



RAJIV  
CHANDRASEKARAN

AUTHOR OF

IMPERIAL LIFE IN THE EMERALD CITY

LITTLE AMERICA

THE WAR WITHIN  
THE WAR FOR AFGHANISTAN

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# Little America

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THE WAR WITHIN THE WAR  
FOR AFGHANISTAN

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Rajiv Chandrasekaran



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“You, Miss Maxwell, didn’t your government in Washington hand you a neatly typed report on Kabul? Mean temperature. Dress warmly. Expect dysentery.”

“Yes,” Miss Maxwell laughed.

“And it was all the truth, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“But did it prepare you for today?”

*Caravans*

JAMES A. MICHENER

1963

# CONTENTS

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*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

Map of Southern Afghanistan

Prologue

## **PART ONE—GRAND DREAMS**

**1 An Enchanting Time**

**2 Stop the Slide**

**3 Marineistan**

**4 The Wrong Man**

**5 The Road to Ruins**

**6 The Surge**

## **PART TWO—SHATTERED PLANS**

**7 Bleeding Ulcer**

**8 Search and Destroy**

**9 Deadwood**

**10 Burn Rate**

**11 Allies at War**

**12 Odd Man Out**

**13 A Bridge Too Far**

## **PART THREE—TRIAGE**

**14 The Boss of the Border**

**15 A Fresh Can of Whoop-ass**

**16 There Was No Escaping Him**

**17 My Heart Is Broken**

**18 What We Have Is Folly**

Acknowledgments

Notes

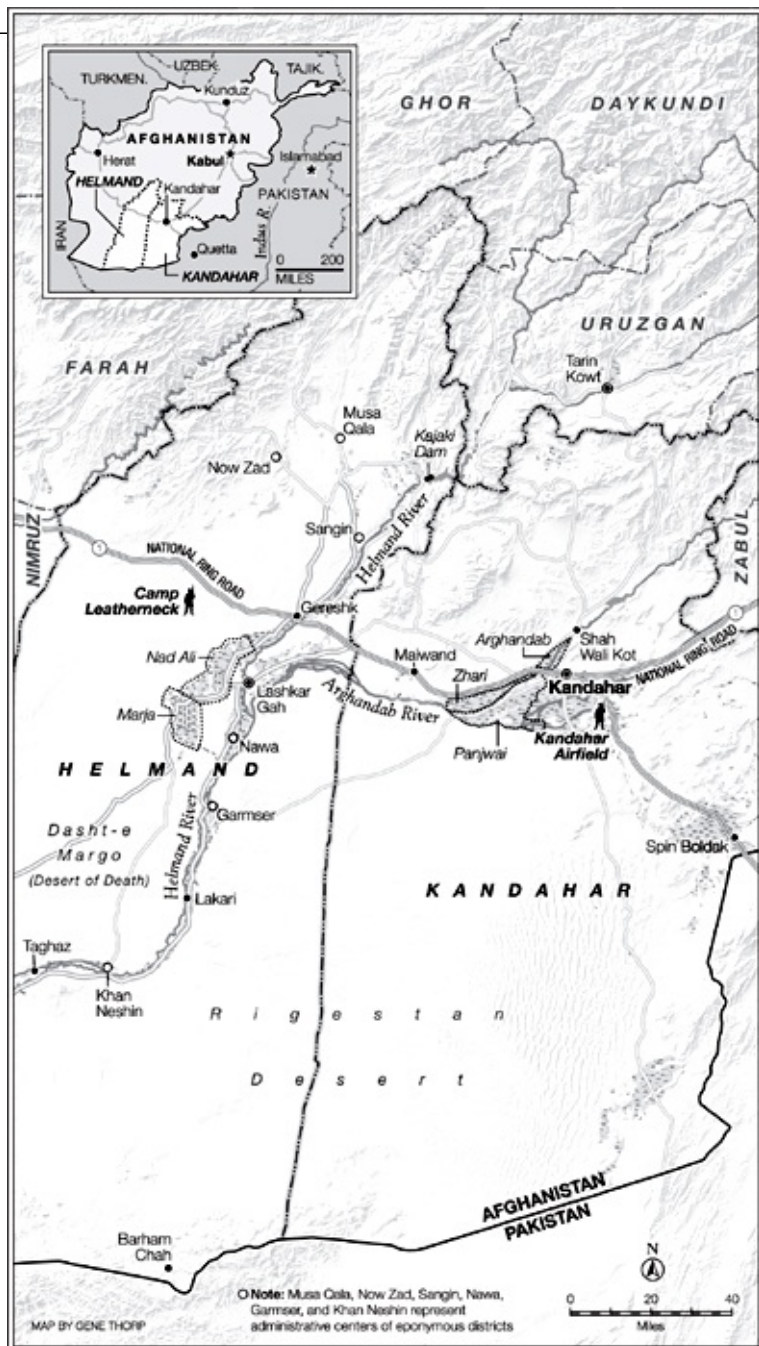
[Bibliography](#)

