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R.I.P. Mr. Charles Wilson, Father of the Taliban

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“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” This proverb which has become a mainstay of foreign policy courses of action has, in fact, pushed the United States to make horrifically misguided and ignorant decisions about how to view challenges across the globe and the ways and means used to confront them. With this proverb in mind, and often with the best of intentions in tow, organs of U.S. national security have walked blindly into situations where our own ignorance became the single most crippling factor to long term success of a program. In turn, this has allowed U.S. strategy to be high jacked by naïve and/or stunningly blinded officials and officers entrusted with defense of our nation. One such official was the Honorable Charles N. Wilson of Texas. His fervent and black and white view of a problem led him to get into bed with a culture, a paradigm, and a mission which had positively no bearing on our national security. Unknowingly, he coupled U.S. foreign policy with a growing and insatiable malevolent influence in the region, and still today, 30 years later, we cannot extricate ourselves from it. The poison he and idealists such as him injected into the veins of our foreign policy runs that deep.

This essay is not simply an interpretation of history to condemn the legacy of a politician. To be sure, the causal events were not Mr. Wilson’s doing alone. Two presidencies and a heavy involvement of a handful of CIA officers (who, since rising up the political ladder, are now responsible for current DoD policy) agreed with Mr. Wilson’s call to arms and orchestrated and funded his goals. Mr. Wilson has a laudable history of altruistic domestic policies and exertions. Unfortunately, they are not the endowment he will be remembered for. The overriding goal here is to provide a warning for future Strategists. Solutions to wicked problems must be found from within the entire environment of systems and their context in time. Mr. Wilson’s solution was, unfortunately, the easy way out which made no effort to consider second- and third-order effects. No realistic appreciation was given to what system we were injecting ourselves into. Finally, this essay is also a condemnation of proxy wars. In the author’s view, it is foreign policy cowardice. Using unwitting “means” as the ways to our ends is abhorrent. Abhorrent even when, on the surface, it seems like a noble cause or that the goals of the puppet are temporarily the same as the master. It is as detestable when the Iranians share shaped-charge technology with Arab insurgents to murder Americans as it was to get Afghan mujahedeen to our geopolitical dirty work.

Mr. Wilson, to be sure, was not the first to use, as a tool, a foreign body as a host to carry our *democratic antibody* to the Communists. But it is he who singled out a loose band of Afghan

mujahedeen under Islamist hardliners as the standard-bearers of this policy. If any one man can be held responsible for the birth of the Taliban and the shambles that is today the quasi-state of Afghanistan, it is Mr. Wilson and his like-minded cohorts then in Congress and the CIA. That we as a nation are there again, almost 10 years since 9/11, owes solely to that old and tired policy and the ghost of Mr. Wilson's idealism still haunting the halls of the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom.

His formative adult years were molded in the U.S. Navy surface fleet, which, along with the rest of the DoD and nation beginning in the 1950's were singularly focused on the Soviet bear and its expansion. Later, as an elected official in Congress and the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, he further refined his ability to wage war on the spread of Communism. The manner in which Mr. Wilson chose to constrict and drive back the Soviets was wars by proxy. In a time when direct military confrontation with the Soviets was unthinkable, Mr. Wilson and similarly-minded defense and security officials determined that whoever around the world might be or become enemies of the Soviets must then become our friends. And not friends in name only, but friends we would fund and equip and urge to do our fighting for us. The policy of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" took firm hold in the mountains of Afghanistan in 1980 when Mr. Wilson made it his personal mission to enable the Afghan mujahedeen to fight off the invading Soviet troops. While superficially, this may seem like a noble gesture (he had seen for himself the horrors of war inflicted on the Afghan civilians by the heavy hand of the Red Army) and possibly even a militarily prudent one given our fears of nuclear escalation, in the case of Afghanistan, it unnecessarily birthed a much more serious monster than a Soviet invasion of a far-off and strategically negligible place on a map ever could.

