

# Charlie did it

by Paul Wolf, 7 June 2003

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## Introduction

1. Charlie did it (6/6/03)
2. Excerpt from *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (2003)

## Introduction

The withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, following ten very frustrating years fighting the CIA-backed mujahideen, led directly, according to many, to the breakup of the USSR.

The results in Afghanistan were no less destabilizing. While the Afghans may have been liberated from Soviet occupation, instead they suffered fourteen years of civil war. There is not much to celebrate today, with half the capital, Kabul, in ruins, protected by US and European occupying forces, and warlords with private armies controlling most of the rest of the country. Twenty four years of war have taken a heavy toll on Afghanistan, a country with no telephone system, few paved roads, an illiterate population, an estimated 5-7 million unaccounted-for land mines, and various other problems that rival those of any other place on Earth.

Every day I walk through the streets, going wherever I am going, passing by dozens of beggars, some of whom will follow me for blocks, grabbing onto my arm they'll follow me all across the city until I give them a one Afghan note -- worth two cents -- that's all they want. They seem happy with it and run away as if afraid I'm going to change my mind and take it back.

I also pass children looking for treasure in the piles of garbage and open sewers where trash is thrown. There are no trash collection or sewage services anywhere in the city.

Such is the price of freedom, from communist oppression, from islamic fundamentalism. The country has been repeatedly destroyed, its development prevented, and still no one helps the poor Afghan people.

Today I learned that the law professors at the University of Kabul, who are helping me with my research project, earn between \$25 to \$30 per month. They are not happy about it and realize it's a low salary. But they are among the few Afghan government employees who are actually being paid.

The police and military, who earn about \$40 per month, have not been paid in at least five months, the law professors say. This doesn't bode well for a nation dominated by opium-financed private armies, with an ineffective and distrusted central government. By comparison, many of the UN and World Bank funded NGO's -- who comprise the *de facto* government of Afghanistan -- pay their workers between \$3000 and \$5000 monthly, easily one hundred times the salary of a law professor, government bureaucrat, or police or military officer.

I say they are the *de facto* government because the combined NGO budget is about ten times that of the Afghan government, and foreign NGO's have, under the authority of the Bonn Agreement which established the current government here, set up commissions for human rights, judicial, civil service, and constitutional reform. These high priced consultants, who have no interaction with the common people of Afghanistan, are deeply resented by the common people here, who think they are stealing the international aid money meant for the desperately poor Afghan people. One professor told me today that the world does not consider Afghan people to be human beings.

None of this will be written into the history of Afghanistan. The man with the turban pulling a cart ten times his own size doesn't count for much; neither does the widow sitting in the street with her malnourished babies on display. These people just live here. Their children and grandchildren will doubtless give their lives, as have so many before, to fight foreign wars in Afghanistan. One Afghan legal scholar asked me what the American people thought about Afghanistan. I said the first thing that came to mind -- Osama bin Laden. He got a good laugh out of it.

- Paul  
Kabul, Afghanistan  
June 7, 2003

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### **Charlie did it**

By George Crile, *The Financial Times*, June 6 2003

In the early summer of 1980, Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson walked off the floor of the House of Representatives into the Speaker's Lobby, a rich, wood-paneled room that stretches along the full length of the House floor. A Teletype at one end spewed out stories from AP, UPI and Reuters. Wilson was a news junkie, and he reached down and began reading a story datelined from Kabul.

The article described hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Afghanistan as Soviet helicopter gunships leveled villages, slaughtered livestock, and killed anyone who harbored

guerrillas resisting the occupation. What caught Wilson's attention, however, was the reporter's conclusion that the Afghan warriors were refusing to quit. The article described how they were murdering Russians in the dead of night with knives and pistols, hitting them over the head with shovels and stones. Against all odds, there was a growing rebellion under way against the Red Army.

It would have been a sobering insight for the Communist rulers if they could have followed what happened in the few minutes after Wilson finished reading the Associated Press dispatch. The mysterious force in the U.S. government that was destined to hound the Red Army with a seemingly limitless flood of ever more lethal and sophisticated weapons was about to be activated.

No one, however, was paying attention, not even in the American government, when Charlie Wilson picked up a phone and called the Appropriations Committee staffer who dealt with "black appropriations", the CIA funds. The man's name was Jim Van Wagenen, a former college professor and one-time FBI agent. Wilson had just been named to the Defense Appropriations subcommittee. He was now part of the band of twelve men in the House responsible for funding CIA operations.

The congressman knew enough about the eccentric workings of the subcommittee to know when a member can act alone to fund a program. "How much are we giving the Afghans?" he asked Van Wagenen.

"Five million," said the staffer.

There was a moment's silence. "Double it," said the Texan.

So far as anyone can tell, no congressman prior to Charlie Wilson had ever moved unsolicited to increase a CIA budget. From the beginning of the Cold War, Congress had granted that exclusive right to the president. But as dramatic as the doubling might sound, it had no visible impact on the war. It wasn't reported or debated, and it never even registered on the KGB's radar screen in Russia. At best, all it did was provide the mujahideen with a few thousand more Enfield rifles and perhaps some machine guns, so that they could go out and die for their faith in greater numbers.

Wilson's intervention had not cost the congressman much more than a telephone call to a key staffer and a few additional minutes when the subcommittee met to appropriate the nation's secret intelligence budget. It was an impulsive action, a personal gesture to bolster a painfully inadequate U.S. program. Wilson so easily crossed the line into this covert arena that no one stopped to question his right to be there or worry about the precedent he might be setting. It would be another two years before he would return to put this precedent to the test. But this is where he first demonstrated that there could be another power center in the American government, one that could act in a way that was totally unpredictable to drive a U.S. covert policy.

The truth is, there were always two Charlie Wilsons at work in Washington. But he was moving heaven and earth in those days to allow only one image to surface, and to promote that image so loudly that no one would go looking for the other. To begin with, he staffed his

office almost exclusively with tall, startlingly beautiful women. They were famous on the Hill, known to all as "Charlie's Angels". And to his colleagues' amazement, whenever questioned about this practice, Wilson invariably responded with one of his favorite lines: "You can teach them how to type, but you can't teach them to grow tits." That was the way he tended to present himself in public, which was tame compared to the way he decorated his condo. It was almost a caricature of what Hugh Hefner might have designed as the ultimate bachelor's lair. Manly hedonism was the theme, down to the last detail: mirrored walls, an emperor's size bed outfitted with plush down pillows and a royal blue bed cover, an entertainment center featuring a giant television and stereo, and a gleaming tanning bed to maintain his year-round tan. Finally, the congressman's most distinctive innovation: the Jacuzzi, not hidden away in the bathroom but so deliberately situated in the center of the bedroom that it forced the unsuspecting eye to draw all the worst possible conclusions about the man who slept in this room. Particularly when visitors came close and discovered silver handcuffs dangling elegantly from a hook within easy reach of the tub. The site of these instruments of hedonism invariably left his colleagues and distinguished guests speechless.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that this was all a false front. Charlie Wilson, after all, is a bona fide hedonist. But he is also guilty of concealing his other identity. It's only when he's alone and everyone else is sleeping that the other Charlie Wilson surfaces. It's a nightly affair. Usually at about three or four a.m. he finds himself awake and turns to his library, with its thick volumes of military history. He's not like other insomniacs, who simply try to get back to sleep. He reads like a scholar steeped in his field but also like a man in search of something personal, poring through accounts of the struggles of the world and the men who counted - Roosevelt, Kennedy, and all the great generals.

But invariably, it is to the biographies and speeches and histories of Winston Churchill that Wilson always returns on these night journeys, to read again and again about the man who was cast into the political wilderness, written off as an alcoholic alarmist, and then, when all was lost, rose to the occasion to save his country and his civilization from the darkness of Hitler. It's no wonder that Charlie Wilson never shared his sense of personal destiny. It wouldn't have made much sense when what he was most noted for at the time was an investigation by a team of federal prosecutors into what precisely he had got up to in the Fantasy Suite hot tub at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas with two long-legged showgirls and "an endless supply" of cocaine. This was not the time even to have whispered of his inner conviction that he and Winston Churchill might have something -- anything -- in common.