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[Illustrations](#)

[Other Books by This Author](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)





## Prologue

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Set atop a dusty plain between two ridgelines, the orchards of Now Zad once yielded pomegranates as large as softballs, luring visitors from across southern Afghanistan during the harvest season. After they gorged on the juicy magenta fruit, most headed home. Others grew so intoxicated by the prospect of farming the fertile soil that they transplanted their lives. Waves of settlers in the 1960s and 1970s transformed Now Zad, which means “newborn” in Persian, into the fourth largest city in Helmand province.

By the fall of 2006, the city looked like old death. The pomegranate fields had been booby-trapped with makeshift mines. Homes and shops had been blown to rubble. Bullet holes pocked the few walls left standing.

The Taliban had invaded Now Zad with hundreds of fighters earlier that year. After desperate pleas from Afghan president Hamid Karzai, the British commanders who were responsible for Helmand under a NATO security agreement dispatched a platoon of Gurkhas to evict the insurgents. But the fearsome Nepalese warriors were outmanned by the Taliban. A tense standoff ensued as the insurgents roamed the city and the Gurkhas hunkered down inside the police station. Every few days, the Taliban would try to storm the compound, sometimes getting close enough to hurl grenades, but the Gurkhas, and subsequent contingents of British troops, managed to keep the enemy at bay with torrents of bullets and rockets. As the fighting escalated, most residents fled.

The Brits were bent on simple survival. Soldiers crouched in their guard towers, gazing at the city through rifle scopes. They named a once lush pomegranate grove just a few hundred yards away Sherwood Forest. A strip of walled compounds teeming with fighters from across the border—their shouts in Urdu revealed their provenance—became known as Pakistan Alley. If the soldiers could have left their Alamo, there would have been no Afghan policemen or soldiers to accompany them on patrol, at least none who were interested in anything more than self-enrichment. The portly police chief, who holed up in the same compound as the Brits, spent his days finding the last few residents to extort and the last few boys to molest.

U.S. Marine Brigadier General Larry Nicholson was appalled when he visited Now Zad on a February 2009 reconnaissance trip. The first thing he saw when he landed was a wall at the police station that was scrawled with graffiti: WELCOME TO HELL. American Marines had relieved the British the year before, and they had expanded the patrol zone by a few blocks, but they were still surrounded on three sides by insurgents hiding in trenches and abandoned houses. Debris-strewn no-man’s-land lay in between, trod only by wild dogs. Injuries from IEDs—improvised explosive devices—were so common, and so dire, that the Marine company at Now Zad was the only one in the country to be assigned two trauma doctors and two armored vehicles with mobile operating theaters.

To Nicholson, a compact former infantryman whose ruddy complexion made his weathered face appear perpetually sunburned, the opposing forces staring at each other reminded him of what it must have been like at Verdun during the epic trench battle between the French and Germans in World War I. He met a Marine at Now Zad who told him, “Sir, we patrol until w

hit an IED, and then we call in a medevac and go back” to the base. “And then we do it again the next day.”

The first U.S. Marines had arrived in Now Zad in May 2008 on a mission to train Afghan security forces. The ninety-five-man reinforced platoon was led by Lieutenant Arthur Karell, twenty-seven-year-old with degrees from Harvard and the University of Virginia who had postponed practicing law for the adventure of combat. When he landed at the NATO base in Kandahar, about a hundred miles to the southeast, he was given a satellite map of Now Zad marked with a small blue star that indicated where he was to build a police station to house newly trained Afghan policemen. But when he got to Now Zad, he discovered the blue star was four miles beyond the British perimeter. In between were Taliban bunkers and minefields. He crumpled up the map.

