

INVADING AFGHANISTAN, 1838-2006: POLITICS AND PACIFICATION

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“More fighting still! when will this country be pacified?”

--Alexander Burnes, Chief British political officer in Kabul, July 1841. ¹

“There is no single piece of land in this country which has not been occupied by a Soviet soldier. Nevertheless, the majority of the territory remains in the hands of rebels...There is no single military problem that has arisen and that has not been solved, and yet there is still no result. The whole problem is in the fact that military results are not followed up by political”.

--Sergei Akhrome'ev, Soviet Deputy Minister of Defence, November 1986. ²

Conventional western views of Afghanistan stem from British imperial history. They describe Afghans as lecherous, treacherous, and dangerous to attack. Thus, just after the USSR occupied Afghanistan in 1979, the Politbureau predicted resistance, because of “the well-known historic and national peculiarities of the Afghans”. In 1986, it explained the failure of its “honest and noble” intervention, by reference to “the most important national and historical factors, above all the fact that the appearance of armed foreigners in Afghanistan was always met with arms in the hands”. ³ This record is not entirely right. Until 1838, few countries were easier to conquer than Afghanistan, its population divided, and armies weak. Alexander, Babur, Tamerlane and Chinghiz Khan did the deed, to name just a few from hundreds. Since 1838 the story has changed, yet

¹ Mohan Lal, *Life of the Amir Dost Mohammed Khan of Kabul, Volume II* (Karachi, 1978: original, 1846) , p. 388.

² *The Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp 178-81.

³*ibid.*, pp 163-65; *The National Security Archive, The September 11th Notebooks, Volume II, Afghanistan, Lessons from the Last War, The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Russian Documents and Memoirs*, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya (National Security Archive), 1.10.01, Document 21.

far than being the graveyard of empires, Afghanistan more often has been their plaything. If Afghans usually defeated foreign invasions, outsiders routinely manipulated its politics. This history merits study, since myths about it shape contemporary discussions on Afghanistan.⁴ This paper will assess invasions of Afghanistan since 1838, and ask: why do foreign states invade that country? How far do they achieve their aims? Why do they leave? Why do some invasions succeed, that is, produce acceptable military costs and political results for an outsider, like the British attack of 1879-81 and (so far) the American led assault of 2001, while others do not? What relations between force and politics produce successful interventions? Is pacification possible? Is it necessary? What lessons can be drawn from this history, and which cannot?

Britain first invaded Afghanistan because of habit. Since 1757, expansionist forces within its administration in India had driven its empire there. Danger always stood beyond its borders, or could be made to look that way. War suited frontier officials seeking promotion better than peace.⁵ Only superior force could stop Britain in Asia, which it had not yet met. Indian authorities invaded Afghanistan in 1838 because they thought it easily could be made a protectorate, and used to dominate Central Asia. They were misinformed—this invasion stemmed from intelligence failure, and confused and optimistic policy. British authorities knew little about Afghanistan, which they expected to be no harder to control than other states they had conquered in Asia—not surprisingly,

⁴ Thomas J. Barfield, "Problems in Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan", *Iranian Studies*, 37/2, 6.04, pp. 263-93.

⁵ For the background to these events, cf. Garry Alder, "Big Game Hunting in Central Asia," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 9, no. 3 (1981); David Gillard, *The Struggle for Asia, 1828-1914*, (London, 1977); Edward Ingram, *The Beginning of the Great Game in Asia, 1828-1834* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979); M.E. Yapp, *Strategies of British India, Britain, Iran and Afghanistan, 1798-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980). D.M. Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819-1835*, (New York, 1995).

given the chaos which had engulfed it for fifty years. They were overly impressed by the promises of the ally they hoped to place on the throne of Kabul, the exiled ex-Shah Shuja. During the occupation, his administration continued to give false intelligence to British authorities in Kabul, leading them to destroy his enemies, and their credibility.⁶ Another force shaped Britain's decision to invade. Indian authorities were well informed on internal plots against their rule, especially by Muslims, whom they believed might be inspired by Afghanistan.⁷ Statesmen took this danger seriously. The chief official in India, the Viceroy, Lord Auckland, believed

The agents of Russia were openly striking the credit and power of this country, in political schemes, fraught with danger, not to our interests only, but to the safety, of the British Indian Empire...The most vague and wild alarms prevailed throughout India. Every element of malignity and disaffection within the vast limits of our supremacy, was called into eager action.

The invasion of Afghanistan, he claimed, had killed these dangers dead.⁸ Auckland talked defence, but took the offence. He and his lieutenants acted as much from ambition as fear, believing Afghanistan the key to Asia, and easy to turn.

This first occupation of Afghanistan failed, but not in a simple way. 22,000 British and Indian soldiers entered a country divided between hundreds of independent units, from clan to kingdom. Many supported the British advance, few opposed it, and the strongest leader, the Emir of Kabul, Dost Mohammed, fled. British forces garrisoned the cities, while political officers maintained influence in rural areas through bribes and paid levies. For two years, occupation did not face great opposition. Afghans were willing to let Britain intervene in dynastic politics, but not to take them over. As it began to do

⁶ Mohan Lal, Dost Mohammed, pp. 42-5.

⁷ Auckland to Hobhouse, 10.5.39, 1.4.39, Elphinstone to Hobhouse, 29.9.39, Broughton de Gyfford Mss, F 213/8, India Office Records and Library (IORL), British Library.

⁸ Auckland to Elphinstone, 13.11.39, *ibid.*, F. 213/10.

precisely that, opposition rose. Yet British officials initially wanted Shuja to establish a real regime, albeit a protected one. Only when they saw he could not do so did they make their own, motivated by a search for what they regarded as good government. Thus, Shuja and his regime became seen as puppets which, for his own reasons, he described himself to leading Afghans. As in all areas of Asia they ruled directly, Britons raised taxes and attacked existing customs and interests, especially of chiefs and warriors, while the mere presence of their garrisons caused inflation and irritation. Mohan Lal, an Indian intelligence officer, reported that Afghan people complained “the English enriched the grain and the grass sellers, etc., while they reduced the chiefs to poverty, and killed the poor by starvation”.⁹

In 1841-2, this sparked a combination of jihad, elite coup, Pushtun war of national resistance, and banditry, not a national revolution, but dozens of loosely related risings. The British had no friends; once they ceased to be feared, and slashed their bribes, everyone struck opportunistically. Rebellions occurred among chiefs unhappy with cuts in their subsidies. Panicked leaders caused the revolt in Kabul, by murdering the political officer, Alexander Burnes, in a private vendetta which became political when their acts were not punished. Pushtuns, well equipped with firearms and possessing a system by which all tribesmen were mobilised into warrior bands (**lashkars**), saw threats to their society and religion, and a chance to loot. In the nineteenth century, prolonged guerrilla campaigns were hard to mobilize from peoples with loose organisation beyond lineage or village. This required a general fear by local elites and people of threat to their way of life, and some widespread bodies, usually religious ones, to overcome social atomization and unify a resistance movement. In

⁹ Mohan Lal, Dost Mohammed, p 321.

