill's description of them, when four decades later the Pashtuns joined the freedom movement against British rule that led to the formation of independent Pakistan and India in 1947, politicized Pashtuns were notable not for savagery but for joining Mahatma Gandhi's campaign of non-violent non-cooperation.

Nevertheless, the Churchillian image of primitive, fanatical brutality armed with cutting-edge technology, which singled Pashtuns out as an extraordinary peril to the West, survived the Victorian era and has now made it into the headlines of our own newspapers.

Bruce Riedel, a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst, was tasked by the Obama administration with evaluating security threats in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Arnaud de Borchgrave of the Washington Times reported breathlessly on July 17 that Riedel had concluded:
A jihadi victory in Pakistan, meaning the takeover of the nation by a militant Sunni movement led by the Taliban ... would create the greatest threat the United States has yet to face in its war on terror ... [and] is now a real possibility in the foreseeable future.
The article, in true Churchillian fashion, is entitled "Armageddon Alarm Bell Rings."

In fact, few intelligence predictions could have less chance of coming true. In the 2008

parliamentary election, the Pakistani public voted in centrist parties, some of them secular, virtually ignoring the Muslim fundamentalist parties. Today in Pakistan, there are about 24 million Pashtuns, a linguistic ethnic group that speaks Pashto. Another 13 million live across the British-drawn "Durand Line", the border - mostly unacknowledged by Pashtuns - between Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Most Taliban derive from this group, but the vast majority of Pashtuns are not Taliban and do not much care for the Muslim radicals.

The Taliban force that was handily defeated this spring by the Pakistani army in a swift campaign in the Swat Valley in the North-West Frontier Province, amounted to a mere 4,000 men. The Pakistani military is 550,000 strong and has a similar number of reservists. It has tanks, artillery, and fighter jets.

The Taliban's appeal is limited to that country's Pashtun ethnic group, about 14% of the population and, from everything we can tell, it has a minority taste even among them. The Taliban can commit terrorism and destabilize, but they cannot take over the Pakistani government.

Some Western analysts worry that the Taliban could unite with disgruntled junior officers of the Pakistani army, who could come to power in a putsch and so offer their Taliban allies access to sophisticated weaponry. Successful Pakistani coups, however, have been made by the chief of staff at the top, not by junior officers, since the military is quite disciplined. Far from coup-making to protect the Taliban, the military has actually spent the past year fighting hard against them in the Federally Administered Tribal Area of Bajaur and more recently in Swat.

Today's fantasy of a nuclear-armed Taliban is the modern equivalent of Churchill's anxiety about those all-conquering, ultramodern Pashtun riflemen with the instincts of savages.

Frontier ward and watch

On a recent research trip to the India Office archives in London, to plunge into British military memoirs of the Waziristan campaigns in the first half of the twentieth century, I was overcome by a vivid sense of deja vu. The British in India fought three wars with Afghanistan, losing the first two decisively, and barely achieving a draw in the third in 1919. Among the Afghan king Amanullah's demands during the third war were that the Pashtun tribes of the frontier be allowed to give him their fealty and that Britain permit Afghanistan to conduct a sovereign foreign policy. He lost on the first demand, but won on the second and soon signed a treaty of friendship with the newly established Soviet Union.

Disgruntled Pashtun tribes in Waziristan, a no-man's land sandwiched between the Afghan border and the formal boundary of the British-ruled North-West Frontier Province, preferred Kabul's rule to that of London, and launched their own attacks on the British, beginning in 1919. Putting down the rebellious Wazir and Mahsud tribes of this region would, in the end, cost imperial Britain's treasury three times as much as had the Third Anglo-Afghan War itself.

On May 2, 1921, long after the Pashtun tribesmen should have been pacified, the

Manchester Guardian carried a panicky news release by the British Viceroy of India on a Mahsud attack. "Enemy activity continues throughout," the alarmed message from Viceroy Rufus Isaacs, the Marquess of Reading, said, implying that a massive uprising on the subcontinent was underway. In fact, the action at that point was in only a small set of villages in one part of Waziristan, itself but one of several otherwise relatively quiet tribal areas.

On the 23rd of that month, a large band of Mahsud struck "convoys" near the village of Piazha. British losses included a British officer killed, four British and two Indian officers wounded, and seven Indian troops killed, with 26 wounded. On the 24th, "a picket [sentry outpost] near Suidgi was ambushed, and lost nine killed and seven wounded". In nearby Zhob, the British received support from friendly Pashtun tribes engaged in a feud with what they called the "hostiles", and - a modern touch - "aeroplanes" weighed in as well. They were, it was said, "cooperating", though this too was an exaggeration.