In his seven months in the city, the only civilians he saw were a few brave farmers from a nearby village who came looking for firewood. When he led his Marines on patrol, they were met with gunfire less than three hundred meters from the base. His platoon killed dozens of insurgents, but at a cost: One of his men was sent home in a casket, and 20 percent had to be evacuated because of injuries. At first, despite the danger, his Marines didn't complain. There were plenty of bad guys to kill. But even the most trigger-happy eventually started to wonder why they were in a town that had been abandoned. “There’s nobody here,” they said to Karell. “Why are we here?”

When Nicholson became the top Marine commander in Afghanistan in April 2009, he resolved to save Now Zad. IEDs had blown off the legs of more than two dozen Americans and around the city. Fighting a war of attrition with fixed positions was not something Marines did, at least not in his book. “If we’re not showing progress, if we’re not showing movement towards stability, what the fuck are we doing?” he asked. The situation was emblematic to him of everything that was wrong with the war.

The officers working for him agreed, as did Helmand’s governor, but his bosses at the NATO regional headquarters in Kandahar felt differently, as did the American and British diplomats at the reconstruction office in the provincial capital. They maintained that Now Zad was a ghost town that lacked the strategic significance to merit more troops and dollars. They believed the stalemate was a good enough outcome in an imperfect war: A small unit of Marines had succeeded in tying down hundreds of insurgents who couldn't launch attacks elsewhere. Nicholson was told not to worry about Now Zad.

But he would not let go. His job was to protect the people of Helmand, and that meant allowing the displaced to return home. He bristled when British and American officials told him that the former residents of Now Zad would not come back. That’s how people in the West might behave, but Afghans, he believed, would act differently. The only real assets most Helmandis had were their homes and their land. Nicholson felt they would reclaim them if they could.

It seemed as though every day he received word of another American double amputee in Now Zad. Each folded, handwritten casualty notification his aide passed to him stopped his heart a beat longer. The losses of his brother Marines had to be worth something. Failing to act, he thought, would mean they had sacrificed lives and limbs in vain, and it would condemn more Marines to the same fate. He pondered what to do.

When Nicholson’s political adviser, John Kael Weston, the diplomat he trusted most

arrived in Helmand that June and asked the general which outpost he should visit first. Nicholson did not mention the places where most of his troops were conducting counterinsurgency operations.

“Kael,” he said, “you’ve got to go to Now Zad.”

At first glance, the thirty-seven-year-old Weston seemed like a surfer who’d taken a wrong turn on the way to the beach, but his tousled hair and untucked shirts belied his place among the most erudite and experienced diplomats of his generation. Weston had spent more time in Iraq and Afghanistan than anyone else at the State Department. By the time he landed at Camp Leatherneck, the Marine headquarters in Helmand, he had already put in six consecutive years in the two war zones, with just a few short breaks to visit family and friends back home.

On the U.S. Embassy’s organizational chart, Weston was listed as the State Department representative to the Second Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He was supposed to advise the Marines about Afghan government matters, palaver with local leaders, and keep his bosses in Kandahar and Kabul apprised of political developments in the Marine area of operations. Fellow diplomats who had similar jobs generally stuck to those requirements, but Weston saw his writ in more expansive terms. He was the brigade’s political commissar. He constantly reminded the Marines that the military had been deployed in support of the Afghan government, not the other way around. And he was Nicholson’s confidant. They had forged an enduring friendship while serving side by side for a year in the Iraqi hellhole of Fallujah. The general could open up to him, sharing doubts and gossip, in ways he could never do with the officers under his command. Their close relationship also meant Weston could do what none of the Marines could: When he thought Nicholson was making a mistake, he could walk into the general’s office and say so.

Weston’s helicopter landed in Now Zad at night. Moonlight illuminated the jagged cliffs as he descended. Over the next three days, he climbed a guard tower to see Sherwood Forest, where the dead pomegranate trees were rigged with explosives. He walked through the shuttered bazaar, praying that his next footfall would not be atop a pressure-plate IED buried in the dirt. Halfway through the patrol, he asked the corporal ahead of him, who was scanning the ground with a metal detector, how much training he had received to use the device. “Well, sir,” the corporal replied nonchalantly, “not as much as you’d like to think.”

