

War and Peace

WESTERN MORNING NEWS : Sept 2001 (longer version)

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It doesn't take a genius or a Russian novelist to tell us that something strange is afoot. Yet the beginnings of the present Middle Eastern rumblings are to be seen not in the last decade but in the last few hundred years. Remember the Crusades when muscular evangelical Christianity pitched itself time and time again against Islam? Imagine wearing suits of armour and chain mail in the heat of the day. You can still see the Crusader fortresses in Southern Turkey, Cyprus and Syria.

But the Arab world gave us many things, not least the concept of zero, something which had been lacking in medieval mathematics, without which the binary language of modern computing would be impossible. It gave us many abstract ideas and patterns much of which filtered through Spain in the time of the Moors.

The battle ground between the two religions has always been shifting, but the west has never fully acknowledged its debt to Islam particularly in the world of Art. Where would we be without the kelim patterns or the carpet designs, or the architecture of the Alhambra? What would William Morris have done? Trade of goods and ideas is sometimes more potent than war itself.

My own alarm bells rang earlier on this year when the Taliban started hammering away at the Great Buddhist statue in Bamian with artillery, explosives and manual workers. For me this was a terrible moment, because it underlined the ruthlessness of the message which was coming out of Afghanistan. The Great Buddha was 175 ft high and would, in its heyday, have been brightly coloured and its face covered in gold leaf. Like many of the early Buddhist carved statues it combined the best of the Greek sculpture with the Indian tradition. It represented an extraordinary meeting of minds and cultures. For it to have survived 1400 years and then to be destroyed piecemeal was an indignity, particularly when you consider the message which it conveyed. Many of the Buddhist caves and other statues were much older and dated from the time of Kanishka, a Kushana King in the 1st century AD who had his capital at Peshawar. He encouraged a great flowering of Buddhist art called the school of Gandhara. His kingdom spread across a fair slice of Central Asia including what is now Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Ladakh. The Buddha symbolised not just peace, but the mind at peace with itself. Meditation rather than the edicts of guerrilla tactics. Annihilation of the self. Emptiness, not suicide bombings.

Of course those Buddhas had been defaced before but somehow destroying them completely, despite international appeals, was a point of no return. Then again during the Russian-Afghan war in the 1980's when the Russian artillery used the wonderful inlaid turquoise tiled Minarets of the Friday Mosque in Herat for target practice, did we complain? A mosque which had been re-built in 1498 after the attentions of none other than Ghengis Khan. Symbolically, zero tolerance for religious icons is taken by some as an act of war. An indicator of what was to come.

Two other events alarmed me. One was the unprovoked machine gunning of four Buddhist monks in Ladakh last summer by Islamic militants and the other was the blowing up of Ahmad Shah Mahsood, the rebel leader holding out against the Taliban in north-eastern Afghanistan. His attackers were Arabs posing as news cameramen who were blown up by their own bomb concealed in the camera. News of this second attack only came on the morning of the terrorist attack in New York. Was this the first card dealt from the pack? History is much more complex than we at first imagine. Was it not America which went to war with Iraq on behalf of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait against Iraq? and yet bin Laden is from a respectable Saudi Family.

Where does Russia fit in? The Russians would have done well to have read a little more about obscure British military history on the North West frontier before invading Afghanistan. The First Afghan War of 1842 was precipitated by the murder of the British Envoy in Kabul. Many disasters followed including the defeat of a British force retreating to Jellalabad. Everyone was wiped out and the Afghans left the only surviving officer, Dr Brydon, to ride back towards Peshawar to tell of their defeat. Yet another cataclysmic disaster that was turned into an immortalised Victorian heroic

moment. Just think of the sinking of the troopship 'Birkenhead' or 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'; The British in 1842 were also fighting a war with China enforcing the iniquitous but very lucrative opium trade on China; Much of the recent resistance to the Russians in the 1980's was financed by the CIA and the export of opium from Afghanistan, and in a curious reversal by China itself who sent in special rocket batteries.

The British learnt their lesson and didn't return to Afghanistan in force until 1878 when the Amir of Afghanistan signed a treaty with Russia, giving Russia guardianship of himself and his country. A year later the British resident in Kabul was murdered, an act which provoked an ultimatum and finally an invasion. The Great Game in earnest. And yet the Great Game was won not on the battlefields but on the secret maps which proved decisively that no large scale force could possibly cross over the terrain of Afghanistan, at least not without great difficulty and much warning. The Third Afghan war was fought in 1919 with the aid of the Royal Air Force who bombed villages and tribesmen as they later did in Northern Iraq and gave Saddam Hussein a few ideas; It was Churchill who in a secret memo to Chief of Air Staff, Sir Hugh Trenchard in 1920 explored the possibility of using asphyxiating gas as a way of controlling rebellious tribesmen.