At the time, the Royal Air Force (RAF) was eager to prove its colonial worth on the imperial frontiers in ways that extended beyond simple reconnaissance, even though in 1921 it maintained but a single airplane at Peshawar, the nearest city, which had "a hole in its wing". By 1925, the RAF had gotten its wish and would drop 150 tons of bombs on the Mahsud tribe.

On July 5, 1921, a newspaper report in the Allahabad Pioneer gives a sense of the tactics the British deployed against the "hostiles". One center of rebellion was the village of Makin, inhabited by that same Mahsud tribe, which apparently wanted its own irrigation system and freedom from British interference. The British Indian army held the nearby village of Ladka. "Makin was shelled from Ladka on the 20th June," the report ran.

The tribal fighters responded by beginning to move their flocks, though their families remained. British archival sources report that a Muslim holy man, or faqir, attempted to give the people of Makin hope by laying a spell on the 6-inch howitzer shells and pledging that they would no longer explode in the valley. (Overblown imperial anxiety about such faqirs or akhonds, Pashtun religious leaders, inspired Victorian satirists such as Edward Lear, who began one poem, "Who, or why, or which, or what, Is the Akond of Swat?")

The faqir's spells were to no avail. The shelling, the Pioneer reported, continued over the next two days, "with good results". Then on the 23rd, "another bombardment of Makin was carried out by our 6-inch howitzers at Ladka". This shelling "had a great moral effect", the newspaper intoned, and revealed with satisfaction that "the inhabitants are now evacuating their families". The particular nature of the moral effect of bombarding a civilian village where women and children were known to be present was not explained. Two days later, however, thanks to air observation, the howitzers at Ladka and the guns at "Piazha camp" made a "direct hit" on another similarly obscure village.

Such accounts of small, vicious engagements in mountainous villages with (to British ears) outlandish names, fit oddly with the strange conviction of the elite and the press that the

fate of the empire was somehow at stake - just as strangely as similar reports out of exactly the same area, often involving the very same tribes, do in our own time.

On July 7, 2009, for instance, the Pakistani newspaper The Nation published a typical daily report on the Swat valley campaign which might have come right out of the early 20th century. Keep in mind that this was a campaign into which the Barack Obama administration forced the Pakistani government into to save itself and the American position in the Greater Middle East, which displaced some two million people, risking the actual destabilization of the whole northwestern region of Pakistan. It went in part:
[T]he security forces during search operation at Banjut, Swat, recovered 50 mules loaded with arms and ammunition, medicines and ration and also apprehended a few terrorists. During search operation at Thana, an improvised explosive device (IED) went off causing injuries to a soldier. As a result of operation at Tahirabad, Mingora, the security forces recovered surgical equipment, nine hand grenades and office furniture from the house of a militant.
The unfamiliar place names, the attention to confiscated mules, and the fear of tribal militancy differed little from the reports in the Pioneer from nearly a century before. Echoing Viceroy Rufus Isaacs, secretary of state Clinton said on July 14, "Our national security as well as the future of Afghanistan depends on a stable, democratic, and economically viable Pakistan. We applaud the new Pakistani determination to deal with the militants who threaten their democracy and our shared security."

As in 1921, so in 2009, the skirmishes were ignored by the general public in the West despite the frenzied assertions of politicians that the fate of the world hung in the balance.

A paranoid view of the Pashtuns
On July 21, 1921, a "correspondent" for the Allahabad Pioneer - as anonymous as he was vehement - explained how some firefights in Waziristan might indeed have consequences for Western civilization. He attacked "Irresponsible Criticism" of the military budget required to face down the Mahsud tribe. He asked, "What is India's strategical position in the world today?" It was a leading question. "Along hundreds of miles of her border," he warned darkly in a mammoth run-on sentence, "are scores of thousands of hardy fighters trained to war and rapine from their very birth, never for an instant forgetful of the soft wealth of India's plains, all of whom would descend to harry them tomorrow if they thought the venture safe, some of whom are determinedly at war with us even now."

Note that he does not explain the challenge posed by the Pashtun tribes in terms of typical military considerations, which would require attention to the exact numbers, training, equipment, tactics and logistics of the fighters, and which would have revealed them as no significant threat to the Indian plains, however hard they were to control in their own territory. The "correspondent" instead ridicules urban "pen-pushers," who little appreciate the "heavy task" of "frontier ward and watch".