Afghanistan during 1841-2, broader ethno-religious legitimacy and leadership emerged when chiefs, Dost Mohammad's son, Mohammad Akbar Khan, and Sufi religious orders, like the Naqshabandiyya, provided inspiration and organisation, though lashkars generated most military force.¹⁰

This precise combination of popular and elite resistance was unique in Asia at that time, but similar characteristics (with more emphasis on Sufi and less on secular leadership) motivated the other great contemporary cases of resistance to European imperialism in Chechnya-Daghestan and Algeria. Parallel characteristics also underwrote powers in India whom the British found hard to defeat, like Mahrattas and Sikhs, and later sparked the rebellion in Awadh which triggered the Indian "mutiny". In these other cases, however, so much was at stake that despite heavy losses, far larger than anything Britain suffered in Afghanistan during 1841-2, European powers fought until they won. Indeed, right after it abandoned Afghanistan, Britain crushed a greater power, the Sikh kingdom. What saved Afghanistan then, as later, was the fact Afghans could make occupation expensive, while no one wanted to pay much to control this poor and isolated country. Each stage of the rising surprised the British, who were stunned into steps they rarely took: one political officer offered 10,000 rupees each, "or even 15,000", for the heads of several Pushtun leaders.¹¹ The British force at Kabul was smashed when its leaders were murdered and their successors, naive and paralyzed, accepted an offer of free passage away, which became a pitiless massacre of 4500 soldiers and more followers through snowdrifts down the Khyber Pass. Most other

¹⁰ The best account is Yapp, Strategies, op.cit, pp. 307-460; cf. Senzil Nawid, "The State, The Clergy, and British Imperial Rule in Afghanistan during the 19th and Early 20th Centuries", International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 29/4 (11.1997), pp. 581-605; and Barfield, op.cit..

¹¹ Hari Ram Gupta, Life and Work of Mohan Lal Kashmiri, 1812-1877 , (Lahore, 1943) pp. 337-59.

garrisons, however, stood until relieved by another British force, which attempted to recoup the disaster by demonstrating its ability to devastate Pushtun territory, and left. Instead, these events encouraged the rise of a new ethno-religious identity among Pushtuns, which linked manliness, resistance to occupation, and the idea of holy warrior, or ghazi.

Dost Mohammed returned to Kabul where, over the next twenty years, he created a new state, which borrowed heavily from British ideas and aid.¹² Through marriage, politics, murder and war, he forced much of Afghanistan to accept loose control by his dynasty. He left local power in the hands of existing elites, who did not pay taxes unless they were forced to do so. He had little control over the Muslim clergy, or ulama. Distrusting anyone outside his family, he allowed only his sons to be provincial governors, giving them a power base which ensured political fractures during his lifetime, and civil war afterward. Against this, Dost Mohammad increased the financial and military power of the monarchy. Relying on British subsidies of L 220,000 and 8000 flintlock muskets, he balanced the old military system, of feudal cavalry and lashkars, by a new army, armed and trained on western lines. After the civil war which followed Dost Mohammad's death, his son and successor, Sher Ali', continued the process. He bolstered his regular army, aided by British subsidies of L 100,000 and 17,000 rifles which, through reverse engineering, were manufactured in large numbers by his armoury at Kabul. He and his father made the country more prosperous than it had been for decades.

¹² The best accounts are Christine Noelle, State and Tribe in Nineteenth Century Afghanistan, (Padstow, 1997), especially pp. 250-97 and Vartan Gregorian, The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan, Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946, (Stanford, 1969), pp. 52-90; and, for military events, T.A. Heathcote, The Afghan Wars, 1839-1919, (London, 1980), pp. 32-83.

Britain tolerated, and sometimes encouraged, these events. After 1842, it abandoned attempts to establish a forward defensive system for India through alliances with Persia, Afghanistan, or the khanates of Central Asia. A new view arose on Indian security, a genuinely defensive one. The "close frontier" school held that India was best defended on the northwest frontier itself, without commitments beyond. Exponents of these views, best exemplified by John Lawrence as Viceroy, pursued little diplomatic contact with states or tribes beyond India's borders. He held Britain could exert little influence on Afghanistan because of the "fanaticism, the pride of race, the feeling of strength and the inclination to combine against us" of its population, the divisions in its ruling family and "the conflicting passions and interests which convulse the body politic".¹³ Nor did members of this school view Russian expansion in Asia as a threat.

By the 1870s these tenets of thought were undergoing challenge. Russia leapt across central Asia, annexing several khanates, and bringing its borders next to Afghanistan. Simultaneously, it threatened several strategic buffers for the British Empire. Russian control over the Ottoman empire would imperil British interests in the Middle East; further Russian expansion in Central Asia might endanger Britain's hold in India. In response, Lawrence's successors as Viceroy pursued greater contact with neighboring states, while a "forward school" emerged among Indian officials. These men differed over whether Persia or Afghanistan should become the forward bastion of Indian defense, but all agreed that Russian expansion in central Asia could threaten the Raj, which must establish a defense zone beyond the northwest frontier.¹⁴ Their views were shaped by a doctrine taught to all Indian officials and soldiers in the nineteenth

¹³ Lawrence to Wood, 27.5.65, Volume, 30, and Lawrence to Eastwich, 15.7.66, Volume 39, John Lawrence Mss, F. 90, IORL.

century, the idea of an internal-external threat. It centered on the belief that Britain's hold in India was weak; a single spark from beyond the Hindu Kush might raise a fire against the Raj. As one commander of the Indian Army, Lord Roberts, wrote in 1891, any Russian victory over Britain in Afghanistan would trigger an avalanche of enemies to the south, Cossacks joined by "almost every Afghan capable of bearing arms" and many tribesman on the northwest frontiers, while Indian soldiers and people would revolt against Britain.¹⁵ The Russian threat was largely a euphemism for an Indian one. Such fears were neither incomprehensible nor irrational. The rising of 1857, barely a generation away, convinced British statesmen that deadly peril could arise out of the blue, and that many internal enemies, especially Muslim ones, wished to wreck the Raj. The British, however, usually saw that internal threat as latent rather than large.

Once again, between 1874-80, Afghanistan was seen in a broader context-- as the key to India, and Asia-- and Britain aimed to turn it, believing that task easy. This policy was driven above all by Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State for India and later Prince Bismark's only equal among statesmen. He held that Russia wished to gain influence in Afghanistan so, "as the Russians themselves say, 'to besiege Constantinople from the heights above Peshawur.'"¹⁶ Britain must make Afghanistan a loose protectorate, a shield against St. Petersburg rather than an agent of subversion, by stationing a few British officials there, whom he expected to become the power behind the throne. This policy rested on good intelligence and poor ideas. Salisbury oversaw excellent intelligence services, which he used well, yet he grossly

¹⁴ The most recent treatment is "Lord Salisbury, Secret Intelligence, and British policy toward Russia and Central Asia, 1874-1878", in John Robert Ferris, *Intelligence and Strategy*, (London, 2005), pp 8-44.