Rumblings on the North West Frontier carried on until 1935. Usually warnings were given and the day before a raid they would drop leaflets advising the tribesmen to move their goats, women and children out of the village. On the other hand, in case they were shot down, had mechanical failure or ran out of fuel, aircrew in The Royal Air Force were issued with 'Ghoolie chits' which were written in Urdu and Pashtu. These 'chits' were to be shown to North West frontier tribesmen and they said that the British Government promised them a large bag of gold coin if they returned the airmen to safety without cutting off their testicles. A known Frontier habit. It relied somewhat on the literacy, goodwill and financial acumen of the tribesmen whose villages were being bombed from the air. The dangers on the ground were obvious as Kipling had pointed out in the 19th century.

'When you're wounded and lying on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut up what remains,
Roll to your rifle and blow out your brains
And go to your Gawd like a soldier.'

No airman would ever fly without a 'ghoolie chit'. Maybe the Pentagon is xeroxing such chits at this moment for its special forces. You never know when they may come in handy. The ball is in their court so to speak.

But to return to the structure of the Middle East as we know it today, much of it was determined at the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris and in Cairo in 1921. Lawrence of Arabia, who had been duped by the British and French diplomats with the 'Sykes-Picot' agreement of 1917, said that the real problems would be with their grandchildren. How right he was. The 'Sykes & Picot' treaty effectively carved the Middle East between Britain and France without giving any land to Feisal, whose men had been blowing up Turkish trains and raiding remote garrisons on Allenby's behalf. The French got Damascus and Syria, while Britain looked favourably on the Zionist cause. Ironically the first moves for Zionism were made from Berlin to Turkey in 1914. Feisal was eventually 'elected' King of Iraq after the opposition leader was kidnapped by the British. Abdullah was given Trans Jordan, but the old and stubborn King Hussein would not recognise the Treaties. Jordan was simply pencilled in on the map. Palestine was a time bomb waiting to go off.

The British and French had also tried to carve up Turkey by much the same means and failed when Ataturk drove the Greeks out of Smyrna also in 1922. Just to complete another piece of the Middle Eastern jigsaw, Turkey signed a deal with Britain in 1878 whereby Britain could lease Cyprus from them for a nominal sum, so long as they came to their aid if Russia ever invaded in the east again. The first accurate surveying of Cyprus was done by none other than Lt. Herbert Kitchener. At the outbreak of the First World War, Britain stopped paying rent for Cyprus and became a squatting tenant, which is why we still have bases there today with a modern airfield at Akrotiri and a listening station at the other end of the island, which decodes all the Arab, Israeli, Russian, Turkish and Egyptian messages flying around the Middle East. No doubt they are working overtime at the moment.

The other piece of the post Imperial jigsaw, is the partition of India and the formation of West Pakistan. East Pakistan of course is now called Bangladesh. If Ghandi had managed to keep India intact then the split between Moslem and Hindu would not have been so pronounced. The partition of India has I think much to answer for, it was in Pakistan that the Taliban and fundamental Islam appeared to gain control of the next generation, many of whom were Afghan refugees. In the later stages, only Ahmed Shah Mahsood and his followers stood against them in Badakhshan, Nuristan and the Panjshir valley, areas across which I extensively walked in 1974. A 'long' walk in the Hindu Kush. Extraordinary difficult terrain with razor sharp ridges, terrain which defeated even the Russians. Afghanistan became their Vietnam. From my own direct experience on the ground, I would counsel caution to the American forces before the war becomes unmanageable. Look what happened the last time American troops landed in Iran to try and rescue the hostages in Tehran, they had to ask passing Iranians which way it was to Tehran.

The terrain of Afghanistan as mapped by British and Indian surveyors prior to 1880 will show them the impossible nature of a land campaign. Maybe the Americans should not only be exroxing their 'ghoolie chits' but boning up on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Afghan wars. Strange that the Great Buddha of Bamian and Shah Mahsood have shared the same fate. Maybe the SAS in Hereford are already studying recent Russian military history and re-learning Pashtu at night school.

For myself, I remember Afghanistan as a wild, but very beautiful country. I think of the Lapis Lazuli mines in the Munjan valley, crossing the Hindu Kush on foot via the Kotal Ramgul and then finding the valleys of Nuristan at exactly this time of year, rich with apricots and mulberries, apples, walnuts and wild grapes. But I also think of the old man I found cradling an 1878 Snieder Enfield percussion cap rifle captured from the British in 1878 and still in use 100 years later. True, I was held hostage by villagers at one camp for 2 days but that was because they mistook us for Russian geologists and it was no worse than being held up by Kurdish communist bandits on Mt Ararat. The idea that Afghanistan should be hit with cruise missiles fills me with as much horror as the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamian.

War and peace. Diplomacy on the North West Frontier without understanding the true importance of history is a delicate art. We have a choice, but not for much longer. Osama bin Laden is probably on the high pastures minus his mobile phone.