There is no doubt that the U.S. won the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. However much as we might like to pat ourselves on the back for the rightfulness of our cause or the morality of our actions, we actually did take the easy way out; we decided that the ends justified the means and we would use whoever was necessary, on a global scale, to achieve those results. We would find the stooges to fight for us in the name of 'democracy.' That, however, is not the worst of it; the sad fact is that we had a much nobler blueprint in hand though we chose not use it. We had the ways and means that were suitable, feasible, and acceptable, although we ended up choosing means that were the converse of all three; if not, why then were they funded under the cover of black appropriations? Simply to hide from the American people what was being done in their name and with whom we had gotten into bed. Idealists such as Wilson could not let the uneasy truth be known that that we spend economic, military, and political capital on solutions that entwine us with such monsters as Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire, Somoza in Nicaragua, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, or eventually a band of religious atavists in Afghanistan.

The blueprint mentioned above was NSC-68, penned in theory by George Kennan in the Long Telegram and implemented by Paul Nitze in policy. Echoing Shoeless Joe in the movie Field of Dreams, Nitze described a "Build it and they will come" strategy; America maintains its most credible influence and intrinsic power when it acknowledges and reinforces the "strength and appeal of its idea, and feels no compulsion sooner or later to bring all societies into conformity with it." Proxy wars such as those which Mr. Wilson and the CIA enabled in 1979 and even what we are doing today in Afghanistan is directly contrary to this advice. Furthermore, Nitze says

that only by leveraging the “moral and material strength of the free world” and “building a successfully functioning political and economic system” can we defeat the threat. In other words, only by ensuring our own house is in order and living up to the ideals which first made us a great nation can we “truly frustrate” the designs of our enemies, be they the Taliban or al-Qaeda of today or the Soviets of yesterday. Only then can we convince authoritarian regimes and the disenfranchised groups who become insurgents of the “falsity of [their] assumptions.”

But this is not the path Mr. Wilson chose. He convinced our policymakers to take the direct military route, even if the direct route meant by proxy. We chose to mistranslate and misimplement NSC-68 and pull it from its political and economic roots to transform it into a military foreign policy. This was used to justify our kinetic fight with Russians (*by, with, and through* other host nations nonetheless) to contain communism. We used it to start or expand “dirty little wars” conducted on the periphery of documented grand strategy to achieve an assumed cheaper and quicker fix. However, reality tells a very different story with a vastly different ending. Mr. Wilson, as much as he derided our lack of follow-through and commitment to what he started in Afghanistan leading to its collapse in 1991, did not see that it was he and his fervor to contain the Soviets that actually began the long slide to those very events and, in the view of the author, 11 September 2001 itself.

The facts about pre- and post Marxist Afghanistan are not in question. Corruption and the poor economic policies of the ruling monarchy led to the 1973 coup orchestrated by the King’s cousin and serving Prime Minister, Mohammad Daoud Khan. Due to the unpopularity and heavy-handedness of his reforms, he, too, was overthrown and murdered in 1978, leading to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) run by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan with support of the Afghan National Army. This self-proclaimed Marxist government eventually needed foreign support to quell Islamic insurgents who could not accept further progressive reforms initiated under the DRA. Jamiat-e Islami under Ahmed Shah Massoud led the revolution and the DRA, unable to respond alone, eventually requested the full intervention of the Soviet government. Due to a 1978 treaty after almost 60 years of informal and unconsolidated military and economic support to Afghanistan, Moscow felt obliged to intervene.

Enter U.S. naïveté. The U.S., as early as 1978, 6 months prior to the Soviet intervention, veritably induced the Russian intervention. The intent was, as President Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski stated, to give the Russian’s their Viet Nam war. Only by using the Afghans and neighboring Pakistan as tools in the larger U.S. strategy, we flooded arms and money into both countries with goals and agendas very different from our own. We, however, chose not to ask the hard questions, chose not to scratch below the surface, and chose to assume the enemies of our enemy were our friends. As such, we directly entered into talks with Islamist insurgent leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, enabling not only a growing fundamental Islamic jihad in Afghanistan, but also enabling the equally destabilizing regime of President (Gen.) Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and his double-faced ISI in Pakistan. Without Representative Wilson and like-minded officials in the CIA, it is not difficult to imagine the events of 9/11 would not have occurred; Afghanistan could very possibly have remained a local issue with the Russians securing and stabilizing the sitting DRA regime. Although not ‘democratic’ in Western eyes, stability could have returned nonetheless and a nascent Islamic fundamentalist movement might have been quashed from the beginning. That is, without the work of Mr. Wilson.

