

Afghanistan: Charlie Wilson And America's 30-Year War

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Global Research, February 16, 2010

[Stop NATO](#) 16 February 2010

Theme: [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

On February 13 the United States and NATO led an assault with 15,000 Western and Afghan government troops against Marjah, a town in Helmand province with a population of 75,000. One soldier for every five civilians. The NATO contingent involved in the offensive includes troops from Britain, Canada, Denmark, Estonia and the U.S.

In the opening hours of the massive attack, "the biggest air[borne] assault ever undertaken by coalition forces in the country," [1] two rockets fired from a NATO High Mobility Artillery Rocket System slammed into a house outside Marjah and killed twelve civilians. General Stanley McChrystal, commander of all U.S. and NATO Forces in the country, described the incident as "regrettable."

An account from a British newspaper described the situation in the town after the assault began: "The populous Taliban stronghold of Marjah has, say residents, become a ghost town. Shops are shuttered, streets deserted and most inhabitants are hiding inside their mud-brick houses wondering when their 'day of doom' will come." [2]

The operation is the largest staged by the U.S. and its NATO allies since the war in Afghanistan was launched in early October of 2001. It is the opening salvo in the plan for escalation of the counterinsurgency war in that nation announced by U.S. President Barack Obama at the West Point Military Academy last December 3. [3]

Obama's strategy is based on the COMISAF (Commander International Assistance Security Force) Initial Assessment of General McChrystal issued on August 30, 2009. In that document the former head of the Joint Special Operations Command, from which post he took charge of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, presented the blueprint for transitioning from what had been designated a counterterrorist strategy to a counterinsurgency one.

There is no war without an adversary, and McChrystal identified the targets of the campaign that over 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops will soon be waging: "The major insurgent groups in order of their threat to the mission are: the Quetta Shura Taliban (QST), the Haqqani Network (HQN), and the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HiG)." [4]

The last two groups are named after their founders and leaders, Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, respectively.

Haqqani and Hekmatyar lost an old friend and colleague on February 10, former 12-term U.S. Congressman Charlie Wilson. The hero of one of the most successful American films of 2007-2008, Charlie Wilson's War, he has been eulogized in the press and by his former

partner in arming and training the likes of Haqqani and Hekmatyar - and Osama bin Laden - current U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who was Deputy Director of Central Intelligence from 1986 to 1989 and who said in a 1999 speech, "CIA had important successes in covert action. Perhaps the most consequential of all was Afghanistan where CIA, with its management, funnelled billions of dollars in supplies and weapons to the mujahideen...." [5]

Gates was referring to Operation Cyclone, the largest covert operation conducted by the CIA and indeed by any agency or nation. The full title of the book by George Crile the movie Charlie Wilson's War is based on is Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History.

The bulk of the billions of dollars Gates boasted of supplying to arm the Pakistan-based Mujahideen was directed to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. Those two are now identified by the same Pentagon that Gates heads up as two of the three targets of the world's largest and longest war.

The day Charlie Wilson died, Gates celebrated him as "an extraordinary patriot" for "liberating Afghanistan from Soviet occupation." [6] On February 23 Wilson will receive a graveside service with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

As Gates praised his former colleague for playing a decisive role in arming and training the forces of Hekmatyar and Haqqani, so Wilson was effusive in his praise of both the latter.

During the first Afghan war of 1979-1992 Wilson was a guest of Jalaluddin Haqqani in eastern Afghanistan in 1987 and referred to his host as "goodness personified." When after September 11, 2001 Haqqani was named number three on the U.S. most-wanted list after Osama bin Laden and Mullah Muhammad Omar, Wilson said: "That did give me pause for thought. But Haqqani took care of me, and I'll never forget that. I'd love to see him again. I would try to persuade him that the Taleban was a force for destruction - which he definitely wasn't." [7]

Old friendships are the firmest.

An editorial in The Times of London two days after Wilson's death was more measured than the uniformly laudatory obituaries and tributes in the American media - Britain has now lost more soldiers in Afghanistan than in any conflict since Korea and Malaya in the 1950s - reminding its readers that "In helping to beat the Soviet menace, Charlie Wilson unleashed a monster. The jihadi commanders who fought with the funds that he provided in Afghanistan remember the Congressman fondly. His fellow countrymen are now fighting the guerrillas that he helped to arm and the civilians who are suffering at their hands might be more reserved about his legacy." [8]

The piece added:

"Wilson once described the warlord Jalaluddin Haqqani as 'goodness personified'. Today the elderly commander is one of America's most wanted terrorists.

