'A journey through more than a decade of hell and futility, written vividly in this most captivating of war journals' *OBSERVER*

CHRISTINA LAMB

FAREWELL KABUL

FROM AFGHANISTAN TO A MORE DANGEROUS WORLD

'If you had to recommend one book on Afghanistan then *Farewell Kabul* should be it' *DAILY TELEGRAPH*

Christina Lamb

Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan To A More Dangerous World

«HarperCollins»

Lamb C.

Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan To A More Dangerous World / C. Lamb — «HarperCollins»,

From the award-winning co-author of 'I Am Malala', this book asks just how the might of NATO, with 48 countries and 140,000 troops on the ground, failed to defeat a group of religious students and farmers? How did it go so wrong? Twenty-seven years ago, Christina Lamb left Britain to become a journalist in Pakistan. She crossed the Hindu Kush into Afghanistan with mujaheddin fighting the Russians and fell unequivocally in love with this fierce country of pomegranates and war, a relationship which has dominated her adult life.Since 2001, Lamb has watched with incredulity as the West fought a war with its hands tied, committed too little too late, failed to understand local dynamics and turned a blind eye as their Taliban enemy was helped by their ally Pakistan.Farewell Kabul tells how success was turned into defeat in the longest war fought by the United States in its history and by Britain since the Hundred Years War. It has been a fiasco which has left Afghanistan still one of the poorest nations on earth, the Taliban undefeated, and nuclear armed Pakistan perhaps the most dangerous place on earth.With unparalleled access to all key decision-makers in Afghanistan, Pakistan, London and Washington, from heads of state and generals as well as soldiers on the ground, Farewell Kabul tells how this happened.In Afghanistan, Lamb has travelled far beyond Helmand – from the caves of Tora Bora in the south to the mountainous bad lands of Kunar in the east; from Herat, city of poets and minarets in the west, to the very poorest province of Samangan in the north. She went to Guantánamo, met Taliban in Quetta, visited jihadi camps in Pakistan and saw bin Laden's house just after he was killed. Saddest of all, she met women who had been made role models by the West and had then been shot, raped or forced to flee the country.This deeply personal book not only shows the human cost of political failure but explains how short-sighted encouragement of jihadis to fight the Russians, followed by prosecution of ill-thoughtout wars, has resulted in the spread of terrorism throughout the Islamic world.

© Lamb C.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Copyright 8
Dedication 9
Epigraph 10
Contents 11
The Leaving 15
PART I 21
1 22
2 27
3 37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 47

CHRIS

FAR

Copyright

William Collins
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.WilliamCollinsBooks.com
First published in Great Britain by William Collins in 2015
Copyright © Christina Lamb 2015
Christina Lamb asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work
Cover photograph: Justin Sutcliffe
Maps by John Gilkes
A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library
All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.
Source ISBN: 9780007256921
Ebook Edition © April 2015 ISBN: 9780007287277
Version: 2016-03-18

Dedication

In memory of all those who lost their lives to terrorism – or fighting it – from New York to London to Kandahar to Peshawar

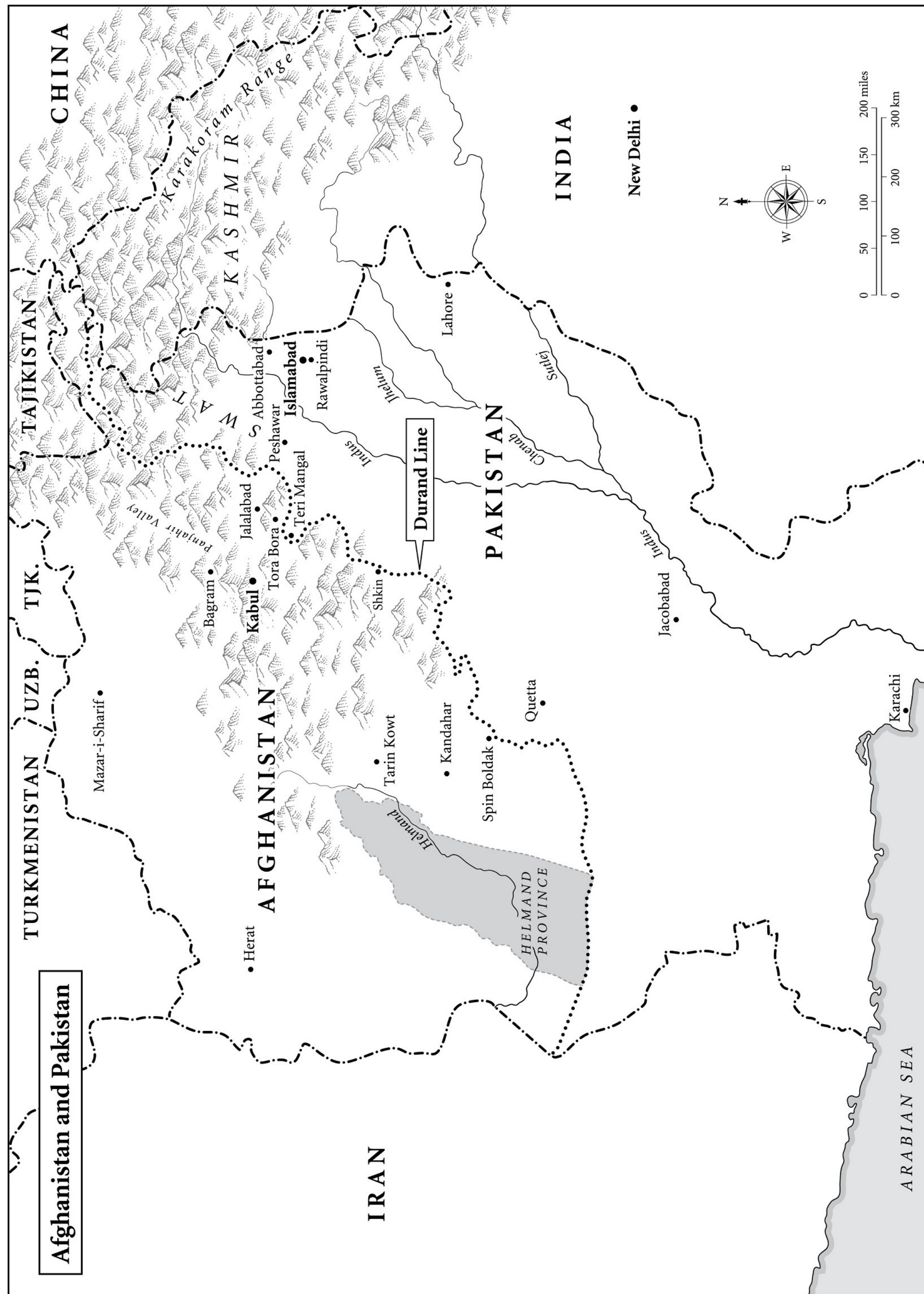
Epigraph

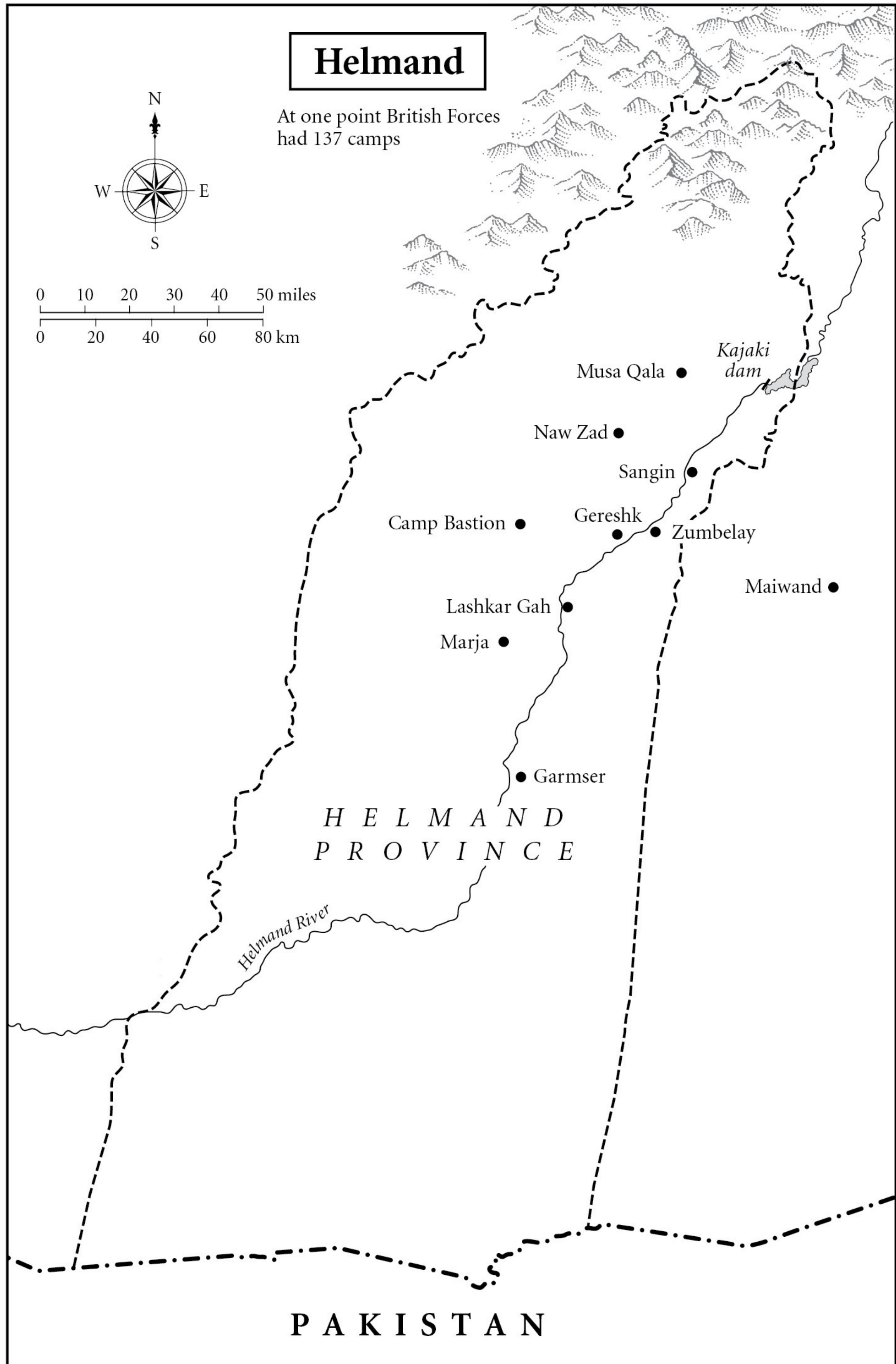
It is fatal to enter any war without the will to win it.
General Douglas MacArthur

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Epigraph
Maps
The Leaving
PART 1: GETTING IN
1 Rule Number One
2 Sixty Words
3 Making – and Almost Killing – a President
4 Ground Zero
5 Losing bin Laden – the Not So Great Escape
6 A Tale of Two Generals
7 Taliban Central
8 Merchants of Ruin – the Return of the Warlords
9 Theatre of War
10 A Tale of Two Wars
11 Voting With Mullah Omar
PART II: WAR
12 Ambush
13 Bringing Dolphins to Helmand
14 Tethered Goats
15 The President in His Bloody Palace
16 Whose Side Are You On?
17 The Snake Bites Back
18 The Weathermen of Kandahar
19 We'll Always Have Kabul
20 Death of a Poet
21 Meeting Colonel Imam
PART III: THE GOOD WAR
22 The View From Washington
23 All About the Politics
24 The Butcher of Mumbai
25 Losing the Moral High Ground in Margaritaville
26 Chairman Mullen and the Cadillac of the Skies
PART IV: GETTING OUT
27 Killing bin Laden
Postscript: War Never Leaves You
Appendix: The Costs of War
Picture Section
Acknowledgements
Notes
Select Bibliography
Index
Also by Christina Lamb

[About the Author](#)
[About the Publisher](#)




Helmand
At one point British Forces had 137 camps
N
W
E
S
0 10 20 30 40 50 miles
0 20 40 60 80 km
Musa Qala
Kajaki dam
Naw Zad
Sangin
Camp Bastion
Gereshk
Zumbelay
Maiwand
Lashkar Gah
Marja
Garmser
HELMAND PROVINCE
Helmand River
PAKISTAN

Tribal Areas
AFGHANISTAN
Kabul
Jalalabad
Tora Bora
Teri Mangal
BAJAUR
MOHMAND
SWAT
KHYBER
Peshawar
ORAKZAI
KURRAM
PAKISTAN
NORTH
WAZIRISTAN
Indus
Shkin
SOUTH
WAZIRISTAN
Jhelum
Durand Line
Chenab
N
W
E
S
0 10 20 30 40 50 miles
0 20 40 60 80 km

The Leaving

Camp Bastion, Helmand, 26–27 October 2014

'Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats for the End of Operations Ceremony!' The American voice boomed enthusiastically over the speakers as if it were the drum roll for a sporting event.

Rows of grey fold-up chairs had been arranged facing a large blast wall painted with murals marking each of the last few commands in Helmand. In front of the wall two detachments of US Marines and British troops stood to attention, flanked on either side by Afghan soldiers, who had been instructed beforehand not to hold hands. Above flew four flags – the Union Jack, the Stars and Stripes, and those of NATO and Afghanistan.

A padre read some Koranic verses, then three American generals took turns at the plinth to speak. One of them was the last commander in Helmand, Brigadier General D.D. Yoo of the US Marines, a man of Napoleonic stature both in height and personality who took the mike from the lectern to strut in front of the audience as if about to burst into song.

Phrases from the speakers, each as determinedly upbeat as the announcer, swam in the hot air like speech bubbles. No one spoke of defeat, or retreat, or withdrawal in the face of an intransigent enemy, or of publics and politicians back home who could take no more flag-draped coffins.

'This transfer is a sign of progress,' said Brigadier General Yoo. 'It is not about the coalition. It is really about the Afghans and what they have achieved over the last thirteen years.'

