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A historical parallel to the Iraq war

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The world's leading power was engaged in a global war against piracy. A controversial intervention against an Arab dictator brought Islamic extremism to the fore. The empire suddenly found itself in conflict with a broad Islamic movement with a mystical fanatic at its head. The year was 1882.

Great Britain had long consciously avoided colonising all lands in

which it had interests, preferring instead to exert influence through friendly local rulers. Securing trade routes was a greater concern. It is in this context that one must view Britain's war against piracy, which was launched with broad international support during the long peace that followed the Napoleonic wars. What followed exhibits clear parallels to the current situation.

MAIN POINTS

The current US war on terror, hunt for Osama bin Laden, and war against Saddam Hussein has historical parallels in the 1880s UK war against piracy, conflict with the Mahdi, a mystical fanatic leading an Islamic movement, and intervention against Arabi Pasha, an Arab dictator.

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The war against piracy brought the British into a number of local conflicts where they were obliged to take sides. One such example was when the privateer pirate hunter, James Brooke, of his own accord colonised parts of Borneo and placed the lands at the feet of Queen Victoria. He received a polite 'thanks, but no thanks'.

But not all situations were as easy to walk away from. In 1882 the Egyptian army under the leadership of the nationalist Arabi Pasha rebelled against the pro-western despot ruling the country. Reluctantly the British Prime Minister Gladstone decided to intervene in order to secure the Suez Canal – which was seen as the lifeline of the British economy. France objected to the intervention, citing international law, and was instantly accused of dressing up self-interest in peace talk. Gladstone defended the government's policies through unpersuasive spin claiming that Britain took to arms out of 'love of peace and in accordance with the principles of peace'. Violent debate ensued in the popular press and in the parliament. Some argued that the intervention was thinly disguised imperialism while others saw a British presence as a bulwark between the civilian population and anarchy. A member of the Gladstone government labelled the war as unethical and resigned in protest.

British propaganda promised a quick, surgical intervention followed by a withdrawal as soon as a 'responsible', pro-western regime was in place. Then the navy was sent in. Alexandria was bombarded and the Suez occupied. Arabi Pasha and his junta were captured and sent into exile. The Egyptian army was disbanded. Gladstone then sent one of his best administrators to the country and expected that the last had been heard on this matter.

Evelyn Baring initiated a string of reforms aimed at getting the Egyptian economy back on its feet. This done, the government in London felt they had done enough. So when a rebellion broke out in the Sudan, which at the time was an Egyptian province, the British refused to take action. The rebellion was seen as primarily directed at Egyptian mismanagement and the British simply told the Egyptians to pull out and abandon the region to the rebels. In order to oversee the evacuation, a general was dispatched from London in 1884. Charles Gordon is one of those grand, irregular personalities that history offers occasionally. He was a war hero and Victorian celebrity with experience from the Sudan. By nature the general was a mystic. He was deeply religious and ever concerned with discovering God's intention so that he could comply with His will.

In the Sudan the dervishes awaited: a fundamentalist grass roots movement directed at corrupt rulers, foreigners and those who did not follow the true teachings of Islam as interpreted by Muhammad Achmed, the Mahdi ('divinely appointed'). His followers called themselves dervishes, meaning 'the impoverished' or 'those who have nothing to lose'. The Mahdi was a religious man from the same mould as Gordon. In 1881 he declared himself a prophet and claimed he had been sent to reverse the decline of Islam and re-introduce the faith to the Arab world at the point of a sword.

His opponent General Gordon saw himself as a Christian warrior fighting for the cross. Retreat had never figured in his vocabulary and after overseeing the evacuation Gordon decided to stay behind. It is questionable whether the Sudan would have been big enough to hold two such personalities as General Gordon and the Mahdi. Khartoum was certainly not. When Gladstone hesitated in sending troops to his aid, Gordon decided to hold the city alone against the dervishes. Unsurprisingly he found his fate there. Contemporary sources tell that his body was desecrated and body parts were carried around the streets in triumph. The Mahdi died some months after from typhoid fever.

The news of Gordon's death was met with a cry of rage from the British public. The press adored Gordon – the "hero of heroes" – for his faith in God, his love of battle and his commitment to the underprivileged in words and deed. The empire had abandoned one of its own. A penal expedition quenched the immediate thirst for revenge. But many issues demanded attention in the cabinet of the world's most powerful nation. Trouble arose in other corners of the world and the dervishes were left to rule Sudan as the pacifists in parliament demanded. In the thirteen years that followed, the dervishes brought about a humanitarian disaster that nearly depopulated the country. War, Hunger, Pestilence and Death. The movement failed in bringing about an Islamic revival. In Egypt the untiring administrator Baring continued his work. The country was to become one of Britain's best run colonies. His labours towards modernising the country's economy was to the benefit of a majority of the population and has led to some historians labelling him a 'father of modern Egypt'.

By contemporary standards Great Britain was at the beginning of the 1860s neither an imperialist nor expansionist country. A complex mixture of economic pressures and political events led to a step by

step militarization of foreign policy. The global net of military strongpoints was expanded, and interventions such as the one in Egypt become more commonplace though not everyday events. In 1910 the historian F. M. Sandwith wrote that the intervention in Egypt in 1882 led to a situation where Great Britain two years later found itself in a situation more complex and perilous than at any time in the preceding fifty years. The Egypt question and the death of General Gordon was a watershed in Britain's relations with the world. The events contributed to tipping the scales in favour of those who argued for taking up the 'white man's burden' and go out and make the world safer, more civilised, more British.

A century later it is too early to tell which of the sides were right over the decision to intervene in Egypt. We have yet to reach clarity on whether it is right for developed countries to intervene in order to drag less developed states into the future as defined by western leaders. Some claim that the British disarmed the first fascist dictator and saved the Egyptian people from the reign of terror witnessed in the Sudan, while others argue that the British intervention laid the cornerstone of the dysfunctional Egypt we see today. What remains certain is that the intervention triggered three quarters of a centu-

ry's formal British imperial rule in Africa and Asia.

The story of General Gordon and the Mahdi offers a number of parallels to the current situation – more than can be listed here. British superiority economically, technologically and militarily at the time is not dissimilar from the position of the United States at the beginning of the 21st century. The mysticism of General Gordon resounds in President Bush's belief that he is part of a divine plan. No-one knows what will come of the US intervention in Iraq. But what happened in the Sudan is a chilling precedent to what is happening in this country today while the West might again abandon the civilian population to fanatics. The story also stands as a bleak reminder for those who argue for a pull-out from Iraq, and a hand-over of the country to fundamentalists. But we seldom learn from history. Such insights are, as the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed, like the lantern on the stern – which shines only on the waves behind us.

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