Nor did he explain why the painting over his bed, his one steady nightly companion, was like a talisman to him. The painting -- a lone pilot in the cockpit of a Spitfire, patrolling the night skies of London -- had hung over his boyhood bed in tiny Trinity, Texas, at a time when the Nazis were sweeping across Europe. Night after night, on the second floor of the white frame house, in the corner room that Charlie shared with his uncle Jack, the boy would sit staring out the window, ever vigilant; searching the sky for signs of Japanese bombers and fighter planes, whose characteristics were burned upon the memory of this seven-year-old defender of Trinity. "They aren't coming, Charlie," his kindly uncle Jack would assure him. "But if they do, you'll be the first to see them."

Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's historic North-West Frontier, is the last stop before Afghanistan on the famed Grand Trunk Highway, which originates in New Delhi. It's a

historic smugglers crossroads, an intrigue-filled city that was home to the British colonial army, which maintained garrisons there and which Rudyard Kipling immortalized in his poems and novels. By 1982 it had also become the not very secret center of the Afghan resistance. All the Americans who would later make this passage to Peshawar experienced the same giddy sensation of entering a time warp. There is a sound in the streets of this city that must be experienced to be understood. It's like being inside a beehive -- a whirl of turbans, beards, ox-drawn wagons, brightly painted buses; motor scooters turned into rickshaws and driven by Pashtun tribesmen. Every face looks biblical, and everything is in motion on the streets: money changers, rug merchants, horse-drawn carts, men washing their feet and hands at the entrances of mosques, young boys scurrying about with trays of freshly baked Afghan bread and tea.

Peshawar was only thirty miles from the Afghan border and minutes from the sprawling refugee camps. There were hidden storehouses, and Afghan commanders living behind walled compounds surrounded by armed bodyguards. This was home to the leaders of the seven mujahideen military parties that the US Central Intelligence Agency and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) had created to organize the war effort. But no one offered to take Wilson to visit these secret warriors. He hadn't yet earned the right to pass freely into that world. His schedule on his first trip to Peshawar called for the traditional tour of the U.N.-supported refugee camps, a scene that appalled everyone who came to Peshawar: millions of proud Afghans living in mud huts without running water or the ability to feed themselves. In the month of his visit twenty thousand more had poured in -- young boys and girls dressed in right tribal clothing; the women with their faces covered. They came from the mountains and valleys of a country where their ancestors had lived for centuries, a legendary warrior nation not easy to intimidate and uproot.

All brought horror stories of what had caused them to flee their country. In particular they talked of helicopter gunships that hovered over their villages, hounding them even as they fled. It began to dawn on Wilson that there were only Afghans in this part of Pakistan and that he was witnessing an entire nation in flight from the Communists. This spectacle of mass suffering roused him but he had been to refugee camps before and for him there was something almost impersonal about such a mass of humanity. What did catch his attention that day was the absence of men -- no teenagers, not even forty or fifty year olds. He was told they were all fighting in the jihad.

It was at his next stop, the Red Cross hospital on the edge of Peshawar, that he lost his heart to the Afghans. Scores of young men were laid out on hospital cots. The doctors sat with Wilson at the bed of a young boy and explained that his hand had been blown off by a Russian butterfly mine designed to look like a toy. This threw Wilson into a rage. A young Afghan who had stepped on a land mine explained he was proud of his sacrifice. "He told me his only regret was that he couldn't have his feet grown back so he could go kill Russians."

Wilson moved from bed to bed, undone by the carnage but increasingly aware why most of them were there. He spoke to a wounded commander as the effects of an anaesthetic started to kick in. The man was waving his hand in a circle, speaking in Pashtun, describing the horror of the Russian gunship that had put him there. Not one of them complained about their lost limbs. But every one of them described their fury at the Russian gunships. And to a man, they asked for only one thing -- a weapon to ring down this tool of Satan. Wilson

wanted desperately to give something to these warriors and, before leaving, he donated a pint of his own blood.

His next stop was a meeting with a council of Afghan elders, hundreds of whom were waiting for him in a huge colorful tent, decorated with cotton fabrics that looked like floating Oriental rugs. As he walked in, Wilson was dazed by the sight of long white beards and turbans, and the men's fierce, unblinking eyes. The Pakistanis had told them that the congressman had come as a friend offering assistance, and as he entered they shouted, "Allahu Akbar" -- God is Great.

To Wilson it was like a scene out of the Old Testament. When the elders invited the Texan to speak, he delivered what he thought would be just the right message. "I told them that they were the most courageous people in the world and I said, 'We're going to help you. None of your families will suffer from lack of shelter and food.' I pledged that their soldiers would not be left to die in agony and that we would give them millions in humanitarian assistance."

An old man rose to respond. He told Wilson he could keep his bandages and rice. What they needed was a weapon to destroy the gunships. These old men were no different from the young warriors in the hospital. They were all fixated on the Russian Mi-24 Hind helicopter. It was at this moment that Charlie Wilson realized he was in the presence of a people who didn't care about sympathy. They didn't want medicine or charity. They wanted revenge.

And they got it -- courtesy of Charlie Wilson. When the last Soviet soldier walked out of Afghanistan on February 15 1989, there were many who echoed the words of Pakistan's military leader General Zia ul-Haq: "Charlie did it". Not the least of these was the CIA itself, which four years later treated Congressman Wilson to a rare honour inside its headquarters in Langley, Virginia. On a large screen on the stage of the auditorium was that very quotation, and beneath it the words: "President Zia ul-Haq explaining the defeat of the Russians in Afghanistan."

Throughout the 1980s the Afghan mujahideen were America's surrogate soldiers in the brutal guerrilla war that became the Soviet Union's Vietnam, a defeat that helped trigger the subsequent collapse of the Communist empire. Afghanistan was a secret war that the CIA fought and won without debates in Congress or protests in the street. It was not just the CIA's biggest operation, it was the biggest secret war in history. In the course of a decade, billions of rounds of ammunition and hundreds of thousands of weapons were smuggled across the border on the backs of camels, mules, and donkeys. At one point over 300,000 fundamentalist Afghan warriors carried weapons provided by the CIA; thousands were trained in the art of urban terror. Before it was over, some 28,000 Soviet soldiers were killed.

It was January of 1989, just as the Red Army was preparing to withdraw its last soldiers from Afghanistan, when Charlie Wilson called to invite me to join him on a fact-finding tour of the Middle East. I had produced a CBS *60 Minutes* profile of Wilson several months earlier and had no intention of digging further into his role in the Afghan war. But I quickly accepted the invitation. The trip began in Kuwait, moved on to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and then to Saudi Arabia -- a grand tour that took us to all three of the countries that would soon take center stage in the Gulf War. For me, the trip was just the beginning of a decade-long odyssey.

There were two surprises on that trip, revelations that opened my eyes to a bigger story: the first was the princely reception given to Wilson wherever he went in the Arab world. The second was my introduction to Gust Avrakotos, the CIA agent who had worked closely with Wilson ("As I saw it," Avrakotos once said, "the tie that bound us together was chasing pussy and killing Communists.") Avrakotos recently retired from the Agency and was reunited with his co-conspirator for the first time in several years. As we moved from Kuwait down to the battlefield of Basra, where hundreds of thousands had died in the closing battles of the Iran-Iraq War, I began talking to Avrakotos, and in short order I realized that the Afghan campaign had been anything but a typical CIA program.

When our commercial flight back to Baghdad was canceled, Avrakotos managed to get us onto a lavish Boeing 707 owned by a Saudi religious leader by telling him about Wilson's role in the Afghan war. We shared the flight with a delegation of holy men from the strict Wahhabi sect, some of whom were still sending money and Arab volunteers to the jihad in Afghanistan. The plane was, in effect, a flying mosque: luxuriously outfitted with solid-gold bathroom fixtures, soft leather seats, and numerous monitors that tracked the direction of Mecca for the plane's passengers. In Riyadh, a royal receiving party met us at the airport. A caravan of brand-new white Mercedes-Benzes, complete with police escort, swept us off to the palace for a meeting with the king's brother, Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan. After tea, Wilson delivered his message: he had come to thank the Saudi royal family for its extraordinary generosity in matching the Americans dollar for dollar in Afghanistan. It became clear that the gratitude went both ways when Wilson was shown to his quarters several hours later -- a preposterously lavish suite with a living room that seemed to be the size of a football field.

