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Afghanistan: From Tragedy to Comedy

March 3, 2009

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A review of the film **Charlie Wilson's War**, discussing what the film did not mention and how the activities of the USA in Afghanistan started before the Soviet invasion and its unintended consequences.

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Marx famously said that history repeats itself, first time as tragedy, second time as farce. Tom Hanks has placed a Hollywood spin on Karl's comments by producing and starring in "**Charlie Wilson's War**". It is about the role of Texas Democratic congressman Charlie Wilson in getting the US to arm those in Afghanistan fighting the Soviet Union occupation in the 1980s. It is, apparently, presented as a comedy.

The film is based on a book by George Crile and its original subtitle gives an indication of a key problem with both book and film: "*The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History – the Arming of the Mujahideen.*" For Crile, the key was that lots of Soviet soldiers were killed in a war which contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Strangely, he fails to mention the subsequent activities of his "freedom fighters" – their attacks on the US after the Soviet collapse.

In other words, Wilson's work in relation to Afghanistan led directly to the blowback that peaked on September 11 and, with some help from the Bush Junta, to the current bloody invasion and occu-

pation of Iraq. The film follows in this. There is a vague reference to subsequent events. In an “epilogue” to the book, Crile quoted Wilson: *“These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world. And the people who deserved the credit are the ones who made the sacrifice. And then we fucked up the endgame.”* The film also ends with this just before the credits roll.

Unless you are well versed in geopolitical history neither the reader nor the audience member would know that this was referring to how the Afghan “freedom fighters” of the 1980s turned into the al Qaeda and Taliban of the 1990s and 2000s. For all the joy in presenting Wilson’s “out of channel” attempts to garner secret appropriations of millions of dollars to the guerrillas, it fails to discuss the consequences of such acts or the fact when the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989 the US lost interest in the country and left it to descend into civil war. The “endgame”, you would think, turns this “comedy” into a tragedy of epic proportions. Surely the US helping to build Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda base and how the millions of dollars worth of weapons Wilson helped to secretly supply ended up being turned on the US are important facts?

Another important fact which the book and film fail to note is that the CIA started to support the mujahedeen before the USSR invasion. For the CIA legally to carry out a covert action, the president must authorise it. The book repeatedly says that President Carter authorised the CIA to provide covert backing to the mujahedeen *after* the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. In reality, he did so on July 3, 1979, i.e., six months before the Soviet invasion. This was done on the advice of his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who confirmed this in January 1998 in an interview in the French newspaper “**Le Nouvel Observateur**”: *“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.”* He had no regrets, stating it *“had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap ... 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.” Secretary of Defense, and former CIA Director, Robert Gates confirms this in his 1996 memoirs.

So the “freedom fighters” of the mujahedeen were used as cannon fodder by Washington to give the USSR its own Vietnam. Which they did – but with horrific consequences not only for the Soviet Union. Mentioning those would, undoubtedly, have undermined the comic potential of the illegal activities of a politician subverting the normal channels of democratic accountability within the U.S. government to bolster the covert actions of the secret state in pursuit of American imperialist ends.