

Afghanistan Graveyard of Empires

Milton Bearden

THE GREAT GAME

MICHNI POINT, Pakistan's last outpost at the western end of the barren, winding Khyber Pass, stands sentinel over Torkham Gate, the deceptively orderly border crossing into Afghanistan. Frontier Scouts in gray *shalwar kameezes* (traditional tunics and loose pants) and black berets patrol the lonely station commanded by a major of the legendary Khyber Rifles, the militia force that has been guarding the border with Afghanistan since the nineteenth century, first for British India and then for Pakistan. This spot, perhaps more than any other, has witnessed the traverse of the world's great armies on campaigns of conquest to and from South and Central Asia. All eventually ran into trouble in their encounters with the unruly Afghan tribals.

Alexander the Great sent his supply trains through the Khyber, then skirted northward with his army to the Konar Valley on his campaign in 327 BC. There he ran into fierce resistance and, struck by an Afghan archer's arrow, barely made it to the Indus River with his life. Genghis Khan and the great Mughal emperors began passing through the Khyber a millennium later and ultimately established the greatest of empires-but only after reaching painful accommodations with the Afghans. From Michni Point, a trained eye can still see the ruins of the Mughal signal towers used to relay complex torch-light messages 1,500 miles from Calcutta to Bukhara in less than an hour.

In the nineteenth century the Khyber became the fulcrum of the Great Game, the contest between the United Kingdom and Russia for control

of Central Asia and India. The first Afghan War (1839-42) began when British commanders sent a huge army of British and Indian troops into Afghanistan to secure it against Russian incursions, replacing the ruling emir with a British protégé. Facing Afghan opposition, by January 1842 the British were forced to withdraw from Kabul with a column of 16,500 soldiers and civilians, heading east to the garrison at Jalalabad, 110 miles away. Only a single survivor of that group ever made it to Jalalabad safely, though the British forces did recover some prisoners many months later.

According to the late Louis Dupree, the premier historian of Afghanistan, four factors contributed to the British disaster: the occupation of Afghan territory by foreign troops, the placing of an unpopular emir on the throne, the harsh acts of the British -supported Afghans against their local enemies, and the reduction of the subsidies paid to the tribal chiefs by British political agents. The British would repeat these mistakes in the second Afghan War (1878-81), as would the Soviets a century later; the United States would be wise to consider them today.

In the aftermath of the second British misadventure in Afghanistan, Rudyard Kipling penned his immortal lines on the role of the local women in tidying up the battlefields:

*When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains
and the women come out to cut up what remains
Jest roll to your rite an' blowout your brains
An' go to your Gawd like a soldier.*

The British fought yet a third war with Afghanistan in 1917, an encounter that neither burnished British martial history nor subdued the Afghan people. But by the end of World War I, that phase of the Great Game was over. During World War II, Afghanistan flirted with Aryanism and the Third Reich, becoming, fleetingly, "the Switzerland" of Central Asia in a new game of intrigue as Allied and Axis coalitions jockeyed for position in the region. But after the war the country settled back into

its natural state of ethnic and factional squabbling. The Soviet Union joined in from the sidelines, but Afghanistan was so remote from the consciousness of the West that scant attention was paid to it until the last king, Zahir Shah, was deposed in 1973. Then began the cycle of conflict that continues to the present.



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Not much left to lose: outside Kabul, Afghanistan, September 2, 2001

RUSSIAN ROULETTE

AFGHANISTAN FESTERED through the 1970S, but with the seizure of power in Kabul by Nur Mohammed Taraki in 1978, the country began a rapid spiral into anarchy. Washington's ambassador in Kabul, Adolph Dubs, was kidnapped in February 1979 and later killed during a failed rescue attempt; the next month, Hafizullah Amin seized the prime minister ship along with much of Taraki's power; and eight months later, on Christmas Eve, after watching the disintegration of order for much of a decade, the Kremlin decided to try its hand at military adventure.

The Soviets began with a modern repetition of the fatal British error of installing an unpopular "emir" on the Afghan "throne." The operation was marked by a brutal efficiency: Hafizullah Amin was killed under mysterious circumstances, Kabul was secured, and the Soviets put their man, Babrak Karmal, at the helm of the Afghan government. It looked initially as if the Soviets' optimistic prediction that they would be in and out of Afghanistan almost before anyone noticed might prove correct. Certainly, President Jimmy Carter was too preoccupied with the hostage crisis in Iran to give much thought to Afghanistan, or so the Kremlin believed. To Moscow's surprise, however, Carter reacted quickly and decisively.