Later on, Weston talked to a few Afghan men who had congregated at a mosque. Some told him the Marine presence was encouraging the Taliban to occupy the city, and others pleaded for the Americans to stay. The following day, he mourned with the Marines of Golf Company when they received word that Corporal Matthew Lembke, who had enlisted on his eighteenth birthday and served two tours in Iraq, then reupped to deploy with his buddies to Afghanistan, had died from an infection. Three weeks earlier, he had stepped on an IED while on a night patrol. The blast had blown off his legs and deposited the rest of him in the crater left by the bomb.

Weston had supported President Barack Obama’s decision in early 2009 to deploy 21,000 more troops to Afghanistan. He too believed Afghanistan was the war that the nation had to fight after 9/11. The war that had to be won.

But after almost eight years of fighting, what did that mean? Weston shared Obama’s view that the new troops—about half of whom were Marines under Nicholson’s command—needed

to be directed toward only the most critical areas, the most vital fights. Their job was to hammer the Taliban so that it no longer posed an existential threat to the Afghan government. In some cities and towns, that would require a protect-the-population strategy. In others, the Americans would have to strike hard and fast against insurgent redoubts, but leave the arduous work of security and governing to the Afghans. It was, after all, the country, and Weston knew well the dangers of trying to do too much for them.

As he prepared to depart the outpost, a young corporal approached him. “Sir, I just hope this all adds up,” he said. “All of my friends are getting hurt over here.” *That’s why I’m here*, Weston thought. *My job, and the general’s job, is to make sure that by the time those guys are on foot patrol, it is going to add up to something.* Now Zad seemed like a blood feud to him. “It is truly an area where you’ve got a company of bad guys versus a company of good guys,” he told his parents in an audio recording he sent them shortly after the trip. “The question for me, the general, and others at headquarters is going to be: What kind of further effort do you put towards a place like Now Zad?”

He would answer that question three months later. By then, Nawa, Garmser, and Khan Neshin—the districts that had been the Marines’ initial focus—had grown relatively quiet. Nicholson wanted to address other problems in the province, and the arrival of a replacement battalion in northern Helmand provided an opportunity to make a big push in Now Zad. One night in early October, Nicholson made his pitch to Weston.

“I’m frustrated,” he said. “I feel like a bulldog who wants two more links in my chain.”

“You’re on twitch muscles,” Weston replied.

“I am. There are places I can’t go right now and it’s killing me,” Nicholson said. “I’d like to finish Now Zad because I think there’s a strategic payback and benefit of showing people what we’re doing—we’ll repopulate the second largest city in Helmand.” (Only Nicholson thought Now Zad was once that big. Afghan records listed it as fourth.)

“The people have to want to come back,” Weston said. “And right now, it doesn’t sound like they want to.”

Such raw discussions did not occur often among civilians and generals, but Weston and Nicholson trusted each other.

“If you clear it, they will come,” Nicholson continued.

“I’m just being honest with you,” Weston said. “I don’t believe in the time we’ve got there. Now Zad is where we should focus our attention. Our report card ain’t going to be about Now Zad.”

“When Now Zad starts to be repopulated, it will be one of the biggest stories to come out of Afghanistan.”

“If the world still cares about Afghanistan.”

“The world will care about it,” Nicholson said.

The next morning, Weston was in his office eating a bowl of instant oatmeal. He explained to me that his opposition to focusing on Now Zad was rooted not just in the risk of casualties in seizing an empty town. Committing more forces there, in his view, would mean that Nicholson would have fewer Marines to tackle places far more vital to Afghanistan’s security.

Back in Washington, Obama was considering a request from the military to send 40,000 more troops to the war front. Nicholson and every Marine officer I met thought America needed more boots in Afghanistan. But not Weston. For him, military commanders needed

be more judicious in how they applied the forces already on the ground. He didn't believe Marines should be charging into remote hamlets in the eighth year of the war. He believed the war should be about triage—protecting the most important cities and towns so the Afghan government would have a fighting chance of holding on to power.

Two months earlier, he had been sitting next to Nicholson in a conference room during a planning session for an assault on Now Zad. Halfway through, Nicholson had been handed a folded note. A twenty-one-year-old Navy petty officer, Anthony Garcia, who had been serving as a medic for a Marine platoon, had been killed by a roadside bomb in a district almost as remote as Now Zad. The message said Garcia's comrades were still trying to remove his corpse from the smoldering wreckage.

