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6-09-03: Hot Topics

The Largest Covert Operation in CIA History

By Chalmers Johnson

Mr. Johnson is the author of Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire and The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic, to be published in January by Metropolitan Books.

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The Central Intelligence Agency has an almost unblemished record of screwing up every "secret" armed intervention it ever undertook. From the overthrow of the Iranian government in 1953 through the Bay of Pigs, the failed attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro of Cuba and Patrice Lumumba of the Republic of Congo, the Phoenix Program in Vietnam, the "secret war" in Laos, aid to the Greek colonels who seized power in 1967, the 1973 killing of Salvador Allende in Chile and Ronald Reagan's Iran-contra war against Nicaragua, there is not a single instance in which the agency's activities did not prove acutely embarrassing to the United States. The CIA continues to get away with this primarily because its budget and operations have always been secret and Congress is normally too indifferent to its constitutional functions to rein in a rogue bureaucracy. Therefore the tale of a purported CIA success story should be of some interest.

According to the author of the newly released *Charlie Wilson's War*, the exception to CIA incompetence was the arming between 1979 and 1988 of thousands of Afghan mujahedeen ("freedom fighters"). The agency flooded Afghanistan with an astonishing array of extremely dangerous weapons and "unapologetically mov[ed] to equip and train cadres of high tech holy warriors in the art of waging a war of urban terror against a modern superpower," in this case, the USSR.

The author of this glowing account, George Crile, is a veteran producer for the CBS television news show "60 Minutes" and an exuberant Tom Clancy-type enthusiast for the Afghan caper. He argues that the U.S. clandestine involvement in Afghanistan was "the largest and most successful CIA operation in history" and "the one morally unambiguous crusade of our time." He adds that "there was nothing so romantic and exciting as this war against the Evil Empire." Crile's sole measure of success is the number of Soviet soldiers killed (about 15,000), which undermined Soviet morale and contributed to the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the period from 1989 to 1991. That's the successful part.

However, he never mentions that the "tens of thousands of fanatical Muslim fundamentalists" the CIA armed are some of the same people who in 1996 killed 19 American airmen at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia; bombed our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; blew a hole in the side of the U.S. destroyer *Cole* in Aden harbor in 2000; and on Sept. 11, 2001, flew hijacked airliners into New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Today, the world awaits what is almost certain to happen soon at some airport -- a terrorist firing a U.S. Stinger low-level surface-to-air missile (manufactured at one time by General Dynamics in Rancho Cucamonga) into an American jumbo jet. The

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CIA supplied thousands of them to the mujahedeen and trained them to be experts in their use. If the CIA's activities in Afghanistan are a "success story," then Enron should be considered a model of corporate behavior.

Nonetheless, Crile's account is important, if appalling, precisely because it details how a ruthless ignoramus congressman and a high-ranking CIA thug managed to hijack American foreign policy. From 1973 to 1996, Charlie Wilson represented the 2nd District of Texas in the U.S. House of Representatives. His constituency was in the heart of the East Texas Bible Belt and was the long-held fiefdom of his fellow Democrat, Martin Dies, the first chairman of the House Un-American Affairs Committee. Wilson is 6 feet, 4 inches tall and "handsome, with one of those classic outdoor faces that tobacco companies bet millions on." He graduated from the Naval Academy in 1956, eighth from the bottom of his class and with more demerits than any other cadet in Annapolis history.

After serving in the Texas Legislature, he arrived in Washington in 1973 and quickly became known as "Good Time Charlie," "the biggest playboy in Congress." He hired only good-looking women for his staff and escorted "a parade of beauty queens to White House parties." Even Crile, who featured Wilson many times on "60 Minutes" and obviously admires him, describes him as "a seemingly corrupt, cocaine snorting, scandal prone womanizer who the CIA was convinced could only get the Agency into terrible trouble if it permitted him to become involved in any way in its operations."

