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Dangers of Afghanistan Obliviousness in U.S. Professional Military Education

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The end of the longest war in United States history came to be more reminiscent of events in April 1975 in Saigon than the formal end, however imperfect, of the half-century long insurgency in Colombia in 2016, the latter being closer to the strategic aim of the February 2020 agreement between the United States and the Taliban. The final strategic assessment of costly war in Afghanistan, especially since the killing of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in May 2011 in Pakistan, remains to be done. The necessary debate, however, is not occurring in any meaningful manner across the U.S. government, including within the Professional Military Education (PME) community. This piece is an attempt to raise awareness on the essentiality of keeping the totality of the U.S. experience in Afghanistan since 2001, if not from the mid-1990s, as part of the ongoing and future PME efforts and future war studies, not just as part of U.S. military history. One case, mythmaking to fit history into a working narrative, is offered to emphasize the need to continue teaching about and learning from our collective experience in that country.

The author's perspectives from 2010 on the "botched and hasty" negotiations to end the Afghan conflict, shifting responsibility to the Afghans for safeguarding their country after the killing of Osama bin Laden, the formation of the current governing scheme in 2014, and the resurgence of the Islamic State outfits in Afghanistan in 2018, and more recent recommendations of keeping an enduring small military footprint, while part of the debate, are not relevant for this piece.¹

Afghanistan Studies in PME

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, there was a sudden surge in demand for expertise on Afghanistan throughout the U.S. government, with the most immediate and extensive requirements coming from the Department of Defense. The evolving and expanding military mission in Afghanistan naturally led to the mushrooming of PME centers of excellence engaged in the study of every aspect of, and consequently to the growth of subject matter experts (SMEs) on, that country. The urgency and demand for understanding Afghanistan were much greater than the small number of Afghanistan SMEs available in the United States or worldwide, for that matter. This major gap led to the people with the thinnest educational, linguistic, cultural, or practical experience about the country, passing, and being accepted, as authorities, often with dire strategic consequences.

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Hyperlinks are annotated by underline.

In the absence of true scholarship and understanding of the facts as well as in an effort to romanticize the war and justify positions, a number among the multitude of SMEs began producing scenarios based on questionable facts or sheer mythmaking.

On the more positive side, the PME institutions tried and in many instances succeeded in providing U.S. military personnel with a sound background in understanding not only Afghanistan, but as the coalition standing with the United States grew, the multitude of other countries and their operational cultures, norms, and peculiarities. Cultural learning within PME institutions resurged between 2004 and 2020. The initial focus was on Afghanistan and Iraq, but there grew a wider intention to improve military personnel's capacity to understand and operate effectively within culturally complex environments.²

The 2020 DoD officer PME policy clearly stipulates the need for the “development of strategically minded joint warfighters” who are capable in both traditional and irregular warfare (IW). Not studying the strategic and IW—or counterinsurgency (COIN), which has become an unutterable word—dimensions of the two decades of conflict in Afghanistan is to ignore the reality that future wars will most likely involve one or more of the following experiences in Afghanistan, to name a few: dealing with coalitions, inaccessibility, unreliability of partners, societal peculiarities, corruption, and lack of clarity in clarifying the strategic endgame of such conflicts as well as the added dimension of direct or opaque involvement of peer power adversaries. Also, a large number of the leaders and participants of that war are still either on active duty or are available for direct consultation with PME classrooms.

The “Graveyard of Empires” Myth within the PME Context

The “Graveyard of Empires” myth serve as a brief case study on how historical military engagements in Afghanistan have been misunderstood or mythicized from the outset. Such myths, when believed as fact, have consequences not only in U.S. decision-making processes but also on other players in the field. Gaining a deeper understanding of such myths and their impacts through deeper interrogation in the PME environment can lead to “the development of strategically minded joint warfighters who think critically and can creatively apply military power to inform national strategy.

From the outset of the Afghan war, a number of SMEs engaged in the construction of fables, partly based on facts and Afghanistan's own historical narratives and partly based on limited understanding of that country's history or the intentions of the empires fighting therein. The myth that no empire that has attempted to conquer Afghanistan has ever managed to do so was born and, from the outset, began to shape the debate on the viability of a military mission to achieve political aims there. Of course, the fact that the United States and its NATO allies and other partners were not in Afghanistan to conquer the country was passed over as having minor consequence. I would argue that at the end that ambiguity is why for most assessments the Afghan war, at least in the short- to medium-term, will be considered a defeat even though the U.S. and its allies won the war, albeit we lost the victory. As I argue below, the British Empire in India, while losing battles, won its long war in Afghanistan precisely because it had a clear strategic goal. We lost the victory because we lacked a clear strategy of how victory can and would look. The best venue for this strategic assessment would have been the PME institutions, post the 2012-drawdowns, not by shying away from the subject or learning from it.

The mythmakers' lists of empires that introduced military forces into Afghanistan and lost their strategic or tactical objectives varied. Common empires included in these lists were the Macedonian Greeks led by Alexander the Great, the British Raj in India, and the Soviet Union. The inclusion of Alexander the Great in this list raises a historical question. Afghanistan as a state where the Afghans proper (i.e., Pashtuns) were the dominant political elite did not come into existence until the mid-eighteenth century.

Today, the United States and its allies are included in that list. The unquestioned and unstudied narrative of “Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires” will be fueling current and the next generation of jihadis’ information operations (IO), claiming that a relatively small movement defeated the largest Western military alliance, including the superpower United States. Not only do the jihadi IO benefit from this narrative, but also the peer power competitors of the United States are already cheering the “defeat of the US is a clearer demonstration of US impotence than the Vietnam War”. Why does this matter in PME and war studies? Because false assumptions on any battlefield – physical, societal, cognitive, and cyber alike – can easily lead to difficulties in achieving the objectives or to total defeat.