"In the 1980s the self-proclaimed Holy Warrior, with close links to Osama bin Laden, was getting millions of American tax dollars to send Arab and Afghan volunteers into battle against Soviet troops. The CIA were his allies. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was another Islamist commander bankrolled by Wilson's money. Today both men are in charge of militant

networks responsible for countless attacks against US, Afghan and international forces.”

The Times quoted a former colleague of Hekmatyar saying of Charlie Wilson, “He really helped the Mujahidin.” [9]

Another British daily, The Telegraph, also commented on Wilson’s death on February 12: “Charlie Wilson’s War drew Osama bin Laden first to Peshawar in Pakistan and then into Afghanistan with his Arab jihadis. A key beneficiary was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whose Hezb-i-Islami fighters form one of the most deadly factions in the Taliban-led insurgency today....” [10]

In 2003 the U.S. State Department designated Hekmatyar, the main recipient of America’s largest-ever covert military-intelligence operation, a “Specially Designated Global International Terrorist.” [11]

Haqqani is still active in the Afghanistan that Charlie Wilson and Robert Gates spent billions of dollars and provided an arsenal of weapons to “liberate.”

An Indian news agency wrote at the beginning of the year that “It has now been shockingly admitted that the suicide bombing that killed seven CIA employees in eastern Afghanistan this week was masterminded by warlord and one-time key CIA ally Jalaluddin Haqqani.”

“During the 1980s, Mr Haqqani was a respected commander battling, with Western support, against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. After they withdrew, he became a member of the US-approved coalition that formed the post-occupation government.” [12]

Gulbuddin Hekmatyar became prime minister of what was left of Afghanistan in 1993-1994, immediately after the U.S. backed their Mujahideen clients’ takeover of the country in 1992.

Hekmatyar’s and Haqqani’s roles as ringleaders of the internecine bloodshed and violent anarchy that followed the defeat of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan are worth recalling in reference to repeated comments by Charlie Wilson and lately by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the only mistake the U.S. has made in Afghanistan over the past 30 years is – a rough paraphrase – “not staying to finish the job.” It is that lapse and no other action that Washington is now “redressing.” The follow up that Wilson envisioned was continuing to arm and fund the likes of Hekmatyar and Haqqani, after 1992 leaders of the ruling regime in Afghanistan.

Wilson’s chief partner in building the military forces of two of today’s three main insurgent groups the U.S. and NATO are waging an over eight-year war against was Gust Avrakotos, also celebrated in the 2007 film Charlie Wilson’s War as a modern American “flawed but lovable” maverick hero/anti-hero.

Avrakotos, who died in 2005 and who “ran the largest covert operation in the agency’s history, was dubbed ‘Dr. Dirty’ for his willingness to handle ethically ambiguous tasks....Working with former Rep. Charles Wilson, D-Texas, Avrakotos eventually controlled more than 70 percent of the CIA’s annual expenditures for covert operations, funneling it through intermediaries to the mujaheddin.” [13]

Regarding the weapons that he and Wilson ran to their Pakistan-based allies, they “later were used in the fratricidal war in Afghanistan before the Taliban took control.

“Critics noted that those weapons probably still were in use, both in support of and against U.S. troops, when the United States went to war in Afghanistan in 2001.” [14]

Even though George Crile’s book documents that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani were the main recipients of U.S. military aid secured by Wilson and his counterparts in the CIA – including Robert Gates – neither is mentioned in the film version.

One criticism of the film points out that “The producers...imply that the chaos that ensued in Afghanistan after the war resulted from rogue forces taking over the country – ignoring the impact of their training in terrorist methods by the CIA (including specialization in high explosives).” [15]

An edition of U.S. News & World Report from 2008 provided details on Wilson’s relations with both Hekmatyar and Haqqani and the current activities of the last two.

“In recent weeks, Hekmatyar has called upon Pakistani militants to attack U.S. targets, while the Haqqani network is blamed for three large vehicle bombings, along with the attempted assassination of [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai in April....[T]hese two warlords – currently at the top of America’s list of most wanted men in Afghanistan – were once among America’s most valued allies.”