He cancelled a number of pending agreements with the Soviet Union, ranging from wheat sales to consular exchanges; he set in motion the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics; and, much more quietly and decisively, he signed a presidential finding that tasked the CIA with the organization of aid, including arms and military support, to the Afghan people in their resistance to the Soviet occupation. In January 1980, Carter sent his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, for consultations with Pakistani leaders who were already supporting the Afghan resistance. On a side trip from Islamabad, Brzezinski traveled the length of the Khyber Pass to the outpost at Michni Point, where he was photographed squinting along the sights of a Soviet AK-47 assault rifle, its muzzle elevated and pointing into Afghanistan. In that moment, the president's national security adviser became the symbol of the impending U.S. phase of involvement in Afghanistan's endless martial history.

The CIA had to scramble to comply with the president's order. But within weeks it had organized its first weapons delivery—a shipment of several thousand venerable Enfield .303 rifles, the standard weapon of the Afghan tribals—to the resistance fighters who were already beginning to snipe at the Soviet invaders. During the 1980s, the agency would deliver several hundred thousand tons of weapons and ordnance to Pakistan for distribution to the Afghan fighters known to the world as

mujahideen, the soldiers of God. The coalition of countries supporting the resistance grew to an impressive collection that included the United States, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and China. Lining up behind seven separate and fractious Afghan resistance leaders based in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, the mujahideen field commanders were allotted their supplies and sent off to face the Soviet forces.

For the first five years of its covert war, the CIA attempted to maintain plausible deniability. Its officers in Pakistan kept a low profile, and the weapons it supplied to the mujahideen, with the exception of the British Enfields, were models manufactured in Warsaw Pact countries.

An additional advantage of using Soviet bloc weapons was that the mujahideen could use any ammunition they could capture from army garrisons of the puppet Democratic Republic of Afghanistan-or buy, with American dollars, from corrupt DRA quartermasters or even Red Army supply officers.

By 1985, the Soviet 40th Army had grown from its original, limited expeditionary force to an occupation force of around 120,000 troops, widely dispersed at garrisons around the country. But as the Soviet forces grew, so did the Afghan resistance. By the mid-1980s the mujahideen had more than 250,000 full- or part-time fighters in the field, and though they and the civilian population had suffered horrendous losses-a million dead and 1.5 million injured, plus 6 million more driven into internal and external exile-the Soviet forces were also beginning to suffer.

As the CIA became more deeply involved in its covert proxy war with the Soviet Union, it became clear to President Ronald Reagan's new CIA director, William Casey, that the conflict had stalemated. The United States was fighting the Soviets to the last Afghan in a confrontation that could run on indefinitely. By 1985 Soviet air tactics had been refined, and the mujahideen suffered increasing casualties from the growing Soviet fleet of heavily armored MI-24D attack helicopters.

The Afghans had nothing in their arsenal adequate to defend against this equipment and so, after a heated debate and heavy pressure from Congress, the White House decided to provide them with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. The Stingers entered the war a month after Mikhail Gorbachev's seminal August 1986 speech in Vladivostok, where he described the conflict, now in its seventh year, as a "bleeding wound." U.S. intelligence at the time, however, indicated that as he uttered those first words of disengagement, he also gave his generals one year to bring the Afghans under control, using whatever force necessary. Three months earlier the Soviets had replaced the failing Babrak Karmal with the brutal, sadistic secret-police chief Mohammed Najibullah, a move that only stiffened mujahideen resistance and set the scene for the endgame of the Soviets) Afghan adventure.

Two events in the late summer of 1986 changed the course of the war. On August 20 a lucky shot by the mujahideen sent a 107 mm rocket into a DRA supply dump on the outskirts of Kabul, setting off secondary explosions that destroyed tens of thousands of tons of ordnance, lighting up the skies of the Afghan capital by night and smoldering during the day. A month later, on September 26, a team led by a resistance commander with the unlikely name of Ghaffar ("the forgiver," one of the 99 names of Allah) brought down three MI-24 helicopters in the first Stinger ambush of the war. The effect of these events on the mujahideen was electric, and within days the setbacks for the Soviet forces were snowballing, with one or two aircraft per day falling from the skies at the end of the Stingers' telltale white plumes.

When the snows melted in the high passes for the new fighting season of 1987, diplomatic activity intensified, with the United States represented by the exceptionally able Michael Armacost, the under-secretary of state for political affairs. It had become clear not only to Gorbachev and his negotiators but also to his generals in the field that there would be no letup in Afghanistan, and that the time to consider disengagement had come. On April 14, 1988, after agonized negotiations over such tortured concepts as "negative symmetry" in drawing down supplies to the

combatants, the Geneva Accords ending Soviet involvement in Afghanistan were signed. The date for the final withdrawal of all Soviet forces was set at February 15, 1989, a timetable that the commander of the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan, General Boris Gromov, choreographed to the last moment of the last day. February 15 also marked the end of outside military support to both sides in the war, at least in theory.