Helmand would now be under control of Afghan forces, commanded by Major General Sayed Malouk. 'We are ready,' Malouk insisted, even though he didn't quite look me in the eye as he said it. He had already lost almost eight hundred men that fighting season, and had himself narrowly escaped a roadside bomb in Sangin.

No British officer spoke, and Britain's eight-year role in Helmand garnered barely a mention, which seemed odd, for this had been the country's longest war in modern times, and its hardest fighting for more than half a century.

The hot sun beat down and guests swigged from bottles of mineral water as 'God Save the Queen' and 'The Star-Spangled Banner' were played and the flags were lowered. The Union Jack was carefully folded, and handed to Brigadier Rob Thomson, the last British commander. Only the Afghan flag was left fluttering as Camp Bastion came under Afghan command, and Britain's fourth war in Afghanistan officially came to an end.

Guests were taken into a cabin where a banquet lunch of smoked salmon, slow-cooked beef and chocolate fudge cake had been specially flown in. The genial Afghan army chief General Sher Mohammad Karimi presented Brigadier General Yoo with a commemorative certificate and a carpet, and both sides took souvenir photographs. It all seemed surreal.

I felt tears stinging my face. Four hundred and fifty-three British soldiers had been lost in Afghanistan, of whom 404 died in Helmand, many of them young enough to be my son. Hundreds more had lost limbs to roadside bombs or been mentally scarred for life. Tens of thousands of Afghans had lost relatives or homes, and I had met many Helmandis living as refugees in a camp in Kabul, begging for scraps of dry bread and meat fat, and burying children in the mornings who had frozen to death overnight in the winter cold.

Watching the flag come down felt like the end of everything. This fierce, turtle-shaped country had been part of my entire adult life, longer than any relationship or job. It was twenty-seven years since I'd first come to Afghanistan as a young wannabe foreign correspondent, crossing the Hindu Kush with the mujaheddin fighting the Russians, and falling unequivocally in love with this land of pomegranates and war. I'd had narrow escapes in muddy fields nearby, both with those mujaheddin who went on to become Taliban, and then with British soldiers fighting those Taliban. My first

big assignment was covering the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and never in my wildest dreams had I imagined I would be back a quarter of a century later, covering my own country's ignominious departure. Just as after the Russians had gone, everyone had lost interest in Afghanistan, now Western troops were leaving I wondered if anyone would care.

The Union Jack at Bastion was the last to come down over Helmand. Once there had been 137 British bases across the province, but over the last year these had all been bulldozed one by one and turned back to desert, home again only to scorpions and camel spiders.

Some, in places like Sangin, Musa Qala and Naw Zad, had become unlikely household names back in Britain. Many were small, primitive FOBs – Forward Operating Bases: like Camp Inkerman, which was known to everyone as Camp Incoming because it was so frequently hit. Conditions in these places were described as 'austere', which meant showers were hot bags once a week, the dust so deep that you felt it sucking at your boots, and the toilet a stinking pit that was targeted so often it was known as Tali-alley.

Bastion was where it had all started. When it opened in 2006 it was a gritty, grey, sprawling place on the edge of the Dasht-e-Margo, or Desert of Death, that had previously been used for camel-grazing, according to the agreement signed by the Defence Secretary John Reid. Over the years, like the war, it had been expanded and expanded to become Britain's biggest overseas camp since World War II, the first billion-pound base. At its height it housed more than 30,000 people with a coffee bar, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, three gyms, state-of-the-art hospital and even a water-bottling plant producing 15,000 gallons of Bastion Water a day. The camp's three canteens had served a hundred million meals since 2006, getting through 66,500 eggs a week and 6,000 tubs of ice cream, all flown in. Its airfield saw so many flights a day – six or seven hundred, from jumbo jets to unmanned Reapers – that it had become Britain's third busiest airport.

Now everything had been packed up, bar-coded and sent back or destroyed. The detritus of twenty-first-century war is so vast that after more than eight years in Helmand, Lieutenant Colonel Laurence Quinn, the engineer who oversaw both its building and its dismantling, compared it to packing up 'a town the size of Aldershot with Gatwick airport bolted on'. Five thousand five hundred shipping containers had gone back, mostly by air. The hospital, the pie shop in Lashkar Gah, the air-conditioning units, the Naafi shop, the water-bottling plant had all gone, as had the tented camps, one of them ending up sheltering refugees in a new war in Iraq. The naughty posters had been stripped down and the rockery dismantled. Thousands of unspent bullets were fed into a popcorn machine to be harmlessly exploded. Fifty aircraft had been sent back, and 3,300 armoured vehicles, including Mastiffs and Wolfhounds, six-wheeled armour-caged monsters costing more than £1 million apiece, so different from the open Snatch Land Rovers in which troops had started out and that the Americans mocked as 'safari vehicles'. The security cameras and radios were stripped from the control towers, leaving the Afghans who would man them no way to keep watch on the perimeter or to communicate. Hardest of all to pack was the massive Giraffe rocket-detector. Last to go was the airport radar and a foam-dispensing fire engine. The Afghans joked sourly that the British would have taken the concrete walls if they could.

As if the foreigners were trying to erase all signs of their presence, the murals had been painted over. One of the most moving sights at Bastion had been the Memorial Wall to the fallen, with 453 brass plates bearing the names of all those killed, under the lines from the First World War poet John Maxwell Edmonds: 'When you go home tell them of us and say/for your tomorrow we gave our today.' Even that had been dismantled, and there would be no monument in Helmand to British lives lost. There would be no voices calling 'We are the dead,' for the poppy fields of Helmand would be very different from those of Flanders a century earlier.

On the last night, even the electricity was switched off, a young British corporal, Sam Boswell, nervously turning off the final switch at 3.30 a.m. on Monday, 27 October. 'I double-checked and it was definitely off,' he told me afterwards. It was eerie driving around the camp in its final hours

of British presence. Under the faint glimmer of a crescent moon reclining low in the sky, abandoned patches of desert stretched for miles and miles, ringed by fences of barbed wire. The only buildings left were the control tower, some giant hangars that had housed workshops or aircraft, and the line of towers around the twenty-three-mile perimeter. Adding to the apocalyptic air, a few bonfires were burning to incinerate the last remaining sensitive documents.

But the strangest thing was not the emptiness. The Bastion I knew had always hummed with the sound of large generators blasting air into each of the tented camps, and the constant take-off and landing of planes. Now there was silence. For that last night the remaining thousand or so British and American troops withdrew into a small camp by the side of the airfield. The outer perimeter towers were guarded till the end, and 'lumes', or illumination mortars, were fired off in a final expensive fireworks display meant to present a show of strength to the Taliban.

In the countdown to what was called 'H Hour', the withdrawal was coordinated from a control room facing the runway. British and American soldiers sat at a T-shaped table mounted with framed photographs of the Queen and the action-movie star Chuck Norris, and tapped away at tablets or spoke on radios. In front of them a giant screen played a feed from a Reaper somewhere overhead. The footage showed a compound just south of Bastion, where two men were clearly visible walking around outside. As we watched, the men fired off a rocket-propelled grenade. I was quickly shuffled out while the soldiers discussed whether to respond. In the end they did nothing.

For the final six hours before the withdrawal the air above us was full of Apaches, Cobras, Tornadoes and B1 bombers circling around. Nothing was left to chance. 'We don't want anything that looks like helicopters fleeing from the US Embassy roof in Saigon,' had been the instructions from Whitehall to RAF officers orchestrating the event.

The Afghan forces that the British and Americans had been talking up so highly were not being trusted to guard their exit – even the perimeter guard towers were only handed over at the last minute. The air-traffic controllers destroyed equipment in the control tower before leaving. The final wave of aircraft was guided out by an airborne control team on a Hercules.

In the end the departure was so perfectly choreographed one could almost forget it was a retreat. Fifteen waves of Hercules transport planes and a last one of choppers – four monstrous CH53s, two Hueys and two British Chinooks. It was the biggest airborne withdrawal since the Berlin Airlift. I went on one of the last waves to Kandahar, landing in time to watch the final helicopters swooping in and disgorging the troops, so cinematic that the only thing missing was a soundtrack.

The airlift went so smoothly it finished more than three hours ahead of schedule, at 11.54 a.m. on Monday, 27 October. Yet even before the soldiers had set foot back on home soil, recriminations started. There were calls for a Chilcot inquiry like that into the war in Iraq, and the country looked set for the same kind of long and bitter blame game as that which followed America's involvement in Vietnam. Lord Paddy Ashdown, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats, called it 'catastrophic'. Admiral Lord West, the former First Sea Lord, described the war as an 'abject failure', and demanded a public inquiry. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Williams, a former commander of the SAS, wrote an article in *The Times* which lambasted the lack of planning, adding, 'It is also clear to me that we did not run or command it well either.'

There would be no victory parades, for there had been no victory. Lofty aims of transforming the country were forgotten. Now it was about damage control. 'Helmand is not the Western Front; it doesn't end in a hall of mirrors in Versailles like 1918,' said Brigadier Rob Thomson. 'I don't think wars today end in defeat or victory; you set the conditions to allow other elements to come in.'

The question on everyone's lips was how long would it be till the Taliban raised their black flags instead? Already they were back in many districts, showing their presence, if not yet hoisting flags.

Brigadier Thomson would not be drawn on the future. 'There's clearly going to be a contest,' he said, 'and it would be foolish of me to make a prediction into the long term about how this will run.'

The Taliban, meanwhile, had already declared victory. 'The flight of the British invaders is another proud event in the history of Afghanistan,' said their spokesman.

Locals watched and shrugged at the latest foreigners to come and leave their country. They had been surprised when the *Angrez*, as they called the British, came back, for the British Army had suffered one of the worst defeats in its history at nearby Maiwand in 1880. No one had ever really explained why they had returned, if not to avenge that. Nor had they understood what the point of killing Taliban was, when more just came over the border from Pakistan, a country which had received more than $20 billion in Western aid since 9/11, and turned out to have been hosting bin Laden.

So the farmers just got on and harvested their poppy, for it would be a record crop of more than 200,000 hectares, almost half of that in Helmand, by far the world's biggest producer. Most villages still had no jobs, no electricity, no services.

Ministry of Defence bureaucrats could spend money commissioning slick 'legacy videos', but the truth was that Britain's fourth war in Afghanistan had ended in ignominious departure. It had been the country's longest war since the Hundred Years War, longer than the Napoleonic Wars, and the most deadly since the Korean.

British officers might be lobbing accusations at each other, but Helmand was a reflection of the whole war in Afghanistan. In the thirteen years since invading Afghanistan in response to 9/11, NATO forces had lost 3,484 troops and spent perhaps $1 trillion. For the Americans, who lost the most soldiers and footed most of the bill, it was their longest ever war. What had once been the right thing to do – what President Barack Obama called 'the good war' – had become something everyone wanted to wash their hands of.

How on earth had the might of NATO, forty-eight countries with satellites in the skies, 140,000 troops dropping missiles the price of a Porsche, not managed to defeat a group of ragtag religious students and farmers led by a one-eyed mullah his own colleagues described as 'dumb in the mouth'? And why had they even tried?

Overall, more than $3 trillion had been spent in Iraq and Afghanistan in response to a terrorist attack that cost only between $400,000 and $500,000 to mount.[1] The aim, as stated by Gordon Brown while he was Prime Minister, was that 'We fought them over there to not fight them here.' Yet it was hard to see how these wars had left the West safer. On the contrary, we had ended up with the Pakistani Taliban, who were far more dangerous than the original Afghan Taliban, and regional offshoots of al Qaeda like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in North Africa, al Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria. Mullah Omar was still at large, as was Ayman al Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, who had succeeded him as leader. Some of the original al Qaeda from Afghanistan/Pakistan that was supposed to have been incapacitated had turned up under the name Khorasan in Syria. Lastly, there was ISIS, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, far larger and more terrifying than al Qaeda, which by the end of 2014 controlled territory the size of Britain in Iraq and Syria, as well as making inroads in Libya. ISIS had declared a Caliphate, and was vowing to extend its reign of terror and beheadings as far as Spain, prompting the US and Britain to send advisers back to Iraq, and sucking them back into their fourth war since 9/11. So many Europeans had been attracted as jihadists into its ranks that intelligence chiefs were warning an attack on British soil was 'almost inevitable'.

From Libya to Ukraine, around the world conflicts were springing up everywhere, like the Whack-a-Mole arcade game in which no matter how many moles are smashed with a hammer, more simply pop up elsewhere. There were more countries undergoing wars or active insurgencies than at any time since the Second World War, yet never had the major powers been wearier of intervention. What had started with hopes of a new world for Afghan women had ended with medieval black-hooded executioners, religious wars across the Middle East, and Jordan's King Abdullah warning that World War III was at hand.[2]

As for Afghanistan, schools, clinics and roads had been built across the country, yet it remained one of the poorest places on earth. By the end of 2014 the US would have spent more on Afghanistan than it had on the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe after the Second World War. Yet poverty remained stubbornly high, with more than a third of Afghans still surviving on less than 80p a day, according to the United Nations Development Programme, and half its children having never set foot in a classroom.3 In a land where 70 per cent of the population was under thirty, the majority had only ever known war. War against the Russians, war against each other, war between the West and al Qaeda and the Taliban. In this last, 15,000 Afghan troops had died, as well as more than 22,000 civilians, and the numbers were going up each year.

The West's relations with the country it had been trying to help, and the ruler it had installed, had deteriorated to such an extent that in President Hamid Karzai's farewell speech to his cabinet in late September 2014, there were no thanks for Britain or America. Instead he blamed America – as well as Pakistan – for not wanting peace. 'We are losing our lives in a war of foreigners,' he raged.

No one who goes to war comes back unchanged. I spent two wars in Afghanistan – the first as a recent graduate (covering the final showdown of the Cold War), the second as a new mum in the aftermath of 9/11 (covering a war involving my own country). I left a middle-aged woman who had more than used up her nine lives, with a teenage son going into a world far more ominous than that in which I grew up.

