



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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First Anglo-Afghan War: Why are Empires Buried in Afghanistan?

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Hubris hates history and the latter keeps thus getting an opportunity to repeat itself. Nowhere is this as true as the killing fields of Afghanistan. The sad saga of First Anglo-Afghan War shows how lives of so many were lost in the merciless gorges and blood-thirsty passes between Kabul and Jalalabad, mainly because of the strategic blunders, outright dishonesty and unforgivable chicanery of a few. The story of this war also reveals that, more than the fierce Afghan or his treacherous terrain, the inept and indecisive leadership of the empire was to blame for getting buried in Afghanistan and helping that land become the 'graveyard of empires'.

Some trivia to start with. The war lasted from 1839 to 1842. Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, a Durrani Pashtun, was the legitimate King of Afghanistan before being ousted by the Anglo-Indian army of occupation. The name of the puppet installed by the British was Shah Shuja – a man expelled in disgrace years before the war and someone who could never hope to step beyond Khyber Pass without foreign assistance.

As seemingly ear-less wise men continue to blunder in that unfortunate land, here are some echoes from the past. Instead of counting the trees, I have focused on the big picture to see how a war that happened 170 years ago could shed some light on the one being fought today.

Flimsy Pretexts: Afghanistan was declared at fault for nothing. Most of the reasons for this gory tale resided less in real threats and more in imperial hubris, client betrayals and a zero-sum rivalry (shamelessly dubbed as the Great Game) between Russia and the British Indian Empire. While historians may differ on details, nobody can possibly question the fact that what was done through a costly military campaign could easily have been accomplished through money and deft diplomacy. British interests at stake were surely not significant enough to justify loss of thousands of lives. True that the Russian influence was growing in Kabul and a joint Russo-Persian attempt to absorb Herat, then an autonomous principality along Iran-Afghanistan border, was afoot. However, before the offensive force even completed its initial assembly, Persians withdrew from Herat and deprived the British of the sole quasi-legitimate cause to invade Afghanistan. Thereafter, the campaign was nothing but an act of wanton aggression and a costly attempt at regime change.

Level of Involvement: Knee-deep or Neck-deep: After the fateful decision to fight for a motive as sordid as the return of disgraced Shah Shuja, then hiding in Indian Punjab, saner voices prevailed and a decision was made to provide only a limited number of officers and advisers to

Shah Shuja and ask him to do the rest. However, these voices of reason were soon drowned by war hysteria and Lord Auckland made the unfortunate choice of mobilizing a large Anglo-Indian Force and putting it under the banner of incompetent Shah Shuja. Thousands of Anglo-Indian soldiers were thus pushed into the valleys of death beyond Khyber Pass to help a man hated by his own people.

Mistaking the Ways: Since the desired objective was to contain Russian influence and preserve and promote British interests in Afghanistan, many believed that the best and the most obvious way to get there was through building partnership with the existing (legitimate, fairly popular and effective) government under Amir Dost Muhammad Khan. However, blinded perhaps by the arrogance of power, British authorities in India decided to insult Afghan sense of honor by installing a stooge and then fighting a losing war on behalf, and increasingly on behest, of that worthless creature. Resultantly the standing and credibility of British efforts was reduced to being only as good as their man in Kabul.

Mismanaging the Means: Initially, two divisions were assembled for the expedition. However, as the Iranians withdrew from Herat, the resources were worn down to just one, relatively under-equipped division. In a land that was soon to prove endless, this force was stretched thin and was ultimately overwhelmed by surging hordes of Afghan national resistance.

Choosing Wrong Friends: In favor of a loathed and defeated Shah Shuja, the incumbent Amir Dost Muhammad Khan was demonized and deceitfully portrayed as a ‘vermin’ whose very existence was pernicious to British interests in Afghanistan. The campaign was based on lies and delusions as the Amir was in fact widely regarded as an effective and astute ruler who had been generally amenable towards British interests. Willful mischaracterization and vilification of this noble man were soon to come back to haunt the leaders of British India. Just a few years down the lane, British would find themselves honorably escorting Dost Muhammad and negotiating with his son for a safe passage back to colonial India.

