

## **Details of U.S. victory are a little premature**

**Eric Margolis**

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On the frigid night of Dec. 24, 1979, Soviet airborne forces seized Kabul airport. Elite Alpha Group commandos sped to the presidential palace, burst into the bedroom of Afghan President Hafizullah Amin and gunned him down. Columns of Soviet armour crossed the border and raced south toward Kabul.

It took Soviet forces only a few days to occupy Afghanistan. They installed a puppet ruler, Babrak Karmal. Moscow proclaimed it had invaded Afghanistan to "liberate" it from "feudalism and Islamic extremism" and "nests of terrorists and bandits."

Soviet propaganda churned out films of Red Army soldiers playing with children, building schools, dispensing medical care. Afghan women were to be liberated from the veil and other backward Islamic customs. The Soviet Union and its local communist allies would bring Afghanistan into the 20th century.

Two years later, Afghans had risen against their Soviet "liberators" and were waging a low-intensity guerrilla war. Unable to control the countryside, Moscow poured more troops into Afghanistan. The Soviet-run Afghan Army had poor morale and less fighting zeal. The KGB-run Afghan secret police, KhAD, jailed and savagely tortured tens of thousands of "Islamic terrorists," then called "freedom fighters" in the West.

Fast forward to December, 2002, and a disturbing sense of deja vu. A new foreign army has easily occupied Afghanistan, overthrown the "feudal" Taliban government and installed a puppet regime in Kabul. Western media churn out the same rosy, agitprop stories the Soviets did about liberating Afghanistan, freeing women, educating children. The only real difference is that kids in today's TV clips are waving American instead of Soviet flags. The invaders have changed; the propaganda remains the same.

America's invasion of Afghanistan in October, 2001, was billed as an epic military victory and the model of future imperial expeditions to pacify Third World malefactors. Since then, news about this war-ravaged land has grown scarce. America's limited attention has turned elsewhere.

### **Afghanistan in chaos**

In fact, America's Afghan adventure has gotten off to as poor a start as that of the Soviet Union. The U.S.-installed ruler of Kabul, veteran CIA asset Hamid Karzai, must be protected from his own people by up to 200 U.S. bodyguards. Much of Afghanistan is in chaos, fought over by feuding warlords and drug barons.

There are almost daily attacks on U.S. occupation forces. My old mujahedin sources say U.S. casualties and equipment losses in Afghanistan are far higher than Washington is reporting --

and are rising.

American troops are operating from the old Soviet bases at Bagram and Shindand, retaliating, like the Soviets, against mujahedin attacks on U.S. forces by heavily bombing nearby villages. The CIA is trying to assassinate Afghan nationalist leaders opposed to the Karzai regime in Kabul, in particular my old acquaintance Gulbadin Hekmatyar.

North of the Hindu Kush mountains, America's Afghan ally, the Tajik-Uzbek Northern Alliance, has long been a proxy of the Russians. The chief of the Russian general staff and head of intelligence directed the Alliance in its final attack on the Taliban last fall. Russia then supplied Alliance forces with \$100 million in arms, and is providing \$85 million worth of helicopters, tanks, artillery and spare parts, as well as military advisors and technicians. Russia now dominates much of northern Afghanistan.

The Taliban, according to the United Nations drug agency, had almost shut down opium-morphine-heroin production. America's ally, the Northern Alliance, has revived the illicit trade. Since the U.S. overthrew the Taliban, opium cultivation has soared from 185 tons a year to 2,700. The Northern Alliance, which dominates the Kabul regime, finances its arms-buying and field operations with drug money. President George Bush's war on drugs collided with his war on terrorism -- and lost. The U.S. is now, in effect, colluding in the heroin trade.

Anti-American Afghan forces -- the Taliban, al-Qaida, and others -- have regrouped and are mounting ever larger attacks on U.S. troops and, reports the UN, even reopening training camps. Taliban mujahedin are using the same sophisticated early alert system they developed to monitor Soviet forces in the 1980s to warn of American search-and-destroy missions before they leave base. As a result, U.S. troops keep chasing shadows. Canadians fared no better.

In the sole major battle since the Taliban's overthrow, Operation Anaconda, U.S. forces were bested by veteran Afghan mujahedin, losing two helicopters.

The ongoing cost of Afghan operations is a closely guarded secret. Earlier this year, the cost of stationing 8,000 American troops, backed by warplanes and naval units, was estimated at \$5 billion US monthly!

The CIA spends millions every month to bribe Pushtun warlords.

Costs will rise as the U.S. expands bases in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgystan and Uzbekistan -- all placed along the planned U.S.-owned pipeline that will bring Central Asian oil south through Afghanistan.

The UN reports the Taliban and al-Qaida on the offensive, Afghan women remain veiled and the country is in a dangerous mess. Declaring victory in Afghanistan may have been premature.

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