This book sets out to tell the story, by someone who lived through it, of how we turned success into defeat. It is the story of well-intentioned men and women going into a place they did not understand at all – even though, in the case of the British, there was plenty of past history. The 1915 'Field Notes on Afghanistan' given to those heading out to the Third Anglo–Afghan War are full of salutary warnings, starting right off with 'Afghans are treacherous and generally inclined towards double dealing.' Major General Dickie Davis, sent to Afghanistan in 2002, recalls how when he was briefed on the mission at military headquarters (PJHQ) before departing, he asked, 'How many hundreds of years have we got?'4

Anyone visiting the NATO military headquarters in Kabul might be struck by the number of saplings planted on the small green over the years – one for each commander. There had been seventeen in the course of the war. In Helmand alone Britain had had seventeen commanders, each there for just six months. They might wonder too how a war could be fought effectively when there was no real border with the neighbouring country of Pakistan, which the enemy made its safe haven.

Yet more than a military failure, this was a political failure. Just as a lack of imagination had failed to predict the possibility of using passenger aeroplanes as weapons, a lack of imagination caused us to assume people wanted the same as us, and that because our enemy were uneducated they were ignorant savages we could easily outsmart. It was a strategy that ignored tribal realities and other people's national interests, including those of our key partner. Along the way, the West lost the moral high ground by giving positions of power to those the Afghan people most blamed for the war, and by the detention and torture of prisoners, some of whom had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Over those thirteen years I watched with growing incredulity as we fought a war with our hands tied, committed too little too late, became distracted by a new war of our own making based on wrong information, and turned a blind eye as our enemy was being helped by our own ally. Yet only when Osama bin Laden was found living in a house in a Pakistani city, not far from the capital, did it seem to dawn on people that we may have been fighting the wrong war.

Throughout this period I lived in Pakistan, Afghanistan, London and Washington, as well as covering the other war and its aftermath in Iraq, and visiting Saudi Arabia, which was the birthplace of fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers. I spoke to almost all key decision-makers, including heads of state and generals, as well as embedding with American soldiers and British squaddies actually fighting the wars. Most of all I talked to people on the ground. I travelled the length and breadth of

Pakistan, from the tribal areas to the mountain valleys of Swat, from the cities of Quetta, Lahore and Karachi to the jihadist recruiting grounds in madrassas and in remote villages of the Punjab. In Afghanistan my travels took me far beyond Helmand – from the caves of Tora Bora in the south to the mountainous badlands of Kunar in the east; from Herat, city of poets and minarets in the west, to the very poorest province of Samangan in the north, full of abandoned ghost villages. I also travelled to Guantánamo, met Taliban in Quetta and from the Quetta *shura*, visited jihadi camps in Pakistan, and saw bin Laden's house just after he was killed. Saddest of all, I met women whom we had made into role models and who had then been shot, raped, or forced to flee the country.

On the way I had several narrow escapes – from being ambushed by Taliban with the first British combat troops in Helmand to travelling on Benazir Bhutto's bus when it was blown up in Pakistan's biggest ever suicide bomb. I lost many friends in those years, a number of whom appear in the following pages.

I could not have lived through all this and just walked away. I have written this book because I thought it was a story that needed telling. How it ends is yet to be told.

PART I
GETTING IN

British general to Afghan tribal chief in 1842 during the First Anglo–Afghan War: 'Why are you laughing?'

Tribal chief: 'Because I can see how easy it was for you to get your troops in here. What I don't understand is how you plan to get them out.'

1
Rule Number One

Kabul, Christmas Eve 2001

I sat on the roof of the Mustafa Hotel on the seat of an old Soviet MiG fighter jet and looked out over Kabul feeling happy. Happy endings are few and far between in my foreign correspondent world, where we fly in to report war, misery and disaster in time for our deadlines, then out again back to our comfortable lives, disturbed only by an occasional nightmare or sad memory that floods in unexpectedly to darken a moment.

The hills all around were dotted with tiny wattle houses in squares of beige and sky-blue, melding into each other like a Braque painting. There was 'Swimming Pool Hill', named after the Olympic-sized concrete pool the Russians had built on its top, long empty and last used by Taliban to push blindfolded homosexuals to their deaths off the diving tower; 'TV Mountain', with a broken antenna and littered with rocket casings from years as a major battleground for rival mujaheddin groups; and 'Cannon Hill', where until all the fighting started an old man would fire off a cannon every day at noon, a tradition begun in the nineteenth century by the 'Iron King' Abdur Rahman to give his unruly countrymen a sense of time.

Along the tops I could see remains of the old city walls picked out in relief, starting and ending at the Bala Hissar fortress, an ancient polygon of walls which crowned Lion's Gate Mountain and managed to be both crumbling and imposing. The name means 'high fort', and from this perch for centuries ruled Afghan kings (some of whom ended up in its dungeons, the Black Pit) and, long ago, some of the world's mightiest conquerors. Among them were Timur the Lame, the Tartar despot who levelled cities from Moscow to Baghdad and built towers from the skulls of their people; and Babur, the first Moghul Emperor, who adored Kabul for its gardens, where he counted thirty-two different kinds of tulips. Babur loved this city, describing it as 'the most pleasing climate in the world … within a day's ride it is possible to reach a place where the snow never falls. But within two hours one can go where the snow never melts.'

I loved it too, even though it was a long time since Kabul had been a city of gardens. Rather it was a city of ghosts, many of whose bodies were buried in the hills. Some of them were from my own country. Britain had fought two wars with Afghanistan, losing two and perhaps drawing the third. Yet initially the country seemed so benign that when British forces first stormed Kabul Gate in 1838, to oust king Dost Mohammed and install their own king, Shah Shuja, they took with them their wives, hundreds of camels laden with provisions such as smoked salmon, cigars and port, and even packs of hounds for hunting foxes in the Hindu Kush. Wives wrote of swapping tips on growing sweet peas and geraniums with local Afghans1 and of outings to boat on the lake or ice-skate in winter. By January 1842 the British would have fled. The king they had installed on a gilded throne under richly painted ceilings in the Great Hall of the Bala Hissar and described as "a man of great personal beauty"2 ended up slaughtered at its gates. The defeat of what was then the most powerful nation on earth – and slaughter of thousands of its forces – by marauding tribesmen was the greatest military humiliation ever suffered by the West in the East.

Yet they went back. In the second war, the British Envoy Sir Louis Cavagnari was hacked to death in his residence inside the fort in September 1879 by tribal brigands angry at not being paid promised stipends, and at British interference in their land. In revenge the British general Frederick Roberts led a column on Kabul called the 'Army of Retribution', and had forty-nine tribal leaders hanged from gallows inside the Bala Hissar. He ordered the fort's destruction as 'a lasting memorial of our ability to avenge our countrymen', though in the end it was left. Such was the feared reputation

of the land of the Bala Hissar that in 1963 Britain's Prime Minister Harold Macmillan would declare, 'Rule number one in politics – Never Invade Afghanistan.'

I had first travelled in these valleys and mountains in the late 1980s when the Russians were being driven out, so was only too familiar with all those stories of Afghanistan as the 'Graveyard of Empires'. Indeed, Kabul still had a British cemetery, with graves going back to those killed in the First Anglo–Afghan War, if any reminder were needed.

But if we knew those things then, we were not thinking about them. If I shivered, it was because of the cold. The first snow was falling softly, and loud Bollywood music blared discordantly from the street below. On the roof were other journalists from Japan, Italy and Australia, shuffling around their satellite dishes to try to find the right angle to locate satellites in the sky so they could magically transmit their copy to their foreign desks. 'Oh for fuck's sake, bring back the Taliban!' joked one, struggling to be heard over the jarring music. I laughed, catching a snowflake on my tongue and thinking there was nowhere I would rather be.

Everything had happened so quickly it was hard to take in. On 11 September 2001 I had just moved to Portugal with my husband and two-year-old son when my sister-in-law called telling me to switch on the news. We hadn't yet got a television so we headed to a local piri-piri chicken café which had a large screen to show football matches to English tourists. Watching the planes fly through the brilliant blue sky of a Manhattan morning and smash into the iconic towers of the World Trade Center was impossible to comprehend, no matter how many times we watched.

Then we heard two other passenger planes had crashed – one into the Pentagon and one into a field in Pennsylvania. I held my son tight, for it was clear that nothing would be the same again.

It wasn't long before the TV commentators were joining the dots to Saudi billionaire's son Osama bin Laden, who had vowed war on the United States. Soon they were focusing their pointers on maps of Afghanistan where the al Qaeda leader had fought in the 1980s and been living under the protection of the Taliban since 1996.

Who were the Taliban, and their mysterious one-eyed leader Mullah Omar? It was a regime about which the West knew so little that when 9/11 happened, Jonathan Powell, Chief of Staff to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, sent out his staff to buy all the books they could on the Taliban.3 They had only been able to find one – Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban*, which had struggled to find a publisher. Now it was a best-seller and everyone had heard of the zealots who wanted to lock away Afghanistan's women and take the country back to the seventh century.

Editors who had not been in the least interested in goings on in Afghanistan suddenly could not get enough stories of the horrors of life under the Taliban. For weeks we had been writing about the women lashed for wearing nail varnish or white shoes; the men beaten with logs for not having beards as long as two fists; the sports stadiums used for amputations and executions; and the banning of everything from chess to music.

Now, just two months later, they had been driven out. In Kabul, everyone seemed to be out on the streets, hearing each other's stories, like people inspecting the damage after a massive storm. The reports we were sending were upbeat tales of life beginning again: girls' schools reopening, women casting off the blue burqas they had been made to wear. On every street there were people hammering Coke and 7 Up cans into satellite dishes. In a teahouse I came across the first meeting of a long-banned chess club; in the bookshop around the corner from the hotel was Shah Mohammad Rais, who had hidden his books to prevent the Taliban burning them. In the National Gallery I found a man with a sponge and bucket washing off the trees and lakes he had painted over faces on artworks so the Taliban would not destroy them.

Most magical of all were the kites flying from the rooftops. On the road up to the Intercontinental Hotel (that wasn't really an Intercontinental) a parade of tiny kite shops had reopened. Inside each sat a man wrapping bamboo frames with tissue paper then pasting on shapes in bright pinks, yellows and blues like a Matisse collage and finally rolling the string onto giant reels. Each

man claimed to be the most famous kite-maker in Kabul. We didn't know then that the string would be coated with ground glass, and the objective was to cut down kites of other boys (even then, we never saw girls flying kites).

The story I had written that day was of an encounter with British Royal Marines on Chicken Street, a favourite destination back in the days of the hippie trail, with all its little shops selling carpets, shawls, and lapis and garnet stones set into silver rings that would soon blacken. The soldiers were the first arrivals of the International Stabilisation Assistance Force (ISAF), which was quickly nicknamed the International Shopping Assistance Force.

The first foreign troops to enter Kabul since the Russian occupation twelve years earlier, the British were warmly welcomed by locals. After years of civil war, many Afghans saw foreigners as the only way to end the fighting so they could get on with life. The fact that of all people they were British, back for more, seemed to endear them further to the locals. The British soldiers sat on top of their armoured personnel carriers handing out sweets to Afghan children and cigarettes to the men, and all round it was smiles.

'Hello my sister, what gives?' Wais Faizi, the hotel's manager, was a thirty-one-year-old Afghan with a fast-talking New Jersey patois like the car salesman he had once been. 'The Fonz of Kabul', we called him. His family had owned the Mustafa for years, until it was seized by communists around the time of the Soviet invasion in 1979, and they had fled to America when he was just a child. They had recently returned to Afghanistan, and had been in the process of converting the Mustafa into a gemstone and money exchange when 9/11 happened and Kabul unexpectedly became the focus of world attention. So they quickly turned it back into a hotel, just in time for the flood of journalists, though with not enough time to actually make the rooms comfortable.

'*Chai sabz*?' Wais handed me a mug of green tea.

'*Tashakor*.' I thanked him. It had about as much taste as old dishwater, but it was warm, tendrils of steam rising in the frigid air, and I cupped my hands gratefully around the sides.

'Still working on the espresso machine,' he apologised. He found his home country harder to get used to than we nomad journalists did, and often talked wistfully of Dunkin' Donuts and Domino's Pizza. A coffee machine would actually be useless, given how rarely we had electricity; and when it came it was in gadget-destroying bursts. But if anyone could get one, it would be Wais. He'd already turned one of the rooms into a makeshift gym, complete with some dumbbells bought from a warlord, and decorated with posters of his hero Al Pacino.

Wais had even managed to get hold of the only convertible in Kabul, a 1968 Chevy Camaro which had belonged to one of the Afghan princes before the King was deposed, and had taken me for a spin. We'd had a glorious afternoon driving around the ruins of Kabul, children waving in astonishment, carpet-beaters jumping out of the way and men wobbling on their bikes at the sight of a foreign woman in an open-top car and headscarf fancying herself as Grace Kelly.

Next he had promised us a bar, and he was organising a Christmas dinner, for, unbelievably, he had found someone in the Panjshir valley who raised turkeys. It would make a change from the past-their-date tuna ready-meals, peanut butter and white-furred bars of Cadbury's chocolate we had been living on from Chelsey (sic) Supermarket, where Osama bin Laden's Arabs used to shop.

I caught another snowflake on the tip of my tongue. 'Christina *jan*, don't eat the snow – it's full of shit!' admonished Wais. He meant it literally. Everyone in Kabul seemed to have a permanent cough, and Americans I met loved to tell me the air was full of faecal matter – waste went straight into the streets, and the smoke rising from the houses on the hills was from pats of animal dung that people burned as fuel.

'No thanks to your horrid pigeons!' I replied. Wais had recently discovered Kabul's old Bird Market, which sold anything from tiny orange-beaked finches to strutting roosters, all meant for fighting. There, he had acquired a flock of burbling pigeons which he kept in a glass coop in the open courtyard in the centre of the hotel. Pigeon-flying was popular in Kabul, where houses had flat roofs

and people trained them to take off as if by remote control then loop the loop by waving a stick called a *tor*, with a piece of black cloth on the end. As always in Afghanistan, it wasn't a benign pastime: the real aim was to try to get someone's rival flock to land on your rooftop. You could usually tell pigeon-trainers by their beak-scarred hands.

