

2



AN UNPREPARED AND IGNORANT LUNGE TO DEFEAT—THE UNITED STATES IN AFGHANISTAN

The art of war is simple enough. Find out where the enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.

General U.S. Grant.¹

Today the United States in Afghanistan deludes itself with the vanity of apparent power and imagines that its fate will be better than the fate of earlier invaders. . . . Apparently it has not properly read Afghanistan's history.

Mullah Omar, 13 September 2002.²

The Russians, moreover, foolishly did not try to punish rogue Afghans, as [Britain's Lord] Roberts did, but to rule the country. Since Afghanistan is ungovernable, the failure of their effort was predictable. . . . America should not seek to change the regime, but simply to find and kill terrorists.

John Keegan, 24 September 2001.³

When entering on duty as an intelligence officer two decades and more ago, one of my first supervisors often said the key to framing and solving intelligence problems was to first "do the checkables." The check-

ables were those parts of a problem that were knowable, the things on which there were classified archival records, pertinent and available human experience, current human assets to consult, or even the results of media and academic research—the latter then, as now, generally underused because of the false assumption that information is not useful unless classified. This supervisor's recipe was to exploit to exhaustion the "checkables" to learn the problem's history and context, determine precisely what we already knew, establish the range of things we knew little or nothing about, and, thereby, identify the information we needed to acquire before acting to resolve the problem. To the know-it-all new intelligence officer I was then, the supervisor's emphasis on following this procedure seemed self-evident and hardly the product of genius. Yet, two decades on, it is astonishing how often the checkables are ignored, or, at best, partially exploited. I know of no case in post-1945 U.S. foreign and military policy where failure to exploit the checkables has yielded a more complete disaster than in the period before and since the start of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan—although the jury is still out on Iraq. So bad has been our performance in Afghanistan that one must assume a long list of Afghan checkables lie—like John Brown's body—a' moldering in a locked and dust-covered archive. It is, overall, hard to disagree with al Qaeda's assessment of the U.S. Afghan campaign. "For it is obvious that the U.S. administration, in defining this goal [winning the Afghan war]," the Internet journal *Al-Awsar* commented in August 2002, "did not proceed from a careful and in-depth study of the enemy it was about to face. Instead, it proceeded from a hysterical state that made its position lack the basic scientific rules that ought to be considered when making a decision."⁷⁴

At War's Start: The Cost of Prolonged Failure, 11 September–7 October 2001

In a list of al Qaeda victories, the attacks on New York and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 are far from the first entries. Before that day, which al Qaeda calls "Victory Tuesday," the date of "blessed strikes against world infidelity," and which historian Malise Ruthven describes as "the perfect icon of destruction, of hubris punished and arrogance brought low,"⁷⁵ bin Laden's fighters had stitched to their battle flag six major victories: Aden, Yemen (1992); Mogadishu, Somalia (1993); Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (1995); Dhahran, Saudi Arabia (1996); Nairobi,

Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (1998); and, again, Aden, Yemen (2000). Given these attacks, their increasing lethality, and the fact bin Laden and al Qaeda had been based in Afghanistan since May 1996, one would have expected the U.S. government to have had its military—if not since the 1998 East Africa attacks, then surely since the 2000 Aden strike—ready to respond immediately to the next al Qaeda attack, which anyone listening to bin Laden knew was a sure bet. Even if the Clinton administration's sordid blend of moral cowardice and political calculation prevented America's defense in late 2000, U.S. citizens and al Qaeda's leaders had to believe the world's greatest military power would not let another anti-U.S. attack go quietly by the boards. So as the immobilized destroyer *USS Cole* came home aboard a floating dry dock, and the 2000 presidential election likewise limped to a delayed finale, the commonsense assumption was that when Osama bin Laden next pulled the trigger, his side would be struck by a precise and devastating U.S. military attack on long-identified al Qaeda and Taleban targets. Among these, one would have bet, were training camps, airfields, air defenses, and government facilities in major Afghan cities; vehicle depots, ammunition dumps, and weapons storage areas; the facilities of the heroin-refining industry that helped fund the Taleban and al Qaeda; troop barracks; intelligence headquarters; and cave-and-tunnel complexes identified since the 1980s. Such an immediate, savage attack would come not only because it was deserved, but because U.S. generals knew they had to hit al Qaeda and the Taleban fast and hard before they dispersed into the Afghan mountains and countryside, or across the border into Pakistan, Iran, or Central Asia. An instant U.S. response, moreover, was possible because we knew the enemy could not deter an attack. The Taleban air force and air-defense system consisted of thirty-year-old, Soviet junk: ancient, unmaintained MiG fighters, decrepit past-generation radars, and Vietnam-era antiaircraft weapons. This prewar knowledge was validated by Lieutenant General C. F. Wald, USAF, who said Taleban air defenses and command-and-control were destroyed "in the first fifteen minutes or so" of war. In sum, Mullah Omar was not capable of interfering with a U.S. counterattack on his or al Qaeda's manpower, armaments, or facilities. "In terms of conventional arms," Don Chipman wrote straight-faced in *Air Power History*, "Taleban fortifications were not overly formidable."⁷⁶

Unintimidated by U.S. military power, bin Laden after the *Cole* attack publicly repeated his intention to strike the United States at home and abroad, pledging each attack would be of better quality than the

last—meaning more casualties and greater physical and economic damage. For most Americans, bin Laden was courting annihilation; surely the U.S. military had zeroed-in on al Qaeda and Taleban targets in Afghanistan, as well as al Qaeda-related targets in Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, and the Philippines. After all, a nation with reconnaissance satellites, high-altitude aircraft, a \$28 billion intelligence community, and the most lethal military ever built surely could target a man and a group such journalists as Peter Bergen, Abd al-Bari Atwan, John Miller, Robert Fisk, Hamid Mir, Jamal Ismail, Peter Arnett, and Rahimullah Yusufzai had found and covered. Even John Walker Lindh, the American Taleban, had met bin Laden several times. With these tools and five years to plan a counterstrike since bin Laden's 1996 declaration of war, Americans confidently assumed al Qaeda's next attack probably would be its last.

