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"Freedom of the Press belongs to those who own one."

A. J. Liebling of the New Yorker

October 13, 2001



Uzbekistan

I t has been 15 years since I was in Uzbekistan. I went there on a tour with a very small group of aging Cold Warriors, including the former Number Two in the CIA for 40 years. We were there to witness the final throes of the old Soviet Empire. Uzbekistan was then part of the old Soviet Empire. I remember thinking how different it was from the sterile atmosphere of Moscow from whence we had come by that awful Russian airline Aeroflot.

Uzbekistan was certainly not a European culture. Alexander Borodin's fantastic symphony "In the Steppes of Central Asia" is not just some of the world's most beautiful music, but is descriptive of the area - as is the modern counterpart "Kismet," which reflects both the majesty and the cruelty of the area.

Uzbekistan was obviously a Moslem culture, and it was equally obviously foreign to Communist economics because the farmers market was HUGE, and the people were bright and walked with their heads up. I do remember taking Aeroflot back to Moscow with goats in the aisle and boxes of vegetables everywhere as the Uzbeks tried mightily to feed Russia.

Uzbekistan is certainly not a modern country, but its alliance with us in the current fight is vital because, despite the media love affair with Pakistan, it is from Uzbekistan that our Special Forces are probably operating.

Coverage of Pakistan makes more sense for correspondents. It has nuclear weapons, more modern media utilities, and, more importantly, better hotels for the media to relax.

Uzbekistan has little of anything, except for an airfield (currently guarded by 1,200 American



Commentary

soldiers) from whence Special Ops are probably launched. There are no riots in Uzbekistan, so there is nothing for TV crews to film. It is harsh country, populated by people with a violent past, a feature it shares with its southern neighbor, Afghanistan. Apparently, radical Islamic culture did not court the Uzbeks because they did not own the "Islamic Bomb" as does Pakistan.

There was a small cadre of radical Uzbeks who sided and fought with the Taliban in its fight to take over Afghanistan, but radical Islamic recruiting has never had much success among the proud Uzbeks. In fact, when the radicals returned to Uzbekistan from their success in supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan, they tried to take over Uzbekistan from the secular government, only to be defeated and driven into the hills to lick their wounds. They have never threatened again.

Uzbeks are a fierce tribe. Tamerlane, born near Samerkand in Uzbekistan, conquered the Persian Empire, took Syria, and almost all of India. The Uzbeks have fought with and against the best, including Alexander the Great.

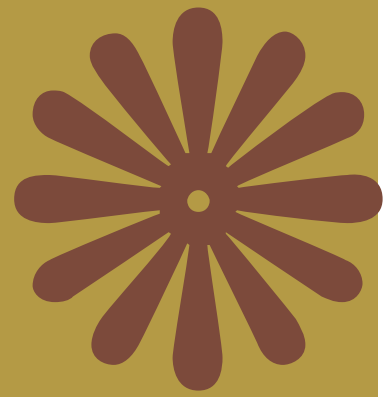
The Uzbeks, living under a secular government, now host our troops. I wonder how they feel about it. Because Uzbeks are historically a fierce people - and they hated the Russians with a passion - I suspect they are quietly proud that our most feared fighters are in their homeland. Fortunately, Uzbeks were so far from the Russian flagpole that the area did not appear to even be part of the Evil Empire

I admit a certain good feeling about the Uzbeks. This past week, an AP reporter approached a Colonel in the Uzbek Army to inquire about the Uzbek support of the American attack.

"Yes, we are allies," the Army Colonel told the American journalist. "Now go away."

Sage advice, and spoken like a warrior. I respect that man.

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A life spent
making
mistakes is not
only more
honorable but
also more
useful than a
life spent
doing nothing.
— George
Bernard Shaw