That night, at fifteen minutes after midnight, Weston stood with Nicholson as Garcia's flag-draped body bag was hoisted across the tarmac, between a long row of ramrod-straight Marines, and placed inside a C-130 Hercules transport plane. The chaplain said a prayer, and Nicholson walked up the tail ramp, knelt before his fallen fighter, and paid his respects. The following day brought news that four Marines in the same area had burned to death in the Humvee after striking another bomb.

Weston knew war meant middle-of-the-night repatriation ceremonies, but he wanted each grieving parent who received a knock at the door from Marines in dress blues, bearing the worst possible news a father or mother ever could receive, to know their son had died fighting for key terrain.

In August 2007, exactly two years before Kael Weston gazed on Anthony Garcia's body bag, Senator Barack Obama had declared Afghanistan "the war that has to be won." He pledged to deploy more troops and increase reconstruction funds. "We will not repeat the mistake of the past, when we turned our back on Afghanistan," he had said. "As 9/11 showed us, the security of Afghanistan and America is shared."

For Obama, Afghanistan had been the good war, the war that began with two fallen towers, not the war that stemmed from faulty intelligence and exaggerated claims of weapons of mass destruction. Republicans and Democrats alike had embraced the Afghan operation—to exact revenge and prevent another attack, to sideline radical mullahs and allow girls to attend school. But the war in Iraq had distracted the Pentagon and the White House and had diverted troops, helicopters, and other essential resources from Afghanistan.

When he moved into the White House in January 2009, Obama sought to make good on his campaign promise. His administration's approach to salvaging the failing war, forged through sometimes contentious discussions among his national security team, amounted to calling a mulligan in the eighth year of the conflict: He doubled troop levels, dispatched thousands more civilian advisers, devoted vast sums to reconstruction, and demanded greater accountability from Karzai's government. The Pentagon and the State Department put the best people onto the challenge, many of whom had gleaned valuable counterinsurgency experience from their years in Iraq.

I traveled to Afghanistan soon after Obama's inauguration to observe the war he had inherited, and I returned more than a dozen times over the following two and a half years to track America's progress there. I flew with generals and hiked with grunts, feasted with warlords and walked fields with sharecroppers, ducked my head during firefights and

witnessed the human toll of roadside bombs. This book traces Obama's war, from early 2001 to the summer of 2011—from the surge to the drawdown. It is set in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where most of the new troops were sent, and where the story of the United States in Afghanistan began in the late 1940s, when Americans launched an enormous development effort whose legacy is etched across the Helmand River Valley.

After observing the dysfunctional American attempt to secure and rebuild Iraq, I wondered whether we could get Afghanistan right. Had we learned from our failures? Would more troops, civilian advisers, and reconstruction funds resuscitate a flatlining war? Would a protect-the-population counterinsurgency strategy work in Afghanistan? Would the Pakistanis crack down on Taliban sanctuaries in their country, and would Karzai work in good faith with the United States?

Confronted with a stubborn insurgency in a primitive land, could officials in Washington adapt? Could we wage a good war?

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PART ONE

## **Grand Dreams**

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## An Enchanting Time

PAUL JONES ARRIVED in a Chevy pickup, billowing dust clouds in his wake as he crossed the desolate desert. The khaki-clad engineer had set out from his base soon after first light to observe a massive construction project aimed at transforming the long-neglected valley along Afghanistan's Helmand River into a modern society. Irrigation canals would feed new farms that would produce so much food that the country would export the surplus for profit. New towns, with Western-style schools, hospitals, and recreation centers, would rise from the sand. So too would factories, fed by electricity from a generator at a dam upriver. Jones had witnessed a similar metamorphosis near his house on the outskirts of Sacramento, and he was certain it could be duplicated on the moonscape of southern Afghanistan.

Jones was sixty-three but appeared as hale and trim as a man two decades younger, save for his graying hair, which he covered with a hat or helmet while outside. One of his sons, an Army aviator, had been killed in the war a few years earlier. His wife, who remained at the family home, could not fathom why he wanted to embrace a hardscrabble existence halfway around the world. He had been indecisive, despite his employer's urging, until he heard a preacher on an AM radio station out of Modesto: "Go into a far country—a strange land—inhabited by a different people. Let God within you point the way!" So he let himself be lured by the prospect of adventure and altruism. His country and his employer, the construction firm Morrison-Knudsen, were doing something grand and noble. He wanted to be a part of it.