"We want you to know, Mr. Congressman," the prince's aide said, "that these are larger quarters than we provided for George Bush. Mr. Bush is only the vice president. You won the Afghan war."

Throughout the Muslim world, the victory of the Afghans over the army of a modern superpower was seen as a transformational event. But back home, no one seemed to be aware that something important had taken place and that the United States had been the moving force behind it. Any chance of an American appreciation for the Afghan miracle was fast disappearing, as one incredible event after another began to unravel the Soviet eastern bloc. That August, Lech Walesa and his movement pushed aside the Communists and took power in Poland. Then in November, the ultimate symbol of Communist oppression, the Berlin Wall, came down. It was just nine months after the Red Army's humiliating retreat from Afghanistan, and the dominoes were now falling in central and Eastern Europe. As Charlie Wilson saw it, his Afghans had played a decisive role in helping to trigger and hasten the collapse of the Communist eastern bloc. More than a million Afghans had died, and no one had ever thanked them for their sacrifice.

Throughout the war, Wilson had always told his colleagues that Afghanistan was the one morally unambiguous cause that the United States had supported since World War II -- and never once had any member of Congress stood up to protest or question the vast expenditures. But with the departure of the Soviets, the war was anything but morally unambiguous. By 1990 the Afghan freedom fighters had suddenly and frighteningly gone back to form, re-emerging as nothing more than feuding warlords obsessed with settling

generations-old scores. The difference was that they were now armed with hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of weapons and explosives of every conceivable type. The justification for the huge CIA operation had been to halt Soviet aggression, not to take sides in a tribal war -- certainly not to transform the killing capacity of these warriors.

Wilson proposed a billion-dollar U.S. aid package to begin rebuilding Afghanistan and did his best to rally support. He set off for Moscow to see what could be done to end the surrogate war that continued to rage. The Russians were pumping an estimated \$3 billion a year into Afghanistan to prop up the puppet government led by Najibullah, while the CIA, with Saudi matching funds, maintained the enormous flow of weapons to the feuding warlords.

Andre Kozyrev, the future Russian foreign minister, told Charlie that the United States and Russia now had a common interest in stabilizing Afghanistan and particularly in preventing radical Islamic elements from taking power. The Soviets' preoccupation, Kozyrev explained, was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the mujahideen leader who had so impressed the Afghans' American champions and whose close ties to Pakistan's ISI made him the leading recipient of CIA weaponry. Kozyrev insisted that Gulbuddin's brand of militant Islam was just as dangerous to America as it was to the Soviet Union -- a point Charlie had heard frequently that year from his own side.

What struck Wilson most on his visit was not Kozyrev's reasoned appeal, but the discovery that, whatever the sins of the Communist regime, the people of Russia had been liberated. He witnessed the explosion of religious faith after years of repression, and he attended a daring production of the musical *Hair* in the union hall of a cigarette factory. But everywhere, the scarcity of consumer goods shocked and saddened him. This, he realized, was a defeated nation.

In the second year after the Soviet withdrawal, Wilson delivered another \$250 million for the CIA to keep its Afghan program intact. With Saudi matching funds, the mujahideen would receive another half a billion dollars to wage war.

The expectation was that they would join forces for a final push to throw out the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime, restore order, and begin the process of rebuilding. The Agency even sent word to Wilson that as an act of gratitude for the renewed budget, the mujahideen planned to take Jalalabad by June 1, Charlie's birthday. It didn't happen. Instead the Najibullah forces held, as the Afghans bickered and disgraced themselves by massacring prisoners.

That year, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait; adding insult to injury, Gulbuddin and Abu Sayaf -- the mujahideen leader closest to the Saudis -- both publicly sided with Saddam Hussein against the United States. Their subsidies, however, continued. With the news from Afghanistan growing darker, Charlie escaped so deep into drink that he began attending sessions of the congressional chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. At best he was operating on automatic pilot, rarely attending the special briefings the Agency put on for him and refusing to meet with the mujahideen when they came to Washington. It was almost as if he didn't want to see or hear what was happening to his old freedom fighters.



Finally, on April Fools' Day, 1991, there was good news from the front -- very good news. Wilson learned that his favorite commander, Jalaluddin Haqani, had "liberated" Khost. The first major Afghan city was now in the hands of the freedom fighters, and it was in no small measure due to the introduction of a series of lethal new weaponry provided by Wilson. Soon after, I accompanied Wilson's administrative assistant, Charlie Schnabel, to meet up with Haqani and take stock of how the mujahideen were conducting themselves as they began to reclaim their country. The stories we heard once we reached Pakistan were alarming. The mujahideen were hijacking the US AID trucks, making regular runs impossible. At Friday prayers, the mullahs were inflaming their followers with accounts of Western NGO volunteers teaching Afghan women to wash with soap. An enraged mob had marched on the facility that provided free health care to women, now convinced that the clinic was promoting free sex. They burned the facility to the ground and trashed seventeen cars -- \$1.8 million in damage in just one day. Afghan women working in refugee camps as teachers and nurses were threatened; one had just been kidnapped and murdered. In Peshawar, the American consul relayed a particularly horrific account of one of Gulbuddin's many outrages. A few months earlier he had sought to "liberate" Khost by shelling the civilian population of the city.

Khost was like a ghost town when we arrived. The bazaar, which had been full just days before, was empty. Everyone had fled the liberators. Nothing moved except armed mujahideen soldiers. Many of the warriors were said to be radical Arabs who had come to get in on the jihad. There was little sign of life and few prospects of people returning anytime soon. Instead of devoting its energies to rebuilding Afghanistan, as they had hoped, the State Department's Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program found itself following the liberators in a desperate attempt to persuade them not to murder and pillage.

None of this attracted any real attention in the world press, which had either forgotten about or lost interest in Afghanistan -- in spite of the fact that the CIA and KGB were continuing to mount the largest covert Cold War battle in history. For all practical purposes, the Cold War was over, and it seemed as if the United States and Russia had come to share roughly the same long-term goals in Afghanistan. The only logical explanation for why the two superpowers were now funding this mysterious war of the tribes was the force of inertia. Simply put, neither side wanted to be the first to pull back.

It was almost unthinkable, but Ambassador Robert Oakley now wondered if the US-backed Afghans, no longer menaced by the Red Army, were any different from the Afghans whom the Russians were backing. In fact, it was the leaders of the Afghan puppet government who were saying all the right things, even paying lip service to democratic change. The mujahideen, on the other hand, were committing unspeakable atrocities and couldn't even put aside their bickering and murderous thoughts long enough to capture Kabul. Oakley kept coming upon the same signpost "What's a nice group of kids like us doing in a place like this?" Without the Russians around, did we really want to be giving long-range Stingers, satellite-guided mortars, burst transmitters, and hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of ordnance to these men?

Wilson was surprised that spring to hear that the administration was not putting in a request for more money. There had been meetings in Wilson's office and talks with Judge William Webster, the new director of Central Intelligence, about the coming year's budget, but the

Agency was no longer of a single mind. The Bush administration, however, wanted out of this game -- so the CIA's seventh floor had no choice but to reflect the opinion of their masters in the White House.

With no request for funds, the Senate Select Committee met and reported out a bill with nothing in it for Afghanistan. On September 30, 1991, the end of the fiscal year, the flow of weapons, ammunition, and supplies that the mujahideen had so dearly loved would stop. But for Charlie Wilson, there was something fundamentally wrong with his war ending then and there. He didn't like the idea of the United States going out with a whimper. The president might want to end the war, but it wasn't his war to end. It had always been Congress's war, and just because there was disarray at the CIA didn't mean Congress should step back. That was the essence of the appeal Wilson made to his highly reluctant colleagues on the House Intelligence Committee when they met to consider the annual budget. Incredibly, he carried the day. No one knew how to say no to Charlie.

