

Liberal-in-Law

My sister-in-law Franny came over from Albuquerque in the summer with her daughter Xuexia. Franny and I have been sparring ever since we first met in London

more than 20 years ago. The first round went to Franny. I am not exactly sure what happened on that occasion—maybe we were talking about money, maybe she wanted to know where she could lay her hands on some sterling—but I found myself saying, with elaborate English irony, “I say, Franny, do you have those machines in America that you can stick plastic cards in and get money out of?” Franny looked steadily at me and decided she wasn’t going to take any of this garbage. “We invented them, a-hole,” she said. What a girl! You could have heard her laugh in Galveston.

Franny rightly takes pride in her country’s achievements, and in her own jokes, and she knows her mind, which may explain why she is a left-wing conspiracy nut. She gets her news not from the *Albuquerque Journal* or even from the *New York Times* but from the *Guardian* and BBC websites, from PBS and Air America and Rachel Maddow. I subsist on much the same diet, though with a little help from my friends at the *Salisbury Review* and, occasionally, *L’Osservatore Romano*.

We agree on some important stuff, Franny and I, especially on why it is a bad idea to bomb Arab women and children in the name of peace and democracy. But there is a Left-Right tension in our dealings. She has a high opinion of Barack Obama, and I do not. She believes we should still give Michael Jackson the benefit of the doubt, and I do not. She believes the LBJ administration may have been dealing drugs in an

attempt to destroy idealism in the young, and ... I do ... not.

So we had a lively time of it in London, and most of the time I controlled myself. Just occasionally, though, I would let go and suddenly find myself growing hair and turning into a yellow-dog Republican. No sooner had Franny unpacked her bags than she launched into such a violent attack on the “Nazi” Fox News that I found myself defending Bill O’Reilly. No, really.

Worse was to come. A couple of days later, in an Italian café near the British Museum, Franny said she thought that Woodrow Wilson got things pretty much right, especially with the League of Nations, and I started to run around in circles and bark. Lookee here, Franny, I growled: not only should the U.S. not

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have intervened in World War I, but she should probably have stayed out of World War II as well. Plus, I yelped, George W. Bush was driven by idealism in 2001 to 2003, which just goes to show how dangerous Wilsonianism can be.

I was becoming someone I’d rather not be. I was starting to sound like Ed Anger. I was ashamed of myself. I hung my head, I hung my head.

But politics is a nasty and usually futile business. Later, I began to wonder whether Franny might have had a point about Wilson. It is an article of faith on

the anti-neocon Right—where I still have a mailbox—that Bush and his buddies were “Wilsonian interventionists/internationalists/imperialists.” Yet how true is that? Of course Wilson, like Bush, was a dangerous liberal, and again like Bush, he believed in manifest destiny. Unlike Bush, however, he also believed in international law and international cooperation, no matter that he made a mess of things abroad. If Bush had been as willing to embrace the UN as the 28th president of the United States had been willing, in theory, to embrace the League of Nations, the world might have been spared a lot of misery and the U.S. much embarrassment.

That’s enough idle speculation, however. You never know where it will lead. The last thing we need right now, I suppose, is a rehabilitation of Woodrow Wilson. In any case, it all ended well here in London, as I rather thought it would. Franny and I found common ground in Buckingham Palace. My

sister-in-law may be a man of the people, but she does like our royals. She and Xuexia went round the palace like a couple of girls from a parochial school in the 1950s. I was proud of them. Not all American visitors are quite as respectful. Last time I visited Buckingham Palace I spent some time in the company of a young car mechanic from New Jersey, who looked around nodding appreciatively. “Hey, this is great,” he said. “Know what it reminds me of? Graceland.” There’s only one word for a guy like that, right, Franny? ■

These Colors Run Red

The U.S. follows the Soviet Union into Afghanistan.

By Andrew J. Bacevich

WITH THE 30TH anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan approaching, the question retains its fascination: Why did the Russians do it? The misguided Afghan War sounded the death knell of the Soviet empire. How could they have been so stupid?

With the United States several years into its own Afghan War, the question possesses more than academic interest. However wrapped in irony and paradox, history is offering us instruction that we ignore at our peril.

When it came to divining the motive behind that Soviet invasion, Richard Pipes, the Harvard historian and Russian expert, expressed considerable certainty. As he told the *New York Times* in early 1980, the incursion into Afghanistan showed that the Soviets were on the march. "Russians do not seize territories that have no strategic importance," Pipes announced.

Afghanistan has no natural resources of importance, and the risk of antagonizing the West is very high for a bit of mountainous territory with a primitive economy, with a population that has never been subdued by any colonial power.

To run all these risks for the sake of occupying this territory makes little sense—unless you have some ultimate, higher strategic objectives.

Pipes and others believed the ultimate Soviet objective was to seize control of Persian Gulf oil, something they insisted the United States prevent. Pres-

ident Jimmy Carter heeded that demand. In what became enshrined as the Carter Doctrine, he declared that attempts "by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf" would constitute "an assault on the vital interests of the United States," to be "repelled by any means necessary." Everyone understood "outside force" to be a thinly veiled reference to the Soviet Union.

Yet in reality, the Kremlin had no intention of using Afghanistan as a jumping-off point for a grand offensive across Iran and Iraq to the oil El Dorado of Saudi Arabia. Nor did the Soviet legions possess the capability of doing so. Pipes got it wrong. According to their own lights, the Soviets had entered Afghanistan for defensive purposes—to prevent this remote outpost of communism from slipping out of the Soviet orbit.

Allow the Afghans to go their own way, and other Soviet satellites might follow—or so the Kremlin feared. To preserve their empire, therefore, Soviet leaders embarked upon what became a costly, open-ended war, oblivious to the fact that the real threats to their empire were internal: the Soviet economy had stagnated, and the Soviet system was fast losing its legitimacy. The Kremlin's stubborn insistence on keeping a grip on Afghanistan served only to hasten the empire's demise—a process helped along when the U.S. and its allies famously funneled arms and money to Afghan "freedom fighters" resisting Soviet occupation.

Meanwhile, the force that actually

threatened the Persian Gulf appeared not outside but inside: Saddam Hussein's Iraq. During the 1980s, Washington had forged a marriage of convenience with Saddam, supporting his war of aggression against the Islamic Republic of Iran. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, President George H.W. Bush called the marriage off and thereafter denied its existence. The Carter Doctrine underwent a subtle transformation: preventing outsiders from dominating the Gulf no longer sufficed; defending the Gulf now required that the United States establish itself in a position of unquestioned primacy. The Gulf War began the effort, still ongoing, to incorporate the Persian Gulf more directly into the American empire.

That effort offended the sensibilities of some Muslims and provoked considerable resistance. American officials spent the next decade fixating on Saddam, said to be the source of all the woes afflicting that part of the world. In the meantime, a more genuinely dangerous adversary was gravitating to Afghanistan, of all places. By the 1990s, Afghan freedom fighters that Washington had enthusiastically supported in the 1980s were providing sanctuary to violent Islamists who wanted to wage *jihād* against the United States, primarily in retribution for sins committed under the aegis of the Carter Doctrine. Only with the events of 9/11 did Americans awaken—albeit only briefly—to the fact that efforts to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet Vietnam had produced poison fruit. When the Soviets