And yet, as is often the case in today's America, expectations based on common sense and the tenets of professional behavior proved unfounded when al Qaeda's exquisitely planned and executed attack occurred over two hours on 11 September 2001. As smoke billowed over al Qaeda's massive victories in New York City and Washington, D.C., no savage, preplanned U.S. military response was initiated; none had been planned in the eleven months since the attack on the USS *Cole*, or in the five-plus years since bin Laden declared war. Oddly, the National Security Council and FBI did move with speed to assist the "dead of night exodus" of twenty-plus bin Laden family members from the United States to Saudi Arabia. The FBI did not "verify whether the fleeing bin Ladens were both personally and financially estranged from Osama."⁷⁷

While the 11 September attack was a human-economic calamity, Washington's failure to have its military ready for a crippling, next-day attack on al Qaeda turned it into catastrophe. It cost America its best—perhaps only—chance to deliver what is called a "decapitation" operation, one with a chance to kill at a stroke many al Qaeda and Taleban leaders. Even if the leaders survived, immediate U.S. strikes could have pounded thousands of enemy soldiers into pulp. But no attack came on Tuesday, 11 September, or on Wednesday the 12th, or on Thursday the 13th, and, even later, the scandalous absence of a counterstrike was not only universally ignored, but such scholars as Frederick W. Kagan chided the Bush administration not for paralysis, but for surrendering to a "perceived need to start operations [in Afghanistan] hastily."⁷⁸

In the first postattack days, the only launches were of Clintonite

excuses: "We must have a smoking gun"; "Al Qaeda could not have done this, it must have been a state sponsor like Iran or Iraq"; "What about Hizballah?"; and that hoary excuse for supine inaction, "We must consult with our allies and build a coalition." And there were those whose Pavlovian response was to blame America, implicitly suggesting a limited military response. "To a large extent," terrorism expert Brian M. Jenkins absurdly asserted, "Osama bin Laden is our own creation. The United States encouraged and helped him wage a holy war against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan."⁷⁹ These cynical and false mantras filled the air and gave the appearance of a sensible, sober, and European-pleasing U.S. desire to avoid counterattacking the wrong target—though since 1996 America had but one foe who had declared war on and attacked it. In hindsight it is clear the mantras were meant to hide the fact that the U.S. military's cupboard was as bare as Mother Hubbard's, no forces in place, no plans on the shelf—not even any to destroy the Afghan heroin factories that have killed more Americans than the 11 September attacks—only negligence and dereliction far and wide. "The U.S. military, which seemed to have contingency plans for the most inconceivable scenarios," Bob Woodward wrote in *Bush at War*, a book that fascinates and terrifies by describing the ill-informed and timid support the president received as he led America to war, "had no plans for Afghanistan, the sanctuary of bin Laden and his network. There was nothing on the shelf that could be pulled down to provide at least an outline."⁸⁰ The best that could be done was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asking his planners for "credible military options" on 12 September—a stark underscoring of the bare cupboard—and getting a response on 21 September. Rumsfeld sent it back to the planners on 1 October for more detailed "target sets and force requirements," and the plan did not get President Bush's okay until 2 October.⁸¹ As a result, U.S. military action was delayed a month. "Only in America," Professor R.K. Betts has written, "could the nation's armed forces think of direct defense of national territory as a distraction."⁸²

This inexcusable delay afforded al Qaeda and Taleban leaders an unexpected lull to further disperse personnel, military stores, and funds within the Texas-size nation of Afghanistan, across its borders with Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia, and from there to the rest of the world. This process probably was under way before 11 September because al Qaeda had expected a massive U.S. attack since the 1998 East Africa bombings, and especially since the October 2000 strike on

the Cole. "It is no secret," al Qaeda said in July 2002, "that the crusade against Islam and Afghanistan was planned a long time ago, even before the 11 September incident."¹³ In addition, bin Laden had six days warning of the 11 September attacks and presumably took evasive action. Still, a foe susceptible to considerable damage on 11 September was, by the war's start on 7 October, largely out of America's view and capable of continuing its worldwide anti-U.S. insurgency. In this context, America probably lost the war against al Qaeda on 11 September because the U.S. military had been caught completely unprepared. The more than three-week delay denied America the chance, for once, to respond to an al Qaeda attack with a fury and bloodthirstiness that would have cost bin Laden dearly, and that Western governmental and public opinion would have tolerated because visions of the collapsing towers and burning Pentagon were still fresh. By 7 October, however, the window for savagery had shut, and whiners about "collateral damage" and "innocent Afghans" steadily constricted President Bush's ability to, as one of his windier CIA officials said, "take off the gloves." The negative impact caused by the U.S. failure to prepare was well-described by a Harvard scholar in November 2001. The status of the warring sides, Graham Allison wrote in the *Economist*, were different as night from day—the Americans *ad hoc-ing* their way to war, the Islamists steering a long-planned course.