"Where will we get the money?" the chairman of the Intelligence Committee asked.

"It doesn't matter," Wilson said in his most selfless tone. "Take it from a Texas defense contract. Whatever. The main thing is: this body should not be cutting off the mujahideen." "Well, shit. How about \$25 million?" asked the chairman, meaning \$25 million per quarter, \$100 million for the year. "How about \$50 million?" Wilson responded. And \$50 million a quarter is what they ultimately agreed on. With the Saudi contribution, that meant another \$400 million for the mujahideen.

It was only the beginning of the extraordinary maneuvers Wilson had to make to push this bill through a highly reluctant Congress. By then even his most reliable ally, John Murtha, the chairman of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee, wanted to end the CIA program. Murtha was appalled at reports of the mujahideen's drug trafficking, but in the end he stood with Charlie, and his support guaranteed the bill's passage in the House. It was passed in the Senate that fall. The secret appropriation was hidden in the \$298 billion Defense bill for fiscal year 1992. When it was presented for a vote, no one but the interested few noticed the \$200 million earmarked for the Afghans.

And so, as the mujahideen were poised for their thirteenth year of war, instead of being cut off; it turned out to be a banner year. They found themselves with not only a \$400 million budget but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen.

However disgraceful the mujahideen's conduct was in the following months, in April 1992 they managed to stop fighting one another long enough to take Kabul. Once again Charlie felt vindicated. He had stayed the course and allowed the victory that belonged to the Afghans to occur. But then everything became ugly. By August, the interim foreign minister, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, was outside of the capital, with his artillery shelling the positions of his former comrade in arms, the interim defense minister Ahmad Shah Massoud. Kabul, which had survived the entire Afghan war relatively intact, was suddenly subjected to intense urban warfare. Before it was over, close to 40 percent of the housing was destroyed; the art museum was leveled; the palace ravaged.

Under normal circumstances, such misuse of American resources should have led to a scandal or at least entered the American consciousness as an issue of concern. But the anarchy in Kabul was completely overshadowed by the historic events sweeping the world. In December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Everywhere across the twelve time zones of the former Soviet Union, statues of Lenin were coming down and freedom was breaking out in a Russia reborn. People were now referring to the United States as the world's lone superpower.

For the men who ruled the CIA, Afghanistan was acknowledged as the main catalyst that helped trigger these historic changes. Flush with the glory of tumbling dominoes and convinced that the Afghan campaign had been the key to it all, the Directorate of Operations led a ceremony on a sunny humid June day in 1993 to recognize the man who had made it possible. Without Charlie Wilson, Director Woolsey said in his comments, "History might have been hugely different and sadly different". It wasn't the parade that Charlie had sought, but then no other member of Congress, indeed no outsider, had ever been singled out by the CIA for such an accomplishment. If that's where it all had ended for Charlie Wilson -- standing tall at the CIA's Langley headquarters that day with the fear of nuclear war fast receding and America now the world's only superpower - then it truly would have been a Cold War fairy tale come true.

But that's not the way history works. Inevitably, great events have unintended consequences. What no one involved anticipated was that it might be dangerous to awaken the dormant dreams and visions of Islam. Which is, of course, exactly what happened. There were many early warnings well before Charlie's award at Langley. In January of that year, a young Pakistani, Mir Aimal Kasi, walked down the line of cars at the gates of the CIA and calmly murdered two officers before escaping to Pakistan where he was embraced as a folk hero. A month later a bomb went off in the car park of the World Trade Center. What emerged from the smoke was a clear indication that some of the veterans of the Afghan campaign now identified America as their enemy.

As early as a year before at Khost, a haunting portrait of the future was already in place: battle-hardened Afghan mujahideen, armed to the teeth and broken down into rival factions -- one of the largest being a collection of Arab and Muslim volunteers from around the world. Pakistan's former intelligence chief, Hamid Gul, maintains that over the course of the jihad, up to thirty thousand volunteers from other countries had come into Pakistan to take part in the holy war. What now seems clear is that, under the umbrella of the CIA's program, Afghanistan had become a gathering place for militant Muslims from around the world, a virtual Mecca for radical Islamists. As early as the Gulf War, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, long the main recipient of CIA weaponry, had articulated his belief that the United States was seeking world domination and control of Muslim oil. The man Charlie once described as "goodness personified," Jalaluddin Haqani, had long been a gateway for Saudi volunteers, and for years the CIA had no problem with such associations. Osama bin Laden was one of those volunteers who could frequently be found in the same area where Charlie had been Haqani's honored guest. As the CIA's favorite commander, Haqani had received bags of money each month from the station in Islamabad.

The presumption at Langley had been that when the United States packed its bags and cut off the Afghans, the jihad would simply burn itself out. If the Afghans insisted on killing one

another, it would be a shame but not America's problem. Perhaps that policy would have worked out had it been only weapons that we left behind. But the more dangerous legacy of the Afghan war is found in the minds and convictions of Muslims around the world. To them the miracle victory over the Soviets was all the work of Allah -- not the billions of dollars that America and Saudi Arabia poured into the battle, not the ten-year commitment of the CIA that turned an army of primitive tribesmen into technoholy warriors. The consequence for America of having waged a secret war and never acknowledging or advertising its role was that we set in motion the spirit of jihad and the belief in our surrogate soldiers that, having brought down one superpower, they could just as easily take on another.

The morning of September 11, 2001, broke bright and shining in the nation's capital. As was his custom before leaving for work, Charlie Wilson walked out on to his terrace to take in the spectacular view. Never in history had a nation accumulated such dominance over the rest of the world as the United States had in the decade following the Soviet collapse. Wilson's name was all but unknown to most Americans, but as he looked out over the monuments and the historic houses of government, he had every reason to believe that he had played a part in the startling disappearance of America's greatest enemy.

A call from a friend interrupted his morning ritual: "Do you have your television on?" The sight of the World Trade Center in flames stunned him, but like most Americans, he assumed it had to have been a horrendous accident. Some ten minutes later he was watching when the second plane appeared on screen and flew straight into the second tower. A sickening realization gripped him: it had to be the work of terrorists, and, if so, he had little doubt that the killers were Muslims.

"I didn't know what to think, but figured if I got downtown I could learn more." By then Wilson had retired from Congress and was working as a lobbyist, with Pakistan as one of his main accounts. At 9:43 am, half an hour after the first attack, he was driving across the Fourteenth Street Bridge with the windows up and news radio blasting so loud that he didn't hear the explosion that rocked the Pentagon less than a mile away.

For five straight nights he watched, until the fires were finally put down and the smoke cleared. He didn't know what to make of it all at first. When the photographs of the nineteen hijackers appeared in newspapers across the country, he took some comfort in pointing out that they were all Arabs, not Afghans. "It didn't register with me for a week or two that this thing was all based in my mountains."

For most Americans, the events of 9/11 were quickly tied to Afghanistan when it was learned that the hijackers had all spent time there. Much was made of this by the Bush administration, which assailed the Taliban for harboring Osama bin Laden and for allowing Afghanistan to become a breeding ground for international terrorists. The American public rallied behind the president when he launched his "war on terror". But almost everyone seemed confused about who the terrorists were, and all but clueless to explain why they hated the United States so much.

The question is not so difficult to understand if you put yourself in the shoes of the Afghan veterans in the aftermath of the Soviet departure. Within months, the U.S. government "discovered" what it had known for the past eight years -- that Pakistan was hard at work on

the Islamic bomb. (The dirty little secret of the Afghan war was that Zia had extracted a concession early on from Reagan: Pakistan would work with the CIA against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and in return the United States would provide massive aid but would agree to look the other way on the question of the bomb.) But with the Russians gone, sanctions were imposed and all military and economic assistance was cut off. A fleet of F-16s that Pakistan had already purchased was withheld. Within a year, the Clinton Administration would move to place Pakistan on the list of state sponsors of terrorism for its support of Kashmiri freedom fighters. The Pakistan military had long been the surrogates for the CIA, and every Afghan and Arab mujahid came to believe that America had betrayed the Pakistanis. And when the United States kept its troops (including large numbers of women) in Saudi Arabia, not just bin Laden but most Islamists believed that America wanted to seize the Islamic oil fields and was seeking world domination.