¹⁵ Memorandum by Roberts, "The dangers to which a reverse would expose us", 27.1.91, L/MIL/17/14/80, IORL.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Salisbury to Northbrook, 25 March 1875, Northbrook Papers, C 144/12, IORL.

misconstrued how Afghans would react to his pressure. Naturally, it displeased Sher Ali'. His attempts to avoid becoming a puppet, and Tsarist efforts to build influence in Kabul so to shape British policy in Turkey, including a military march on the country and the despatch of a mission to Kabul, led Britain to invade Afghanistan in 1878. Ironically, this decision was driven by authorities in India, against the will of many ministers in London, including Salisbury. Britain wanted to prevent Russia from influencing Afghanistan, but invasion was in part an accident. It might not have happened without ostentatious Tsarist efforts.

Conquest proved easy. 37,000 British and Indian soldiers marched, Sher Ali's army broke and he fled, to die in exile. Control proved hard. British forces withdrew, leaving behind an allied emir, Muhammad Ya'qub, Sher Ali's son, with a British advisor, Louis Cavagnari. When a sudden rising in Kabul killed Cavagnari, British forces returned, Ya'qub resigned, saying he rather would be peasant than puppet, and chaos emerged. 30,000 ghazis and soldiers, united under the banner of jjihad and Ya'qub's son, attacked Kabul, catching British forces by surprise again. A third British offensive up the Khyber Pass in 13 months dispersed the besiegers, but several pretender cousins built local power bases and grabbed for the throne. One of them, Muhammad Ayyub, with 20,000 men, beat a British force at Maiwand. At this stage, fortuitous political circumstances changed relations between Afghanistan and Britain. Though tough minded men still supported the forward policy—"They have killed Cavagnari", wrote General Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, "then send Snooks, if they kill him, send Jones, if they see we are firm and consistent, if they see that their cowardly treachery and fanatical blood thirstiness, only makes us draw the yoke tighter they will give in

sooner or later. Because they are curs at bottom”¹⁷ —most recognised its bankruptcy. Britain, realising it could neither control Afghanistan through a puppet nor let it splinter, looked for an Afghan prince able to keep his country united and quiet. It found one in Abd al-Rahman, an able man with some power, in need of more. He offered Britain political support in return for military aid. For British leaders, this step was a gamble: they had little trust in any Afghan prince, and hitherto had seen Abd al-Rahman as a Russian ally, because of his years of exile in Tsarist controlled Central Asia. The Russians aided his return precisely because they hoped he would help them and damage Britain. Had Abd al-Rahman wished to do so, only another British invasion could have stopped him. The British could not be sure of the truth, that experience in exile had taught him mistrust of Moscow. In any case, the issue ceased to be national resistance to British control over Afghanistan, but a struggle between candidates for the throne. By stating its intention to leave and to support a widely acceptable candidate, Britain negated religious and nationalist opposition to its presence, while retaining some ability to shape Afghan politics. So long as Britain would leave, even the central figure in the jihad, the Qadirriya Sufi shaikh Mulla din Muhammad, was willing to accept its candidate as Emir.¹⁸ Abd al- Rahman used his political influence to help Britain destroy Ayyub, by neutralising his rival’s support and helping his friends acquire supplies on the march including, one embedded journalist noted, “such luxuries as fowls, eggs and milk at reasonable rates”.¹⁹ British forces, moving fast and hard, smashed Ayyub’s forces, helped their ally overawe other rivals, handed power to him, and left the country.

¹⁷ William Trousdale (ed), War in Afghanistan, 1879-80, The Personal Diary of Major General Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, (Detroit, 1985), p.78

¹⁸ Nawid, “State”, pp. 589-90, is useful, despite errors of fact about British policy in 1878-80; Heatcote, Afghan Wars, pp. 103-65.

¹⁹ Howard Hensman, The Afghan War, 1879-80, (London, 1992), p 492.

Abd al-Rahman's primary concerns were internal. Between 1880-1901, he created a large and effective army, while terrible campaigns destroyed all rivals. He brought Pushtun tribes and the ulama under his control. The country became richer. He established a state, as against a confederation of tribes, loose but more powerful than any seen before in Afghanistan, and extended its rule across the country. He governed through bureaucracy; all governors and officials were his servants, rather than his sons. This state was effective in broad terms, but not in depth. It rested loosely on Pushtun power, and the ruthless suppression of Hazaras and Nuristanis. It was a condominium between a few Pushtuns and Tajiks, with the same, tiny, effect on 90% of the population. It did not much interfere with khans and custom at a local level. Abd al-Rahman's power also rested on unprecedented levels of British aid, over L 100,000 per year and 40,000 rifles. In return, he accepted Britain's demand that Afghanistan have foreign relations only with it, and not with Russia. Abd al-Rahman was willing to cooperate with Britain, which he found a useful counter to Russian expansion.²⁰

Meanwhile, Britain created a new and effective policy toward Afghanistan, based on a version of the "close frontier". It lasted until 1947, and the end of the Raj. Britain left a tactical buffer just south of Afghanistan, defined by the Durand Line, which survive as the "tribal areas" in modern Pakistan, under the control of Baluchi and Pashtun tribes. It disciplined them through diplomacy, raids and subsidies, using force only as a tool to convince tribesmen they should accept bribes not to bother the British. Roughly 10% of India's secret service budget was spent on these subsidies.²¹ It created forces, like the Khyber Rifles, essentially as a means to pay Pushtuns to be soldiers, rather than

²⁰ Gregorian, Emergence, pp. 129-62.

²¹ Appendix to Finance Department, 14.1.31, R/1/4/1028, IORL.

bandits. Britain found operations in these areas hard, because the population, including veterans of the Indian Army, armed with effective rifles, played its hand well against Britain. During one war in 1897-98, snipers fought 59,000 British and Indian soldiers to a standstill, ambushing units and picking off officers.²² As the tribal areas were hard to control, this approach was wise, but not cheap. They became a hotbed of Pushtun resistance and Muslim challenges to the British Empire, while their population maintained close links with their cousins across the border.²³ Despite these problems, this policy let Britain keep Afghanistan a strategic buffer, which it could defend against Russia, or not, as it chose. Until 1947 that helped to keep Britain and Russia from war, despite constant rivalry and occasional hostility between them. Even in 1919-20, when Abd al-Rahman's grandson, Emir Aman-Allah, started a war with Britain, the Raj merely defended its frontiers, while forcing him to terms by stalling his armies and levies, bombing Kabul, bankrupting his regime, and agreeing that Afghanistan could have diplomatic relations with anyone it chose. Again, during 1929, when Aman-Allah's policies of westernization and secularization sparked a civil war which, British intelligence showed, might spark Soviet intervention, Britain pursued its aims through diplomacy rather than force.²⁴

After 1880, however, Russia's internal enemies in Central Asia acquired shelter and inspiration in Afghanistan, and sometimes support from its people or state. Tsarist frontier officials found Afghanistan a problem, often wanted to discipline it by force and sometimes did so, as in the Penjah crisis of 1884-85. Their Soviet successors had