Wais claimed the pigeons reminded him of the blue mosque in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, a building surrounded by so many white doves that when they take to the air it feels like being inside a just-shaken snowglobe. But to me they were completely different. Pigeons, I reminded him, had left the young Emperor Babur fatherless at thirteen, when his father fell from his dovecote. 'The pigeons and my father took flight to the next world,' he'd written in his journal.

'Why can't you fly kites instead of pigeons?' I asked.

'You of all people should like the pigeons,' Wais laughed. 'When they fly they always follow the lead of a female.'

The music stopped, its owner perhaps paid off by some exasperated journalist, and I could hear peals of children's laughter. Down on the pavement some local street kids were jumping and diving, trying to catch the snow, which was starting to fall more thickly, sending cloth-wrapped figures scurrying to their homes. Soon I would be driven inside too, to one of the freezing glass-partitioned cells with metal bars on the outside that passed for rooms at the Mustafa. But for a moment I wanted to enjoy the rare sight of children playing in this country which had seen more than twenty years of war.

The mood in Washington and Whitehall was also celebratory. Just sixty days after the first US bombing raid on Afghanistan the Taliban were gone, far quicker than Pentagon estimates. They had been driven out by a combination of American B52 bombers and Afghan fighters from the Northern Alliance, a group of mainly Tajik and Uzbek commanders who had started waging war against the Russians in the 1980s, then continued fighting against the Taliban when they took power in the 1990s.

It was an astonishing success, and seemed like a new model of war. Colin Powell, then US Secretary of State, said: 'We took a Fourth World army – the Northern Alliance – riding horses, walking, living off the land, and married them up with a First World air force. And it worked.'

The Northern Alliance certainly did not consider itself a Fourth World army, and the fact that there was already a fighting force in place well acquainted with the Taliban was a huge advantage. Based in the picturesque Panjshir valley, they were the fighters of a legendary commander, Ahmat Shah Massoud, a poetic figure with a long, aquiline nose, blue eyes and a rolled felt cap, known as the Lion of Panjshir, whom the Russians had never defeated. Under his leadership the Northern Alliance controlled around 9 per cent of Afghanistan in the north-east – the one bit of the country the Taliban had never managed to conquer.

Massoud's foreign spokesman was his close friend Dr Abdullah Abdullah, a short, dapper-suited ophthalmologist with a penchant for wide ties. His name was really only Abdullah, as like many Afghans he had just one name, but he had taken another 'Abdullah' to accommodate the need of the Western media for surnames. Dr Abdullah had repeatedly travelled to America and Britain, warning that Arab terrorists were taking over Afghanistan. He told me he had made ten trips to Washington between 1996, when the Taliban took power, and 2001 asking for help – all to no avail.4 The Americans were not interested in Afghanistan, and had no desire to get involved with a warlord who financed his operations through the trafficking of drugs and lapis lazuli. Massoud was particularly distrusted by the State Department because he received support from Iran and Russia, and because of the fact that he was hated by Pakistan, which the US wanted to keep onside. 'They just said it was an internal ethnic conflict,' said Dr Abdullah. Massoud himself spoke at the European Parliament in April 2001, appealing for humanitarian aid for his people and warning that al Qaeda was planning an attack on US soil.

He was hardly a lone voice. George Tenet, who was Director of the CIA at the time, later testified before the 9/11 Commission that the Agency had picked up reports of possible attacks on the United States in June, and said the 'system was blinking red' from July 2001. On 12 July Tenet

went to Capitol Hill to provide a top-secret briefing for Senators about the rising threat from Osama bin Laden. Only a handful of Senators turned up in S-407, the secure conference room. The CIA Director told them that an attack was not a question of *if*, but *when*.

Another warning came in the first meeting between President George W. Bush and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in a Slovenian castle in July 2001, the American President was taken aback when the former KGB man suddenly raised the subject of Pakistan. ‘He excoriated the Musharraf regime for its support of extremists and for the connections of the Pakistani army and intelligence services to the Taliban and al Qaeda,’ recalled Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s National Security Adviser, who was present. ‘Those extremists were all being funded by Saudi Arabia, he said, and it was only a matter of time until it resulted in a major catastrophe.’5

This was written off as Soviet sour grapes for having lost in Afghanistan. No notice was taken, nor was the Northern Alliance provided with help. It says something about Massoud’s charisma that without Western assistance or much hope of success, he kept his fighters together. ‘He always wore a *pakoul* [wool cap], and he’d say, “Even if this *pakoul* is all that remains of Afghanistan I will fight for it,”’ said Ayub Solangi, who had fought with him since the age of sixteen, and had lost all his teeth in torture in Russian prisons.

Two days before 9/11, two Tunisians posing as TV journalists came to his Panjshir headquarters to do an interview. ‘Why do you hate bin Laden?’ they asked him, just before their camera exploded in a blue flash. The assassination of the Taliban’s biggest enemy was widely assumed to be a gift from al Qaeda to their Taliban hosts, to ensure their support as the Bush administration wreaked its inevitable revenge on Afghanistan for blowing up the Twin Towers.

2
Sixty Words

Before exacting revenge, the Bush administration wanted Congressional approval, as under the United States Constitution only Congress can authorise war. So just twenty-four hours after the second plane hit the South Tower, while most people were still trying to digest what had happened, White House lawyer Timothy Flanigan was already sitting at his computer urgently typing up legal justification for action against those responsible.

The last time the US had declared war was in 1991 against Iraq, so he first cut and pasted the wording from the authorisation for that. However, the problem was that this time no one really knew who or where the enemy was, so something wider and more nebulous was needed.

By 13 September Flanigan and his colleagues had come up with the Authorisation for Use of Military Force, or AUMF, for Congress to vote on. At its core was a single sixty-word sentence: 'That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.'

In other words, this would be war with no restraints of time, location or means.

At 10.16 a.m. on 14 September, the AUMF went to the Senate. The nation wanted action, and all ninety-eight Senators on the floor voted Yes. From there they were bussed straight to Washington's multi-spired and gargoyled National Cathedral for a noontime prayer meeting called by the White House for the victims of the attacks. It was a highly charged service, with many tears, prayers, a thundering organ and an address by President Bush, followed by the singing of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'. Members of Congress were then bussed to the House for their vote. One after another called for unity. Four hundred and twenty voted in favour, and just one against. Barbara Lee, a Democratic Congresswoman from California, was as heartbroken as anyone by 9/11 – her Chief of Staff had lost his cousin on one of the flights. But she worried that what she called 'those sixty horrible words' could lead to 'open-ended war with neither an exit strategy nor a focused target'. So to the outrage of her colleagues, she stood up and voted No. Her voice cracking, she cried as she asked people to 'think through the implications of our actions today so this does not spiral out of control'. She ended by echoing the words of one of the priests in the cathedral: 'As we act let us not become the evil we deplore.'

By the time of the vote, I was on a plane. International air traffic had reopened on 13 September after an unprecedented closing of the skies. Most journalists headed to northern Afghanistan to join up with the Northern Alliance, or to Peshawar in north-west Pakistan, the closest Pakistani city to the border with Afghanistan, and the headquarters of the mujaheddin during the war against the Russians. I headed further west, to the earthquake-prone town of Quetta, which was the nearest Pakistani city to Kandahar, the heartland of the Taliban, and like Peshawar had long been home to hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees. It was also where my oldest Afghan friend, Hamid Karzai, lived.

I checked into the Serena Hotel, where there were soon so many journalists that makeshift beds were set up in the ballroom. I was happy to be back. From my window I could see hills the colour of lion-skin, populated with tribes so troublesome that the British Raj had given up trying to control them and instead given them guns and cash to leave them alone. Beyond those hills lay Afghanistan.

The town used to be on the overland route for backpackers, and in the 1980s I would see big orange double-decker buses that had come all the way from London's Victoria station. The buses did not come any more, but little else had changed. On the main Jinnah Road you could still buy a

rifle or some jewelled Baluch sandals, both of which were sported by the local men who wandered around hand in hand.

I met up with commanders I had known back in the 1980s when they were young, dashing and full of hope. Now they were potbellied, greying and jaded, but they had been given a sudden lease of life by finding their long-forgotten country the focus of world attention. Just as in the old days we sat cross-legged on cushions on the floor drinking rounds of green tea, served with little glass dishes of boiled sweets (in place of sugar) and crunchy almonds.

The most important call of all my old contacts was Karzai, whom I had got to know when we lived near each other in Peshawar and he was spokesman for the smallest of the seven mujaheddin groups fighting the Russians. His family were prominent landowners from the grape-growing village of Karz, near Kandahar. His father had been Deputy Speaker of parliament, and his grandfather Deputy Speaker of the senate; they were from the majority Pashtun tribe, the same Popolzai branch of the royal family as the unfortunate murdered King Shah Shuja. Karzai had been at school in the Indian hill city of Simla when the Russians invaded, and would never forget the moment his schoolfriends gave him the news. 'I felt I could no longer hold my head high as a proud Afghan,' he told me. Though he was the youngest of six brothers, he became spokesman for the family as the only one to stay after the others moved to America and opened a chain of Afghan restaurants called 'Helmand' in Baltimore, Boston and San Francisco.

'If you want to understand Afghanistan you must understand the tribes,' he urged me on our very first meeting. He invited me to his home to meet elders from across southern Afghanistan who soon had me spellbound with astonishing stories that mostly involved fighting and feuding.

Karzai insisted that the key city of Afghanistan was Kandahar, where its first King, Ahmat Shah Durrani, had been crowned. He took me on my first trip there in 1988, the only time he had gone on jihad, when we rode around on motorbikes and had several narrow escapes from Soviet bombs and tanks. The group we had travelled with, the Mullahs' Front, went on to become Taliban.

A year after that trip the last Soviet soldier crossed the Oxus River out of Afghanistan, but what seemed an astonishing victory quickly soured as the Afghan mujaheddin all started fighting each other. I moved on to other stories in other countries and continents that didn't bruise my heartstrings quite as much. I still went back and forth to Pakistan, however, and had last seen Karzai in 1996, when we quarrelled bitterly in Luna Caprese, the only Italian restaurant in Islamabad after he told me he was fundraising for the Taliban.

Later he had turned against them, saying Pakistanis had taken over the Taliban and Arabs had taken over the country, and like Dr Abdullah he kept banging on offices in Whitehall and Washington with Cassandra-like warnings. For years, he too had met only closed doors. The British Foreign Office didn't even have an Afghan section, and a diplomat in the South Asia section told me Karzai would be palmed off with the most junior official, who would moan, 'Not him again.'

He moved to Quetta, to the house of his genial half-brother Ahmed Wali, who had supported him through all those years when everyone else had forgotten Afghanistan. Now, of course, everything had changed. As a fluent and eloquent English speaker he had a queue of diplomats, spies and journalists at his, or rather Ahmed Wali's, door.

Karzai greeted me warmly. His father had been assassinated in 1999 by men on motorbikes as he was walking back from prayers at the mosque around the corner from the house. Karzai blamed the Taliban and Pakistan's powerful military intelligence agency, ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence). He had become head of the tribe after that and needed a wife, so in a betrothal arranged by his mother he married his cousin Zeenat, a gynaecologist at Quetta hospital.

He was shocked by 9/11. 'If only people had listened,' he said.'Everything will change now,' I replied.

Some things, it seemed, hadn't changed. Back in the 1980s we had endlessly discussed how ISI were pulling the wool over the eyes of the CIA, which had given them carte blanche to distribute

billions of American and Saudi dollars and weapons to the mujaheddin fighting the Russians. Karzai and other Afghans had not forgiven ISI for the way they directed the vast majority to their favourites, the fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, or diverted it to fund their own proxy war in Kashmir as well as build their nuclear bomb. In those days they didn't really hide this, and I'd even been to visit one of their militant training camps just outside Rawalpindi. Their openness had some limits. In 1990, when I wrote stories that Karzai had helped me research on ISI's interference and on selling arms to Iran, I had been picked up from my apartment in Islamabad, threatened and interrogated by ISI for a night, followed for a week by two cars and a red motorbike, even to a friend's wedding, then eventually deported.

Now over green tea Karzai insisted that Pakistan was again lying to the US. 'They are saying they have stopped supporting the Taliban because otherwise the US will declare them a terrorist sponsor state and bomb them too,' he said. 'The Americans told them you are either with us or against us. But you and I know it's an ideology, not just a policy. I promise you they are still supplying arms to the Taliban.'

To start with, I wasn't sure I believed him. The eyes of the world were on this region. Surely Pakistan would not be so reckless. But I did know that they had got away with it before, and how personally involved many ISI officers in the field were with some of the Taliban after more than twenty years of working with them. I'd had enough discussions with them to agree with Karzai that for many it was an ideology, not a policy – some told me they saw the Taliban as a pure form of Islam, and would like a similar government in Pakistan.

Some strange things were happening. Shortly after 9/11, when President George W. Bush had asked Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf for cooperation, Musharraf had asked that the US hold off any action until Pakistan had made a last try at persuading the Taliban to hand over bin Laden. General Mahmood Ahmed, the ISI chief, who had helped to organise the coup that brought Musharraf to power, led a delegation of clerics to Kandahar to personally appeal to Mullah Omar. But Mufti Jamal, one of the clerics who went with him, told me that the General made no such request. 'He shook hands very firmly with Mullah Omar and offered to help, then later even made another secret mission without Musharraf's knowledge.'

It seemed ISI had calculated that however the Americans retaliated in Afghanistan, they would eventually lose patience, and like all foreigners before them be driven out. 'We knew the Americans could not win militarily in Afghanistan,' I was told by General Ehsan ul Haq, who later replaced Mahmood as ISI chief. Pakistan would, however, still be next-door, so it was understandably hedging its bets. 'The Americans forget other people have national interests too,' said Maleeha Lodhi, then Pakistan's Ambassador to Washington.

From Quetta I went to Rawalpindi to see General Hamid Gul, who had been head of ISI when I lived in Pakistan, running the Afghan jihad. He was virulently anti-American, blaming the US for his dismissal in May 1989. It was the first time I had spoken to him since my deportation, and he insisted to me that the people who had abducted and interrogated me were 'rogue agents'. He still lived in an army house, and somehow it seemed to me that he was still involved. He had personally known bin Laden, and encouraged Arabs to come and fight against the Russians in Afghanistan, setting up reception committees, which as he said the CIA was very happy to use at the time. Indeed, on his mantelpiece was a piece of the Berlin Wall sent to him by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. It was inscribed: 'With deepest respect to Lt Gen Hamid Gul who helped deliver the first blow.' 'You in the West think you can use these fundamentalists as cannon fodder and abandon them, but it will come back to haunt you,' he had told me in a rare interview just after the Soviet withdrawal. At the time I had not understood what he meant.