By the end of 1993, in Afghanistan itself there were no roads, no schools, just a destroyed country -- and the United States was washing its hands of any responsibility. It was in this vacuum that the Taliban and Osama bin Laden would emerge as the dominant players. It is ironic that a man who had had almost nothing to do with the victory over the Red Army, Osama bin Laden, would come to personify the power of the jihad. In 1998, when bin Laden survived \$100 million worth of cruise missiles targeted at him, it reinforced the belief that Allah had chosen to protect him against the infidels.

It's not what Charlie Wilson had in mind when he took up the cause of the Afghans. Nevertheless, in spite of 9/11 and all the horrors that have flowed from it, he steadfastly maintains that it was all worth it and that nothing can diminish what the Afghans accomplished for America and the world with their defeat of the Red Army: "I truly believe that this caused the Berlin Wall to come down a good five, maybe ten, years before it would have otherwise. Over a million Russian Jews got their freedom and left for Israel; God knows how many were freed from the gulags. At least a hundred million Eastern Europeans are breathing free today, to say nothing of the Russian people. It's the truth, and all those people who are enjoying those freedoms have no idea of the part played by a million Afghan ghosts. To this day no one has ever thanked them.

"They removed the threat we all went to sleep with every night, of World War III breaking out. The countries that used to be in the Warsaw Pact are now in NATO. These were truly changes of biblical proportion, and the effect the jihad had in accelerating these events is nothing short of miraculous.

"These things happened. They were glorious and they changed the world. And the people who deserved the credit are the ones who made the sacrifice. And then we fucked up the endgame."

The story of Charlie Wilson and the CIA's secret war in Afghanistan is an important, missing chapter of our recent past. Ironically, neither the United States government nor the forces of Islam will want this history to be known. But the full story of America's central role in the Afghan jihad needs to be told and understood for any number of reasons. Clearly it's not helpful for the world of militant Islam to believe that its power is so great that nothing can stop it. But the danger exists for us as well. It may not be welcomed by a government that prefers to see the rising tide of Islamic militancy as having no connection to

our policies or our actions. But the terrible truth is that the group of sleeping lions that the United States roused may well have inspired an entire generation of militant young Muslims to believe that the moment is theirs.

This extract was taken from *My Enemy's Enemy: The Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History -- the Arming of the Mujahideen by the CIA* by George Crile, published by Atlantic Books Ltd in the UK (£17.99) and in the US by Grove Atlantic Inc under the title *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* Atlantic Monthly Press (\$26)

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Excerpt from  
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*to the Fall of the Taliban*  
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### **The Rise of the Taliban**

The mujahideen were predominantly Muslim fundamentalists, part of a loose movement that had become increasingly dangerous since the fall of the Shah of Iran. Islamic terrorism, vividly demonstrated with the destruction of a Pan Am jetliner over Lockerbie, Scotland in 1988, had spread to Europe, Africa, and Asia, and threatened to reach the United States. Most Islamic terrorists were from the Mideast, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict fueled the fire, but the CIA was aware that many of the most vicious terrorists had acquired the nickname "Afghans." These were Arabs who had joined the jihad in Afghanistan, emerging afterward with training, weapons, and combat experience. Most Arab volunteers had been affiliated with the parties of Sayaf and Hekmatyar, though one young Saudi aristocrat, Osama Bin Laden, had set up his own organization.

Bin Laden first visited Afghanistan as a twenty-three-year-old in 1980, at the behest of Prince Turki Bin Faisal, head of Saudi intelligence. By 1982 he had established a base in Pakistan from which to provide infrastructure for the mujahideen, drawing on the expertise of his family's billion-dollar construction business. With funds from the Saudi government, his family and other wealthy contributors, he carved out caves and tunnel complexes in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, mainly around the city of Khost and south of Jalalabad. He also claimed to have fought in the jihad, participating in several ambushes. In 1990, disillusioned with squabbling among the mujahideen, Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia to work in the family business. He also created an organization to aid and support the 35,000 Arab veterans of the Afghan war, who were now among the most dedicated and experienced fighters in the world. This group came to be known as Al Qaeda (the Base) and instead of simply providing veterans' benefits would undertake new operations when the jihad went global.

In the CIA, there was already worry that the United States had created a monster. The Bush

administration began to favor a peaceful solution to the continuing war in Afghanistan rather than continued support of the mujahideen. Secretary of State James Baker met with Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze to discuss leaving the Communist Najibullah in power pending internationally supervised elections for a new Afghan coalition government.

By 1989, the original architects of Pakistan's covert war strategy, President Zia and ISI chief Akhtar, had been assassinated. Yousaf, who had been head of the ISI branch that directed mujahideen field operations, plus weapons supply and training, had retired after being passed over for promotion. Under the new head of ISI, Hamid Gul, the CIA finally won its long struggle to control the arms flow to particular commanders in the field -- a prerogative that Zia and Akhtar, both devout Muslims, had jealously guarded. Despite the CIA's new control over its shipments, however, elements within ISI could still support favorites with its own resources, as could Saudi Arabia, which had poured nearly as much money into the war as the Americans.

In March 1990, Najibullah survived a coup attempt by a Khalq general in the DRA, Shah Nawaz Tanai. After being foiled, Tanai fled to Pakistan where he joined forces with Hekmatyar. Diplomat scholar Martin Ewans has suggested that at the root of this otherwise bizarre alliance between a Communist and an Islamic radical was a base loyalty to the Ghilzai Pashtuns. Throughout the year, mujahideen launched attacks on DRA-held Khost, Herat, and Kandahar, while government convoys took great risks in traversing the roads in between. The resistance had once more reverted to guerrilla tactics, at which it was unsurpassed, the only exception coming late in the year when Hekmatyar launched a frontal assault on Kabul. He was beaten off with heavy casualties.

The DRA army had grown to about sixty thousand men and held firmly to the large cities. KhAD security forces and Sarandoy paramilitary police added to the government's strength, as did local militias. During this period one militia leader, Abdul Rashid Dostum, carved a fiefdom for himself in northern Afghanistan with fellow Uzbeks. Suspicions were prevalent among the mujahideen that Soviet troops were still around, flying aircraft or operating Scuds.

The most significant event of 1990 was Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which triggered a massive American-led response. Through the fall, President George Bush engineered the most impressive military coalition in history, uniting Saudis to Russians to Japanese to Brazilians, among dozens of others. After several months of bombing, a 300,000-man force, predominantly American, crushed the Iraqi army holding Kuwait in a 100-hour campaign. Hekmatyar and other fundamentalists among the mujahideen rooted for Saddam Hussein.

In March of that year, while Americans were trying to put out the oil fires left behind by the Iraqis in Kuwait, the mujahideen took the eastern Afghan city of Khost, which had held out for a decade in the midst of resistance bases. They then converged on Gardez, while Najibullah in Kabul switched the name of his People's Democratic Party to the "Homeland Party," in a desperate attempt to ditch his government's Communist affiliation. Indeed, the international handwriting on the wall was spelling his doom. He had already seen the Soviet Union support the U.S. in the Gulf War. In May, the United Nations devised a peace plan to which the Afghan government, Iran, Pakistan, the U.S., and Soviets all agreed. But it was rejected by the fundamentalist parties of the mujahideen.

In August, Gorbachev barely survived a military coup staged in Moscow, and then the Americans and Soviets jointly agreed to stop committing funds to the Afghan conflict at the end of the year. But Gorbachev would not get that far. In October 1991, the Berlin Wall came down, and on Christmas Day he resigned his post as general secretary of the Communist Party. His resignation signaled the end of the Soviet Union, its constituent republics becoming independent nations free to adopt whatever governmental system they chose. The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was now on its own.