But this was not to be. Through the urging of Mr. Wilson, the U.S. provided Stinger MANPADS, small arms, propaganda services, and even F-16s to Pakistan in addition to billions of dollars more in aid to the Zia regime. The only thing conceivably worse than military hardware was the money spent (costs shared between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia) to fund madrassas and foster religious fanaticism to coalesce the jihad to fight the Soviets. Besides the U.S. training which took place in NY and Virginia, the ISI was sanctioned to use the Pakistani-based Jamiat ul-Ulema-e Islam Wahhabi-Deobandi fundamentalist group to build madrassas and jihad-related organizations. These “terror outfits” were organized solely to assist in the fight with the Russians and served to create a fanatically religious indoctrination for thousands of regional Muslims after 1979. This only accomplished one thing however. It laid the groundwork for a group like the Taliban to come to power.

This history precluded Afghanistan from remaining a strategic backwater. Because of the groundwork Mr. Wilson laid, events took place which required, as President Obama stated in his 1 December 2009 West Point speech, Afghanistan to become our “strategic partner.” Charlie Wilson would be proud. He would be proud on one hand, but on the other would say that the eventual collapse of Afghanistan once the Russians left and even the events of 9/11, happened solely because we failed to politically carry through our support of the insurgent resistance to the DRA and Soviet forces. In actuality, it is *because* of Charlie Wilson and the CIA’s intervention in Afghan affairs to begin with that the future took the course it did. Not only did we directly arm and train Afghan insurgents on how to perform acts of terror and assassination against Soviet and DRA forces, we coordinated support from across the Persian Gulf states to ensure the mujahedeen were successful against Soviet forces. Our intervention only further entrenched the age-old culture among the ranks of Afghan atavists of fighting against all things progressive, distrusting all things foreign, fighting off any and all foreign intervention or support, from wherever it comes. By coordinating a response from other Muslim states, we re-birthed and solidified the false understanding that the ‘umma’ can again be an effective tool to combat non-Muslim forces and that jihad is the way to secure their ends. Our enabling the mujahedeen mainstreamed this effect and created the various groups who would fight and kill for power once the Soviets threw in the towel. Only the secondary effect of this strategy was the successful pushing back of the Soviet invasion. The primary effect, however, was the regional acceptance of the reborn mujahid movement and rise of one former Saudi fighter, Osama bin Laden and others like him, to fight off a newly perceived threat, the U.S. The fuse was lit.

We created the very monster we now fight in the provinces of Afghanistan and failingly get the Pakistani’s to half-heartedly fight on our behalf on their side of the Durand Line. Because Mr. Wilson and his CIA brethren could not even begin to conceive of the complexities and nuances of Afghan culture, power bases, and politics, he doomed his own effort to failure. He further doomed the U.S. to remain mired in Central Asia long after the “Great Game” has ended. We have the benefit of hindsight, however, yet we continue to make the same mistake. What Mr. Wilson and his idealistic foreign policy has brought us is 9 years of a U.S. war in Afghanistan long after OEF should have ended, a terrorist-producing intelligence service in Pakistan, and a regional assumption that jihad is an effective and sanctioned method to combat U.S. forces and goals. If anything gave rise to the mainstreaming of “jihad” and the political and military coalescing of groups like the Taliban *and* al-Qaeda, it is the policy of the ‘enemy of my enemy is

my friend' and the unfortunately effective results of Mr. Wilson's actions. It is in play as much now by supporting the Kabul regime to partner with and transform the Taliban to fight al-Qaeda as it was in supporting the mujahedeen against the Soviets and DRA thirty years ago. This should not be surprising given the key CIA officials who orchestrated Operation Cyclone in 1979 are the same ones who, now in the DoD, drive policy for Operation Enduring Freedom.