Yet as the American government scrambles to pursue a war for which it was not prepared, it must, in the idiom, "go with what we've got." Assembling a coalition of very strange bedfellows, acquiring intelligence from sources and by methods it had mostly neglected, and jerry-rigging defenses around the most obvious vulnerabilities, it gallops off in all directions. It does so without a comprehensive assessment of the threats it now faces, and lacking a coherent strategy for combating mega-terrorism.

In contrast, Mr. Bin Laden and his al Qaeda network have been thinking, planning, and training for this war for most of a decade. September 11th demonstrated a level of imagination, sophistication, and audacity previously thought impossible by the American, or any other, government.¹⁴

In the next section, an attempt is made to explain why America was willfully unprepared for the New York and Washington attacks and what that lack of preparation has so far cost. The final cost of 11 September's unpreparedness, of course, will be clear only after al Qaeda's

next attack in the United States. On that day, America will stand quivering with rage, massively powerful but unable to respond unless willing to destroy areas in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province thought to shelter al Qaeda and Taleban fighters, strikes that would be more likely to destroy Pakistan than our enemy. "Unencumbered by a territorial base that would make a convenient cruise-missile target, and fully dispersed," Jonathan Stevenson wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "al Qaeda is now less susceptible to counterterrorism measures than it was before Sept. 11."¹⁵ Change the word "less" to "not" and Stevenson would have it exactly right.

Into Afghanistan: Tragic Country, Absurd Analysis

Afghanistan. It is hard to think of another country on earth that has suffered more in every conceivable way in the last quarter-century. Since being invaded by the Red Army in December 1979, the Afghans have waged war to rid their country of homegrown or foreign atheists and infidels. To date, they have partially succeeded, but at a cost nearly impossible to comprehend—of a prewar invasion population of about fifteen million, more than 1.5 million dead; nearly five million forced into exile in Pakistani or Iranian refugee camps; and several million internally displaced. In addition, centuries-old and indispensable irrigation and agricultural-terracing systems were ruined during the war by natural deterioration after farmers were driven abroad, or, more tellingly, by deliberate destruction by the Soviets in their effort to depopulate areas supporting the insurgency. Afghanistan's limited road system was likewise destroyed, and the penury produced by years of war spurred a lucrative crop-substitution program that saw farmers abandon grains and fruits for poppies to feed the expanding heroin industry. "On a percentage basis," the leading Western analyst of the Red Army's Afghan war has estimated, "the Soviet Union inflicted more suffering on Afghanistan than Germany inflicted on the Soviet Union in World War II."¹⁶ Throughout this horror, the Afghans continued to fight foreigners and their influence—as well as amongst themselves—and clung to a lifestyle in which ethnic and tribal affiliations dominate to a degree unimaginable in the West.

By the end of the day on 11 September 2001, Afghanistan was again the starring act on the world's stage and was soon to be smack at the center of a bull's-eye tardily drawn by the United States. On reflection,

America's political leaders, generals, and military planners should have been overjoyed that Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda were based in Afghanistan. The U.S. intelligence community and, to a lesser extent, the U.S. military had been closely involved in and around Afghanistan even before the 1979 Soviet invasion because of the country's strategic Cold War location on the USSR's southern border. In addition, these institutions—led by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—had run in Afghanistan the largest, most expensive, and most well-publicized covert action program in U.S. history to support the anti-Soviet mujahideen. This thirteen-year program was capped by success when the last Bolshevik general walked out of the country in February 1989, and when the Afghan communist regime was defeated in April 1992.

During the course of this endeavor, multiple hundreds of uniformed military personnel, intelligence officers, analysts, logisticians, military trainers, medics, geographers, imagery analysts, demolition experts, mule skimmers, communication specialists, and cartographers developed strong expertise on Afghanistan. As important, they experienced an intimate acquaintance with the patient, brave, devout, brutal, and stubborn men who beat the Soviet and Afghan communists. In addition, hundreds more State Department and Administration for International Development officers participated in implementing the diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian aspects of U.S. Afghan policy. Finally, the interest of members of both houses of Congress in the Afghan covert program was intense; many senators and congressmen demanded regular, detailed briefings on the war, traveled repeatedly to the region, and voted enthusiastically for the war's steadily growing covert action budget. The range of motivations among the politicians ran from an altruistic desire to help the dirt-poor Afghan David against the nuclear-armed Soviet Goliath to a simple, cold-blooded eagerness to pay back Moscow for Vietnam.

On 11 September 2001, the bottom line on Afghanistan was that it was one country in which the usually geographically challenged Americans knew their way around, and one in which their intelligence community had either collected or commissioned an enormous amount of information, much, but not all of it, right up to date. The U.S. government had experts on both the fundamental facts and the esoterica of Afghan society, history, and tribalism; on the country's demography and topography; on the role of the country's multiple ethnic and sectarian groups and their at-times-vicious rivalries; and, most important, the U.S. government had experience in dealing face-to-face with Afghans

and in appreciating the obdurate determination and endless patience of these people when it came to resisting with arms foreigners who sought to impose their will on the country. And the thing that these American experts knew best and above all others was that there was no possibility of installing a broad-based, Western-style, democratic, power-sharing central government in Kabul. They knew also that any attempt to do so would inevitably fail and take that much-brutalized country on yet another long and bloody trail that would end, at some point, in the res-toration of a Pashtun-dominated Islamist government that would mirror the Taleban in all but name.