Not only were the tribes a danger in themselves, the hawkish correspondent intoned, but "beyond India's border lies a great country [Afghanistan] with whom we are not even yet technically at peace." Nor was that all. The recently-established Soviet Union, with which

Afghanistan had concluded a treaty of friendship that February, loomed as the real threat behind the radical Pashtuns. "Beyond that again is a huge mad-dog nation that acknowledges no right save the sword, no creed save aggression, murder and loot, that will stay at nothing to gain its end, that covets avowedly a descent upon India above all other aims."

That then-Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, who took an extremely dim view of colonialism and seriously considered freeing the Central Asian possessions of the old tsarist empire, was then contemplating the rape of India is among the least believable calumnies in imperial propaganda. The "correspondent" would have none of it. Those, he concludes, who dare criticize the military budget should try sweet-talking the Mahsud, the Wazir and the Bolsheviks.

In our own day as well, pundits configure the uncontrolled Pashtuns as merely the tip of a geostrategic iceberg, with the sinister icy menace of al-Qaeda stretching beneath, and beyond that greater challenges to the US such as Iran - incredibly, sometimes charged by the US military with supporting the hyper-Sunni, Shiite-hating Taliban in Afghanistan. (See US revives talk of Iran-Taliban ties, Asia Times Online, July 7). Occasionally in this decade, attempts have even been made to tie the Russian bear once again to the Pashtun tribes.

In the case of the British Empire, whatever the imperial fears, the actual cost in lives and expenditure of campaigning in the Hindu Kush mountain range was enough to ensure that such engagements would be of relatively limited duration. On October 26, 1921, the Pioneer reported that the British government of India had determined to implement a new system in Waziristan, dependent on tribal mercenaries.

"This system, which was so successfully inaugurated in the Khyber district last year," the article explained, "is really an adaptation of the methods in vogue 40 years ago". The tribal commander provided his own weapons and equipment, and for a fee, protected imperial lines of communication and provided security on the roads. "Thus he has an interest in maintaining the tranquility of his territory, and gives support to the more stable elements among the tribes when the hotheads are apt to run amok." The system would be adopted, the article says, to put an end to the ruinous costs of "punitive expeditions of merely ephemeral pacificatory value".

Absent-minded empire keeps re-inventing the local tribal levy, loyal to foreign capitals and paid by them, as a way of keeping the hostiles in check. The US Council on Foreign Relations reported late last year that "US military commanders are studying the feasibility of recruiting Afghan tribesmen ... to target Taliban and al-Qaeda elements".

Taking a page from the so-called "Sunni Awakening" in Iraq, which turned Sunni tribesmen against militants first in Anbar Province and then beyond, the strategic about-face in Afghanistan would seek to extend power from Kabul to the country's myriad tribal militias. Likewise, the Pakistani government has attempted to deploy tribal fighters against the Taliban in the Federally Administered areas such as Bajaur. It remains to be seen

whether this strategy can succeed.

Both in the era between the two world wars and again in the early 21st century, the Pashtun peoples have been objects of anxiety in world capitals out of all proportion to the security challenge they actually pose. As it turned out, the real threat to the British Isles in the 20th century emanated from one of what Churchill called their "civilized" European neighbors. Nothing the British tried in the North-West Frontier and its hinterland actually worked. By the 1940s the British hold on the tribal agencies and frontier regions was shakier than ever before, and the tribes more assertive. After the British were forced out of the subcontinent in 1947, London's anxieties about the Pashtuns and their world-changing potential abruptly evaporated.

Today, we are again hearing that the Waziris and the Mahsuds are dire threats to Western civilization. The tribal struggle for control of obscure villages in the foothills of the Himalayas is being depicted as a life-and-death matter for the North Atlantic world. Again, there is aerial surveillance, bombing, artillery fire, and - this time - displacement of civilians on a scale no British viceroy ever contemplated.

In 1921, vague threats to the British Empire from a small, weak principality of Afghanistan and a nascent, if still supine, Soviet Union underpinned a paranoid view of the Pashtuns. Today, the supposed entanglement with al-Qaeda of those Pashtuns termed "Taliban" by US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) officials - or even with Iran or Russia - has focused Washington's and Brussels' military and intelligence efforts on the highland villagers once again.

Few of the Pashtuns in question, even the rebellious ones, are really Taliban in the sense of militant seminary students; few so-called Taliban are entwined with what little is left of al-Qaeda in the region; and Iran and Russia are not, of course, actually supporting the latter. There may be plausible reasons for which the US and NATO wish to spend blood and treasure in an attempt to forcibly shape the politics of the 38 million Pashtuns on either side of the Durand Line in the 21st century. That they form a dire menace to the security of the North Atlantic world is not one of them.