²² T.R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947*, (London, 1998)

²³ Nawid, "The State, The Clergy", pp. 593-602, and *Religious Response to Social Change in Afghanistan 1919-29: King Aman-Allah and the Afghan Ulama*, (Costa Mesa, 1999), ch. 2.

similar problems and attitudes after the October Revolution, when their rule in Central Asia was opposed by most of the population, local elites, and thousands of guerrillas, the **basmachis**.²⁵ Between 1925-29 the USSR became increasingly involved in Afghanistan, to limit its aid to **basmachis** and to support Aman-Allah, whom Soviet diplomats and intelligence officers in Kabul saw as an ally. In 1929, when his regime collapsed, they advocated military intervention to save him, which might have created the fascinating counter-weight of a coalition between a British army and an anti-Soviet **jihād**. However, the USSR did not invade Afghanistan, though it did raid into that country to destroy **basmachis**, who were attacking Soviet territory, and supported a faction which lost a civil war to one backed by Britain.²⁶

Between 1880-1947, Russian authorities refrained from attacking Afghanistan, largely because they feared British intervention. For thirty years after 1947, that country became a distant Soviet satellite, with internal autonomy. It mattered little to Soviet policy, save when Moscow particularly focused on communist parties in the third world, as between 1923-29 and 1974-84. Despite improvements, the Afghan state remained weak and the country poor. Government was effective in cities, but not outside them, with one administrator per district. By 1970, the state was increasingly ineffectual. Like many Muslim polities since 1900, it was thrown off balance by the rise of a small class of educated students, who made socialism, nationalism and Islam into political forces, and the unrestrained power of the army. In April 1978, a coup by a few left wing

²⁴ *ibid*. The best, though unsatisfactory, account is Rhea Talley Stewart, Fire in Afghanistan, 1914-1929, Faith, Hope and the British Empire (New York, 1973).

²⁵ Jennifer Siegel, Endgame. Britain, Russia and the Final Struggle for Central Asia, (London, 2002), pp. 145-7, 170-3.

²⁶ William S. Ritter, "Revolt in the Mountains: Fuzail Maksoun and the Occupation of Garm, Spring 1929, The Journal of Contemporary History, 25/4 (10.90), pp 547-580; George Agabekov, O.G.P.U., The Russian Secret Terror, (New York, 1931), a tolerably accurate memoir by the Soviet intelligence chief in Kabul; solutions of Soviet diplomatic and intelligence telegrams

politicians and officers brought a fractured and murderous communist regime to power in Kabul.

Thus, the Soviets became committed to a regime they did not control. They opposed its bitter divisions between Khalq and Parcham factions, and its “mass” and “unjustified repressions”. However, they tolerated those against “class enemies” like “Moslem Brother”, the Ikhwan-al-Muliman, a student movement which included many men who later became leaders of the mujahadin, like Gulbeddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Masud . The Soviets wanted the factions to unify and the regime to “adopt a measured and flexible policy to isolate the counter-revolution from the people, to deprive it of the opportunity to take advantage of the backwardness of the masses”.²⁷ Instead, the regime imploded into a dictatorship run by Hafizullah Amin, his family, and part of the Khalq faction. It murdered thousands of officers, students and Sufis, Moslim Brothers and Muslim leaders. These actions created foes which struck back, threatening its survival.²⁸ Despite mounting fear over the situation, the Soviets were reluctant to intervene directly. They knew such actions would have heavy diplomatic costs. They believed the regime, with massive aid, could defeat its opposition, which they thought was “a domestic counter-revolution” of “reactionary masses” led by “religious fanatics”, aided by tens of thousands of “saboteurs and terrorists” from Iran and Pakistan. The question was, how massive were the masses? Some Politbureau members wondered whether the opposition included “large numbers of ordinary people? Thus, we will be required to wage war in significant part against the people”.

from Afghanistan, by British codebreakers, HW 12/117, No. 34443; HW 12/119, Nos. 35132, 34998, passim, National Archives United Kingdom.

²⁷ The Cold War International History Project Bulletin, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 145-6.

Afghans “are all Mohammedans, people of one belief, and their faith is sufficiently strong that they can close ranks on that basis”. During the Herat rising of March 1979, when convinced “almost nobody does support the government”, even the hardest members of the Politbureau opposed intervention. The Foreign Secretary, Andrei Gromyko, said Soviet forces would have to fight “the Afghan people first of all, and it will have to shoot at them”. The head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, said, “we can suppress a revolution in Afghanistan only with the aid of our bayonets, and that is for us entirely inadmissible. We cannot take such a risk...To deploy our troops would mean to wage war against the people, to crush the people, to shoot at the people”.²⁹

Ultimately, the Politbureau did intervene. Contrary to western claims at the time, its aim was not offensive, to strike for a warm water port, but defensive, to hold what it held. So long as they thought the regime had some support from the army and people, Soviet leaders acted on what Gromyko called a “fundamental proposition... under no circumstances may we lose Afghanistan”. That would be a “sharp setback” in a struggle with the United States, and the internal-external threat of Muslim subversion.³⁰ The KGB, with its control over information, convinced the Politbureau these dangers were one: Amin was about to betray Moscow, and join Muslim enemies at home and Washington abroad. In December 1979, Soviet forces seized Kabul, killed Amin and imposed a new regime, to keep an ally from becoming an enemy. The Politbureau told the Party that the Soviet invasion had ended “certain tendencies in the development of the situation in the Middle East which are dangerous to us”, especially American

²⁸ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge, 1986); Ken Lizzio, “Embodying history: a Naqshbandi shaikh of Afghanistan”, *Central Asian Survey*, 2/3 22, June/September 2003, pp. 176-7.

²⁹ *The Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 145-6.

³⁰ *ibid.*

attempts to orient “Islamic fanaticism on an anti-Soviet course” and “to draw Afghanistan into the orbit of imperialist policy and to create a threat to our country from the south”.³¹ While sincerely held, these fears were wrong, a self-fulfilling prophecy. In 1986, the Politbureau noted that intervention occurred because its picture of Afghanistan was “insufficiently clear. We do not want to say it, but we should: at that time, we did not even have a correct assessment of the unique geographical features of that hard-to-enter land”.³²

Intervention splintered the regime, which remained paralyzed between Khalq and Parcham factions. Soviet leaders agreed that Amin’s regime had intensified “anti-Soviet moods” in Afghanistan, without realising that their intervention had doubled the damage. “A certain period of time evidently will be required for the normalization of the situation”, during which the Red Army “will remain the basic stabilizing factor standing in opposition to the activity of domestic and foreign counter-revolutionary forces”. In February 1980, the Defence Minister, Dmitri Ustinov, estimated troops could not be withdrawn for 12-18 months, “otherwise we may incur much unpleasantness”.³³ This proved an understatement. Soviet policy suffered from ignorance, but even more from Marxist-Leninist ethnocentrism. It viewed Afghanistan through the prism of a universal doctrine preaching that all peoples passed through similar stages, facing problems with identical solutions. Soviet leaders thought their intervention in Afghanistan would have the same success as in Hungary, 1956, and Czechoslovakia, 1968. Andropov spoke of “conducting major work among the tribes so as to attract the people to the side of the

³¹ [The Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, The Soviet Union and Afghanistan, 1978-1989: Documents from the Russian and East German Archives](#), pp. 43, 58.