In short, the list of "checkables" was immense, the cadre of qualified checkers was large, and yet tragically—for Americans as well as Afghans—almost no checking seems to have been done. Indeed, so uneducated was the U.S. intelligence community's official input to America's Afghan strategy that began to be implemented on 7 October 2001 that it was almost as if the task of advising policy makers and planning covert action had been left to African and Latin American experts. As I will explain, for example, the strategy Bob Woodward describes in *Bush at War* as the "Tenet Plan" was used because it made sense to the U.S. mind—using the power of money and few Americans while having foreigners die for us—not because it had drawn on the U.S. government's vast repository of Afghan knowledge.¹⁷ However, the strategy's subsequent failure shows its planners' complete lack of comprehension of Afghanistan's tribal, ethnic, and religious realities. Using nonexperts to devise strategy when experts were at hand would, of course, be a great disservice by the U.S. intelligence community (IC) to Americans and their elected leaders too serious to contemplate. Then again, soon after the war began the *New York Times* quoted unnamed "senior intelligence officials" who claimed the U.S. government did not "have the people to exploit [information about Afghanistan]." The senior officials and several academic experts led *Times*' journalist Diana Jean Schemo to conclude that, "As the United States takes up a war against terrorism that will demand human intelligence as well as smart bombs, it faces a nationwide shortage of Americans with a deep knowledge of the languages and cultures of Afghanistan and the surrounding region. . . ."¹⁸ While the U.S. was indeed short on fluent speakers of the regional languages, it beggars the imagination that any "senior intelligence official" could utter the bald-faced lie that the U.S. government lacked expertise on South Asia, the region most likely to host the world's first nuclear war. I have found, in my career, that the IC leaks

this kind of comment only when senior managers have failed to develop a cadre of substantive experts, when they want to put their "pets" in charge of programs for which they have no substantive expertise, or when they want to prepare the public for failure. As noted, the first motivation is not the case here, and our hubris ensured no thought went to possible failure. And so, it seems, substantive experts were not used, and that we are paying an exorbitant price because we ignored Sun Tzu's advice not to "demand accomplishments of those who have no talent." What follows is a look at the disasters that have befallen America in Afghanistan and speculation about those to come. Past and future, these harvests of pain were predictable but not forecast because no U.S. leader was given the expert analysis that would have allowed him to see beyond the war's easy part—bombing the air-defenseless Taleban from power.

Hey, Did Anyone Know the Red Army Lost a War in Afghanistan?

For those fortunate enough to have assisted the Afghan mujahideen to force the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the unfolding of U.S. operations there since October 2001 has been horrifying. Although the media in late 2001 lamented the U.S. government's lack of expertise on Afghanistan, few assertions—as noted above—could be more incorrect. As George Crile wrote in his excellent book *Charlie Wilson's War*, U.S. aid to the Afghan mujahideen, as administered by the CIA, was the largest, most successful covert action program in American history.¹⁹ Given the size and diverse nature of this 13-year program—guns, food, vehicles, money, training, uniforms, orange drink, donkeys, you name it—there are hundreds of military, intelligence, diplomatic, and AID officers who gained extensive Afghan experience and knowledge. Many worked on the Afghan program far longer than the two- or three-year tour common in the federal services, a longevity due to the program's unique size, a desire to see the Afghans defeat the Red Army and its barbarity toward civilians, and an itch to pay back Moscow for Vietnam. Many officers also were held by South Asia's intoxicating appeal. Americans in the 1980s were as enthralled as British sahibs in the 1870s by the people, topography, and history of a region that was ancient when Alexander neared the Indus River in the fourth century before Christ. To date, no benefit from this hard and expensively won experience can be seen in America's two-year-old Afghan misadventure.

The debilitating impact of not tapping America's Afghan expertise has been compounded by our failure to learn from the experience of the USSR, the most recent nation to join the list of states that failed to win wars in Afghanistan. Here, too, detailed studies of the Soviets' disastrous Afghan experience are readily available at local libraries and the nearest Borders. Soviet soldiers—conscripts, field-grade officers, and generals—have written a number of excellent memoirs of the war, and the University of Kansas Press has published, in a translation by Lester Grau and Michael A. Gress, the Soviet General Staff's after-action report on the Soviet-Afghan war.²⁰ This study details what the Soviet armed forces did in Afghanistan—save for atrocities—and assesses which political and military policies and actions succeeded or failed. Generally, the study depicts the frustrations of an arrogant superpower trying to cope with a people and a country it did not understand, as well as with an enemy all but invulnerable to conventional military operations and more than able to deal with special forces (Spetsnaz). The study's conclusions were condensed by a senior Russian official when he met senior CIA officials in mid-September 2001. "With regret," the Russian said, "I have to say that you are going to get the hell kicked out of you." One of the Americans responded in words that will someday be found in a U.S. military study of its failed Afghan war. "We're going to kill them," the U.S. official asserted. "We're going to put their heads on sticks. We're going to rock their world."²¹ The occasional substitution of bravado for thought is truly an eternal attribute of senior intelligence and military officers.