No Garlands for the Invaders and the Traitors: History proved once again that no honorable people would ever welcome an occupation army or installation of a pawn who lacked guts to fight it out for himself. The same happened to the disgraced Shah Shuja and Anglo-Indian host marching under his banner. As the ‘kangaroo king’ reviewed his victory parade, the streets of Kabul were deserted and people angrily peered through their windows and watched indifferently from roadside hills. People’s apathy was soon to turn into anger and anger into a fire that engulfed the whole length and breadth of that country.

The Issue of End State and Mission Creep: The expedition was originally aimed at achieving two objectives: first, quash Russo-Persian attempts to capture Herat and, second, install Shah Shuja as a puppet in Kabul with the mandate to guard British imperial interests. First objective was achieved even before the first Anglo-Indian soldier stepped into Afghanistan. What was left was apparently brief. However, as time went by, the mission got revised to ‘staying the course until the new regime was stable enough to stand on its own feet and fight off threats to its survival’. The expeditionary force established sprawling garrisons in Kabul and Jalalabad. British civil-military commanders assumed the role of quasi-rulers of Afghanistan as forces brought up their families, and helped Shah Shuja’s thugs in policing Afghan towns and extorting

taxes and bribes from the masses. As history has proved over and over again, the day of a 'stable puppet' never dawns and it never dawned on Shah Shuja's Afghanistan. The Anglo-Indian force stayed on as the guarantors of the corrupt, decrepit and unpopular king. The mission ended only when the entire occupation force, except one man who was allowed to creep back across Khyber to tell the tale, had been mowed down by Afghan resistance.

Focus on Kabul: Majority of the British Indian contingent chose to garrison in Kabul where British Envoy mostly bunkered his imperial highness. Although some military and intelligence presence was maintained at a couple of other important population centers also, most of the resources, time and effort were invested at the top. Operations were launched only to suppress opposition to the corrupt King and his venal officials. The entire effort gradually degenerated into a campaign that looked more like a selective firefighting instead of a coherent drive to expand and consolidate the writ of the regime through winning over or buying the loyalty of tribal chiefs and their followers.

The Missing Civilian Compliment: The official designated as 'Envoy and Minister on the part of the Government of India at the Court of Shah Shuja' was one of the chief proponents of the entire misadventure. Bright and enterprising in the dealings of East-India Company, this gentleman was thoroughly incompetent and inexperienced in the affairs of a state as crippled and complex as Afghanistan. More importantly, he lacked the support of required number of able civilian staff and advisers who could help him run the affairs of the state. Resultantly, most of the so-called state building or even day-to-day governance was left to the soldiers of the queen.

The Incoherent Rumble of Afghan Resistance: As in all other Afghan struggles against unpopular rulers in Kabul or foreign forces before or since, the popular resistance against British presence started as a million venomous droplets spread across Afghanistan in general and in Pashtun regions in particular. Over time, indifference grew into hatred and hatred into whispers and whispers into war cries and hundreds of war cries collected into a tribal lashkar and tens of tribal lashkars started praying at British interests wherever they found them. Soon these tribal lashkars gelled into a national struggle under the banner of a son of the ousted King. While the storm was gathering, the British civil-military leadership in Kabul kept dismissing the threat as 'insignificant' and 'despicably disorganized'. The insurgents never tried to win any battles and yet they went on chipping away at the will of the occupiers. They never tried to take over the capital city even when, at least on one occasion, they plundered the British garrison inside Kabul with complete impunity. Such was the psychological impact of this omnipresent threat that, without any battle, the British leadership chose to negotiate a most humiliating, and ultimately catastrophic, pull out from that country.

Post Script: War ended in a disaster for the British. Soon thereafter, King Dost Muhammad Khan was back in Kabul and Shah Shuja was shamed to oblivion. The verdict of history is clear: take a pause and listen before it is too late.

Views expressed in this article are author's own and do not represent his parent organization, Pakistan Army, or his current establishment, Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth. The author is thankful for an overwhelmingly positive response to his earlier article published in Small Wars Journal.

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