³² [The September 11th Notebooks, Volume II](#), ed. Svetlana Savranskaya, Document 21

³³ [The Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, The Soviet Union and Afghanistan, 1978-1989](#): pp. 43-4., 46, 48

party and to strengthen the unity of the people with the party". The Politbureau believed all problems could be solved by focus on "true unity in the ranks of the Party and the unification of all progressive and national patriotic forces in the framework of a united front", by building on already established "progressive socio-political foundations" and "the experience of a range of socialist countries", especially Czechoslovakia.³⁴ These nostrums were nonsense. By April 1980, the Politbureau recognised that the situation was "complicated and tense": "the class struggle, represented in armed counterrevolutionary insurrections", was strong, the state weak, and efforts to attract moderates had failed— but it took comfort from the enemy's inability to fight major actions, instead "mostly engaging in terrorist acts and small group actions ...putting their stakes on economic sabotage, disruption of transportation and food supplies, arousing religious, nationalist and anti-Soviet feelings (and) animosity toward the government and its undertakings".³⁵ Soviet leaders saw their enemy, but did not understand it, or what to do with it.

The USSR had a sophisticated model of counter-insurgency, originally developed from fighting another group of Islamic guerrillas, the **basmachis**. It aimed to turn struggles for national liberation into class wars, by combining ruthless attacks on guerrillas and their friends; with efforts to split local societies and bribe support into existence, by redistributing land from richer to poorer peasants; and by using amnesties to make some guerrillas into tools while isolating the intransigent. This approach, associated more with the KGB than the army, beat serious guerrillas with strong support

³⁴ [The Cold War International History Project Bulletin](#), Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 163-5.

³⁵ [The Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, The Soviet Union and Afghanistan, 1978-1989](#)., pp. 52.

in Central Asia, Lithuania and Ukraine.³⁶ At the start of the occupation, the Politbureau and KGB envisioned something similar, “a gradual attack on the position of the tribal reaction, the showing of flexibility and a differentiated approach to various tribes and socio-economic strata”, splitting “moderate Moslem leaders” from “reactionary clerical circles”, and convincing “the leaders and elders of the most warlike tribes” to stop fighting.³⁷ After the coup, Soviet leaders advocated a radical redistribution of land, to build rural allies and arm them, unsuccessfully. As land holding patterns in Afghanistan generally were equitable and accepted, while efforts at reform were violent and incompetent, they created far fewer friends than enemies. 18 months after the invasion, local commanders warned that this failure was crippling “the class division among the peasantry and the enlistment of its broad masses to the side of popular democratic rule”.³⁸ The KGB pursued other parts of its classic counter-insurgency programme more successfully. It had some political success with Pushtun tribes in Afghanistan, and even more across the Durand line in Pakistan, hampering support for the **mujahadin** and their supply lines. It organised terrorist bombings which killed hundreds of civilians in Pakistan, to pressure that regime. 84 “false bands” of **mujahadin** penetrated and confused the resistance. By manipulating divisions within the **mujahadin**, the KGB claimed to have convinced 250 (out of an estimated 5000) bands defect and become militia. The Red Army and the **mujahadin** alike respected the power of these militias, the largest of which controlled as many men and people as the strongest guerrilla group. Contrary to usual Soviet practice, however, these forces were

³⁶ Alex Statiev, “Social Conflict and Soviet Counter-Insurgency in the Western Borderlands, 1944-1950”, PhD dissertation, The University of Calgary, 2004.

³⁷ The Cold War International History Project Bulletin, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp. 163-5.

allies, not puppets, doubly so after the Red Army left, and thus a mixed blessing.³⁹ In 1992 their decision to abandon the regime destroyed it.

Counter-insurgency succeeded in Central Asia, Lithuania and Ukraine, because the Red Army destroyed enemy conventional forces and bases across borders. The USSR could not apply its model of counter-insurgency in Afghanistan, because it never had enough forces or control over the population. Ironically, this lack of force drove Moscow to rely even more heavily on it. The Politbureau later noted, “essentially, we put our bets on the military solution, on suppressing the counterrevolution with force. We did not even fully use the existing opportunities for neutralization of the hostile attitudes of the local population towards us”.⁴⁰ Just 50,000 Soviet soldiers launched the coup of 1979, whose “mere presence”, the official history of the Russian General Staff later admitted, was expected “to ‘sober up’ the Mujahadeen”.⁴¹ The next 20 months provided a better sense of who needed an AA meeting. By July 1981 the Soviet military advisor to the Afghan government termed the situation a “catastrophe”.⁴² Even so, in order to contain losses, and their negative impact on opinion at home, the “Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan” stood at between 80,000—120,000 soldiers, augmented by perhaps 40,000 Afghan regulars and 25,000 militia. This force was large but too small, given the rule of thumb that ten counter-insurgents are needed to defeat one guerrilla, doubly so because the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia gave the **mujahadin** extraordinary amounts of infantry weapons. The Soviets

³⁸ “Report of Military Leaders to D.F. Ustinov”, 10.5.81, Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,”

³⁹ Vasili Mitrokhin, “The KGB in Afghanistan”, pp. 62-4, 67, *ibid*.

⁴⁰ The September 11th Notebooks, Volume II., ed. Svetlana Savranskaya, Document 21.

⁴¹ Lester W. Grau and Michael I. Gress, The Soviet-Afghan War, How a Super-Power Fought and Lost, The Russian General Staff (Manhattan, Ks, 2002), p. 18

confronted more armed opposition in Afghanistan than in Lithuania, Ukraine or Central Asia, or Britain had faced in 1841-42 or 1878-80. Although precise numbers are uncertain, and varied from month to month, the orders of magnitude are clear. In 1985, the CIA estimated that 30,000 full-time and 120,000 part time guerrillas fought in Afghanistan, while their Pakistani coordinator claimed that his bureau had given 80,000 guerrillas basic training. In 1986, the Afghan government estimated its enemies at "183,000 men, eighty thousand of which comprise the active combat force of the counterrevolutionaries".⁴³

Before and during the intervention, the Afghan army collapsed. Thereafter, it was the great focus of political battle between Khalq and Parcham, poorly led and motivated, 25-40% below strength. Though some units became decent, conscription barely matched desertions and, Soviet advisors noted, soldiers routinely were "dragooned" or "press-ganged".⁴⁴ The KGB, its Afghan equivalent, the Khad , and militia, conducted effective counter-insurgency in some rural areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Red Army, however, provided the military muscle and direction. It was stretched thin in garrisons, far under strength and poorly trained. Officers in battle often failed to act competently, or at all; soldiers replacing garrisons sometimes were killed on minefields which their predecessors had forgotten to clear, or to report.⁴⁵ Some forces and tactics proved effective, such as the use of helicopter borne Special Forces

⁴² "Record of a conversation between Cheremnykh, Chief Military Advisor Mayorov, and N.A. Mur, Karmal's deputy", 4.7.81, Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan",

⁴³ The National Security Archive, The September 11th Notebooks, Volume II, Afghanistan, Lessons from the Last War, The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: U.S. Analysis of the Soviet War in Afghanistan (Declassified), ed. John Prados, 9.10.01, Document Five, CIA, 1985, "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Five Years After"; Mohammam Youssef and Mark Adkin, Afghanistan, The Beartrap, The Defeat of a Superpower, (Barnsley, 2001), p. 4 ; excerpt, 13.11.86, from Boris Gromov, "Limited Contingent", Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan".