Grau's translation of the Soviet study is a must-read for any group of officials responsible for invading Afghanistan—an admittedly small audience—or, more generally, by anyone preparing to use conventional forces against a large and experienced insurgent organization. And beyond this easily acquired public material, one also must assume that the multiple analytic arms of the U.S. intelligence community produced an ocean of classified, electronically retrievable analyses about all aspects of Afghanistan's travails, from coup d'état, to invasion, to occupation and war, to a victory triggering the USSR's demise, to civil war, to the rise of the Taleban and large-scale heroin trafficking, to Mullah Omar's rule and the return of Osama bin Laden. More especially, the IC had to have produced detailed analyses of why the Red Army failed in Afghanistan and what it might have done to win. Given the wealth of public and classified data that appears to have gone unused, one is tempted to paraphrase Churchill to the effect that never in the history

of U.S. foreign policy have so many officials failed to read so much pertinent information to the detriment of so many of their fellow citizens.

Checkables: success rides on how fully they are retrieved, reviewed, and absorbed. Perhaps the most acute observation made about Soviet performance in Afghanistan, sadly, can likewise be made about America's 2001–2004 performance. The comment is in the Soviet General Staff study noted above; it ought to haunt U.S. leaders who did not read it before starting to “rock their world” on 7 October 2001.

When the highest political leaders of the USSR sent its forces into war, they did not consider historic, religious, and national peculiarities of Afghanistan. After the entry these peculiarities proved the most important factors as they foreordained the long and very difficult nature of the armed conflict. Now it is completely clear that it was an impetuous decision to send Soviet forces into this land. It is now clear that the Afghans, whose history involves many centuries of warfare with various warring groups, could not see these armed strangers as anything but armed invaders. And since these strangers were not Muslims, a religious element was added to the national enmity. Both of these factors were enough to trigger a large mass resistance among the people, which various warriors throughout history have been unable to overcome and which the Soviet forces met when they arrived in Afghanistan.²²

Interestingly, the Soviet General Staff tries to attribute much of the Red Army's failure to the fact that it had not previously fought this type of war, much as U.S. leaders now say that U.S. forces in Afghanistan are fighting a “new” type of war. Grau and Gress correctly reject the Soviet General Staff's alibis—as Americans might consider doing with new-type-of-war claims—and call attention to the Red Army-run insurgent campaigns of World War II, as well as the mass of material pertinent to fighting Afghan insurgents available long before the 1979 Soviet invasion. “Therefore, the initial inept approach of the [Soviet] 40th Army to fighting guerrillas was not due the lack of historical experience to draw on,” Grau and Gress snorted. “Further, British experience on their Indian Northwest Frontier is replete with tactical solutions to fighting the ancestors of the mujahideen. Mujahideen tactics were basically unchanged over the decades, and the British lessons were still valid.”²³

From Day One—A Worse Dance Partner Was Not Available

By 1 September 2001, the Taleban, with important but not indispensable help from al Qaeda, had defeated the multiethnic Northern Alliance. The Alliance, led by Ahmed Shah Masood, held only 10–15 percent of Afghanistan—some estimates are as low as 5 percent—and was a military force, as historian Frederick W. Kagan has written, “that had exhausted its ability to continue fighting [the Taleban].”²⁴ The Alliance's viability also was, as always, overwhelmingly dependent on its leader's unquestioned brilliance as an insurgent commander, his media-winning charisma, and the weapons, funds, and economic aid coming from Russia, Iran, India, and Uzbekistan. The first three were trying to seal Afghanistan to isolate the Taleban contagion, while India sought an anti-Pakistani regime in Kabul that kept military forces active near Pakistan's western border. France, too, flitted about in this picture, providing lavish rhetorical support for Masood and some clandestine military aid and funding to his fighters. France had no strategic interest in Afghanistan, understood little about it, and was involved mainly due to its self-deluding love affair with Masood's image as a moderately Islamic, long-suffering artist-turned-warrior; an image Masood cynically crafted and that European journalists and politicians eagerly consumed for over twenty years. No doubt the French teared up over the Northern Alliance chief's death and were anguished by the news that on the night before his death Masood and several colleagues had stayed up late, reading Persian poetry aloud until three in the morning.

External support might have enabled Masood's Alliance to survive for several more years and perhaps even add small bits of territory to its enclave in what had been a back-and-forth war with the Taleban, but for all intents and purposes the Taleban stood victorious on 1 September 2001 and had installed a harsh but stable law-and-order regime over most of the country. More important, Mullah Omar's regime was increasingly accepted by Afghans as they started to see the end of pervasive banditry and warlordism and the gradual return of safety for themselves, their children, and their meager amounts of property. Most Afghans seem to have regarded this as a fair exchange for the Taleban's rigorous, unforgiving application of strict Sunni Islam.

The Taleban's victory, of course, was sealed on 9 September 2001 when a patient, sophisticated al Qaeda operation killed Masood as he

sat down to be interviewed by two explosives-laden al Qaeda fighters. Exploiting Masood's belief that the Alliance's survival required positive media coverage, and Masood's well-known love for playing reporters like violins, the two al Qaeda fighters used the interview to kill themselves and Masood. The meeting appears to have been arranged by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a man who was Masood's partner in the Northern Alliance, the chief of the Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan, and—perhaps not coincidentally—a longtime friend of Osama bin Laden. The assassins gained an audience with Masood, explained Engineer Arif, a senior Masood lieutenant, because "Sayyaf's imprimatur permitted the Arabs to bypass normal security procedures."²⁵

Masood's death ended the Northern Alliance's chances for surviving as a viable political-military force, let alone as one that might serve as the framework for a national government. As Professor Michael Doran wrote in the *Political Science Quarterly*, "bin Laden engineered the decapitation of the Northern Alliance in order to throw it into such disarray that it would be useless to the United States as an instrument of retribution."²⁶ Indeed, only the fact that the assassination of Masood occurred three weeks later than scheduled prevented the Taleban from crushing Alliance remnants, thereby completely denying the United States an Afghan ally. Masood was the Northern Alliance; he groomed no successor, and while he lived it was clear that the other Alliance "leaders"—Mohammed Fahim, Abdullah Abdullah, Rashid Dostum, Yunus Qanooni, et cetera—were at best second-raters, perhaps able to work effectively under the great man's direction but unable to fill his shoes. They commanded little respect in the Alliance—although Qanooni was feared as Masood's security chief²⁷—and each was unknown internationally.