Wilson's partner in getting the CIA to arm the mujahedeen was Gust Avrakotos, the son of working-class Greek immigrants from the steel workers' town of Aliquippa, Pa. Only in 1960 did the CIA begin to recruit officers for the Directorate of Operations from among what it called "new Americans," meaning such ethnic groups as Chinese, Japanese, Latinos and Greek Americans. Until then, it had followed its British model and taken only Ivy League sons of the Eastern Establishment. Avrakotos joined the CIA in 1961 and came to nurture a hatred of the bluebloods, or "cake eaters," as he called them, who discriminated against him. After "spook school" at Camp Peary, next door to Jamestown, Va., he was posted to Athens, where, as a Greek speaker, he remained until 1978.

During Avrakotos's time in Greece, the CIA was instrumental in destroying Greek freedom and helping to turn the country into probably the single most anti-American democracy on Earth today. Incredibly, Crile describes this as follows: "On April 21, 1967, he [Avrakotos] got one of those breaks that can make a career. A military junta seized power in Athens that day and suspended democratic and constitutional government." Avrakotos became the CIA's chief liaison with the Greek colonels. After the fall of the colonels' brutally fascist regime, the 17 November terrorist organization assassinated the CIA's Athens station chief, Richard Welch, on Dec. 23, 1975, and "Gust came to be vilified in the Greek radical press as the sinister force responsible for most of the country's many ills." He left the country in 1978 but could not get another decent assignment -- he tried for Helsinki -- because the head of the European Division regarded him as simply too uncouth to send to any of its capitals. He sat around Langley for several years without work until he was recruited by John McGaffin, head of the Afghan program. "If it's really true that you have nothing to do," McGaffin said, "why not come upstairs? We're killing Russians."

Wilson was the moneybags and sparkplug of this pair; Avrakotos was a street fighter who relished giving Kalashnikovs and Stingers to the tribesmen in Afghanistan. Wilson was the more complex of the two, and Crile argues that his "Good Time Charlie" image was actually a cover for a Barry Goldwater kind of hyper-patriotism. But Wilson was also a liberal on the proposed Equal Rights Amendment and a close friend of the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan (D-Texas), and his sister Sharon became chairwoman of the board of Planned Parenthood.

As a boy, Wilson was fascinated by World War II and developed an almost childlike belief that he possessed a "special destiny" to "kill bad guys" and help underdogs prevail over their enemies. When he entered Congress, just at the time of the Yom Kippur War, he became a passionate supporter of Israel. After he traveled to Israel, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee began to steer large amounts of money from all over the country to him and to cultivate him as "one of Israel's most important Congressional champions: a non-Jew with no Jewish constituents." Jewish members of Congress also rallied to put

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Wilson on the all-powerful Appropriations Committee in order to guarantee Israel's annual \$3-billion subsidy. His own Texas delegation opposed his appointment.

Wilson was not discriminating in his largess. He also became a supporter of Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza, the West Point graduate and dictator of Nicaragua who in 1979 was swept away by popular fury. Before that happened, President Carter tried to cut the \$3.1-million annual U.S. aid package to Nicaragua, but Wilson, declaring Somoza to be "America's oldest anti-Communist ally in Central America," opposed the president and prevailed.

During Wilson's long tenure on the House Appropriations Committee, one of its subcommittee chairmen, Clarence D. "Doc" Long, used to have a sign mounted over his desk: "Them that has the gold makes the rules." Wilson advanced rapidly on this most powerful of congressional committees. He was first appointed to the foreign operations subcommittee, which doles out foreign aid. He then did a big favor for then-Speaker Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.). The chairman of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee at the time, Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), had been caught in the FBI's ABSCAM sting operation in which an agent disguised as a Saudi sheik offered members of Congress large cash bribes. O'Neill put Wilson on the Ethics Committee to save Murtha, which he did. In return, O'Neill assigned Wilson to the defense appropriations subcommittee and made him a life member of the governing board of the John F. Kennedy Performing Arts Center, where he delighted in taking his young dates. Wilson soon discovered that all of the CIA's budget and 40 percent of the Pentagon's budget is "black," hidden from the public and even from Congress. As a member of the defense subcommittee, he could arrange to have virtually any amount of money added to whatever black project he supported. So long as Wilson did favors for other members on the subcommittee, such as supporting defense projects in their districts, they would never object to his private obsessions.