⁴⁴ Grau and Gress, Soviet-Afghan War, p. 50; Report of Military Leaders to D.F. Ustinov", 10.5.81, Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan",

(**Spetznaiz**) to hit guerrillas in safe areas, jets to attack mujahadin forces on the move, and ground forces, aircraft and mines to interdict supplies and ambush reinforcements across the Durand Line or entering Afghanistan. Like its American counterpart in Vietnam, however, the Soviet army did not wish to conduct counter-insurgency, which it left to the KGB, but to follow its book for war in Europe. That focused on complex fire procedures and fast moving mechanised forces. The army fought as large units and formations, using (as a contemporary CIA analysis said) “stereotyped search and destroy operations”. Battalions tried to trap small groups of **mujahadin** through slow moving assaults, while divisions deployed down valleys in stately echelons.⁴⁶ Usually, Soviet security was too weak to achieve surprise, its reconnaissance could not find the enemy, its forces were too few to trap and kill guerrillas, or efforts at combined arms and fancy plans turned into bloody clashes between light infantry. Constant attacks were launched to take pieces of ground, which were abandoned, reoccupied, left and counterattacked again. Six successive divisional attacks in the Panjsher valley failed to make any lasting gains. Both unintentionally and to terrorise peasants from supporting guerrillas, Soviet firepower killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and drove millions into exile.

The great Soviet strength was its enemies’ weaknesses. Resistance was nation wide. Initially, in villages across Afghanistan, **shaikhs** led the people to attack local agents of the regime, while students demonstrated in the cities. These forces lacked central leadership, and liked to stand in the open. During the first year of occupation,

⁴⁵ Grau and Gress, Soviet-Afghan War, pp. 19-20,

⁴⁶ Prados, op.cit. Useful Soviet or Russian accounts of their tactics and operations, and commentaries on them, are in Lester W. Grau, The Bear Went Over the Mountain, Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan, (London, 1998) and Grau and Gress, The Soviet-Afghan War

Soviet forces smashed them. Then more effective leaders, religiously inspired, who had fought the regime before intervention, took the lead. They used guerrilla tactics, terrorism and assassination to rally civilians and defeat the government, and ground, fire and intelligence well in combat. Contrary to western stereotypes, the **mujahadin** saw themselves not as freedom fighters, but **ghazis**. While sharing religious and anti-foreign motivations, they were divided on ethnic and political grounds. These splits swelled because Pakistan and Saudi Arabia directed all foreign aid to their favoured factions, which were not the best soldiers. Pakistan deliberately factionalised Pushtuns; of the 2500 or so Stinger missiles sent to the **mujahadin**, their best leader, Ahmed Shah Masud, received just 8.⁴⁷ Each band fought its own war and disliked other ones almost as much as they did the regime. Little wars between them killed thousands of **mujahadin** and drove the losers to join the government's militias. A few **mujahadin** leaders were able soldiers and strategists. In particular, despite constant Soviet attack, between 1980-86, Masud developed an effective administration over a large Tajik population northeast of Kabul, based on the Panjsher valley. He told his officers,

The strategy of the Mujahideen is a long-term strategy. All the Mujahideen can do is harass the enemy, make them tired and their lives difficult and dangerous...We must prolong the war so the cost of the war will finally bleed the enemy to death. The cost will be economic, in manpower and equipment, and the end will come through crisis and the loss of public and political support. The enemy cannot smash the Mujahideen, the vanguard of the people, as this is a national resistance and a holy war. In the end, we will not *defeat* the enemy. We will force them to *retreat*.⁴⁸

Leaders like Masud and Ismail Khan shook Soviet power, yet even they did no more than dominate just one province. In Afghanistan as a whole, the guerrillas could not take

⁴⁷ Stephen Coll, *Ghost Wars, The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, (New York, 2004), pp. 12.

⁴⁸ Will Davis and Abdullah Shariat, *Fighting Masoud's War*, (South Melbourne, 2004), p 131.

strategic or active measures, just tactical and defensive ones. They could harass Soviet road borne logistics, sometimes destroying dozens of trucks, but never stop it. The guerrillas could not win, but given massive foreign aid, neither could they lose; and they could make their enemy bleed.

By 1986 the USSR realised, in the words of Mikhail Gorbachev, "We have been fighting in Afghanistan for already six years. If the approach is not changed, we will continue to fight for another 20-30 years".⁴⁹ 26,000 Soviet soldiers were dead, Soviet people were sick of the war; the regime controlled only one third of the population, five million people, 60% of whom were in the cities.⁵⁰ The Soviets decided to change their approach: to withdraw, while salvaging something from the wreck through politics. By continuing to aid the communist regime, which radically changed its policies, they hoped to prevent a **mujahadin** victory. This approach had some success, and would have had more had the USSR lasted longer. Ultimately, the regime fell, but only after several years, and a struggle which splintered the **mujahadin**.

The war, the most terrible Afghanistan ever has known and the most traumatic event in its history, caused a revolution. Many forms of local authority, and all national structures of power, legitimacy, Pushtun dominance, the state, were smashed. Half the rural population fled to cities or exile, away from traditional village leadership. For the first time, mass and organised politics emerged in Afghanistan, dominated by religion and ethnicity. The primary forms of social identification were ethnic, lineage or religious,

⁴⁹ The Cold War International History Project Bulletin, Issues 8-9, Winter 1996/1997, pp 178-81.

⁵⁰ The official Russian General Staff study states that 26,000 Soviet soldiers were killed, against the publicly stated figure of 13,600 (Grau and Gress, Soviet-Afghan War, p. 44).

with national sentiment secondary, though significant.⁵¹ **Mujahadin** and militia units, and areas of political control, tended to come from one ethnic group. When the communists collapsed, their forces joined the resistance factions dominated by their own ethnic group. Single movements mobilised most members of secondary ethnic groups, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, and made them strong while the majority ethnic group, Pushtuns, was divided between hundreds of clans, each more concerned with its neighbours than anyone else, summarised by the term **tarburwali**, or rivalry between cousins. While weakened, Pushtuns resented their lost dominance, and rule by outsiders. Millions of exiles in Pakistan fell under the influence of Islamist parties, while hundreds of thousands of their boys were educated in **madrassas** (religious schools) preaching forms of Islam alien to Afghanistan, Muslim fundamentalism and internationalism, and **jihad** under charismatic leaders and tight organisation.