“In the 1980s, the CIA funneled hundreds of millions of dollars in weapons and ammunition to help them battle the Soviet Army....Hekmatyar, then widely considered by Washington to be a reliable anti-Soviet rebel, was even flown to the United States by the CIA in 1985.

“He was the most radical of the radicals,” recalls former Rep. Charlie Wilson...”

“U.S. officials had an even higher opinion of Haqqani, who was considered the most effective rebel warlord. ‘I adored Haqqani. When I was in Afghanistan, Haqqani was the guy who made sure I would get out,’ says Wilson. ‘He was a marvelous leader and very beloved in his territory.’

“Haqqani was also one of the leading advocates of the so-called Arab Afghans, deftly organizing Arab volunteer fighters who came to wage jihad against the Soviet Union and helping to protect future al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.” [16]

As seen above, Wilson, the “extraordinary patriot,” adored Jalaluddin Haqqani to his dying day. As The Time’s obituary of the former cited above stated, “[I]t is just possible that some of Wilson’s friends might soon be friends of America again.” [17]

Wilson’s other partner, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, “was...a renowned opium smuggler and warlord, and was alleged to have sprayed acid in the faces of women who did not wear the veil. One of [Hekmatyar’s] colleagues referred to him as ‘a true monster,’ though he allegedly impressed the CIA (revealing something of its character) by wanting to take the war against the Soviets to Central Asia and roll back communism in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

“One CIA officer said, ‘We wanted to kill as many Russians as we could, and Hikmatyar seemed like the guy to do it.’” [18]

The second to the last paragraph reveals another aspect of the first U.S. Afghan war, that it not only intended to drive Soviet forces out of the country, overthrow the government there

and install the CIA's Mujahideen clients, but to extend the war into the Soviet Union.

After the film *Charlie Wilson's War* was released in late 2007 accounts surfaced of other U.S. officials instrumental in arming America's current adversaries in Afghanistan. The book *The Judge: William P. Clark, Ronald Reagan's Top Hand* by Paul Kengor and Patricia Clark Doerner details the role of President Ronald Reagan's National Security Adviser from 1982-1983 and "his work on behalf of Afghan rebels to Polish rebels to Nicaraguan rebels and much, much more."

A review of the volume reveals that "Clark and Reagan quietly authorized the [mujahedin] rebels to cross the Amu Dar'ya River that marked the border between Afghanistan and the Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, where the rebels fought the Soviet Union on its own territory....Specially trained rebel units operating inside the USSR, equipped with high-tech explosives from the CIA, sabotaged Soviet targets. They derailed trains, attacked border posts and laid mines." [19]

A quote from the book states "These were strikingly bold, risky moves - some of the most dangerous action of the entire history of the 40-year Cold War...." [20]

Another account of Wilson's activities mentioned that "the mujahideen in Pakistani camps were trained to wage a war of urban terror, with instructions in car bombings, bicycle bombings, camel bombings and assassination. According to Charlie Wilson, this was the one morally unambiguous crusade of our time." [21] (That Wilson's name and any allusion to morality could be combined in the same sentence is astonishing. Suffice it to recall that although he represented a poor congressional district in Texas, Wilson spent millions of dollars on international junkets for a steady succession of mistresses, alcohol, cocaine and most every species of debauchery.)

The extraordinary American patriot and cinema hero Wilson said of his efforts in the 1980s, "This is the one chance to send the Soviet young men home in body bags like they sent our boys back in body bags. Let's make this a Vietnam for the Soviets." [22]

Within weeks of the Hollywood lionization of Wilson, Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould, in 1981 the first American journalists allowed back into the Afghan capital and the future authors of *Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story*, wrote a letter to the *Boston Globe* to debunk the growing Wilson myth.

The authors said, "we continue to be amazed at how the American disinformation campaign built around the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan lives on.

"Fact: Covert funding for the mujahideen began long before the Soviet invasion, not after.

"Fact: This covert aid was intended to lure the Soviets into the Afghan trap and hold them there, not drive them out, as claimed by Wilson.

"It is well documented that Wilson's war prolonged Afghanistan's agony for another six years, provided a secure multibillion-dollar technological training base for Islamic terrorism, and set the stage for a privatized heroin industry of historic proportions.

"The problem was in the conceptual framework created by America's Cold War policy makers in the first place that made Afghanistan the bleeding ground it remains to this day."