General Gul insisted that 9/11 was orchestrated not by bin Laden but Mossad, the Israeli spy agency, to set the West against Muslims and provide an excuse to launch a new Christian Crusade. 'No Jews went to work in the World Trade Center that day,' he claimed. He was dismissive about

the latest foreigners to enter Afghanistan. 'The Russians lost in ten years, the Americans will lose in five,' he said. 'They are chocolate-cream soldiers, they can't take casualties. As soon as body bags start going back, all this "Go get him" type of mood will subside.'

Meanwhile, we waited. War had come to America, 3,000 people had been killed in the Twin Towers, and we knew the US administration would soon retaliate. 'My blood was boiling,' Bush later wrote in his memoir. 'We were going to find out who did this and kick their ass.' In a televised address to both houses of Congress nine days after 9/11, he told the nation that 'every necessary weapon of war' would be used to 'disrupt and defeat the global terror network'. He warned that 'Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen.'

There was one problem. When 9/11 happened, the CIA did not have a single agent in Afghanistan. Only a handful had been there in the previous decade, and they were in the north. The CIA had no contacts among Pashtuns in the south. The FBI had only one officer dedicated to bin Laden. At Fort Bragg the top US special forces continued to be taught Russian, as if the Cold War had not gone away.

While journalists quickly found their way into Northern Alliance strongholds, renting all the available cars and houses, the military took much longer to arrive. The first Americans into Afghanistan after the journalists were a CIA team headed by a man who, at fifty-nine, had thought his days in the field were long over. One of the few agents to have gone to Afghanistan in recent years, Gary Schroen had been involved with Afghanistan on and off since 1978, and had close contacts with the Northern Alliance. He was preparing for retirement when he was called up by the Counter-Terrorism Center (CTC), much to his wife's annoyance. Seventeen days after 9/11 his seven-man team were on an old Russian helicopter into the Panjshir valley to link up with the Northern Alliance.

Apart from communications equipment, the most important part of their baggage was a large black suitcase containing $3 million in cash. On the first night they gave $500,000 to Engineer Aref, intelligence chief for the Northern Alliance, followed by $1 million the next day to Marshal Fahim, who had succeeded Ahmat Shah Massoud as military commander. More money was sent, and within a month they had handed out $4.9 million.

The plan was to send teams of US special forces to join up with Afghan commanders. The Americans would then direct airstrikes using SOFLAMs (Special Operations Forces Laser Acquisition Markers) to pinpoint targets. They also had GPS systems to provide coordinates, as these could be used in all weathers. B52s would then fly over and drop 2,000-pound smart bombs, which would pulverise the target.

However, when the bombing started, almost a month after 9/11, bureaucratic delays and infighting in Washington meant there was still not a single US soldier inside Afghanistan. The only on-the-ground information was coming from Schroen's CIA team and the Afghans.

From the start there was friction. America wanted intelligence on al Qaeda safe houses and camps, and most of all they wanted the man behind 9/11. Before he had left the US, Schroen's boss Cofer Black had told him, 'I want you to cut bin Laden's head off, put it on dry ice, and send it back to me so I can show the President.' The Northern Alliance commanders were more interested in targeting Taliban front lines so they could advance on Kabul and take power.

On Friday, 7 October, President Bush stood in the Treaty Room of the White House and addressed America, announcing the launch of Operation Ultimate Justice (which was quickly renamed Operation Enduring Freedom). A few hours earlier – night-time in Afghanistan – an awe-inspiring fleet of seventeen B1, B2 and B52 bombers had taken off from bases in Missouri and Diego Garcia to drop their bombs on one of the poorest places on earth. Alongside them were twenty-five F14 and F18 fighter jets flown off the decks of aircraft carriers USS *Enterprise* and USS *Carl Vinson* in the Arabian Sea. Fifty Tomahawk missiles were launched from American ships and a British nuclear submarine. Several had been painted with the letters 'FDNY' – Fire Department of New York – in remembrance of the firefighters who lost their lives trying to rescue victims at the Twin Towers.

The heaviest bombing that night was carried out by the B52s, which rained 2,000-pound JDAMs as well as hundreds of unguided bombs aimed at taking out the Taliban air force and suspected al Qaeda training camps in eastern Afghanistan. That first night they struck thirty-one targets.1 The US State Department sent a cable to Mullah Omar via Pakistan informing him that 'every pillar of the Taliban regime will be destroyed'.

In my hotel room in Quetta I watched on CNN the Pentagon videos of the planes setting off on the bombing raids, and the flashes as targets were hit. Taken on night-vision cameras, the footage was green, with a ticking digital timer running at the bottom, and looked like a video game. I wondered what the Americans could bomb in that country of ruins, with no real infrastructure. Soon they found themselves running out of targets. All the air power in the world was of little use when what they were really fighting was an ideology, not a conventional army.

Our own movements were curtailed by Pakistani minders. For our 'security' we were not allowed out of the hotel without the company of one of the ISI agents who frequented the lobby. I'd found a Fuji photographic shop that had a back door into the market through which I could be met by an old friend. He would whisk me off to meet tribal elders or Afghan commanders so they could speak freely while my minder was watching TV in the Fuji shop. I knew I was testing their patience, so sometimes I met people in what we called 'Nuclear Mountain Park' – its centrepiece was a model of Chagai in the Baluch hills, where Pakistan had carried out its first nuclear tests three years earlier on what was referred to as 'Yaum-e-Takbeer', or Allah's Greatness Day. Every evening people came out to walk round and round the model nuclear mountain, eating ice creams from a cart decorated with red-tipped rockets.

When the US bombing started across the border there were riots in Quetta, and anything perceived as Western was attacked. In Quetta this was not a lot – basically the cinema and the HSBC bank, which had its cashpoint ripped out of the wall, causing untold inconvenience to us correspondents, as it was the only one. The protests gave ISI an excuse to lock us in the hotel altogether, on the grounds that it was too dangerous for us to venture out.

I kept thinking of what Karzai had told me about Pakistan. Before we were locked in I managed to go to the frontier town of Chaman, where I met a chief of the Achakzai tribe, whose people lived on both sides of the border and controlled the smuggling routes in and out. He told me that trucks coming from the National Logistics Company of Pakistan's army, supposedly transporting flour, were actually full of weapons for the Taliban.

Nine days into the bombing, on 16 October, a second CIA team, Team Alpha, arrived in Afghanistan, joining General Abdul Rashid Dostum in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. The choice caused consternation among the Northern Alliance leadership. The whisky-loving Uzbek and his feared Jowzjan militia were notorious for atrocities, such as driving over prisoners with tanks, and had fought alongside the Soviets during the jihad, fighting pitched battles against Ahmat Shah Massoud's forces. Dostum switched over to the mujaheddin in 1992 when the fall of the Soviet-backed President Mohammad Najibullah was imminent, and had only recently linked up with the Northern Alliance. In their view he was not to be trusted. They thought the CIA team should have been placed with their long-time commander Mohammad Ustad Atta, Dostum's rival for control of the city.

The first US military to set foot in Afghanistan was special forces team ODA 555, codenamed 'Triple Nickel', which was flown in from Uzbekistan and landed on the Shomali plains north of Kabul on 19 October to join Marshal Fahim and his CIA advisers. The following day a second special forces team, ODA 595, joined General Dostum in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. A third group was dropped south of Kandahar. Using SOFLAMs, they laser-guided bombs from US fighter jets onto Taliban targets with such precision that Dostum bragged on the radio to Taliban that he had a 'death ray'. They also attempted to organise the Afghan fighters, and were joined by SAS and some Australian special forces.

Back in Quetta, the nights had started to chill. We had all grown tired of the nightly lamb barbecue and fresh apple juice in the orchard. American newspapers were already talking of quagmires. It felt as if we might be there for a long time.

One day, shortly after the bombing had started, I knocked at Karzai's door to be told by his assistant, Malik, that he had gone away.

'Where has he gone?' I asked.

'Karachi,' he replied.

Malik was not a good liar. 'He's gone to Afghanistan, hasn't he?' I said.

Karzai had told me he'd been planning to go to southern Afghanistan to try to raise support. I'd begged him to take me along. 'Taking you inside is as easy as cracking this nut,' he had said, holding up an almond. 'The problem is what to do then.'

He'd always felt insecure about the fact that he hadn't actually fought in the jihad. The only time he had gone inside Afghanistan during the war against the Russians was our trip to Kandahar in 1988. If he was going to play an important role in whatever government replaced the Taliban, he needed to prove his bravery. Also, Pakistan had cancelled his visa, so if he stayed in Quetta he could be arrested.

His intention was to go and rally the southern tribes against the Taliban. He seemed to think this would be quite easy. I couldn't help remembering our own trip to Kandahar, and the way we kept almost being bombed by the Russians as he naïvely broadcast his presence everywhere by radio. Now he was heading into the Taliban's own backyard.

Ahmed Wali said he'd tried to dissuade him, but to no avail. One day Karzai told his wife he was going to visit some relatives near the border, and to pack him a toothbrush. 'If I don't come back after two days forget about me,' he had said.

He'd set off on a second-hand motorbike, accompanied by a few trusted elders. He had asked for help from the CIA, meeting with his case officer 'Casper' in Islamabad. They thought his mission was crazy, so provided him only with a satellite phone and an emergency phone number. He was so poorly equipped that he had to send someone back out to Ahmed Wali in Quetta on a motorbike with the phone batteries for charging.

Over in the east, another old friend from the jihad days had gone into Afghanistan with the same idea. Abdul Haq had been the main mujaheddin commander in the Kabul area during the Russian occupation, and had lost his right foot to a landmine. Like Karzai he was a long-time critic of ISI. He had kept fighting, but eventually left Peshawar for Dubai after his wife and son had been killed there in 1999 – he believed by ISI. After 9/11 he returned to Peshawar and began renewing his old mujaheddin networks. While Karzai headed west, Abdul Haq gathered supporters to head into his home area of eastern Afghanistan around Jalalabad, where his family were very influential, and planned to start a Pashtun uprising against the Taliban.

A charismatic man with twinkling eyes, Abdul Haq always liked to talk. Back in the eighties I had spent many afternoons with him in his house in Peshawar, eating pink ice cream and listening to his stories of the war and why it was going wrong. Predictably, he had told journalists of his plans before setting off over the border on 21 October with his nephew Izzatullah and seventeen men, mostly veterans of the jihad. They had travelled in pick-ups, crossing the border the old way near Parachinar, stopping for the night under the stars, sleeping under Orion and the Milky Way.

It was hard for Haq to walk far over the rugged mountains because of his artificial foot, so the next morning they mounted horses in Jaji, near where bin Laden used to have a camp. They rode through the Alikhel gorge, which had been a favourite spot for ambushing Soviet convoys. But just as their own forces had cut off that road in the past, they soon found themselves cut off by the Taliban, and in the midst of a firefight.

As the bullets were flying, Izzatullah ducked behind a rock and managed to make a call to the US on the satellite phone. He telephoned Bud McFarlane, a retired CIA agent who had been a long-

time backer of his uncle. McFarlane contacted the Agency headquarters at Langley, Virginia. But they could do nothing, and the men were captured and taken to Jalalabad.

On 26 October we got the news that Haq had been executed. He was forty-three. I was horrified. He seemed to me to have been one of the genuinely good people, and someone who might have been critical for Afghanistan's future. His friends believed he had been betrayed by ISI.

I was worried about Karzai.

Frustrated by not being able to report freely in Quetta, I flew to Karachi to meet Mufti Nizamuddin Shamzai, a cleric close to Mullah Omar and the Taliban who headed the Banuri complex, the city's largest madrassa. Some said it was he who had first introduced Mullah Omar and bin Laden. He laughed at the idea that Pakistan had stopped supporting the Taliban. He had personally declared a fatwa against the US.

The evening I returned to Quetta I went to Ahmed Wali's house. We spoke to Karzai on the satellite phone, and he told me some of the things he had seen crossing the border. I got back to the Serena just before the 9 p.m. curfew, planning to write my story for my paper the next day.

I am lucky to sleep well even in war zones, and was deeply asleep when around 2 a.m. I was woken by pounding on my door. Through the spyhole I could see the hotel's duty manager with a group of five men. Wearing grey *shalwar kamiz* and aviator glasses even at night, they were instantly identifiable as ISI.

'There are some guests for you,' said the duty manager.

'It's the middle of the night!' I protested. 'Tell them to come back in the morning.'

I started walking back to my bed, but the duty manager had the room key, and one of the men in grey snapped the door chain. I was shocked rather than scared. I was in pyjamas, and to have strange men barging into my room in an Islamic country where I had always thought there was respect for women was unbelievable. They snatched my mobile phone, which was charging on the side cabinet, and told me I was going with them.

They let me dress after I protested, then marched me downstairs to reception, where I was made to pay my bill before leaving. I was glad when another group of men appeared holding Justin Sutcliffe, the photographer I was working with. They tried to put us in separate vehicles, but we made so much fuss that they finally bundled us into the same jeep, and we were driven off into the night.

The streets were deserted because of the curfew, and for the first time I felt scared. They could do anything they liked with us, and nobody would know. I was relieved when we turned into a driveway rather than out into the vast Baluch desert. At the end was an abandoned bungalow. Inside, the only furniture was a bed. We were told to sleep while our nine guards sat around and watched. We later discovered this was the old rest-house of Pakistan Railways from colonial times. Fortunately Justin always travelled with spare supplies, and he whispered to me that he had managed to secrete a phone in a pocket. During the night he went to the toilet, from which he called our newspaper while I distracted the guards by pretending to be hysterical. None of our editors answered, as it was the middle of the night back in the UK, but eventually Justin managed to get hold of our Washington correspondent, David Wastell.