In February, the powerful Uzbek warlord, Dostum, turned against the Afghan government, which had previously supplied him arms. His forces, together with Massoud's, then took the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. DRA authority in Herat and Kandahar began to integrate and mujahideen were now closing in on Kabul from all sides. International parties did their best to smooth the inevitable transition, the Russians advising Najibullah to step down. The United Nations also played a leading role, Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali submitting a plan for neutral Afghan leaders to form a transitional council to oversee the fall of the DRA and introduce the mujahideen in a bloodless transfer of power.

Najibullah upset the plan by disappearing on April 15, justifiably fearing for his life. The general in command of the KhAD security force committed suicide. By then, Massoud and Dostum, from the north, and Hekmatyar, from the south, had converged on Kabul, both groups vastly reinforced by well-equipped DRA army units who no longer had a government. They paused on the outskirts of the capital while the mujahideen parties, pressured by the United Nations, debated the method of transition and the government's new composition. The mujahideen leaders formed a committee called the Islamic Jihad Council. But they were too late to stop the battle for the capital.

Hekmatyar's men were already slipping through the streets of Kabul, heading for key installations. Massoud launched his own troops. Though Hekmatyar had the advantage of numbers, Massoud, almost alone among mujahideen commanders, had established a highly trained force with excellent command coordination. Dostum's men joined in, and by April 28 Hekmatyar's forces had been evicted from the city, falling back to the south. The Islamic Jihad Council subsequently arrived, naming Mujadidi, head of one of the moderate parties, president; Massoud, defense minister; Gailani (also a moderate), foreign minister; and Sayyaf, he of the close Saudi ties, minister of the interior. The post of prime minister was offered to Hekmatyar, but he refused to accept it while Massoud presided over the ministry of defense. This parceling of responsibility appears well thought out in retrospect, and it cannot be said that the mujahideen lacked the objective wisdom to theorize a stable government. The actual situation, however, has been described by historian Ahmed Rashid, who wrote:

Much of Afghanistan's subsequent civil war was to be determined by the fact that Kabul fell, not to the well-armed and bickering Pashtun parties ... but to the better organized and more united Tajik forces ... and to the Uzbek forces from the north. ... It was a devastating psychological blow because for the first time in 300 years the Pashtuns had lost control of the capital. An internal civil war began almost immediately.

The following years of turmoil in Afghanistan seemed to verify the Soviet Union's point of view that the mujahideen, upon gaining power, would prove disastrous for the country, and that instead of leading it into the modern age, would drag it backward into the medieval



period from which by the late twentieth century it had only barely emerged.

Mujadidi soon got power-hungry and was displaced in the summer by Rabbani, the Tajik head of the Islamic Society, which counted Massoud and Ismail Khan, the mujahideen champion of the Herat area, among its members. This signified complete northern control of the capital -- between Rabbani, Massoud, and Dostum -- prompting Hekmatyar to unleash vicious bombardments of the capital from his positions in the south. One of his rocket barrages in August killed up to eighteen hundred people.

During this new kaleidoscope of inter-Afghan rivalry, now at a greater scale than ever due to the immense wealth of captured DRA material, the focus of fighting shifted. Under the Soviet occupation, enormous efforts had been made to secure the cities, providing safe havens where people could work or live under a semblance of normalcy. The real war had taken place in the countryside, where the Soviets had tried to obliterate the rebels' support environment. During the "mujahideen civil war," however, the cities became the battlefields as rival groups from the countryside vied for control.

Kabul, though subject to sabotage and rocket attacks for years, much on the level of Saigon circa 1972, had more or less stayed intact under the Soviets. Now it was destroyed, block by block, as the former resistance parties fought each other. Ewans summed up the consequences by stating: "Over the year following the mujahideen takeover, it was estimated that some 30,000 Kabulis had been killed and possibly 100,000 wounded, while many more had left the city for internal or external exile." The refugee flow that once headed for Kabul now headed out of it. The "rubbilization" once achieved by the Soviets in the Afghan countryside was now duplicated in Afghanistan's cities.

In 1993, the fighting around Kabul continued, while most of the the country reverted to the same state of affairs encountered by Ahmad Shah in 1757. The Pashtuns held sway at Kandahar while the Tajik commander Ismail Khan established order at Herat with Iranian help. The Iranians appreciated his efforts at repatriating the 1,500,000 refugees who had arrived on their territory during the Soviet war. Dostum created an independent administration at Mazar-iSharif. though he and Massoud fought over control of Kunduz in the north. On the roads in between, independent warlords preyed on traffic for loot or tolls, fighting rival groups for control of territory or poppy fields.

The combination of governmental and economic collapse, along with an armed populace trained in logistics allowed Afghanistan to become the center of the world's opium trade. The holy warriors became drug peddlers -- an irony they excused by the fact that the endusers of the product were infidels. Filtered through labs in Pakistan and the former Soviet republics, Afghan opium was converted to heroin, eventually providing over 70 percent of the world's supply. While enriching some of the mujahideen parties, or at least replacing the drop in foreign aid, opium farming also became the only means for many rural communities to survive.

While the Sunni mujahideen fought each other, not to be forgotten were the Shi'ite Hazaras, who from their domain in the center of the Hindu Kush had broken up during the 1980s into quarreling factions. Since the Soviets had seldom taken on these descendants of the Mongol horde, they had been largely left to themselves for vicious fighting, while completely ignored

by the Peshawar parties funded and supplied by the ISI, CIA, Chinese, and Saudis. After the Soviet evacuation, Iran, the Shi'ite patron of the Hazaras, demanded that they unite into a single organization, as the Sunni parties had been compelled to do by the United Nations. The Hazaras complied by forming the "Party of Unity," an umbrella group that marked their emergence into the civil war as a formidable body of fighters. They promptly joined Hekmatyar in his assaults on Kabul, forcing Massoud to stretch his forces to fight on two fronts.

In early 1994, Dostum and his Uzbeks joined Hekmatyar, and their joint attacks on the capital, including the shutdown of the air corridor that had brought food and relief supplies, forced a new exodus of civilians. Massoud counterpunched by retaking Kunduz in the north, and also launched an offensive that knocked back the Uzbek-Pashtun alliance from the vicinity of Kabul. Dostum retreated back to the north while the Hazaras again emerged from the Hindu Kush to join Hekmatyar's forces for renewed attacks from the west. By the end of 1994, Massoud was still holding on to a corridor of government power from Kabul through the Panjshir Valley to Kunduz, with nominal control of much of the DRA's former base network. But late that summer he received word of still another armed group that had emerged around Kandahar. This party was not mujahideen but an entirely new group that called itself the "Taliban." The word meant "students," or considering its religious connotation, "seekers." Somehow it had already conquered the tribal warlords of the south and was now headed north, toward Herat, Ghazni, and the capital.

The Taliban began amid the anarchy of southern Afghanistan when a local strongman raped several girls in the summer of 1994. Local people turned for help to a mullah named Mohammed Omar and he in turn called on some of his religious students. These men executed the criminal and intimidated his followers. Afterward the students responded to calls from other people victimized by lawless brigands. The ranks of the Taliban grew in direct proportion to the society's desperate desire for order.

In the growth of the Taliban one can also see the gloved hand of Pakistan. Under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, the Pakistanis had decided to open the road to Central Asia through Kandahar and Herat. Bhutto had held direct discussions with Ismail Khan and Dostum about security (bypassing the beleaguered Rabbani government in Kabul). In October the Pakistanis decided to test-drive the route with a thirty-truck convoy filled with food and medicine. The convoy, however, was captured by an Afghan warlord named Mansur.

Just prior to this event, a group of Taliban had seized a huge arms depot at Spinbaldak, capturing eighteen thousand AK-47s and tons of ammunition previously stockpiled for Hekmatyar. Now the Pakistanis asked the Taliban to rescue their convoy, which they did with elan. Mansur was shot and his body was paraded around hanging from the barrel of a tank. The Taliban then turned against Kandahar itself, taking the city after two days of minor fighting. The government garrison surrendered amid rumors that its commander had been bribed. Captured were vast quantities of arms, including tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery. On the airfield the Taliban found a dozen Mig-21 jets and transport helicopters.

