

Can the US and NATO w



By Eric Margolis

Blaming Pakistan for the US and NATO's political and military failures in Afghanistan will only worsen the West's current problems in Afghanistan

HEAVY ground combat in southern Afghanistan this week, in which eight Canadian NATO troops died, vividly recalls the philosopher Santayana's famous maxim that those who fail to study history are doomed to repeat it.

The soldiers were killed near Maiwand, a name meaning nothing to most people. But

near that dusty village, on 27 July, 1880, during the bloody Second Afghan War, the British Empire suffered one of the worst defeats in its colonial history.

Two years earlier, the British Raj had invaded Afghanistan for the second time. The British put an Afghan puppet ruler in power in Kabul, just as the Americans and British did in 2001. Ayub Khan, son of Afghanistan's former emir, rallied 12,000 Pashtun (or Pathan) tribal warriors to fight a British force advancing into southern Afghanistan. Its mission, according to London, was to 'liberate' Afghan tribes and bring them 'the light of Christian civilisation.' Today, the western powers have replaced 'Christianity' by 'democracy'.

After a memorably ferocious battle, the fierce Afghan tribal warriors nearly surrounded, then routed the imperial force, composed of British regulars, including the vaunted Grenadier Guards, and Indian Sepoys. A British army doctor Conan Doyle used as his model for Sherlock Homes' companion, Dr Watson, fought at Maiwand. I recall this epic Afghan victory against British colonialism because understanding today's war in Afghanistan

requires proper historical context. A century and a quarter after Maiwand, Pashtun warriors of southern Afghanistan continue to resist another mighty world power and its allies, who have been faithfully following the imperial strategy of the old British Raj.

The invasion of Afghanistan was marketed to Americans as an 'anti-terrorist' mission and

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effort to implant democracy. It was sold to Canadians, Australians, and Dutch, who sent troop contingents, as a noble campaign of 'nation-building, reconstruction, and defending women's rights'. All nice-sounding, but mostly untrue. What we are really seeing is a war by western powers seeking to dominate the strategic oil corridor of Afghanistan, directed

win war in Afghanistan?

against the Pashtun people who comprise half that nation's population. Another 15 million live just across the border in Pakistan. What we call 'Taliban' is actually a loose alliance of Pashtun tribes and clans, joined by nationalist forces and former mujahidin from the 1980's anti-Soviet struggle.

Last year, a leading authority on

ating 'terrorists' in Afghanistan, they are certainly not winning. Occupation forces are fighting the. The longer the westerners stay, more resistance will grow.

Afghanistan, the Brussels-based Senlis Institute, found Taliban and its allies control or influence half of the nation — roughly equivalent to Pashtun tribal territory. Its study flatly contradicted rosy reports of military success and 'nation-building' from Washington and NATO HQ. This week, the same think tank issued a shocking new survey based on

17,000 interviews.

'Afghans in southern Afghanistan are increasingly prepared to admit their support for Taliban, and belief that the government and international community will not be able to defeat the Taleban is widespread.'

Senlis' study concurs with my own findings in South Asia that Pakistan and India have independently concluded NATO will eventually be defeated in Afghanistan and withdraw. Both are now hedging their bets by deepening contacts with nationalist forces battling foreign occupation.

The US, however, may stay on in Afghanistan even if its NATO allies depart, and reinforce its 30,000 troops there because Washington cannot admit a second defeat after the Iraq debacle, or, even worse, risk seeing its nemesis, Osama bin Laden, emerge to declare victory. The US and NATO are not fighting 'terrorists' in Afghanistan, as they keep claiming, and they are certainly not winning hearts and minds. Western occupation forces are fighting the world's largest tribal people.

The longer the westerners stay and bomb villages, the more resistance will grow. Such is

the inevitable pattern of every guerilla war I have ever covered. Blaming Pakistan for the US and NATO's political and military failures in Afghanistan will only worsen the West's current problems in Afghanistan.

Western troops stuck in this nasty, \$2 billion daily guerrilla conflict will become increasingly brutalised, demoralised and violent. This is precisely what happened to the Soviet Union after it invaded Afghanistan.

If 160,000 Soviet troops and 240,000 Afghan Communist soldiers could not defeat the Pashtuns in ten years of bitter fighting, how can 50,000 US and NATO troops do better? Washington is clearly eying Pakistan's army for this job, though there is zero support among Pakistanis for such a daft mission.

Westerners simply have no idea of the tenacity, patience and stubbornness of the Pashtun Afghans who are justly renowned and feared for never forgetting a wrong or insult.

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