The next night our guards drove us to the airport, radioing colleagues with the code 'The eagle has landed.' We were put on a flight to Islamabad and handed over to the FIA, another Pakistani intelligence agency, where no one seemed to know who had ordered our arrest or why. The FIA Director was at a loss what to do, as his cells were being rebuilt, so he kindly fed us some of his own curry dinner and put us under guard in the VIP section of the departure lounge. The next day a diplomat came from the British High Commission, who unhelpfully told us the best thing in terms of our security would be if we left Pakistan. We were unceremoniously deported.

The typed expulsion notices were dated 3 November 2001, and signed by Shah Rukh Nusrat, Deputy Secretary to the government of Pakistan. Mine stated: *'Whereas Miss Christina Lamb, British national acting in manner prejudicial to the external affairs and security of Pakistan it is necessary*

that she may be externed from Pakistan. Now because in exercise of the powers conferred by section 3 subsection 2 clause C of the Foreigners Act the federal government is pleased to direct that the Miss shall not remain in Pakistan and should leave the country immediately.'

The Pakistani newspapers printed a ludicrous story, fed from ISI, that we had tried to buy a plane ticket in the name of Osama bin Laden. Years later I would still get asked why we had done this.

My relationship with Pakistan had been conflicted since my previous deportation. As we were led onto the PIA plane (having been asked to pay for the ticket, which we refused to do), I vowed I would never go back.

Shortly after take-off, one of the stewardesses came and said the pilot was inviting us into the cockpit. We were astonished. This was less than two months after 9/11, and the world's airlines had all issued instructions to keep cockpits locked. I pointed out we had been deported as threats to national security, but she just smiled and led us to the front. Inside the cockpit was Captain Johnny Afridi, the plane's pilot, a Pashtun with John Lennon glasses and a long, skinny ponytail. 'Don't worry about those goons,' he laughed. 'I've been arrested too.' By the end of a very entertaining flight, sitting in the cockpit for a spectacular sunset landing at Heathrow, my resolve never to return to Pakistan was forgotten.

Back in London we were called into the Foreign Office to meet the head of the consular service. I was furious that they had done nothing to fight our case – we were from one of Britain's leading newspapers, the *Sunday Telegraph*, and had been trying to report on a war in which Britain was involved.

'You must understand Pakistan are our allies,' we were told. 'We need their support during the bombing campaign. It's a very sensitive time.' We later learned that four Pakistani bases in Sindh and Baluchistan were being used to fly some of the bombing raids.

It was a bright sunny day, but as we walked out into St James's I blinked back angry tears. It seemed my war was over before it had even started.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan everything was suddenly happening very quickly. Since the start of November the US had agreed to all the urging from the Northern Alliance commanders, and begun pounding Taliban front lines with giant daisy-cutter bombs dropped from AC-130s. Gary Schroen and his CIA team were monitoring Taliban radio traffic, and could literally hear the fear. 'Our guys were listening to the radios and the panic, the screaming, the shouting as bunkers down the line were going up from 2,000-pound bombs,' he said. 'I mean, they were just simply devastated, and they broke.'

There was no more talk of quagmire. Mazar-i-Sharif fell to Dostum's men on 10 November. 'This whole thing might unravel like a cheap suit,' President Bush told President Putin.

The Taliban quickly realised it was no contest, and by 13 November had fled Kabul, leaving the Northern Alliance to move in. By the beginning of December they were gone from all the major cities apart from their heartland of Kandahar in the south, which they finally abandoned on 7 December. 'I think everybody was surprised (with the possible exception of [US Defense Secretary] Don Rumsfeld, who would have felt vindicated) at the result of military intervention, which was nasty, brutish and short,' said Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fry, commandant of the Royal Marines at the time, who went on to be Director of Military Operations at the Ministry of Defence. 'It was remarkably successful in that there were negligible Western casualties. You had overwhelming Western firepower, loads of CIA playing the Great Game with buckets of money, and a compliant infantry in the shape of the Northern Alliance. All of a sudden they thought they'd found the philosopher's stone of intervention.'

New technology, like laser-guided bombs, had avoided a major deployment of troops. To overthrow the Taliban the US had put on the ground fewer than five hundred men – 316 special forces and 110 CIA officers. Only four American soldiers and one CIA agent had been killed, and three of those soldiers were killed by their own bomb – in 'friendly fire'. The whole operation had cost only

$3.8 billion. The CIA estimated it had spent $70 million, mostly in bribes to Afghan commanders. President Bush called it one of the biggest 'bargains' of all time.

So easy did it seem that on 21 November, while US forces were still fighting the Taliban, Bush had secretly already directed Rumsfeld to begin planning for a war with Iraq. 'Let's get started on this and get Tommy Franks looking at what it would take to protect America by removing Saddam Hussein,' he said.

General Franks, the commander of US Central Command, was sitting in his office at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, working on plans for Afghanistan when he got the phone call from Rumsfeld. 'Son of a bitch. No rest for the weary,' is how he recalled his reaction in his memoir. Bob Woodward's book *Plan of Attack* has a rather different account. 'Goddamn, what the fuck are they talking about?' Franks is reported as saying. 'They were in the midst of one war, Afghanistan, and now they wanted detailed planning for another?'

Back in London, Justin and I got help from an unexpected source when Iran obliged us with visas to get into Afghanistan from the west. We flew to Tehran, then to the pilgrim town of Mashad near the border, and drove into Herat the day after the Taliban left. We were helped by Ismael Khan, a warlord who looked the part, with his flowing beard and trucks of neatly clad but fearsome gunmen who accompanied him everywhere. I'd first met Ismael when I went to Herat during Russian times, and his resistance was legendary. He had been imprisoned during the Taliban after being betrayed by General Dostum's men, though he'd managed to escape. Although part of the Northern Alliance he had his own status as 'the Emir of the West', and as soon as the Taliban left he took power in his home city.

From Herat we managed to catch the first Ariana flight to Kabul, a nerve-racking experience, as I'd never before been on a plane that had to be jump-started. As we flew awfully close to mountains, the pilot told us the only instrument working was his 'vision'.

But we made it, and found ourselves in the Mustafa. It had been a complicated journey that in a way felt the culmination of years, not just months. We had hardly any electricity and little food, but we were happy. Wais even got hold of a TV so we could watch BBC World on the occasions when there was electricity.

The challenges ahead were brutally clear. There was destruction everywhere – parts of the city such as Jadi Maiwand, the old carpet bazaar, and the road to Dar ul Aman palace, resembled pictures of Dresden after the bombing of the Second World War. The once sparkling-blue Kabul River was a brown trickle clogged with evil-smelling garbage. I went to visit the Children's Hospital, where the doctors told me the power often went off in the middle of surgery, so children just died. My own son had been born more than eleven weeks premature two years earlier, and I asked a doctor what would happen to him if he were born in the hospital. The doctor looked at me as if I was mad. 'He would die of course,' he said. Afghanistan was the worst place in the world to be a mother or a child.

After I wrote of this in the *Sunday Telegraph*, generous readers raised money for a generator which the British military agreed to fly out. In what should have been a warning for the future, once it reached the hospital the generator disappeared.

Everyone was promising not to abandon Afghanistan again. It had been a model war, and the plan was for a model construction of democracy. There would be no more 'ungoverned space' which terrorists could move into and use as launching pads for attacks. 'You abandoned us last time and got bitten by a scorpion,' warned Hamid Gilani, whose father Pir Gilani was one of the seven jihadi leaders who had raised arms against the Russians. 'If you abandon us this time you'll get bitten by a cobra.'

We all assumed foreign aid would pour in to turn Afghanistan around – a donors' conference was scheduled for Tokyo, and there was talk of billions being pledged. Already there were lots of aid agencies moving in. Kabul was the new sexy place to be, and every day more people arrived at

the Mustafa, prompting effusive reunions. 'Hey, I last saw you in East Timor/Kosovo/Bosnia/Sierra Leone …!' became a common refrain.

There were French lawyers arriving to draw up a constitution. Feminists setting up gender-awareness classes, a women's bakery and a beauty school for which American beauty editors sent make-up. There would even be estate agents, as so many aid agencies coming in pushed rents sky high. Elections were planned for the following spring. But when I talked to my Afghan friends, nobody mentioned democracy or women's rights. They wanted security and food and speedy justice.

The West had its swift military success, dismantling the Taliban regime in two months. I don't think anybody spoke to ordinary Afghans about what they wanted.

3
Making – and Almost Killing – a President

The war that would never end started in a way that it never should. US special forces captain Jason Amerine and his team from the 5th Special Forces Group were eating 'truly bad pizza' in Fortuna Pizzeria in the town of Aktogay in Kazakhstan on the evening of 11 September 2001 when his mobile rang. It was Dan Pedigor, the Defence Attaché from the local US Embassy, with startling news. A plane, he said, had flown into the World Trade Center.

Amerine's reaction was 'Oh wow.'1 In primary school he'd read a book about air disasters, and had made a diorama of the B25 Mitchell bomber that hit the Empire State Building in thick fog in 1945. He imagined something like that.

They went back to their pizzas, talking animatedly. Many of the men were thinking about home. They were in Kazakhstan to train Kazakhs in small-unit tactics for counter-insurgency, and had just three days left. Amerine was feeling nostalgic. His divorce had come through in June, and at thirty he thought it was also time for a career change. He had dreamed of being in the special forces since he was a teenager in Hawaii and first met a Green Beret, and now he was an experienced captain, leading a team specialising in parachute insertions behind enemy lines. He knew that as an officer you only have so many opportunities to lead men in the field, then you're on the staff – and he could not imagine doing an office job. With not much going on in the world, he assumed this would be his last deployment.

Then the phone rang again, and turned everything upside down. A second plane had hit the Twin Towers. Amerine knew then that his country was at war: 'It was OK, it's an attack, and had to be al Qaeda who were operating out of Afghanistan.'

Shocked by the news, the men went back to their quarters, and called home to check on their families. Amerine and his sergeant talked late into the night about what might happen. He knew the US would go to war in Afghanistan, and had no doubt that they would be part of it.

What had not occurred to him was that they would be stuck. Although they were probably the special forces team nearest to Afghanistan, military bureaucracy meant they had to go back to base in the US to be assigned orders. However, war had come from the skies, and air traffic closed down around the world for almost a week. The men were left waiting in Almaty, the old Kazakh capital, and he tried to distract them with some sightseeing. One day they went to the World War II museum which was full of displays of big battles fought by the Soviet Union that emphasised all the deaths. One of their guides was a former Soviet officer who had served in Afghanistan fighting the US-backed mujaheddin. 'It is impossible to win in that country,' he warned them. 'Don't trust the Afghans, and just make sure you come back alive.'

It was 20 September when Amerine and his men finally got back to their base of Fort Campbell in Kentucky. He found it 'surreal' to see how everything had already changed. The airport was guarded by men with guns, and there was an Apache helicopter gunship patrolling the highway outside the gate.

Several other special forces teams had already been deployed to bases in Central Asia. Amerine's team practised live firing and basic soldiering skills while they anxiously waited to be assigned a mission. They presumed this would be to link up with Northern Alliance commanders in northern Afghanistan, and destroy al Qaeda safe havens. Finally, on 10 October, three days after the bombing of Afghanistan started, they were sent back to Central Asia. They had been chosen, along with another team, for the next deployment, and were flown to K2 airbase in Uzbekistan, where they waited.

Two teams were sent to northern Afghanistan, and eventually, after two weeks, Amerine was told that his team would be heading to south-eastern Afghanistan to link up with Abdul Haq and help

him start an insurgency. Amerine knew little about him, other than that he was one of Afghanistan's best commanders from the war against the Soviets. However, within a few hours the news came that Abdul Haq had been captured by the Taliban and executed, so they were to 'stand down'. 'That kind of put into perspective the kind of risk the teams were taking,' said Amerine.

The next day they were told they were being sent to join Hamid Karzai. Nobody seemed to know anything about him, other than that he was a Pashtun, and was trying to raise some kind of Southern Alliance. The information they were given did not even include a photograph. Amerine envisaged 'some grumpy warlord, missing an eye, with a scar on his cheek who spoke no English'. He sent one of his men to the bazaar to buy a 'really big knife we could give to our warlord, and say, "We're here to fight with you, here's a knife."'

Amerine along with eleven of his Green Berets was flown to the Pakistani airbase Jacobabad, in the southern province of Sindh, which the Americans were secretly using. Karzai and his men were waiting there. They had already been into Afghanistan, but had found themselves woefully ill-equipped. 'We weren't prepared at all,' Karzai later told me. 'I went in just in a *shalwar* and vest, and we ended up sleeping on mountains. It was so cold, even curled up. We finally got to Tarin Kowt [capital of Uruzgan], but people told us there were still lots of Taliban and we should go back.'2

Some of the people he met up with betrayed them, and the Taliban came in pursuit. But Karzai got a message out on his CIA phone, and was luckier than Haq – helicopter-borne US Navy Seals flew in to rescue them and take them to Jacobabad.

When Amerine met the less than athletic Karzai, he was astonished. Instead of a warlord, he found an educated and dignified man speaking impeccable English. 'In some ways his total lack of military experience made it easier,' said Amerine. 'I knew immediately there would be no games, no swaggering or posturing – this was someone I'd be able to talk to.' He left what had become known as 'the BFK' (Big F—ing Knife) in his backpack.

Karzai was accompanied by seven or eight tribal leaders who also did not look as if they would be much use on a battlefield. 'Most were older, they seemed tired and a couple looked kind of frail,' recalled Amerine. 'We figured out he had no forces pretty quickly.' Only one man stood out. 'There was this guy Bari Gul with an angry scowl on his face the whole time, he looked a real fighter.'

Karzai seemed unfazed by the task ahead, despite what had happened to Abdul Haq and his own narrow escape. He told Amerine he didn't think they would have to fight at all. 'He believed we'd pretty well show up in Uruzgan, that the main town of Tarin Kowt would rise up and that would be it, the Taliban would surrender.' Amerine was less convinced. 'If it's peaceful that's great, but we'll plan for it to be a lot more difficult,' he told him.

While we in the media sat in our hotels in Quetta watching the bombing on TV, Amerine, Karzai and their men gathered around a large map of southern Afghanistan every day for a week, drinking endless cups of green tea, and formed a plan.