Faced with imminent organizational implosion and final military defeat by the Taleban, the Northern Alliance's leaders found a last-minute life-support system known as the United States when New York and Washington, D.C., were attacked by al Qaeda forty-eight hours after Masood's death. Surprised by the attack, and utterly unprepared to respond with its own military forces, Washington reinvigorated long-established ties to the Northern Alliance, delaying its inevitable demise. Indeed, by using it as indigenous window-dressing for the application of U.S. air power, the Bush administration kept the Northern Alliance alive to an extent that its leaders appear to believe they have defeated the Taleban and won the war. The truth, however, is that America won a single battle using Tajik- and Uzbek-dominated Northern Alliance

auxiliaries and is now "politically beholden to its indigenous allies" who have formed an untenable regime.²⁸ "Under any circumstances," Professor Kagan has said, "it would be difficult to imagine a stable Afghan state in which Pashtuns were ruled over by Tajiks and Uzbeks."²⁹ Thus, most of the war is still to be fought. It is a war the Alliance cannot win unless America provides a far larger infantry force, defeats the Taleban-and-al Qaeda insurgency, and is ready to occupy Afghanistan indefinitely. This scenario, even for men as lucky as Masood's successors, is a bridge too far.

The mistake America made in the first months of its Afghan war was not that it used the Northern Alliance to drive the Taleban from power, nor even that it portrayed the Alliance as a military force that mattered in the long run. It is clear, in fact, that for immediate U.S. purposes, the Alliance was the only game in town: it was at war with the Taleban, it had a military force in the field, and, most important, it had the cannon fodder that foreclosed—at least in the near term—the need to deploy to Afghanistan large numbers of killable U.S. infantrymen. U.S. military planners accurately gauged the obvious by taking advantage of the Alliance's post-Masood desperation, but took no account of the future. As Ralph Peters has written, "Our enemies play the long game, while we play jailbird chess—never thinking more than one move ahead."³⁰ In a severe miscalculation, Washington compounded the mistake by failing to see that the Alliance was soon to be a corpse, operating as if it was only damaged and momentarily leaderless. Moreover, Washington did not recognize that the Alliance had no growth potential to serve as the base for a democratic government in a de-Talebanized Afghanistan. This series of mistakes merits further examination, and at this point it is time to look at some of the easily checkable checkables that were obviously not checked.

Did Anyone Do Their Homework?

What did we know about the Northern Alliance on 11 September that should have informed and hedged the way we used, depended, and still depend on it? Well, we knew Masood formed the Alliance to resist the Pashtun mujahideen groups when fighting began in earnest among the Afghan resistance's constituent members after the pro-Soviet Afghan regime in Kabul fell in April 1992. From inception, the Alliance was an overwhelmingly Tajik-dominated organization. It was dominated,

moreover, by the leaders of a small subset of the country's Tajik minority, men from the Panjshir Valley. In a sense, the Alliance, born of desperation, never had a chance to be the basis for a national government. Even with Masood's guiding genius, the Alliance's *raison d'être*—to force the Pashtuns to share power equally with the minorities—was a forlorn hope. The Pashtuns were not and are not going to abide a political relationship with minority groups they do not dominate. There is something tragically quixotic about Masood. Notwithstanding the confident tone with which he spoke of the future, he was never in a position to do more than hope something would come along to force the Pashtuns to deal equitably with the minorities.

Masood was the most politically important and militarily capable Panjshiri Tajik. He worked tirelessly to bring and keep groups from the country's other ethnic minorities—Uzbeks, northern Pashtuns, Turkmens, Hazara Shias, Ismailis, et cetera—under the Alliance umbrella. His work bore some fruit as General Rashid Dostum's Uzbek forces joined, as did the country's largest Shia group, the Hizbi Wahdat, and some members of the late communist regime. Masood also gave the Alliance a veneer of inclusiveness after the Taleban took power in southern Afghanistan in 1994–1995 by enlisting the tenuous allegiance of the Pashtun groups led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the IULA and the Hisbi Islami (HIG). The Alliance was most cohesive in late 1995 through summer 1996 but weakened after the Taleban took Kabul in September 1996 and its forces slowly retreated north toward the Tajik heartland.

As noted earlier, by 1 September 2001 the Taleban had contained the Alliance in a 10–15 percent slice of Afghan territory adjacent to the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In that ethnically favorable enclave, the Alliance had enough fighters but was dependent on financial, military, and other forms of aid from Iran, Russia, and India, and had little chance of keeping the land it held, let alone expanding. Masood, because of his substantive military brilliance and his international renown, was the key to ensuring this support continued and allowed the Alliance's survival, even in a much reduced form. When Masood was killed by al Qaeda, the Alliance died with him. There was simply no one to take his place. Had there been no foreign intervention after Masood's death on 9 September 2001, we would have seen the military defeat of the Northern Alliance, the nationwide consolidation of Taleban power, and the slow emergence of the first chance for relative peace and security in Afghanistan for nearly a quarter century.