Gromov wanted arrangements to be just right. The international press was shuttled from nearby Termez, Uzbekistan, to a special press center, complete with a new, covered pavilion. The body of a hapless minesweeper had been quietly carried across the Friendship Bridge before the press had time to reason that his blanket-wrapped form was the last Russian soldier killed in the ten-year war. The cameras of several dozen news services zoomed in on the center of the bridge, where a lone Soviet tank had pulled to a halt. The diminutive Soviet general jumped from the turret, pulled his battle-dress tunic into place, and strode purposely over the last hundred yards toward the Soviet side of the Amu Darya. Just before he reached the end of the bridge, his son Maksim, a slim, awkward 14-year-old, greeted his father with a stiff embrace and presented him with a bouquet of red carnations. Son and father marched the last 50 yards out of Afghanistan together.

ARABIAN KNIGHTS

IN TEN YEARS OF WAR, the Soviet Union admitted to having had about 15,000 troops killed in action, several hundred thousand wounded, and tens of thousands dead from disease. The true numbers might be higher, but they are not worth debating. What followed Gromov's exit grew rapidly into a cataclysm for the Soviets and a national disaster for the Afghans.

The first signs came in May 1989, when an already emboldened Hungarian government correctly concluded it could open its border with Austria without fear of Soviet intervention. That signal act was followed

a month later by the stunning election of a Solidarity majority in Poland's parliament, ending that country's nearly half-century of communist rule. Throughout the summer of 1989, the people of East Germany took to the streets, first in small numbers, then gaining strength and courage in the tens and hundreds of thousands until, on the night of November 9, 1989, in a comedy of errors and miscues, the Berlin Wall was breached and Germans surged from east to west. The world had hardly digested these events when Czechoslovakia's Vaclav Havel and his band of dissidents from the Magic Lantern theater carried out their own Velvet Revolution a month later.

With the world's eyes focused almost exclusively on the historic events in Eastern Europe, or on the vivid image of a young demonstrator staring down a Chinese tank in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the drama unfolding in Afghanistan received scant attention. Though there were heroic efforts by relief agencies to provide humanitarian aid, the senior officials of President George H.W. Bush's administration did not look back to that former war zone, their energies instead consumed by the stunning denouement of the Cold War.

In the turn away from Afghanistan, the United States would dismiss even its staunch ally, Pakistan. No longer able to stave off congressionally mandated sanctions triggered by its nuclear weapons development program, Pakistan fell out of Washington's favor. As the 1990s began with great hope elsewhere in the world, in Afghanistan a new post-Cold War construct started taking shape: the failed state. And as it failed and spun into anarchy, Afghanistan became the home of a new and little understood threat: the aggrieved Arab extremist.

The role of the so-called Afghan Arabs in the ten-year war against the Soviet occupation is the subject of much debate and misinformed commentary. By early 1980, the call to jihad (holy war) had reached all corners of the Islamic world, attracting Arabs young and old and with a variety of motivations to travel to Pakistan to take up arms and cross the border to fight against the Soviet invaders in Afghanistan. There were

genuine volunteers on missions of humanitarian value, there were adventure seekers looking for paths to glory, and there were psychopaths. As the war dragged on, a number of Arab states discreetly emptied their prisons of homegrown troublemakers and sent them off to the jihad with the fervent hope that they might not return. Over the ten years of war as many as 25,000 Arabs may have passed through Pakistan and Afghanistan. At one time the CIA considered having volunteer Arab legions take part in the war, but the idea was scrapped as unwise and unworkable. Despite what has often been written, the CIA never recruited, trained, or otherwise used the Arab volunteers who arrived in Pakistan. The idea that the Afghans somehow needed fighters from outside their culture was deeply flawed and ignored basic historical and cultural facts. The Arabs who did travel to Afghanistan from Peshawar were generally considered nuisances by mujahideen commanders, some of whom viewed them as only slightly less bothersome than the Soviets. As fundraisers, however, the Arabs from the Persian Gulf played a positive, often critical role in the background of the war. During some months in 1987 and 1988, Arab fundraisers in both Pakistan and their home countries raised as much as \$25 million for their largely humanitarian and construction projects. Among the more prominent of these Arab fundraisers was one Osama bin Ladin, the son of a Saudi billionaire.



