

Tuesday, March 4, 2008

“We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood. We will never be content with a master .” – An Afghan Tribesman

Understanding national security threats today requires, more than anything else, an understanding of history, which is why I have immersed myself in reading the history of warfare in Afghanistan.

A quote in one book, Stephen Tanner’s Afghanistan has stayed with me. In a few words, it sums up the present situation in that country. It instructs us on what has happened since 2001 and what will continue to challenge us in the years ahead:

“We are content with discord, we are content with alarms, we are content with blood. We will never be content with a master.”

This quote, by an Afghan tribesman, was uttered over 270 years ago, to a British official during Britain’s military incursion there.

Let me be clear. I am hawkish when it comes to Afghanistan. After all, it is where the 9-11 plot was born and bred. It is where Osama bin Laden fled. It is where the war on terror began and where we should have focused our efforts (rather than taking the ball off Afghanistan and plunging into Iraq, where there was no organized al Qaeda presence at the time).

History instructs us that turning Afghanistan from a tribal state accustomed to violence into a stable democracy will not be easy. It will be hard. It will be expensive. It will be long.

Alexander the Great learned it. Genghis Kahn learned it. The Persians and the British and the Soviets learned it.

It should not be a surprise, therefore, that many conditions in Afghanistan have worsened since 2001. Last year, there was more violence than at any time since 2001. Last year, Afghan farmers grew more poppies for opium than ever before. The State Department says that today, Afghanistan produces 93 percent of the world’s opium poppy. According to one report, President Hamid Karzai’s government controls less than a third of the country. The Taliban is surging and now controls an estimated ten percent of the country. The rest of the country is run by warlords.

If ever we needed a surge – of hard power and soft power, of infantry but also governance, health clinics, schools and more – it is now in Afghanistan.

As one Special Forces soldier told me during my recent trip to Afghanistan: We clear a village and the Taliban slips into nearby caves. We build a bridge and then we leave. The Taliban comes back, blows up the bridge and kills the Afghans who supported the Americans who built the bridge.

That contemporary quote and the quote from 270 years ago must guide us in Afghanistan.

The signs of the future are prominently displayed in the past.