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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Doubts About Certitude

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It is the greatest example of the Law of Unintended Consequences.

In a bit of unpoetic justice, Bob Gates helped create the mess in Afghanistan decades ago and now has to try to clean it up.

At the C.I.A. in the '80s, Gates conspired with Charlie Wilson and the Saudis to help the insurgents in Afghanistan turn back the occupation of a superpower. Now he's guiding the attempt of the occupying superpower to turn back the insurgents, some of whom are the same ones he armed to defeat the Soviet Union.

Trying to do a good thing that also seemed like a strategically brilliant thing — help the Afghan Davids repel the raw aggression of the Soviet Goliaths — we created the monsters that have come back to haunt us, and we learned how little control we have over history.

We trained a whole generation of jihadists and armed them. We paved the way for the Taliban takeover and the rise of Osama bin Laden. We created the Islamist power in the northwest frontier of Pakistan, swelled by millions of Afghan refugees. We enabled the conditions for bin Laden's safe haven. We contributed to the instability of Pakistan.

On a rainy day in Kabul last week, I watched Gates climb into the cockpit of a Soviet-era helicopter that Americans use to teach Afghans how to fly. The defense secretary was in one of the same style Mi-17s that he once provided Stinger missiles to shoot down. The absurdity was not lost on Gates, an avid history reader who feels our foreign policy has too often been “an exercise in misread history.”

Gates promised that America would not repeat its disappearing act of 1989. Flying from Kabul to Iraq, I asked him if, like Paul Wolfowitz with the Iraqi Shiites, he was driven to war because of guilt at abandoning people we had promised to stand by.

“I don't feel guilt about it, but we made a strategic mistake,” he said. “And it wasn't just the Afghans. At almost the same time, we basically cut off our relationship with the Pakistanis. And the mistrust that exists today is a reflection of that action on our part.”

I asked what he learned in the exhaustive White House review. He said Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top American commander in Afghanistan, convinced him that “it was less the size of the force footprint than what the forces did on the ground.” The Soviets, he added, “invaded a country.” Well, so did we. But the Soviets, he said, killed a million Afghans and tried to impose “an alien culture.”

But Gates knows messy conflicts get messier. When we were in Kabul, a senior NATO commander conceded that civilians may have been killed during a joint military operation with Afghan forces.

There is a brief window of opportunity when a benign occupying power can accomplish some good before it is regarded with resentment and resistance.

I showed Gates an article in the newspaper Stars and Stripes reporting that U.S. trainers considered Afghan soldiers and police a long way from ready, and that some Afghans in a new unit in Baghlan Province cower in ditches, steal U.S. fuel and weapons and are suspected of collaborating with the Taliban.

Capt. Jason Douthwaite, a logistics officer in Baghlan, told the military paper that he felt more like an investigating officer than a mentor: "It's not, 'Let me teach you your job.' It's more like, 'How much did you steal from the American government today?'"

Given the warping effect of ego in Washington, I asked the defense secretary how he ensures that he doesn't turn into Robert McNamara?

"I've never believed that I was the smartest guy in the room," he said. "I want people around me to tell me if they think I'm headed in the wrong direction. And I read a lot."

Gates laughs at being called an Eeyore, but he believes "too often there is a desire for certitude where it's not possible." Harking back to Cold Warriors who thought there could be a limited nuclear war, he demurred, "once things start, how you get control of it or keep control of it struck me as just inherently a problem."

W. said invading Iraq could help break the cycle of supporting corrupt dictators. But watching the Karzais acting like a mob family going to the mattresses, how do we know we're not simply creating and propping up another corrupt dictator?

"You have to be realistic about the fact that developments of the kind we want to see take time," Gates replied. "If we can re-empower the traditional local centers of authority, the tribal shuras and elders and things like that and put an overlay of human rights on that, isn't that a step in the right direction?"

"I'm leery of trying to change history in dramatic, short strokes. I think it's very risky."

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