Active in Afghanistan since the early 1980s, having previously worked in the Persian Gulf to recruit Arabs for the jihad, bin Ladin focused his early energies on construction projects, building orphanages and homes for widows as well as roads and bunker systems in eastern Afghanistan. He and a few of his Saudi followers saw some combat in 1987, while associated with the Islamic Unity Party of Abdul Rasul Sayaf, an Egyptian-trained Afghan member of the Muslim Brotherhood who later in the jihad embraced Saudi Wahhabism. At the crucial battles of Jaji and Ali Khel, Sayaf and his Saudis acquitted themselves well by stopping a Soviet and DRA advance that could have resulted in large-

scale destruction of mujahideen supply dumps and staging areas in the province of Paktia. More than two dozen Saudis died in those engagements, and the military legend of Osama bin Ladin was born.

But at this point in the war, few were concerned about the role of the Afghan Arabs, with the exception of growing criticism by Western humanitarian organizations of the harsh fundamentalism of the Saudi Wahhabis and Deobandis whose influence in the refugee camps in Pakistan, now bursting with about three million Afghans, was pervasive. It was in these squalid tamps that a generation of young Afghan males would be born into and raised in the strictest fundamentalism of the Deobandi *madrassas* (Islamic schools). It was here that the seeds of the Taliban were sown.

COME, MR. TALIBAN

THOUGH the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, it was not until April 1992 that the mujahideen finally took Kabul, killed Najibullah, and declared what passed for victory. Their triumph would be short-lived. Old hatreds and ethnic realities once again drove events, and without the unifying presence of foreign armies on Afghan soil, the state of Afghanistan simply fell apart. The civil war resumed with horrendous brutality until the population was ready for any path to peace, and wononepresendihclf

Rising almost mystically from the sheer chaos, the Taliban (derived from a Persian word meaning Islamic students or seekers), began to form under the leadership of a one-eyed cleric from Oruzgan province in central Afghanistan, who the world would come to know as Mullah Mohammad Omar. More as a result of timing than of military might, they swept through the Pashtun world of eastern Afghanistan, a welcome relief from the brigands controlling the valleys and mountain passes. By 1996 the Taliban had seized Kabul, and the Afghan people seemed to accept their deliverance. The West fleetingly saw the Taliban as the source of a new order and a possible tool in yet another replay of the

Great Game-the race for the energy riches of Central Asia. U.S. and foreign oil firms were looking for ways to pipe the vast natural-gas reserves of Turkmenistan to energy starved markets in Pakistan. By 1996, most of the route of the proposed pipeline was loosely under Taliban control, and the match of politics, power, and energy seemed attractive. But the optimism was short-lived. In 1997, plans for the Afghan pipeline were shelved and the country began an even sharper downward spiral, as the Taliban over-reached in their quest to take control of the country. Their atrocious human rights record and treatment of women drew international scorn, and with the exception of diplomatic recognition from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan, Afghanistan was in total isolation. Its failure as a state of any recognizable form was now complete.

Against this backdrop, the Afghan Arab troublemakers began to drift back to Afghanistan. Many of them, including Osama bin Ladin, had left Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat, full of determination to bring about radical societal change in their home countries. All failed, and many began roaming among the few remaining states in the world that served as safe havens for their kind, mostly behind the Iron Curtain. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the would-be terrorists of the world fell on hard times. They lost their playgrounds in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, and even the redoubtable Carlos pitched up in Khartoum-where, coincidentally, bin Ladin had also settled after a failed attempt to bring about change in his Saudi homeland. Bin Ladin engaged in a number of agricultural, construction, and business ventures, but most of his consciousness was consumed by a brooding hatred of the United States. This passion grew during the Gulf War, and five years later, with U.S. troops still stationed in Saudi Arabia, bin Ladin's rage found its final form. It would be the United States against which he would concentrate all of his energies.

By 1995, however, bin Ladin's presence in Sudan had become an issue both for the United States and for Saudi Arabia, which by this time had stripped bin Ladin of his Saudi citizenship. The Sudanese were quietly

told that bin Ladin was a major obstacle to improved relations, and that Khartoum would be wise to ask him to leave. Sudan had already begun ridding itself of undesirables. In a dramatic setup, Carlos, stretched out on a Khartoum hospital operating table having a vasectomy reversed, was abruptly bundled up by French security officers and spirited off to Paris to stand trial for earlier crimes. According to a PBS *Frontline* television interview with Sudanese President Umar Hassan al-Bashir, the Sudanese government offered to keep bin Ladin on a tight leash, or even hand him over to the Saudis or the Americans. The Saudis reportedly declined the offer, for fear his presence would only cause more trouble in the royal kingdom, and the United States reportedly passed because it had no indictable complaints against bin Ladin at the time. In 1996, then, on U.S. and Saudi instructions, bin Ladin was expelled from Sudan, and he moved to the last stop on the terror line, Afghanistan.