About this time, Wilson came under the influence of a remarkable, rabidly conservative Houston woman in her mid-40s, Joanne Herring. They later fell in love, although they never married. She had a reputation among the rich of the River Oaks section of Houston as a collector of powerful men, a social lioness and hostess to her fellow members of the John Birch Society. She counted among her friends Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, dictator and first lady of the Philippines, and Yaqub Khan, Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, D.C., who got Herring named as Pakistan's honorary consul for Houston.

In July 1977, the head of Pakistan's army, Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, seized power and declared martial law, and in 1979, he hanged Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the president who had promoted him. In retaliation, Carter cut off U.S. aid to Pakistan. In 1980, Herring went to Islamabad and was so entranced by Zia and his support for the Afghan freedom fighters that on her return to the United States, she encouraged Wilson to go to Pakistan. There he met Zia, learned about the Afghan mujahedeen and became a convert to the cause. Once Reagan replaced Carter, Wilson was able to restore Zia's aid money and added several millions to the CIA's funds for secretly arming the Afghan guerrillas, each dollar of which the Saudi government secretly matched.

Although Wilson romanticized the mountain warriors of Afghanistan, the struggle was never as uneven as it seemed. Pakistan provided the fighters with sanctuary, training and arms and even sent its own officers into Afghanistan as advisors on military operations. Saudi Arabia served as the fighters' banker, providing hundred of millions with no strings attached. Several governments, including those of Egypt, China and Israel, secretly supplied arms. And the insurgency enjoyed the backing of the United States through the CIA.

Wilson's and the CIA's greatest preoccupation was supplying the Afghans with something effective against the Soviets' most feared weapon, the Mi-24 Hind helicopter gunship. The Red Army used it to slaughter innumerable mujahedeen as well as to shoot up Afghan villages. Wilson favored the Oerlikon antiaircraft gun made in Switzerland (it was later charged that he was on the take from the Zurich-based arms manufacturer). Avrakotos opposed it because it was too heavy for guerrillas to move easily, but he could not openly stand in Wilson's way. After months of controversy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff finally dropped

their objections to supplying the American Stinger, President Reagan signed off on it, and the "silver bullet" was on its way. The Stinger had never before been used in combat. It proved to be murderous against the Hinds, and Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev decided to cut his losses and get out altogether. In Wilson's postwar tour of Afghanistan, mujahedeen fighters surrounded him and triumphantly fired their missiles for his benefit. They also gave him as a souvenir the stock from the first Stinger to shoot down a Hind gunship.

The CIA "bluebloods" fired Avrakotos in the summer of 1986, and he retired to Rome. Wilson became chairman of the Intelligence Oversight Committee, at which time he wrote to his CIA friends, "Well, gentlemen, the fox is in the hen house. Do whatever you like." After retiring from Congress in 1996, he became a lobbyist for Pakistan under a contract that paid him \$30,000 a month. Meanwhile, the United States lost interest in Afghanistan, which descended into a civil war that the Taliban ultimately won. In the autumn of 2001, the United States returned in force after Al Qaeda retaliated against its former weapon supplier by attacking New York and Washington. The president of the United States went around asking, "Why do they hate us?"

Crile knows a lot about these matters and presents them in a dramatic manner. There are, however, one or two items that he appears unaware of or is suppressing. For the CIA legally to carry out a covert action, the president must authorize a document called a finding. Crile repeatedly says that Carter signed such a finding ordering the CIA to provide covert backing to the mujahedeen after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Dec. 24, 1979. The truth of the matter is that Carter signed the finding on July 3, 1979, six months before the Soviet invasion, and he did so on the advice of his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in order to try to provoke a Russian incursion. Brzezinski has confirmed this sequence of events in an interview with a French newspaper, and former CIA Director Robert M. Gates says so explicitly in his 1996 memoirs. It may surprise Charlie Wilson to learn that his heroic mujahedeen were manipulated by Washington like so much cannon fodder in order to give the USSR its own Vietnam. The mujahedeen did the job, but as subsequent events have made clear, they may not be grateful to the United States.

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