Over the next three months the Taliban overran twelve southern provinces as its ranks swelled with thousands of volunteers, primarily Afghan refugees or native Pashtuns filtered through Pakistani religious schools. In areas under their control, the Taliban replaced utter

anarchy with strict order under extremely conservative Islamic principles And the Pakistanis now had their open road. In the United States, to the degree that the public was still observing Afghanistan, the emergence of the Taliban seemed fortunate. Americans have always retained a large puritanical streak of their own, and the sight of this mysterious new army, rifles in one hand and Korans in the other, rolling over the countryside leaving order in place of chaos, was not unpleasing. Ahmed Rashid was able to observe them up close from the beginning:

These boys were a world apart from the Mujaheddin whom I had got to know during the 1980s -- men who could recount their tribal and clan lineages, remembered their abandoned farms and valleys with nostalgia and recounted legends and stories from Afghan history. ... They were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they could hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning.

While the Afghan civil war raged, the United States had its own problems in the early 1990s. In Somalia, President Bush had tried to duplicate the success of his coalition in Iraq by mobilizing an international force to feed a starving population that numbered in the millions. Pakistani troops, among others, joined the effort. But the contingent of U.S. special forces suffered eighteen dead in an ill-advised raid to catch a local warlord's aides in the center of Mogadishu. In the following election, Bush was defeated and his successor, Bill Clinton, promptly pulled all U.S. forces out of Somalia.

That same year, a huge car bomb exploded at the World Trade Center in Manhattan. The blast killed six people and injured a thousand more, mostly from smoke inhalation. The attack shook the country because the World Trade towers had become symbols of not only the power of New York City's financial district, but through their soaring majesty of America and even the Western World.

Fortunately, the north tower easily withstood the bomb, set off in its parking garage, and the FBI eventually tracked down the culprits. It was an Islamic group based in New Jersey led by a blind mullah. The group was so inept that one of its members had even tried to retrieve his deposit from the rent-a-car agency that provided the blown-up vehicle. The subsequent prosecution of the Jersey Islamics fell beneath the radar screen of a public more interested in the O. J. Simpson trial, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the Monica Lewinsky affair, all of which took place across a decade of increasing prosperity. Investigators, however, were disturbed to discover that the plotters had Afghan connections and had put on the drawing board a broader plan: to crash a hijacked plane into CIA headquarters.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban churned its way north. In January 1995, Hekmatyar tried to hold them off before Ghazni, but the city fell after fierce fighting on the outskirts. The Taliban then swept through the eastern mountains, groups of mujahideen collapsing before their onslaught, sometimes without a shot being fired as men laid down their arms or joined the new movement. After cutting off Hekmatyar's supply route to Jalalabad, the Taliban zeroed in on his fortress base at Charasyab, south of Kabul. After a last-ditch attempt to rally his forces against the idealistic students, Hekmatyar was forced to flee. The once-feared mujahideen leader had been chased from the country, his forces dispersed or now part of the Taliban.

Massoud took the opportunity of his rival's demise to attack the Hazaras, who had been coordinating with Hekmatyar against Kabul from the west. The Hazaras called upon the Taliban for help, but the two groups fell out and the Taliban captured and executed the Hazara leader, according to some reports by pushing him out of a helicopter. Now it was the Taliban against Massoud. The Taliban closed in on Kabul from three sides, pouring rocket and shell fire into the city. On March 19, Massoud counterattacked, providing the students their first taste of defeat as he knocked their main force back toward Ghazni, clearing the remainder well out of artillery range.

The main Taliban effort then switched to the west. Advancing across the dusty flatlands of western Afghanistan, the long columns of Taliban pickup trucks interspersed with occasional armored vehicles were assailed by government fighter jets flying from Shindand airbase. Ismail Khan, commander of the area, was reinforced by a thousand crack mujahideen airlifted by Massoud from Kabul. The Taliban had as many as twenty thousand fighters against twelve thousand government troops. Just south of Shindand the two sides collided in a ferocious battle, where again the Taliban's inexperience was revealed. They were held and in May, Ismail Khan counterattacked, driving them back to Delaram, two hundred miles south of Herat. This semidesert region became littered with hundreds of wounded young men crawling to find water, their faith in victory having exceeded the ambulatory capacity of their army. A key factor in the campaign was that the Taliban were no longer operating near Pakistan but alongside the border with Iran. The Iranians, alarmed at the rise of a purist Sunni movement on their doorstep, kept Ismail supplied with fuel and munitions, and their border troops skirmished with the Taliban in Nimruz province.

After their retreat, the Taliban sent out a call to the Islamic schools of Pakistan -- in many cases the only social structure provided to Afghan refugees -- and thousands more devout young men rallied to their cause. Pakistan's ISI discreetly shepherded this flow, making sure all the new recruits were properly armed and somewhat trained. In August, Ismail Khan launched another attack, driving the Taliban all the way back to the Helmand River. But then the Taliban counterattacked with new strength, catching Ismail Khan by surprise. The government troops fled, paralleled by machine-gun-mounted, troop-laden pickup trucks racing on parallel routes across the landscape to set up ambush positions in their rear. Shindand airbase fell in a rush as the Taliban inherited fifty-two Mig-21s, an assortment of helicopters, and sixty artillery pieces. Herat was now only a short jump away, and the ancient Timurid capital, once a veritable showpiece of Persian culture, fell without much resistance in early September 1995. The population had heard of the Taliban's success in establishing social order around Kandahar and many were inclined to welcome similar rule. Ismail Khan fled to Iran.

The next month the Taliban were back at Kabul. Massoud had spent the summer vying with Dostum in the north, but now realized that the true threat had reappeared from the south. Tension among Kabul's people also increased following the disaster at Herat. After the government accused Pakistan of supporting the Taliban phenomenon, the Pakistani embassy was sacked by a mob and one man was killed while the ambassador and others were beaten. This did little to diminish ISI's efforts on the Taliban's behalf. Massoud launched counterattacks but was unable to keep the Taliban at bay. Instead, a constant stream of rockets, artillery fire, and air strikes came in against the capital.

The battle stalemated through the winter and spring of 1996 as thousands of civilians died. In midwinter, the United Nations mounted an emergency airlift of food into the capital. In June, Hekmatyar reemerged, taking the post of prime minister that he had once declined. His arrival in Kabul was greeted with a 220-rocket barrage from the Taliban. By this time, Massoud (in his role as general for the Rabbani government), Dostum, and Hekmatyar had put aside their differences. After difficult fighting in the Hazarajat in which the Taliban got the upper hand, Karim Khalili, the new leader of the Shi'ite Party of Unity, also joined the government's coalition.

In late August, Mullah Omar launched the Taliban in an offensive east of the capital. Outposts fell like dominos before their onslaught, and by early September they had fought their way through the mountains and passes to take Jalalabad. The Taliban then aimed northwest, for Bagram, north of the capital. In the end, Massoud was pried rather than beaten out of Kabul. By taking Jalalabad the Taliban had cut the transit route to Pakistan. If they reached Bagram they would have cut the routes north, controlling the mouth of the Panjshir Valley and the Salang highway. Kabul would be isolated before winter set in, fast running out of not just food and fuel (firewood) but munitions. Meanwhile, Massoud looked at a city sprinkled with Hekmatyar's fundamentalist Pashtuns, the remnants of other parties, and the sullen vestiges of KhAD and the Communist militias. On the night of September 26, 1996, Massoud evacuated Kabul. With as much arms as his loyal Tajiks could bring out, the Lion of Panjshir returned to his valley.

The next day the Taliban made an uncontested entrance into the capital. Having little respect for international restraints, they broke into the United Nations compound where the former Communist leader, Najibullah, had been hiding. After killing him and his brother, they strung up his castrated body for public display.

In the fall of 1996 the Taliban surged north of Kabul, but Massoud, with the support of Dostum's Uzbek forces, knocked them back on their heels. When Taliban forces reached the Salang highway, Massoud sprung a devastating ambush, killing 150. Dostum blocked the tunnel and held off further Taliban attacks at Salang while Massoud launched a counteroffensive through Charikar and Bagram, at one point returning to just a few miles from the capital.