Still relatively unknown to the public, bin Ladin came into view through a CNN interview in 1997, when he claimed that his disciples had been behind the killing of 18 American soldiers in Somalia in 1993. The next year he issued a *fatwa*, an Islamic decree, of questionable authenticity, calling for all-out war against all Americans. But it was in August 1998 that he was indelibly etched into the world's consciousness, when terrorists thought to have links to his Al Qaeda organization struck simultaneously at American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 persons, including 12 Americans, and wounding 5,000. The U.S. response was quick but futile---J5 cruise missiles were launched at bin Ladin's training camps in Afghanistan and at a pharmaceutical factory suspected of producing precursors for chemical weapons in Sudan. Bin Ladin escaped unharmed, and the attack on the Sudanese pharmaceutical factory remains a smoldering controversy to this day.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

SINCE 1998, the hunt for bin Ladin has been the driving force behind U.S. policy toward Afghanistan. Though the Taliban have repeatedly claimed that the Saudi has been under their control and incapable of fomenting the various attacks with which he is charged-including that against the U.S.S. *Cole* in Aden and those on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon-the U.S. government has little doubt that bin Ladin is the culprit. The confrontation with him and those who shelter him is at the point of no return.

It probably could not be otherwise, but how this first engagement in the new U.S. war on terrorism is conducted will be crucial to all that follows. The coalition being carefully constructed will function differently from that built for the Gulf War a decade ago. The bulk of the military tasks in that brief war against Iraq were intended from the outset to be carried out by the Americans, the British, and the French. The participation of the Arab states was not crucial to the fighting, though it was crucial to the U.S. ability to operate from bases near Iraq. In this new conflict, the roles will, in many ways, be reversed. The coalition partners from the Arab and Islamic states will have specific, front-line operational roles. They will serve as force multipliers for the usual alliance of American and European intelligence and security services and special operations forces. If the terror network is to be dismantled, it will be with help from the security services of Pakistan, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, and a few others, not from the exclusive efforts of the United States or its European allies.

So the tale ends where it began, at Michni Point. As the Bush administration balances its military and political goals, plans to send U.S. troops into Afghanistan to seize bin Ladin should be weighed carefully for their practicality and political implications. Strident calls to add the overthrow of the Taliban regime to the list of American objectives may be attractive in terms of human rights, but that objective, too, must be weighed against the goal of making certain that the events of September 11 are not repeated.

Some have called for arming and forming an alliance with Afghanistan's now-leaderless Northern Alliance. This grouping of commanders, meticulously pulled together in shifting alliances by the late Ahmed Shah Masoud, now holds about ten percent of Afghan territory. Already the recipient of military and financial support from Russia and Iran, it seems a logical partner in the U.S. quest to locate and neutralize the bin Ladin network and replace the Taliban regime.

But that is not a *wise* course—not simply because of the cold irony of allying ourselves with the Russians in any fight in Afghanistan, but because it *is* not likely to achieve either goal. It is more than doubtful that the Northern Alliance forces could capture bin Ladin and his followers, and there is no reasonable guarantee that they could dislodge the Taliban. On the contrary, the more likely consequences of a U.S. alliance with the late Masoud's fighters would be the coalescing of Afghanistan's majority Pashtun tribes around their Taliban leaders and the rekindling of a brutal, general *civil* war that would continue until the United States simply gave up. The dominant tribe in Afghanistan, which also happens to be the largest, will dominate; replacing the Pashtun Taliban with the largely Tajik and Uzbek Northern Alliance is close to impossible. The threat of providing covert assistance to the Northern Alliance might be a useful short-term strategy to pressure the Taliban, if it is handled delicately, but any real military alliance to Masoud's successors will backfire.

The administration would do better to try to draw off segments of the Pashtun population only loosely allied with the Taliban regime. Those Pashtuns who signed on with the Taliban over the last five years did so because the Taliban seemed at the time to offer a fair chance for peace after decades of indescribably brutal war. They did not sign on to fight the United States, whose military might many of them will recall from the struggle against the Soviet occupation. The administration seems to realize this, and it is now moving quietly, gathering resources in the land of the Pashtun.

If anyone is to replace an emir in Afghanistan, it will have to be the people of Afghanistan themselves. Any doubters should ask the British and the Russians.

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