Back to the fallacies of the narrative which should have been interrogated and ought to be part of future PME curricula for future conflicts. The modern Afghan historical narrative claims all of the current and some adjacent territories—especially northwestern Pakistan—as part of “historic” Afghanistan. In this construct, Alexander the Great indeed fought, mostly unsuccessfully, in what is today Afghanistan. However, most of his fighting was in Central Asia (part of northern Afghanistan). He had little contact with the Pashtun—i.e., Afghans. Additionally, if all conflicts involving the territory of Afghanistan before the mid-eighteenth century are to be counted, the territory has been part of the Achaemenid, Sassanian, and Mauryan empires and later was divided among the Mughals, Safavids, and Mangits. In short, the geographical area that comprises the modern state of Afghanistan has been part of many empires throughout its history, and none of these, with the exception of the Safavids, collapsed or had major setbacks because of their involvement in that territory or with its varied people.

Strategic Lessons from the British Experience in Afghanistan

Since 1747 when modern Afghanistan was established as a regional empire, its only invader that was defeated was the Soviet Union. Argument can also be made that the Soviet military engagement in Afghanistan (1979-89) contributed somewhat to the eventual demise of the Soviet system in 1991 and to the three decades of relative quietism in Russia’s approach to Afghanistan.

However, the British Empire’s long political and military engagements with Afghanistan that began towards the end of the eighteenth century did not end in defeat or cause the collapse of that empire. Paradoxically, as I have argued a decade ago, when viewed strategically, the British Raj did not lose in Afghanistan; it actually achieved its primary strategic goal. All of the policies of the British in India, i.e. the “Forward Policy,” the “Stationary School,” the “Scientific Frontier,” or “Masterly Inactivity,” had one main strategic objective: safeguarding India from possible advancements by an expanding Russian Empire. After the Clarendon-Gorchakov Agreement of 1872-73 between Russia and Britain defined part of the Afghan-Russian boundary and Russia pledged that Afghanistan was outside of her sphere of influence, Afghanistan become part of what has come to be known as the “Great Game” between the two imperial powers. For the British, Afghanistan was never an objective in itself. Rather it was to serve as a buffer between the two expanding empires. Surely, the result of the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-41, part of the “Forward Policy,” was a stunning military defeat for the British; however, the main strategic objective for the British was achieved with few tactical adjustments. With the exception of a minor border incident in 1885 as a result of which Afghanistan lost the Panjdeh oasis to the Russians, through the duration of the British rule of India which ended in 1947, the Russians and later the Soviets never crossed their agreed upon frontier with Afghanistan. In fact, the boundary was respected until 1979. If the British experience in Afghanistan can be summed up as a defeat, then the Allies lost the Second World War, as surely there were defeats in battles and setbacks.

As stated above, to ensure we achieve the current objective of PME in the United States to develop strategic-minded warfighters, we need not to avoid the last twenty years and expand our students’ understanding of that space.

A deeper understanding of the Afghan war, if only from the British experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, would be very instrumental in preparing for future warfare where IW and complex contestations are going to be the norm, not the exception. If only the PME offerings on Afghanistan had dove deeper into the strategic objectives of the British rather than looking myopically at one or two military setbacks, as shocking and romanticized as they have become, perhaps the United States could have fashioned a clearer strategy, especially after Usama bin Laden was eliminated. Imagine if we had contested and deflated the myth with history. By perpetuating it, we have empowered it and now suffer the consequences of us as yet another one of the defeated empires in Afghanistan.

Not Owning the Afghanistan Narrative Has Costs

Beginning in 2004 the central feature of U.S. military missions in Afghanistan as well as Iraq rested on COIN, the modern rendition of the doctrine being published in a new manual, FM-3-24 two years later. *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* was the first COIN manual in twenty years for the Army and in twenty-five years for the Marine Corps. The manual was to train Marines and Soldiers to have cultural understanding of the people they were engaging and be nation builders in addition to performing their kinetic military duties. Looking at Iraq and especially at the Afghanistan debacle, it is obvious that the learning curve about the cultural and societal aspects of these conflicts was steep and we missed the mark on preparation at all levels by a wide margin. The reasons why the twenty year U.S.-led military, political, and economic enterprise in Afghanistan unraveled, even before the last of U.S. forces were scheduled to leave the country, are numerous, requiring critical assessments not just for the sake of history but as part of educating the current and next generations of U.S. military personnel. Politicians, academics, and historians will surely question U.S. involvement in Afghanistan from many angles and there will be finger-pointing among the first category; however, it is incumbent on the U.S. PME community to undertake serious and calm assessments of the last twenty years and not see terms such as COIN as unrelated to future wars, as that would be a grave mistake for the preparation of the future leaders of the U.S. military.

Conclusion

The “graveyard of empires” narrative, unchallenged particularly in the PME community, has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The collective understanding of the military, societal, and political situation in Afghanistan has been erroneous. While we should not be crying over spilt milk, as the saying goes, we also should be examining the glass we have in our hands or those which we are certain to be holding in the future. Obliviousness about the war in Afghanistan, while not new or indefensible in politics, has no room in the PME continuum, especially in intermediate and senior levels one.

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¹ See also, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, edited by Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (Harvard University Press, 2008).

² See the upcoming publication from MCUP, *The Rise and Decline of U.S. Military Culture Programs, 2004-2020*, edited by Kerry B. Fosher and Lauren Mackenzie.