[23]

A review of the couple's 2009 book *Afghanistan's Untold Story* included these details:

"Having gone to great lengths to draw them into Afghanistan in the first place (beginning as early as 1973), the US wanted the Soviets to stay so that their mujahideen proxies could deliver a mortal blow to the 'Evil Empire.'

"As the Cold War deepened and the Afghans drew closer to the Soviets, US interest in the country increased proportionately. Afghanistan would soon become a battleground on which the fantasies of Washington's Cold War policy planners would be played out.

"Invisible History also shows how covert US meddling began as early as 1973 under president Nixon, following the ouster of King Zahir Shah by Mohammad Daoud. The US had not even extricated itself from its own Vietnam War when such plans were afoot as part of the 'Chinese-Iranian-Pakistani-Arabian peninsula Axis' to give the Soviets theirs." [24]

William Blum's translation of a 1999 *Le Nouvel Observateur* interview with the original architect of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, former Carter administration National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, confirms Fitzgerald's and Gould's contentions.

His admissions included:

"According to the official version of history, CIA aid to the Mujahadeen began during 1980, that is to say, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, 24 Dec 1979. But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise. Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.

"That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap and you want me to regret it? The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter. We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war."

"What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?" [25]

A few months after the film that made Charlie Wilson a celebrity, one that has been viewed by several tens of millions of Americans and to one degree or another approved of by most all of them, Wilson said that he could "think of nothing I would have done differently."

The newspaper that interviewed him and obtained the quote wrote, "Never mind that many of the mujahideen guerillas that the former U.S. representative from Texas helped arm...wound up as the very Taliban leaders who shaped the violent and radical Islamic fundamentalism that dominated Afghanistan....Never mind the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaida." [26]

A news dispatch in early 2006 announcing that the movie rights for *Charlie Wilson's War* had

been obtained by Universal Pictures mentioned in passing that “Many of the men armed by the CIA went on to become the Taliban’s enforcers and Osama bin Laden’s protectors.” [27]

Wilson, like Brzezinski, had no regrets. No regrets for what the brutal guerrillas whose training and arming he arranged in Pakistan in the 1980s have done to Afghanistan and its people. No regrets that foreign fighters among them spread out to Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Empire builders have neither time nor inclination for regrets. The terrorism/counterterrorism strategy, tenuously and self-servingly linked with weapons of mass destruction, drugs and now piracy, has over the last decade alone gained the U.S. and its NATO allies military bases and camps in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, the Philippines, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Djibouti, Seychelles, Uganda, Mali, Bulgaria, Romania and Colombia.

There will soon be more U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan – 150,000 from fifty nations – than there ever were Soviet troops in the 1980s. The Western military forces were not invited into the country by any government or any political faction. There is no Charlie Wilson in the U.S. Congress calling for the forcible expulsion of foreign occupation forces, barely anyone there even asking for their peaceful withdrawal.

But Wilson’s project for a second Vietnam-style war may well be realized. America’s second Vietnam.

Notes

- 1) Agence France-Presse/Reuters, February 14, 2010
- 2) The Independent, February 15, 2010
- 3) Nobel Committee Celebrates War As Peace
Stop NATO, December 8, 2009
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/12/08/nobel-committee-celebrates-war-as-peace>
- 5) Washington Post, September 21, 2009
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/21/AR2009092100110.html>
- 5) BBC News, December 1, 2010
- 6) U.S. Department of Defense, February 11, 2010
- 7) The Times (London), January 12, 2008
- 8) The Times, February 12, 2010
- 9) Ibid
- 10) The Telegraph, February 12th, 2010
- 11) United States Department of State, February 19, 2003
- 12) Asian News International, January 2, 2010
- 13) Washington Post, December 26, 2005
- 14) Ibid
- 15) Jeremy Kuzmarov, Charlie Wilson’s War, the Culture of Imperialism and the Distortion of History
History News Network, December 31, 2007
- 16) U.S. News & World Report, July 11, 2008
- 17) The Times, February 12, 2010
- 18) History News Network, December 31, 2007
- 19) The Village News (California), January 10, 2008

- 20) Ibid
- 21) Myra MacDonald, Revisting America's war in Afghanistan
Reuters, September 26, 2008
- 22) Ibid
- 23) Boston Globe, January 11, 2008
- 24) Anthony Fenton, Behind the Afghan propaganda
Asia Times, May 2, 2009
- 25) <http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.html>
- 26) Salt Lake Tribune, April 23, 2008
- 27) Reuters, January 11, 2006

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