Every ethnic or tribal division in Afghanistan became a political fracture. Power stemmed from the barrel of a gun; but they were in many hands. Afghanistan became the most heavily armed country on earth. The **mujahadin** became warlords, divided into five major groups, and many minor ones. None was quite strong enough to defeat or unify all of the rest. Many could veto peace. Spoilers always remained, especially Rashid Dostum's ex communist militia in the northeast and Hekmatyar's jihadists in Pushtun territory. These factions formed kaleidoscopic and effervescent alliances and conducted mass murder and ethnic cleansing. Though the administrations and armies

⁵¹ Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont, "State, national awareness and levels of identity in Afghanistan from monarchy to Islamic state", *Central Asian Survey*, 19 (3 /4), 2000, pp 419-28. Other valuable accounts of events in Afghanistan between 1979-2001 are Barnett J. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Aghanistan, State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Second ed: New Haven, 2002), Gilles Dorrenoro, *Revolution Unending, Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present*, (trs. John King; New York, 2005), Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region* (London, 2002), William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, (London, 2002),

of Masud, Ismail Khan and the Ismaili Hizb-e-Wahadat remained tolerably effective, decent, and popular, other **mujahadin** became **mafiosi**. One respected **mujahadin** leader, Abdul Haq, prophetically warned, "Afghanistan runs the risk of becoming 50 or more separate kingdoms. Foreign extremists may want to move in, buying houses and weapons. Afghanistan may become unique in becoming both a training ground and munitions dump for foreign terrorists and at the same time, the world's largest poppy field".⁵²

By 1994, after several years of stasis, a new contender emerged in Kandahar: the Taliban. Its name was derived from the term "talib", meaning religious student, with the connotations of warrior and **ghazi**. Initially, the Taliban were a small group of ex-**mujahadin**, intensely wedded to an eccentric version of political Islam, aided by private and official Pakistanis. Foreign help in money, arms and men always was fundamental to their power, but so was support from Pushtuns, gained by religious prestige, ethnic loyalty, and pacification of a chaotic area mistreated by small groups of warlords. Pakistan deliberately had split leadership in this region, populated by Durrani Pushtuns, because they traditionally were the dominant faction in Afghanistan. This gave the Taliban its chance to control them. In autumn 1994, through bribery, politics, murder and force, the Taliban quickly rolled up most Pushtun areas, smashing or incorporating local warlord forces. It had two advantages over any other faction, greater political unity and numbers, thus the ability to take punishment and replace losses. The warlords could not cooperate, and their forces constantly split. As one Taliban commander said in July 1997, "No group has enough forces to fight the Taliban on their own, so they

Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban, Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (London, 2000) and Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind, Afghanistan, Al Qa'ida and the Holy War* (Revised ed: London, 2003).

have to try and unite but they can never unite".⁵³ The Taliban remained more united and blocked or destroyed any competition for loyalty over Pushtuns. It became the embodiment of Pushtun power, therefore the single strongest force in Afghanistan. Its revolutionary leadership excluded the old elite and imposed a new one. The core of Taliban forces, Pakistani or exiled Afghan boys educated in **madrassas**, were schooled in an entirely male society, alienated from tribal ways, in a political Islamic ideal, to be **ghazis**. The Taliban's secretive leadership was drawn from men of no social status but much religious authority, overwhelmingly Durrani Pushtun in origin. Power was exercised through mullahs in villages. In April 1996, a meeting of mullahs gave the Taliban leader, Mohammed Omar, the religious and secular title of Amir ul-Momineen, Commander of the Faithful. Soon, he declared a **jihad** against communists and apostates, though in fact the war was directed against fellow Muslims.

Taliban military power rested on a fusion of religious fervour and foreign aid. Their forces, 20,000—25,000 men and boys, numerically matched any warlord army before 1996 or coalition afterward, and also in tanks, aircraft and guns. Initially, they combined original militants, warlord and communist soldiers to man heavy weapons, local Pushtuns, and Afghan **madrassa** students, with little training but high morale. Thousands of ghazis on four wheel drives mounting machine guns, able to leap great distances and fight despite heavy casualties, backed by tanks and aircraft, married **jihad** to **blitzkrieg**. The large armies of Dostum, Hekmatyar and Ismail Khan collapsed from shock. Thus, the Taliban seized much of Afghanistan by 1996. However, non-Pushtun groups strongly opposed the Taliban, which suffered stunning defeats when it

⁵² Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars*, p 238.

⁵³ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, p. 62.

entered their regions; in May-July 1997 it lost almost 7000 men and boys killed or captured (and, later, murdered). Masud's forces routinely whipped them. The Taliban would have stalled just like the warlords, especially since Pushtuns increasingly refused to fight for it, but it was saved by foreign arms, money and **ghazis**. Though every faction gained outside aid, its most important form were steady streams of motivated manpower. Between 1994-2001, more Pakistanis than Afghans fought for the Taliban, mostly part time, in numbers equal to the total number of Afghani combatants at any time. In August 1997, 5000 Pakistani **madrassa** students took a fighting holiday to replace Taliban losses, as did 8000 more a year later, and another 2000 in August 1999.⁵⁴ In their campaigns between 1997-2001, 25--33% of Taliban soldiers were foreign ghazis, Arabs, Chechens, or Pakistanis. During this last, terrible, phase of civil war, the Taliban conquered Afghanistan as Abd al-Rahman had done a century before-- through murder: massacres in captured cities, the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Tajiks, and the slaughter and enslavement of tens of thousands of Ismaili Hazaras; and with almost as much success. By 9 September 2001, and the assassination of Masud, the Taliban were poised to smash his forces, their last opponent, and unify the country.

Things changed two days later. 9/11, the greatest intelligence failure ever linked to Afghanistan, forced the United States to attack for self defence, because that country was the base for Al Qaeda. Other western countries followed suit, putting NATO multilateralism and old school ties into action, to show the wounded hyperpower it still had friends. The Taliban withered against the combination of its Afghan enemies, NATO

⁵⁴ Ahmed Rashid, Taliban, pp 59, 91; Griffith, Whirlwind, p 197.

infantry and American airpower, but its real weakness was political.⁵⁵ Taliban rule was opposed by all non-Pushtuns, and supported (as against, tolerated) by few Pushtuns: half the population aided its defeat, while the rest refused it any help, So too, when Taliban weakness became apparent, the opportunists in its forces (most of the native Afghans) switched sides--which was how they had joined in the first place. The Taliban regime shattered. Western states attempted to replace it, by creating a good and legitimate government, and loaning thousands of NATO soldiers to establish its rule across the country. This was an honest and noble aim, but not an easy one, nor were the liberal democracies of NATO the first states to think they could make of Afghanistan a better place. In 1838 Britons believed they would do so, as did Soviets in 1979; and Afghanistan did become a better place between 1881-1975. In 2002 western states gave a decent but militarily weak Afghan politician, Hamid Karzai, power in Afghanistan, and encouraged his efforts to create a national following and legitimacy. This task has had some success, because western forces were strong, Afghans were tired of war while Karzai and his backers were pragmatic enough to buy many warlords into the process. Yet it also has committed western forces to counter-insurgency in a civil war against many enemies, including Taliban forces which ran to fight another day, and are trying to regain the territory they used to conquer the country a decade ago.