All these things were “knowable” on 11 September 2001 as the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were burning. The question is, therefore, why was the information derived from doing the “checkables” not integrated into U.S. military and political planning for Afghanistan?

The Price of Winging It

The answer to the question, obviously and unfortunately, is that available data was not retrieved, collated, and used; given the content of cabinet-level discussions presented in Bob Woodward's book *Bush at War*, it may not have been requested.³¹ Like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in the 1930s movies, U.S. government agencies got the neighborhood kids together, gave each a role and a script, and expected to produce a professional Broadway musical in the backyard—*Andy Hardy Conquers and Rebuilds Kabul*, perhaps. Sadly, success from “winging it” occurs only in movies, and Washington's attempt to duplicate Hollywood's methods in Afghanistan yielded a full-blown disaster. As Ralph Peters has wisely posited, “If you intervene ignorant of local conditions, you will likely fail—and you will certainly pay in blood.”³²

Of course, no senior U.S. or UK official will admit to winging it. The immediate response from U.S. policy makers and military planners, if asked if they had thoroughly reviewed the checkables, would be something like: “We didn't have time.” “We had to work with the material we had on hand.” “We had to defend America.” Good rhetoric, superficially plausible in days of unthinking high emotion, and self-protectively wrapped in red, white, and blue—and just as clearly factually wrong and deliberately misleading. Once the United States and its allies were unable to strike on the afternoon of 11 September, or the next day, or the next, al Qaeda and the Taleban were well on the way to effective dispersal. As a result, we did have the time to think about what we wanted to do in Afghanistan, line up needed assets, and, most important, identify and accept the things that could not be accomplished there. This was not done, however, and Washington charged ahead to align with a group whose only plausible leaders were second-raters from Masood's Panjshiri mafia—Fahim, Abdullah, and Qanooni—and the Uzbek leader Dostum. The result, journalist Michael Massing has written, is that the “government's top three ministries [defense, foreign affairs, and interior] are controlled by men who

belong to a tiny subgroup of an ethnic minority. . . . Even many Tajiks are unsettled by the prominence of the Panjshiris, regarding them as war criminals."³³ In Dostum, the United States befriended the single most hated man in Afghanistan due to his behavior during and since the Soviet-Afghan war. Among Dostum's endearing habits were having tanks run over trussed-up civilians or prisoners of war, and dousing villagers—men, women, and children, and overwhelmingly Pashtuns—with gasoline and then lighting them up. Dostum's status as a top-ten world villain faded only when more murderous monsters emerged in the Balkans and Central Africa.

Overall, the United States took willy-nilly a Northern Alliance in its death throes, kept it alive and united through the work of a few dozen extraordinarily brave, talented, and lucky U.S. intelligence officers, and assured its capture of Kabul with American air power and special forces. The Alliance's leaders played their part well, strutting into Kabul to the enthusiastic applause of a population unrepresentative of the country; Kabul, now and historically, is much less Islamic and more cosmopolitan than the rest of Afghanistan—witness its status as a haven for hippies in the 1960s, and the Kabulis' willingness to tolerate their decidedly un-Islamic presence—a point that I heard no Western journalist, media expert, or government official mention as they analyzed the city's populace rejoicing over the Taleban's defeat. The hopelessly naive reaction in the United States probably is best described by Bob Woodward. "Soon there were [television] pictures of real liberation," Woodward wrote in *Bush at War*, "women in the streets doing all the things that had been forbidden previously. [National Security Adviser Condoleezza] Rice felt that [U.S. leaders] had underestimated the pent-up desire of the Afghan people to take on the Taleban."³⁴ The Alliance leaders behaved as magnanimous victors before the cameras, while quietly and quickly flooding the capital with fighters and intelligence operatives no more savory than the Taleban fighters they replaced. Rather than the masters of all they surveyed, the Alliance leaders were then—and are now—dead men walking.

Since the United States did no homework on the Northern Alliance, it is not surprising that the Pashtun leaders America welded to the now Fahim-led Alliance to form a "broad-based" interim regime amounted to more dead weight and are, indeed, the kiss of death. In most ways, U.S. officials repeated the same failure they engineered in Afghanistan between 1989 and 1992, when U.S., UN, and other Western diplomats tried to construct a broad-based government—meaning non-

Islamist—to replace the Soviet-Afghan communist regime. The purpose of that attempt was—as is today's—to allow the barest minimum of participation in the new regime by the mujahideen, the uncouth, violent, devout, and bearded men who had won the war. Having banished these unwashed, medieval Islamists to the periphery of politics, the diplomats intended to give the bulk of the new government's posts and power to people more like themselves: secularized Afghans; westernized Afghans who refused to fight for their country and spent a comfortable, self-imposed exile in Europe, India, or the United States; technocrats who had worked for the Soviet and Afghan communists; tribal leaders who had emigrated to preside over refugee camps in Pakistan or Iran and avoid being shot at; the deposed Rome-based Afghan king, his effete, Italianate entourage, and their Gucci-suited "field commanders" who never fired a shot; and even Najibullah, the head butcher of the just-defeated Afghan communist regime. As always for Western diplomats, well-coiffed men who dressed well, spoke a smattering of English or French, and shared an aggressive contempt for religion, were preferable as rulers to the hirsute men wearing funny looking pajama-style clothes who had merely fought and defeated a mass-murdering, super-power enemy in a ten-year war. Style over credibility every time.