To be sure, Charlie Wilson did not *directly* devise a plan with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar or Ahmad Shah Massoud to literally create the Afghani Taliban. It was our naïveté and shortsightedness, however, which allowed the personal mission of a Texas bureaucrat aided by the CIA to get into bed with the likes of Islamic hardliners and General Zia and his ISI. Today's Taliban movement (both in Pakistan and Afghanistan) is the evolution of those agreements, funds, arms, and training. Why? Because the \$4 billion in aid under Operation Cyclone to the Zia regime largely funded the expansion of the ISI to directly aid the Afghan mujahedeen to fight the Soviets. We, with the help of the ISI, reinvigorated the idea that lesser jihad was a valid political tool to fend off the Russians. By further coordinating the assistance (in terms of money and personnel; the "Afghan Arabs") of Saudi Arabia and other Arab states, we only served to mainstream that idea. The result of this is that trained and armed men who were secure in the 'right of their might' then turned on Pakistan and eventually the U.S. Since the ISI organized and fielded the Wazir and Mehsud groups (which became the Lashkar-i-Taiba) to fight India in Kashmir back in 1947 and eventually trained, organized, and equipped the Afghan mujahedeen across the border (with our assistance, primarily through the efforts of Mr. Wilson), there had been a coordinated effort to use insurgent groups as a tool of foreign policy. While we conducted our own proxy war, so did Pakistan for its own reasons. Therefore, the work of Mr. Wilson directly created a host of funded, trained, and equipped men with no job after the Soviets left in '89. What's worse, we had pulled in the support of zealots and criminals like Hekmatyar and virtually begged the likes of Osama bin Laden to get involved by selling it as a jihad against the Russians. What did we think *would* happen when a well-armed and trained group of insurgents would get together to drive out the Russians under an umbrella of religious righteousness we helped open? At best, we could have hoped for an Islamic theocracy a-la Iran. At worst, we could expect an even harder-line group than the mujahedeen to gain control among the various and disorganized warlords to fight on for a further 6 years of civil war. Through our intervention championed by Charles Wilson we veritably created a Darwinian experiment in survival of the most fit and most hardcore of mujahedeen groups to gain control of a newly independent Afghanistan. That group became today's Afghan Taliban.

It is long past the time to put this tired political theory to rest and the notion that Charles Wilson ever did anything beneficial for U.S. foreign policy. He was a champion of great causes such as civil and equal rights, Medicaid, and minimum wage issues, and other progressive domestic ideals. At foreign policy, however, his legacy remains that of a 30 year Afghan civil war, the Taliban, and a misguided U.S. strategy of intervention. It is time U.S. foreign policy took a more realistic view of the world and stop assuming political necessity must yield strange bedfellows. This would enable our military to get back into the business of protecting our nation from existential threats to our security and winning our nation's wars; not waste blood and treasure in misadventures in nation building or securing non vital national interests. Finally, it is interesting to note that the reason the Soviets intervened militarily in Afghanistan in 1979 is the exact same reason we are intervening now: to secure the sitting government from Islamic insurgents. The

high irony is that those same insurgents are now using the ways and means we doctrinally and militarily provided to them in the form of tactics and hardware to fight the Soviets against us in 2010.

The history of Charlie Wilson should serve as a warning against ever using "the enemy of my enemy..." 'theory' of foreign relations ever again. It is never so simple and clear cut; it is the Strategist's easy way out which only serves to create more long-term problems than it seems to solve in the near-term. Good intentions and a benevolent domestic agenda aside, thank you Mr. Wilson. Rest in peace, indeed.

The opinions and views expressed in this article are those of the author and are presented in his personal capacity. They do not necessarily represent the views of U.S. Department of Defense or any of its agencies.

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