In Amerine's eyes the aim was to 'infiltrate, grow a force, lay siege to Tarin Kowt, then grow a bigger force and slowly make our way to Kandahar and compel the Taliban to surrender, which would be the end of them'.

Their maps were so poor that they didn't even know there was only one road between Tarin Kowt and Kandahar. Also, Amerine had never actually raised an army anywhere. Nor was he pleased to discover that he was supposed to take Karzai's CIA handler Casper and four other agents, which would mean he could take fewer of his special forces team than he wanted.

When Karzai asked Amerine about America's long-term plans for Afghanistan, he had to admit he had no idea.

There was another problem. Amerine's commander, Colonel John Mulholland, had given orders that they were not to go into Afghanistan unless Karzai had at least three hundred men on the ground. 'He meant three hundred bright smiling faces greeting us,' said Amerine. 'Karzai said there are more than three hundred men, but they won't gather unless I go in.' As it was, on the night they chose to

infiltrate because the moon would be at its lowest, Amerine couldn't reach Mulholland on the phone. Mulholland's deputy told them to go ahead.

They needed to get going. The bombing campaign was having a quicker impact than expected, and by the time they set off on 14 November, Kabul had already fallen. It was around midnight when Karzai and his seven tribal elders, Captain Amerine and his eleven-man team, and the CIA agent Casper and four more spooks, climbed into five heavily armed Black Hawk helicopters which would drop them deeper behind enemy lines than any other Americans. The soldiers were in camouflage, and most sported beards grown over the previous month to help them blend in with the locals, though close up their thickly muscled builds would give them away. Apart from their weapons and personal GPS, each carried a so-called 'blood chit' with a message in seven local languages. 'I am an American and do not speak your language,' it read. 'I will not harm you. I bear no malice towards your people.'

The infiltration was a disaster. One of the helicopters was blown off course by all the dust and dropped four of Amerine's men in the wrong place, which meant the rest had to wait half the night for them to show up. When the weapons and equipment were airdropped, hundreds of Afghans appeared from the mountains and stole everything, including laptops and the SOFLAM for calling in airstrikes. The Americans were taken to a village on a bend in the Helmand River that was not the place for which they had meticulously planned and studied. It was also clear that Karzai had few people.

Even so, Amerine believed the plan could work, because they would build the force bit by bit. He estimated they would need six months to take Tarin Kowt. He had reckoned without the Afghans. After just three days he got a note from Karzai to say that the people of Tarin Kowt had risen up and taken the town from the Taliban. Amerine was flabbergasted. It turned out that the townspeople had heard that Kabul had fallen to the Northern Alliance, so they stormed the palace of the Taliban Governor of Uruzgan, dragged him out and hanged him. They then drove out the remaining Taliban and declared the town free. To Amerine, this was a disaster. The powerbase of the Taliban was the south, and Uruzgan was Mullah Omar's home province. Amerine was convinced the Taliban leader and his men would not give that up so easily.

Karzai commandeered some local pick-ups and a bus, and they moved into Tarin Kowt that evening and set up headquarters in a compound. Hours later, as they were about to eat dinner, a message came that an enormous Taliban convoy was on its way from Kandahar to retake Tarin Kowt. Eighty vehicles, they were told. Even allowing for Afghan exaggeration, Amerine was worried. 'Doing the math in my head, that was a lot of guys.'

He asked Karzai to round up all able-bodied men from the town. After half the night Karzai had managed to find only thirty men. They borrowed some vehicles and drove off, having to stop for petrol on the way. Just south of Tarin Kowt they found an ideal vantage spot from which to protect the town, a bluff that overlooked a wide valley through which the Taliban would have to pass. The men positioned themselves along the ridge, some of the Afghans smoking hashish, and Amerine's radio operator called in air cover. Soon three F18s were hovering high above at around 30,000 feet.

It was not long before one of Amerine's men spotted something glinting between the hills. It was the Taliban convoy, so long that it looked like an endless snake. Amerine's radio operator contacted the US pilots overhead and pronounced the vehicles 'cleared hot', meaning they could start bombing. The first bomb missed, but the second hit the lead vehicle, turning it to dust and flame. However, when Amerine turned around, his own Afghan fighters were all jumping in their trucks to flee. They had never witnessed American air power before. Without Karzai, who had stayed back in town, Amerine had no translator to explain to them that the airstrikes were theirs, and they should stay.

'I got really frustrated and mad,' said Amerine. 'We had no trucks of our own, and I'd been warned by one of the CIA guys to make sure we took the car keys from the guerrillas, but I hadn't done that.' The Americans had no choice but to jump in the fleeing trucks. 'It felt like we were stealing defeat from the jaws of victory,' he recalled. 'In that moment we lost Tarin Kowt. People would be

slaughtered, and there wasn't anything I could do. I even thought about shooting one of the drivers to take a truck, but if I shot one of our guerrillas they'd never trust us.'

Amerine thought they would just have to grab Karzai from the town and leave. However, when they got back and told him what had happened, Karzai managed to get them two trucks and they drove back. There was not enough time to return to the bluff, but they got to the edge of town and started calling in airstrikes, having figured out that the Taliban were advancing along three paths from the valley in a three-pronged attack.

Word went out at US Central Command that a lone team of Green Berets was under attack from hundreds of Taliban, and F14s and F18s were scrambled from all over the country. 'Every available US aircraft with bombs was in Tarin Kowt to help us,' said Amerine. 'It was this incredible feeling that the might of the military was coming to assist. They knew that our lives were pretty much in their hands.'

One of the pilots looked down from overhead and radioed, 'Where are the friendly forces?'

'OK, so see the two trucks …' replied Amerine.

'That's it?' the pilot asked incredulously.

Despite the massive display of air power the bombs could not wipe out all the Taliban, and some made it into town. 'What really pushed it over the edge was the people of the town came out with guns,' said Amerine. 'At first we were shooing them away, but then we realised they were actually there to fight with us. We killed hundreds of Taliban that day.'

With Tarin Kowt won, over the next three weeks Amerine's team began moving south towards Kandahar, which was still firmly in Taliban hands. They set up a headquarters on the way at a place called Damana. From there, on 3 December they launched an attack to capture the town of Shawali Kowt and its hill, which overlooked a vital bridge over the Argandab River towards Kandahar. There was intense fighting, and the Taliban counterattacked. One of Amerine's men, Wes, was shot in the neck though luckily the bullet missed an artery. Eventually the Americans fought them off, and by the next day had taken the hill, giving them control of the bridge.

Yet when Amerine radioed the news to his headquarters, he was ordered to give up the hill. 'It was a complete foul-up,' he said. 'We'd had two days of fighting and no sleep at all. I was very angry.' The Afghans with them were baffled as they retreated, and with no interpreter it was impossible for Amerine to explain.

'What seems to have happened is that up till then in the war there were no American casualties in battle [just one from an accidental airstrike in the north],' he said. 'At that point fighting up front with the guerrillas wasn't the norm. So when I radioed that one of my men was shot, there was this shock – "What are your men doing, putting themselves in harm's way?" I think someone at some level thought there must be a safe area we could be operating from, but they didn't understand – sorry, we are behind enemy lines, and the guerrillas won't fight unless we are up front.'

The next day they were ordered to retake the hill, which they did, christening it the Alamo.

While Amerine and Karzai were battling it out with the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, 3,000 miles away in Bonn a group of twenty-five Afghans were huddled in a castle on a wooded hill overlooking the Rhine, trying to form a government. Chairing the meeting was Lakhdar Brahimi, the veteran diplomat and former Algerian Foreign Minister who was the United Nations' Special Envoy for Afghanistan. He had thought the Taliban would hold on till spring, but then cities started falling like dominoes – Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Herat – so the Northern Alliance controlled more than half the country. This would not have been acceptable to Afghanistan's Pashtun majority, or indeed its neighbour Pakistan, so there was a sudden rush to come up with a more representative interim administration before it was too late.

The White House wanted to do this at Bagram airbase, but Brahimi insisted it needed to be neutral territory. The Germans offered their official guesthouse, the Petersberg Hotel, a site laden

with history. It was there in 1949 that the three occupying powers, Britain, France and the US, had signed the agreement paving the way to the birth of the German Federal Republic.

The aim of the Bonn Conference was to form an interim administration which would run the country for three to six months until a *loya jirga*, a traditional gathering of elders, could be held to decide Afghanistan's future. There were four delegations – the main ones being the Northern Alliance (including representatives from General Dostum and Ismael Khan) and the Rome group (royalists loyal to the ex-king, Zahir Shah, to which Karzai belonged), then two smaller groups: the Cyprus group (intellectuals thought to have ties with Iran) and the Peshawar group (including the powerful Gilani family). No Taliban were invited, for this was a conference of victors – something that would be rued later. Most of the Afghans were dressed in suits, and aside from the Northern Alliance, many were émigrés, well-educated and Westernised. One of the few in a turban was Pacha Khan Zadran, a warlord. The meeting was opened on 27 November by German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, and tasked with producing a government within a week. That was the deadline because the hotel was then booked for a conference of dentists.

Even without the Taliban, getting an agreement was no easy task. The Northern Alliance felt that they should run the country having taken Kabul, and they resented being outnumbered in Bonn. In fact back in Kabul, their leader, Professor Rabbani, had already moved into the presidential palace. The Pashtuns, as Afghanistan's majority tribe, insisted they should run the government, and were highly suspicious of the Northern Alliance.

As usual in Afghanistan, the situation was complicated by outside interests. Also present in the hotel, though not inside the conference room, were a number of international observers from countries in the region or involved in the conflict, including the US, the UK, Iran, Russia, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The atmosphere was not helped by the fact the meeting was being held during Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, during which Muslims cannot eat in the hours of daylight.

The Americans had sent James Dobbins, a former US Ambassador who had been appointed envoy to the Afghan resistance. A veteran of international conferences that were fuelled by fine food and plentiful wine, Dobbins wondered how this one would work with everyone sober, hungry and tired. Before reaching Bonn he had travelled to Tampa, Florida, to meet General Franks, and had heard the name Hamid Karzai for the first time. 'They said we've got him in a helicopter – he'd been overrun by Taliban and was being flown out to Pakistan. They didn't want another Abdul Haq incident.'3

A few days later in Islamabad Dobbins met the head of ISI, General Ehsan ul Haq, who was the first to suggest Karzai to him as future leader. 'He wasn't an American candidate,' said Dobbins. 'But then I went to Kabul, and Abdullah Abdullah also suggested him. I thought, gee, if ISI and the Northern Alliance are agreed, he must be something.' In Bonn he found the Russians, Indians and Iran all suggested Karzai. 'There was a clear consensus among international observers that he was the most broadly acceptable.'

The Americans had their man. The only problem was convincing the Afghans. Francesc Vendrell, the Deputy Special UN Envoy, describes the astonishment of the delegates when they sat around the big round table for the opening session and saw a microphone hanging down. They were even more surprised when they were told, 'Now we will hear from someone inside Afghanistan.' It was Karzai, speaking from Uruzgan. He told me later, 'I was in a mud hut of two rooms and had a cold. I don't know what I said. I never figured I'd be President.' The line from the satellite phone was not great, but in a way the crackling added to the atmospherics, as he made an impassioned plea for people to set aside their differences for the sake of the nation. 'This meeting is the path towards salvation,' he said.

Dobbins thought the most capable figures were from the Northern Alliance, such as the leader of its delegation, Yunus Qanuni, a small, elegantly dressed man with a slight limp. But the Pashtuns

would never accept one of them. One Pashtun delegate, Abdul Haq's brother Haji Qadir, had already walked out, claiming Pashtuns were under-represented.

It was agreed then that the Rome group would choose the new leader. Supported by the Italians and some of the other Europeans, they really wanted the former King as head of state, but were persuaded by the Americans that he would not be acceptable. So they proposed Professor Abdul Sattar Siarat, an Islamic scholar who had been Justice Minister in the King's last government thirty years earlier. When it came to a vote, Siarat was the clear winner with eleven, compared to two for Karzai.

Siarat was not a Pashtun but an Uzbek, who made up less than 10 per cent of the population, and Dobbins worried that he would not get people to rally round him, nor be able to command respect from Northern Alliance warlords. But while he found none of the Afghan delegates very enthusiastic about Siarat, no one would speak out. Even Qanuni said he could not object to Siarat, as he was a respected figure and his cousin by marriage.

In the end Francesc Vendrell had to call the King in Rome and persuade him to convey to his delegation that 'rather than an Afghan of their choosing he was asking them for a *Pashtun* of their choosing'.4 Siarat was so unhappy about the decision that he locked himself in his room, while another of their delegation, Hedayat Amin Arsala, walked out.

The chairman of the conference, Asadullah Wasifi, was furious, even though Karzai was his nephew and had studied with his son Izzatullah in Simla. 'We elected Siarat but the Americans told me, "No, we want to bring a Pashtun." I asked, "What kind of democracy is that, where *we* elect the man *you* want?" Then Khalilzad came to me and said, "What's the problem? He's your brother's son!" I said, "Yes, he is, that's why I know he won't be able to run the country."5

He refused to sign the document, pointing out that Karzai had never run anything. The only post he had ever held was as Deputy Foreign Minister in the ill-fated mujaheddin government which took power in 1992 after ousting the communists then quickly started fighting each other. Karzai only lasted eighteen months before having to flee to Pakistan, helped by Hekmatyar, putting him in the warlord's debt.

When Karzai later asked Wasifi why he hadn't accepted him, he replied, 'Afghanistan is a big problem and you're too small.'

The next challenge was persuading Rabbani to step aside. The Northern Alliance leader refused to allow his delegation to submit names of candidates for posts in the interim administration. Instead he called a press conference in Kabul, and announced that Afghanistan should hold direct elections for an interim council rather than abide by the decisions made at Bonn.

The Americans were terrified that the Northern Alliance would pull out of the discussions, and then it would be impossible to organise another meeting. Dobbins called Secretary of State Colin Powell to ask his advice. The answer was unequivocal. 'Do not let them break up!' he was told. 'Keep them there; lock them up if you have to!'