Flash ahead a decade and this scenario repeats itself with a new, more ludicrous twist. This time out, the same U.S., Western, and UN diplomats intend to create an interim government from an even less credible crowd, again proving their infallible ability to pick losers. Taking the dimming shadow that is the Northern Alliance—for whom U.S. intelligence officers and soldiers won a battle it could never have won on its own—U.S. officials added the Westernized Pashtun Hamid Karzai as leader of the new government. A genuinely decent, courageous, and intelligent man, Karzai had nonetheless absented himself from the fight against the Soviets, and also from the one against the Taleban, until he jumped in on the side of the Americans and their overwhelmingly powerful military. With no Islamist credentials and minimal tribal support, the India-educated Karzai was and is a man clearly adept and comfortable hobnobbing with U.S. and British elites, but far less so at chewing sinewy goat taken by hand from a common bowl with an assembly of grimy-fingered Islamist insurgent and tribal leaders and their field commanders. Fixing Karzai as chief of the transitional administration via a UN-run and U.S.-manipulated conference held in Bonn, Germany—another sure disqualifier for the xenophobic Afghans—we then liberally salted the new regime with well-educated, detribalized,

and minimally Islamic Afghan expatriates who had been waiting in the wings in the West since the early 1990s for a prize they wanted but for which they would not risk life and limb. We then enlisted tribal warlords such as Hazret Ali in Nangarhar Province, Pacha Khan Zadran in Khowst Province, and Mohammed Shirzai in Qandahar Province to provide Karzai with military muscle in regions where the Pashtun tribes were politically and demographically dominant.

This is not a winning lineup. While Karzai and his expatriate assistants shivered in cold, dark, and bankrupt Kabul, the warlords depended on the forces of the U.S.-led coalition for support because their supposed muscle was nowhere to be found. Having ignored the foregoing checkables, the West quickly discovered that these warlords had been in exile or under domestic subordination not because they disagreed with the Taleban, but because they had failed to provide leadership and security when they ruled Afghanistan before the Taleban arose (they then specialized in banditry and heroin trafficking), had little support inside the country, and were afraid of Taleban and al Qaeda forces.

Thus, the government the West installed in Kabul in early 2002 was missing every component that might have given it a slim chance to survive without long-term propping-up by non-Islamic, foreign bayonets. The Northern Alliance formally represented several minority ethnic groups, but it was and is nothing more than the tool of Masood's Panjshiri clique. There is virtually no genuine Pashtun representation in the regime, though Karzai and some returning expatriates were unrepresentative Pashtuns: they had been living in the West or Pakistan, had not fought the Soviets, and were only nominally Islamic. Likewise, the interim government's warlords were military nonentities unless backed by U.S. and UK military forces. Karzai's regime, at day's end, is the perfect example of the unnecessary mess that always ensues when time is not taken to review and digest the "checkables." And on this occasion, to make matters worse, the checkables were available in local public and university libraries, federal government archives, and the memories and experiences of hundreds of serving and retired U.S. government employees. The data were not hiding until they could be clandestinely acquired by the West's intelligence services. On reflection, one again has the strong but surely incorrect impression that responsibility for U.S. political and military planning for Afghanistan was deliberately given to officials who had spent their careers working on African or Russian affairs and not on the Middle East, South Asia, and Islam. But not even

my generation of senior civil servants could be that criminally negligent. Could they?

Why Are All the Fighters on the Other Side?

The second half of 2003 and early 2004 saw a substantial increase in Taleban and al Qaeda attacks on the military forces of the Karzai government and the U.S.-led coalition, as well as the discrediting of another group of Western experts on the war in Afghanistan. The rising tempo of combat gave lie to such analyses as *Newsweek's* early 2003 speculation that al Qaeda's back "may finally have been broken"³⁵; Max Boot's conclusion that the defeat of the Taleban in 2001 "should have shattered for all time the mystique of the guerrilla"³⁶; and the February 2003 assertion by Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin that "after the punishment meted out in late 2001, it is unlikely that U.S. forces will again face al Qaeda forces on the battlefield."³⁷ The current consensus of media reporting and official U.S. announcements is that "remnants" of the Taleban and al Qaeda are "regrouped and reformed" and are waging a guerrilla war against the Kabul regime and its foreign allies. "Regrouped, rearmed, and well-funded," wrote the *Christian Science Monitor's* Scott Baldauf in May 2003, "they are ready to carry on a guerrilla war as long as it takes to expel U.S. forces from Afghanistan."³⁸ This conclusion is supported by both empirical evidence and the corpses at hand—although whoever coined the term "remnants" for the unvanquished forces of bin Laden and Mullah Omar will regret it—and was underscored when General John Abizaid, head of the U.S. Central Command, said in mid-November 2003 that daily combat operations in Afghanistan are "every bit as much and every bit as difficult as those that go on in Iraq."³⁹ The forces that oppose Karzai's regime and its allies, however, go far beyond the Taleban and al Qaeda, and therein lies another example of the cost of not reviewing the checkables before acting.

While sparsely covered in the Western media—save for the *Christian Science Monitor's* superb reporting, which continues to this day—the Afghan insurgents' war against the Red Army and Afghan communists was among the most vicious, lonely, and lengthy of what are now fashionably called the twentieth century's "small wars." Although over time increasing numbers of non-Afghan Muslims traveled to Afghanistan to fight alongside the Afghan Islamic resistance, the