After winter forced a lull in operations, the Taliban launched a new offensive in 1997, retaking Bagram and, more dangerously, thrusting a left-hook into the north from Herat. Dostum turned to fight them off to the west of Mazar-i-Sharif, but one of his commanders, Abdul Malik, suddenly switched sides, allowing the Taliban to take the city in May. The Taliban now found itself holding a modern city, by Afghan standards, with Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Hazaras on all sides. The Pashtun radicals, with their usual certitude, began implementing Taliban law, and also made the mistake of trying to disarm the Hazaras. New fighting erupted and Malik switched sides again in the Taliban's rear. It was a disaster for the Taliban as up to three thousand of their vanguard were trapped and killed. Later they were able to point out mass graves where their men had been piled, many apparently shot after having surrendered.

Massoud called a meeting of those forces still resisting the Taliban. From which emerged the United Front for the Liberation of Afghanistan -- or as it was more commonly known, the

Northern Alliance. With Massoud as military commander, it basically consisted of all major Afghan ethnic groups other than the Pashtun. By this time, the Taliban's governmental philosophy had become well known. Women were rendered anonymous, refused work or education. Justice was implemented by chopping off people's hands, ears, or heads, depending on the crime. Public stoning was the solution to adultery. Television, music, photographs, whistling, and kite flying were all banned. Women would be beaten if they showed an arm or wore white socks, while the windows in their houses were expected to be blackened. The Taliban had indeed established order in most of the country, but it was of a fearsome medieval kind. The enforcement activities of their Department for the Propagation of Virtue and Suppression of Vice caused most distress in Afghanistan's cities. The primarily rural Pashtun were not overly affected, and prior to the Soviet invasion their women could claim only a 10 percent literacy rate in any case, compared to just under half of all men.

In July 1998, the Taliban launched major new offensives against the north, taking Taloan from Massoud in the east and Mazar-i-Sharif from Dostum. In the latter city they revenged their earlier disaster by slaughtering every Hazara they could get their hands on, up to six thousand. They also killed nine Iranian diplomats in a consulate, prompting Iran to mass seventy thousand troops on the Afghan border. Late in the year, Massoud retook Taloan, whose airfield was important for arms he was now receiving from Tajikistan and Russia, but he had to relinquish it again when another Taliban thrust came in from Kunduz.

Through 1999, towns in the north continued to change hands, while the largest battle took place when Massoud crushed a Taliban offensive north of Bagram, inflicting one thousand casualties. In the Hazarajat, fighting went back and forth for two years until the Taliban secured Bamian. The outside world was finally jolted into paying attention to the conflict in spring 2001 when the Taliban dynamited the two huge statues of Buddha that had been carved into the Bamian cliffs during the third and fifth centuries A.D. The rise of the Taliban had initially been viewed with some hopefulness by casual observers in the West; but their spectacular destruction of the Buddhas furnished proof of their disturbing nature.

After retaking Taloan one last time, the Taliban now controlled 90 percent of the country. The Northern Alliance was pinned into a corner by the border of Tajikistan, its only remaining ground of importance being Massoud's native Panjshir Valley that pointed toward Kabul. Massoud still defiantly refused to allow the Taliban to claim control of all Afghanistan. Mullah Omar, who ruled from a house near Kandahar, had been denied recognition by the international community, and never would be considered the legitimate ruler as long as the Northern Alliance stayed in the field. With the force left at his disposal, Massoud was incapable of rolling back the Taliban by himself. His best hope was that the world at large would realize the abomination the Taliban presented and eventually come to his aid. This would indeed happen; however, Massoud himself would fall just short of witnessing the event.

Osama Bin Laden, having left Afghanistan in 1990, had moved to Khartoum, Sudan in 1992 after arguing vehemently with the Saudi royal family about the aftermath of the Gulf War. He had opposed the entire idea of solving the Kuwait issue with American forces, and was appalled when the United States, after its victory, set up permanent bases on Saudi territory. In the Sudan -- at the time a hotbed of Islamic fervor, mainly directed against black minorities in the south -- Bin Laden devoted himself to building his Al Qaeda organization,

its hard core consisting of Islamic fighters forged through the Soviet war in Afghanistan. With members from forty-three nations, Al Qaeda was dedicated to global jihad on behalf of a puritan strain of Islam, while in its methods it somewhat resembled the medieval sect of Assassins that had been wiped out by the Mongols in 1251.

The CIA tried to follow Bin Laden closely, noting the opposition the U.S. had encountered in Somalia, plus the World Trade Center car bomb and other well-funded terrorist operations. In 1995, five U.S. soldiers were blown up in Saudi Arabia, and a few months later nineteen more were killed by a truck filled with explosives at a barracks in Dhahran. In 1994, the Saudis, fearing they had a wild card on their hands, had revoked Bin Laden's citizenship. After the Dhahran attack, the Sudanese, too, asked him to leave their country. These official moves under U.S. pressure may have had little influence on the true support Bin Laden retained in the Mideast. Still, he needed a secure geographic location from which to direct and build his organization. In May 1996 he returned to Afghanistan and the cave complexes he had previously created within its thousands of mountain folds. Always one of the most forbidding territories in the world, under Taliban rule Afghanistan had also become the most xenophobic, obsessed with pure Islam without concern for what the rest of the world thought.

In August 1998, two American embassies were blown up almost simultaneously, in the capitals of Kenya and Tanzania. Twelve Americans were killed along with 212 Africans, over 2,000 more people wounded. The CIA identified the hand of Al Qaeda behind the attacks, and two weeks later seventy-two cruise missiles came soaring in against Bin Laden's bases around Khost and Jalalabad. Other missiles destroyed a factory in Khartoum that the Sudanese said produced pharmaceuticals. In October 2000, the destroyer U.S.S. Cole, while refueling in Aden harbor, Yemen, was devastated by a suicide bomb that left a gaping hole in the vessel's side, along with seventeen dead and thirty-nine wounded U.S. sailors. Both Yemeni suicide bombers were found to be veterans of Afghanistan. With an election near, the U.S. failed to respond with force but vowed to intensify its intelligence efforts against Bin Laden. By 2001, Clinton had finished his terms in office, and the presidency passed to President Bush's son, George W. Bush, who had squeaked past Clinton's Vice President, Albert Gore, in a disputed election. Bush's primary programs were tax relief, education, and the erection of a hi-tech missile shield for American defense.

Through 2000-01, as the Taliban consolidated its rule of Afghanistan, save for the slice of northern territory held by the tenacious Massoud, Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar began to work closely together. Otherwise ostracized by the world community, the Taliban leader found through Bin Laden a well-funded international network of fighters and scholars dedicated to jihad. Benefiting from the Taliban example in turn, Bin Laden used religious schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan as recruiting stations from which the most serious pupils could be drawn for military training or terrorist missions. The continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, along with Pakistan's battle with India for Kashmir, produced a steady stream of young men anxious to take part on the front lines for Islam. Bin Laden himself seems to have had a larger, more fanatic worldview; however, the ongoing bloodshed in Palestine and Kashmir motivated the bulk of his recruits.

The military situation in Afghanistan remained a stalemate, the Northern Alliance forces having nowhere else to retreat, while Taliban troops were unable to crack Massoud's small

remaining territory. But then Osama Bin Laden proved his worth to his Taliban hosts. In late summer, Massoud granted an interview to two Algerian journalists carrying credentials from Belgium. He had put them off for some time, but finally agreed to a meeting. During the interview a bomb hidden within the camera exploded, mortally wounding Massoud. The Algerians had been members of Al Qaeda.

Massoud clung stubbornly to life but eventually died on a helicopter while being flown to a hospital in Tajikistan. During the twenty-four hours following the blast, the Taliban leadership exulted over the demise of their most formidable opponent. They did not realize that another secret Al Qaeda operation was about to begin. The next day would prove even more fateful for the Taliban, due to an attack taking place on the other side of the world. It was a Tuesday in the United States, September 11, 2001.

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