Commentators routinely assess this situation by reference to history, usually by retelling legends of “The Afghans: a people often oppressed and tormented, but ultimately invincible!” variety.⁵⁶ Yet historical patterns are there to be seen. Except in

⁵⁵ The best accounts of the campaign are Antony Cordesman, The Lessons of Afghanistan, Warfighting, Intelligence, Force Transformation, Counterproliferation, and Arms Control, Center for Strategic and International Studies, (CSIS) Washington, 12.8.02; and Stephen Biddle, Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle (Princeton, 2004).

⁵⁶ Preface by Bert Georg Fragner, in Noelle, State and Tribe, p. ix.

1979, when occupied, most Afghans were neither collaborators nor resisters, but opportunists, who acted rationally in response to their perception of power. Revolts came out of the blue, when an occupier's weakness convinced opportunists they were safe to move. Until 2001, every western invasion of Afghanistan succeeded in destroying the regime, but failed to keep its successor in power. Stable governments emerged only a decade after invaders withdrew, through ruthless conquest. Afghanistan is easy to invade and hard to conquer, because the country is fragmented, its state is weak, and Afghans want to be there more than invaders do. Britain was beaten during 1838-42, and the USSR between 1979-89, not because their armies were crushed, but when they realised victory would cost more than they wanted to pay. Afghans defeat invaders by raising the bar for victory, and not even to a high level, because attackers have little will for the job.

Thus, after 1838, Afghans beat England and the USSR once, and drew Britain twice, in 1881 and 1919; not a bad record for a small power against great ones. Yet Britain and Russia also found it easy to annex much of Afghanistan and, along with Iran and Pakistan, to manipulate its politics. Afghans are unusually willing—aye, eager-- to let outside powers interfere in their politics, especially during civil strife. Afghanistan is simple to dominate from outside. Positive and ambitious aims are hard to achieve there, but limited and negative ones are easy, such as stopping it from being a problem. In Afghanistan, one can get much for little—with the right ally. Its weakness is the same as its strength: fragmentation, isolation and poverty. The Afghan state always has depended on outside aid to control its population and territory. A tiny subsidy kept it from bothering the Raj at key points, like 1916. In 1857, the subsidy of L 220,000

helped keep Afghanistan out of the Indian “mutiny”, when British authorities thought it could take Punjab, with devastating consequences.⁵⁷ From 1950--78, foreign aid provided 40% of Afghanistan’s budget, and even more for both sides between 1979-90; the Taliban conquered the country largely through the aid of a few million dollars and a few thousand ghazis. Afghans have been easy to buy--far easier than to fight. The trick is to avoid trying to conquer the country, while finding an Afghan who will keep it out of your hair.

Compared to historical norms, the present case is unusual in two ways. Western countries never have invaded Afghanistan for its own sake, but always because of its links to broader issues, distant dangers, and internal-external threats. Its value has been easy to exaggerate. Intelligence failures, confusion and optimism colour policy toward Afghanistan. These problems are true today, yet still western countries are there only after having been attacked. They may be paranoids, but they have real enemies, and reasons to fear. The last time they ignored Afghanistan, they got Al Qaeda. Even more unusual, in 2006, five years after NATO entered Afghanistan, is the low level of armed opposition and the high level of support for or toleration of it. This unprecedented event is happening because NATO is not trying to conquer the country, but rather is intervening in a civil war, where it has far more friends than enemies, and can offer aid beyond the avarice of Afghans. It is, however, fighting among (and to some degree, against) Pushtuns, with their traditions of jihad and resistance to occupation, or any outsiders, whether in Kabul or across the valley. Though most Pushtuns are neutral, NATO faces several opponents: people irritated at any foreign presence, or the state; opium smugglers; and the Taliban, which draws some support from Pushtuns on either

⁵⁷ R. Bosworth Smith, The Life of Lord Lawrence, Volume II, (New York, 1883), p 124.

side of the Durand line and, as ever, uses foreigners to substitute for lack of aid from Afghans.

NATO's position is neither hopeless nor simple. It is fighting a guerrilla war. Historically, most insurgencies fail, poor counter-insurgents crush bad guerrillas, but good ones are hard to beat. Only dirty means can defeat tough and ruthless insurgents. Nice intentions backfire. Ambition is dangerous. The fundamental tenets of liberal counter-insurgency—the pursuit of good and effective government-- can create more enemies than friends, because to extend the reach of an unpopular state strengthens rather than weakens resistance to it, while to give it aid increases corruption. In counter-insurgency, politics matters more than force, and the two must be coordinated.⁵⁸ Failure in these areas is NATO's greatest problem. Again, it cannot win this war; only its Afghan ally can do so. Nor can this war be won by force alone—politics are necessary. NATO forces must be strong enough to block a Taliban resurgence, and show that Karzai's regime is here to stay, but so too they will create enemies by their presence, the casualties they inflict on civilians, their attempts to force an unpopular government on Pushtuns, or to attack part of the local economy, the opium trade. If NATO's actions create an alliance between its armed opponents and large numbers of Pushtuns, we will lose. They want to be in Afghanistan more than we do. We lack the ruthlessness needed to conquer them.

NATO's sole reason to be there is self-interest and self-defence: to maintain a government able to keep Afghanistan from threatening us. Such a government may take many forms, but it will not be one we like. We cannot impose liberal democracy or women's rights by the bayonet. Such tasks must be left to time, NGOs and Afghans. We

cannot rule Afghanistan through a puppet, but any other kind of regime will disappoint us. We can achieve limited and negative aims, but they may with dangerous ease become positive, ambitious and impossible. Among NATO countries, public support for the mission probably is strong enough to carry us through to victory, but too weak to sustain us long in case of failure. We should not expect to win if we indicate an intention to leave much before 2011, nor if we need to fight seriously after 2008. We must avoid ethnocentrism, optimism and ambition. We must not show weakness. We must show resolution, and lots of aid. In counter-insurgency, especially among Pushtuns, as in **judo**, what you do matters no more than what you do not. We might revive the techniques by which the British kept the tribal areas quiet, such as paying Pushtun clans to protect themselves, on pain of our returning if the Taliban do. If opium is an issue, perhaps NATO should buy crops, instead of bothering farmers. The key considerations are: we face little opposition, and have little tolerance to pay for being in Afghanistan. The key questions are: how far can one pacify Afghanistan? how far can one make a state effective? Afghanistan never has been pacified nor has the state ever controlled the village. If we accept these limits, we can win; if we challenge them, probably not. Our strategy can work only if it does not ask too high a price of us, or of Afghans.

⁵⁸ The central study is D. Michael Shafer, Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy, (Princeton, 1988).