

My Charlie Wilson War

by Fatima Bhutto

Why is the University of Texas naming a chair of Pakistan Studies after the notorious U.S. congressman who helped destabilize that country? Fatima Bhutto—niece of the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto—demands an answer.

Pakistan's new government, the only in the world headed by two former convicts—who have their fingers on the button of a nuclear-armed state, no less—is nothing if not a keen purveyor of irony.

There's currently an effort underway by the Pakistani diplomatic mission in Texas to raise funds for a chair of Pakistan Studies at the University of Texas in Austin. The chair, a dream of the Pakistani diplomatic community, is to be named after Charlie Wilson. For those who missed the movie, it's worth noting that of all the people to name a chair of Pakistani Studies after, Charlie Wilson is possibly the stupidest.

Why Pakistan would chose to honor Wilson is beyond everyone, even the Texans.

“Good-Time Charlie,” as Wilson was affectionately known by Afghan warlords and Texan socialites alike, has the dubious reputation of being the godfather of what would later be known as the Taliban in Afghanistan. (He was also buddies with Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza.) In the 1980s, Wilson led Congress into supporting the CIA covert operation aimed at funneling money and arms into Afghanistan through Pakistan's military and secret services, the ISI. That money, it should be said, did not go to Afghan refugees fleeing the Soviet's communist invasion. No, it went to the mujahideen in the form of \$17 million worth of anti-aircraft weapons, armaments, and other war toys. By the end of 1983, Wilson had managed to siphon \$300 million of unused Pentagon cash to the Afghan mujahideen. Before they were the Taliban bad boys of the region, the mujahideen were one of Wilson's pet projects. And now, Pakistan has decided to honor him by naming a chair of studies after him.

Personally, this is a source of great revulsion for me. My aunt, Benazir, and I never agreed on much, and though she's no longer alive to debate the point, my guess is that the idea of such a chair would be one more thing we'd not see eye to eye on—she had quite a different relationship with the Taliban than I do.

Why Pakistan would choose to honor Wilson is beyond everyone, even the Texans. According to the university's newspaper, the Charlie Wilson Chair prompted several professors to send a letter to the dean questioning the naming of the chair. And the Pakistanis? The liberal arts development office at the university said that it “has not heard any concerns from the Pakistani community about the naming of the chair.”

Well if that's the case, count me as the first. There's no need to go back in history to find this choice outrageous. Wilson's legacy remains omnipresent in Pakistan. Inspired by the success of

its neighbors, Pakistan now has their very own Taliban (thank you, Charlie), and the ISI continues to exert its might over the country in a distinctly undemocratic way.

Before 2008 was over, Wilson's boys, the Taliban, had trickled from Pakistan's northern tribal borders into the heart of the country. They took over Peshawar, once a garden city known for its Buddhist heritage, and in December attacked the Peshawar Model School. The school, which offers co-education to approximately 12,000 of the city's underprivileged girls and boys, had twelve of its school buses set afire, and a tightly packed set of dynamite detonated in the principal's office. Several groundskeepers and staff were critically wounded by the explosion and the school was forced to shut down for several days.

But that's nothing compared to the militants' hold on the northern city of Swat, the site of a violent civil war that the militants are considered to have won over the past year. The Taliban has set a January 15 deadline in Swat for girls to stop attending school. The choice given to Swat's parents: take your girls out of school voluntarily, or face Taliban-style justice. Young schoolgirls have already been attacked, a warning of what's to come should the city continue with its dastardly plan to educate girls.

Wilson's other pet project, Pakistan's powerful ISI, also remains a newsmaker. India has been pushing Pakistan to admit that the recent Mumbai attacks were linked to a militant group that was supported by the ISI for years – an accusation Pakistan has not yet accepted, though militants captured in raids earlier this month have supported India's suspicions. And the Pakistan government would like to hush up the fact that its predecessor, Benazir Bhutto's administration, aided the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan in 1996, and was one of only three countries in the world to recognize the Taliban government, the others being Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Bhutto's minister of the interior, Naserullah Babar, a ruthless man who carried a cane walking stick, publicly called the Taliban "my boys."

My father, an elected member of parliament, was killed while my aunt was prime minister of Pakistan (by her police force, no less). I was always vocally critical of her government's extra-judicial killings, rife in Karachi at the time. And I spoke out against her corruption and her nepotistically guided politics, which she didn't like very much. But it's her role in recognizing the Taliban that is the gift that truly keeps on giving to me.

See, my email address is public—Google it if you'd like—and I get hundreds of emails a day from Pakistanis. Most are kind and supportive, written by frustrated fellow citizens appalled at the state of our country, seeking someone to commiserate with and debate with. But some are from complete loons, fundamentalist types: "Shame on you," read one recent email. "Yr a disgrace to the veeson (sic) of Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto. She has supported the Muslim brothers in Afghanistan and given the blessing of Pakistan to the fighting sons of the mujahideen... Yr a disgrace to our women, your hairs are uncovered and your arms are bare, dressing in western clothes. You'll see wat we'll do to you when inshallah we are the powerful. Cover yr breasts."

It was a charming email, a sign of how far Charlie Wilson's Taliban has come in Pakistan.

Senator John McCain, unable to focus on what should be a not-so-early retirement, is busy swinging back and forth between India and Pakistan, coddling one country and scolding the other, all the while warning us all that Pakistan is within an inch of being aeri ally attacked by India. Maybe the Pakistani diplomatic mission can get cracking on funding a chair of Pakistan Studies named after McCain and Condi Rice, who very kindly eased tensions between India and Pakistan and dropped discreet hints that Pakistan may want to rein in Wilson's chums at the ISI.

So, why not? Maybe one Charlie Wilson Chair of Pakistan Studies simply isn't enough. Maybe Pakistani diplomatic missions the world over can corral their efforts and set up a whole Charlie Wilson syllabus: Funding Fundamentalists 101; Intro to Training Third-World Secret Services; Right-Wing Dictatorships: Where Have They Gone?

I'd love to sign up for a few classes. Too bad I'm a girl.

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