Powell asked Russia, which had a close relationship with the Northern Alliance, to persuade Rabbani not to break up the conference. According to Dr Abdullah, the Russians 'passed on a message that the world expects an agreement', and warned that the Northern Alliance 'shouldn't expect that without an agreement [Russian] support … can continue'.6

The Iranians also played a key role. To his surprise, throughout the conference Dobbins found himself working closely with them, meeting the leader of their delegation, Jay Zarif, every morning for coffee and cakes to discuss developments.

Under such concerted pressure, the younger members of the Northern Alliance decided to mutiny and continue to participate in the Bonn Conference with or without the support of Rabbani. A strategic American rocket landing near Rabbani's house may have helped.

Even so, Northern Alliance participation came at a price. They demanded three quarters of the cabinet, including the most powerful portfolios of defence, interior and foreign, as well as control of the intelligence. Finally, after a late-night session with the Americans, Indians, Russians and Iranians,

the Northern Alliance agreed a deal, with the Iranians once again playing a critical role. There would be twenty-nine ministries, far more than Afghanistan needed, of which sixteen would go to the Northern Alliance. Two women were included. The King would get the meaningless title of 'Father of the Nation', and convene the *loya jirga* the following year.

The other main argument was over who would provide security for Kabul. The Northern Alliance wanted an all-Afghan force. Others feared that a Northern Alliance-led force would carry out the same kind of abuses that had occurred after the jihadis took power in 1992, which led to the emergence of the Taliban. A small multinational force under the auspices of the UN was agreed.

Thorny issues like disarming warlords were left unresolved – proceedings needed to wrap up by dawn on 6 December so the dentists could move in.

At the time the rapidly approved administration was hailed as a 'diplomatic miracle'. The West had its military success, dismantling the Taliban regime in two months, and now it had a West-friendly interim government to replace it. Brahimi would later admit: 'The deal was reached hastily, by people who did not adequately represent all key constituencies in Afghanistan, and it ignored some core political issues.'7

When Amerine and his men got the news that Karzai had been named interim leader of Afghanistan they were astonished. Up until then Amerine had no idea how important Karzai was – which was not surprising, as most Afghans had never heard of him. He was glad he hadn't known. 'If I'd been told he's the future leader of the country, how do I put the guy in a convoy and try to make my way to Kandahar with three hundred guys?'

By then they were less than thirty miles from Kandahar. But they would never make it. The day after retaking the 'Alamo' hill a team of American reinforcements from headquarters flew in, this time equipped with their own trucks. They immediately started calling in airstrikes on a cave a couple of miles away which they thought might be a hiding place for Taliban.

They also brought welcome cargo – care packages from home, though not for the recently divorced Amerine. The men were on the ridge of the Alamo, reading their letters and enjoying Rice Krispies bars while Bari Gul and some of the Afghans watched the explosions, by then accustomed to the idea that these Americans could call down fire from the sky on their enemies. Amerine was sitting twenty yards away, discussing the battle plan for Kandahar with one of the staff officers who had flown in, when suddenly there was an almighty blinding flash. Amerine was tossed through the air. 'I knew the only thing it could be,' he said. 'We'd been hit by our own bomb.'

They had been struck by a JDAM, one of the satellite-guided 2,000-pound bombs that the Americans had used to decimate the Taliban. 'The person giving the coordinates to the cave accidentally gave our own coordinates,' said Amerine.

There were bodies everywhere, and people groaning – it was clear that they had been hit badly. His own thigh was ripped open by shrapnel, and both his eardrums were perforated. Three of his men were dead, as were many of the Afghans. 'Bari Gul and most of his men were killed in the explosion. My team was finished, everybody had to be medivaced.'

By sheer luck, Karzai was further along the ridge, and was only slightly wounded in the shoulder. 'Hamid couldn't believe what had happened,' said Amerine, who years later would still find it hard to talk about that day. 'We could easily have killed him too. I just didn't have it in me to tell him that our own headquarters had done it.'

Amerine later found out that just that morning, the Taliban had sent a delegation to Karzai to surrender Kandahar. 'The bomb that hit us was probably the last bomb that was dropped in that theatre … at least in that stage of the campaign.'

It was an ominous start.

Still in shock, Karzai was flown into Kabul on 13 December. One of the first people to see him was James Dobbins, anxious to meet the man he had helped get chosen in Bonn. He was relieved,

finding Karzai 'an attractive personality, warm, reasonably open. Many of the qualities we chose him for are what we would later criticise him for. A more forceful person wouldn't have been acceptable.'

Though Dobbins was happy to have formed an administration so quickly, he worried that there had been no provision for peacekeeping forces, which he was convinced would be necessary if the fledgling government were to work. He told Rumsfeld they needed 25,000 troops, but was firmly rebuffed. 'He refused even to discuss it.'

His concerns were shared by the British government, which organised a conference in London bringing together fifteen potential troop-contributing countries. But the Pentagon laid down strict conditions. First, what the Bonn agreement had termed an 'international security force' would be renamed the International Security *Assistance* Force (ISAF), to eliminate any idea that internationals would provide security, which it saw as an Afghan responsibility, even though there was no Afghan army to do this. US troops would not participate, as they 'did not consider peacekeeping a fit role for American troops'. Bush told a meeting of his National Security Council, 'We don't do police work.'8 The US would also limit the numbers. 'We were very wary of repeating the experience of the Soviets and the Brits who ended up looking like occupiers,' Bush wrote in his memoir.9

On 20 December the UN Security Council approved the deployment of a peacekeeping force numbering between 3,000 and 5,000 troops. It would be led by Britain, which would supply 1,500 troops, commanded by General John McColl.

Afghanistan, emerging from more than two decades of war with armed men everywhere and little effective government, would have just one peacekeeper for every 5,000 people. The last conflict in which the West had been involved was Kosovo, where it had left one peacekeeper for every forty-eight people.

It wasn't only the numbers that was a problem. The US had insisted that the peacekeepers be restricted to Kabul, giving the US forces of Operation Enduring Freedom free rein to comb the rest of the country for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. It was the birth of two parallel forces.

Nobody in Kabul seemed to have heard of their new president-to-be. 'Who is he?' people would ask. 'Do you have a picture?'

Few people were aware that Karzai was already in the city and had moved into the Arg, the presidential palace. Shortly after I arrived in the city I got a message from his assistant Malik, inviting me over.

It was not easy to get in. The guards on the gate were those of Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of the Northern Alliance, who had moved into the palace as soon as Kabul had fallen, and thought he should be President, so was refusing to leave. They said they had never heard of any Hamid Karzai. Eventually Karzai's uncle Asis came out to find me and took me inside.

The driveway to the palace was lined with stone lions which had all been decapitated. 'Taliban,' explained Asis. He had been Deputy Chief of Protocol for King Zahir Shah, and knew the palace inside out. He showed us into what he called 'the Peacock Room', in which the Taliban had laboriously daubed white paint over the heads of the peacocks on the wallpaper. There was a dark patch on one wall, where Asis recalled a beautiful Gobelin tapestry of an English garden scene used to hang – a gift from Queen Victoria to King Abdur Rahman when his son visited London. 'Afghans were very confused, and asked why did the stupid king put a horrid carpet on the wall, Afghans have much more beautiful carpets on their floors,' he laughed.

Asis reminisced wistfully about Kabul in the old days. 'We had lots of clubs,' he said. 'Club 25, Club Moon, a bowling alley, dancing at night, and the wonderful Khyber restaurant by the fountain where there was better food than in Italy or France. It's like we've gone back five hundred years.'

Karzai was sitting in an armchair in another room which had a Philips freezer standing incongruously in the middle. The room was as cold as the inside of the freezer – there was just an ineffectual one-bar heater – and he looked dwarfed by the large chair. I was surprised to see him wearing a long, shiny *chapan* coat in striped green-and-blue silk, and an astrakhan hat. As long I had

known him he had always been in jeans and leather jacket, or occasionally beige *shalwar kamiz*. 'I didn't have clothes so someone lent me these,' he explained. 'Everything is still in Pakistan.'

I was still cross that he hadn't taken me on his return to Afghanistan. 'The conditions were very cold and hard,' he said. 'We had to sleep in a shepherd's hut. It wasn't like when you and I went in the old days and people fed us in villages.' He looked thin. Even so he claimed that everything had gone well in Uruzgan, people all coming out to support him. He did not tell me that he had been accompanied by special forces, only that the Americans had flown him on a transport plane from there into Bagram, a military camp just north of Kabul. He had been met by Marshal Fahim, the new Defence Minister, who was astonished to see him alone. Like all warlords Fahim never went anywhere without pick-ups crammed with heavily armed men. 'Where are your militia?' he asked Karzai. 'I have no men,' Karzai replied. 'You are now my men.'

That was all very well, but they weren't his men. They were Tajiks and he was Pashtun. And how could he trust Fahim? It was Fahim who had ordered his arrest seven years earlier when Karzai was Deputy Foreign Minister, and had him interrogated for hours.

I could see his shoulder was bothering him. He told me he'd fallen over in Uruzgan, but wouldn't go into any detail. Something didn't add up. Only later did I hear the whole story.

22 December, the day of Karzai's inauguration, dawned grey. The ceremony took place at the Interior Ministry building just along the road from the Mustafa. Security was tight, roadblocks manned by soldiers and police patrolling in old Russian peaked caps decorated with red and gold braid. They were clutching an assortment of arms, including handheld rocket launchers. Alarmingly I saw one policeman drop his just outside our hotel. Fortunately it didn't go off.

A motley band in uniforms with braided gold epaulettes played a sort of monotone oompah on the only remaining brass instruments in Afghanistan as dignitaries walked along the specially flown-in red carpet. It was all quite grim, not at all like the installation of the last Western-backed ruler, Shah Shuja, in 1839, when one British soldier and artist present wrote that 'the wild grandeur of the whole pageantry baffles description'.10

The foreigners seemed satisfied. General Franks was there, the man who had made this all possible. Next to him was British General McColl, as well as the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Iran, India and Pakistan, and many diplomats.

More interesting for me was watching the assortment of sworn enemies take their seats next to each other as part of the new administration after years of trying to kill each other. General Dostum was there, glowering and bearish as if he'd like to go and kill a few people. He was to be Deputy Defence Minister. Ismael Khan made an entrance by arriving late, thus outdoing Dostum, whose deputy had betrayed Ismael to the Taliban.

A Pashtun might be heading the new administration but it was clear who was dominating it. In prominent places were the Panjshiri trio – Marshal Fahim, the new Defence Minister, who still had his own army on the Shomali plains just outside Kabul; Yunus Qanuni, who was to be Interior Minister; and Abdullah Abdullah, the Foreign Minister.

Overlooking proceedings was a huge portrait of the late Northern Alliance commander Ahmat Shah Massoud in his trademark pakoul. Massoud was rapidly becoming the Che Guevara of Afghanistan. His photograph was everywhere, hindering visibility on the windscreens of the ubiquitous Toyota jeeps, decorating traffic islands and shops. One of the seats in the front row was left empty in deference to him, with his picture on the back and a bunch of plastic flowers on it.

Just as when the British were impressed by Shah Shuja's appearance, Karzai was winning plaudits for his lambswool hat and green-and-blue-striped *chapan*. The fashion designer Tom Ford even called him 'the chicest man on the planet'.

What they thought was his dress sense wasn't the only reason for satisfaction among Western diplomats. They believed they had found the perfect President – a charming man who spoke immaculate English, loved English poetry and was from the majority Pashtun tribe yet was also a

nationalist. And in some ways the fact that no one knew him seemed a good thing, as he was not compromised by his role in the jihad, unlike the warlords who most Afghans blamed for getting the country into such a mess.

After being sworn into office he spoke in his native Pashtu, then read a poem in Dari, one of the seven languages he speaks. He embraced Rabbani and called on Afghans to ‘forget the painful past’. He was just two days away from his forty-fourth birthday, and made reference to his lack of experience. ‘Oh God I am a novice so please help me.’

There was already one black cloud. A group of elaborately turbaned elders from Gardez who had come for the ceremony told us that a convoy from Khost they were supposed to be coming with had been bombed by the Americans, and as many as sixty-five elders killed.

When we journalists clustered round General Franks after the ceremony, he defended the bombing. ‘Friendly forces don’t fire surface-to-air missiles at you,’ he said. ‘We believe it was a bad convoy. We have reason to believe it was a good target.’

No surface-to-air missile had been fired. It would be the first of many such mistakes.

We should have realised then that instead of the end this was just the start. While Karzai was being sworn in as new leader of Afghanistan, a British man called Richard Reid was boarding American Airlines Flight 63 from Paris to Miami. The heels of his shoes had been hollowed out and packed with explosives.

It was the Saturday before Christmas, and the plane was packed with 185 passengers. Over the Atlantic, two hours out of Paris, some of them complained of smelling smoke. Hermis Moutardier, one of the French air hostesses, spotted Reid trying to light a match, and warned him that smoking was forbidden on the plane. He promised to stop, but a few minutes later she smelled more smoke.

To her horror she found Reid hunched in his window seat holding a lit match to one of his shoes. As she went to grab him, he pushed her away so hard she fell. ‘Get him!’ Moutardier screamed. Her colleague Cristina Jones rushed to the scene and threw herself at Reid, who was six feet four and snarling like an animal. He bit her hand and she screamed. Reid was not easy to control, but a small army of flight attendants and male passengers managed to hold him down, doused him with bottled water and tied him up with seatbelts, plastic handcuffs and headphone cables. A doctor on board sedated him. His shoes were then carried into the cockpit for inspection by the pilots, and only then were the fuses spotted.

The ordeal wasn’t over. The crew had no idea if he had any accomplices onboard, so the remaining passengers were kept in their seats for the final nerve-racking two hours and fifty minutes until they could land at the nearest airport, which was Boston. Afterwards they found numerous spent matches. No one knew why they hadn’t caught light. If they had, the shoes had more than enough explosives to blow up the plane.

Less than a week later, on 28 December, General Franks went to visit President Bush on his ranch in Crawford, Texas. Bush told reporters afterwards that they had discussed Afghanistan. In fact it was the first detailed briefing to discuss plans for a war in Iraq.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.