The year was 1951.

Before he departed the United States, his boss told him that the company's first residential project, encompassing 16,000 acres, "must be completed at once." The Afghan government had promised new settlers, who had begun traveling west and south to Helmand on meandering camel trains, that they would be able to farm irrigated fields within sixty days. But surveyors had not yet finished apportioning the plots, and construction crews had not even begun to dig the canals.

To oversee the work, Jones had to leave his comfortable base, which had whitewashed barracks, a weekly movie night, and food that, he reckoned, could compete with the best restaurants in San Francisco, whipped up by Afghans who had been trained by Americans in Kabul. One recent menu had featured steak, fried potatoes, fresh chard, and canned pineapple. There were even cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer to slug back at the end of the day. Almost everything at the base had been sent by sea from California or Oregon and then trucked for six hundred miles from Karachi.

Plans drafted by his fellow engineers specified that the first settlement be divided into forty villages spaced exactly four miles apart. Each would have 120 identical single-story multifamily dwellings in long rows. Every family would receive an apartment—four to a building—and a half acre of land nearby on which to plant a personal garden. The families would also get at least 10 acres of farmland outside the village on which they were to raise



crops for sale. Alfalfa, clover, cotton, grapes, fruit trees, and wheat were to cover a 2,000-acre experimental farm that would verify which crops were best for the new residents.

On that cloudless but chilly February morning, Jones toured Village No. 1 with Jan Mohammed, the director of building construction for the Helmand Valley agricultural commission. Jones recorded his recollection of the conversation and his guide's accent:

"What else will be on this project?" he asked Jan.

"We will have a central city. Here will be a big hotel—big mosque—big business... In each village we will have school through *eight* grade—*compulsory* education for both boys and girls, as you say in *Amrika*."

"And you will have high schools?"

"Oh, yes—high schools. Here *weel* be *ooneeversitee*."

Jones wanted to know what crops the people would grow.

"Oh, many *theengs*—wheat, cotton, corn, sugar beets, alfalfa, clover, fruit. We will have a sugar mill and *fabreek* factory."

What about electricity?

"We want that very soon," Jan said. "We *weel* have hospitals. We *weel* have sports area in each village."

"How long will it take to get going on these things, Jan?"

"Maybe ten to fifteen years."

"That will be marvelous."

As Jones watched Afghan laborers toiling under American supervision, he came to share Jan's enthusiasm. A modern Afghanistan would soon rise from centuries of conflict and neglect. He was certain he was witnessing "the beginning of a new civilization."

The Helmand River Valley has been the chalice of many dreams. The swift water lured nomads across the Desert of Death to replenish their urns. The fertile banks cradled Bronze Age civilization. The escarpments provided a majestic home for the emperors who lorded over a vast swath of Central Asia in the tenth century. One millennium later, the arid landscape that hugged the river inspired Afghanistan's king to transform his nation.

The development of the valley began during the Holocaust. The Nazis forced Jewish furriers to shut their businesses in Paris, Leipzig, and other European cities. Many of those able to flee moved to New York, where they had to find new sources of pelts. They soon turned to Afghanistan, whose hills abounded with karakul—Persian fat-tailed sheep. The soft, curly black fleece of their newborn lambs became lustrous coats and hats. By 1940, Afghanistan was exporting 2.5 million pelts a year to the United States. Because of currency exchange controls that functioned as a tax, the sale of each pelt deposited a few dollars in the country's treasury.

At the end of World War II, Afghanistan had \$100 million in gold and foreign-exchange reserves. As Europe began digging out of its rubble, the thirty-two-year-old king in Kabul, Mohammed Zahir Shah, decided to use the fur windfall to vault his primitive, landlocked nation into the modern era by harnessing the raging waters of the majestic Hindu Kush. He imagined the valley as a fertile oasis.

He was motivated, in part, by the prospect of resurrecting what Genghis Khan had destroyed. The Ghaznavid rulers who had conquered much of Central Asia ten centuries

earlier had spent their winters along the Helmand River, not far from where Jones stood the morning in 1951. They had built imposing mansions and a towering arch, and irrigated the fields with an elaborate network of canals fed by the river. When the Mongols had descended on the area in the early thirteenth century, Genghis Khan had ordered not just the homes destroyed but the canals too. Then, to ensure that what had been lush farms would remain desolate wasteland, he had salted the ground. If Zahir Shah could build a modern city next to those ruins in the southwestern hinterlands, it would strengthen his claim to the nation his father had seized seventeen years earlier, suggesting to his countrymen a connection between the Ghaznavid dynasty and the current occupants of the royal palace in Kabul.

The king also saw the project as a way to redraw the Durand Line, the 1,200-mile-long boundary demarcated by the British in 1893 between colonial India and unconquerable Afghanistan in an attempt to divide and control the ethnic Pashtun population along the frontier. Zahir Shah, who was a Pashtun, wanted to create a new country called Pashtunistan to be carved out of what would become northern Pakistan and eventually absorbed into Afghanistan. Although it was an impossible quest—there was no way the new nation of Pakistan would cede territory—the idea of an ethnically homogeneous state shaped the king's thinking about development in the Pashtun heartland of southern Afghanistan. If he could deliver real benefits for his subjects on the Afghan side of the border, he figured, Pashtuns in Pakistan would notice and rise up to merge.

Zahir Shah had another goal, one far less quixotic than reclaiming the glory of a lost civilization or seizing his neighbor's turf. Many in the hinterlands, particularly those from other ethnic groups—Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras—did not regard the king as a legitimate ruler. Even many of his fellow Pashtuns were suspicious of his government. Isolated in remote valleys and towns far from the capital, Afghans exhibited the same sort of rugged self-sufficiency that had characterized early American settlers on the western plains. Their lives were contained in their villages. They married their cousins and spent their lives tending fields and herding goats. They sought little from the state, which had little to offer. In return, they wanted to be left alone.

Reaching out to his subjects was nearly impossible. Paved roads ended at the gates of Kabul. So too did the country's rail tracks. There were few telegraph and telephone lines. (To call Kandahar, the principal city in the south, which was three hundred miles away, the king had to use a radiophone.) His army was tiny and largely cantoned in the capital; when the country had to defend itself from invaders, the tribes formed militias, which were disbanded when hostilities ceased. He hoped the project would start to transform his rudimentary nation into a coherent whole and extend his influence to the far corners of his kingdom.

The king believed his nation had to embrace progress. If his people were to rise out of poverty and illiteracy, taxes needed to be collected, the population counted, roads built, health clinics established, and schools erected. In the decade before the war, he and his father had sought development assistance from the Germans, who had constructed a radio tower, a power plant, and a handful of small carpet factories and textile mills in Kabul, all of which were run under a royal license. In 1945, he decided to expand the modernization drive into agriculture, seeking to create a breadbasket that could ease the pain of frequent food shortages. German and Japanese engineers had helped to repair two primitive canals off the Helmand River in the 1930s, but they had eventually been evicted during World War II under

pressure from the British and Soviets. With the hostilities over, the king envisioned a far grander development effort. His Cornell-educated minister of public works had proposed building a large canal to feed two new farming communities that would be carved out of the desert. The king thought it a brilliant idea. Because the Afghans lacked the necessary equipment and engineering expertise, they had to look overseas. The king turned to the world's newest superpower, the United States. After all, it was the Americans who had enriched his nation by purchasing so many karakul pelts.

In 1946, the royal government hired Morrison-Knudsen, the giant engineering outfit that had built the Hoover Dam and the San Francisco Bay Bridge. The king bequeathed the company a Mughal palace outside Kandahar in which to set up shop. Morrison-Knudsen's first task was to widen the road from the Pakistani border to Kandahar. The supply route was essential to the firm; it insisted that every piece of equipment, no matter how small, be brought from the United States. The king didn't mind because he had the money.

For some of the king's most influential ministers and advisers, who had been sent at great expense by the government to attend universities in the United States, the project was about more than just creating new farms. They wanted to bring to Afghanistan the America that had dazzled them in their schooldays. New villages would be built, with modern schools and health clinics. Nomads would be resettled, and families from different tribes would live next to one another rather than in separate villages. Girls would be educated, and women would cast off the *chaderi* (what Afghans called the head-to-toe burqa). Eye-for-an-eye Islamic justice would be replaced with written laws and august courts. Professional government men from Kabul would supplant the gray-bearded elders who wielded power in the provinces. It was to be a grand social engineering experiment, and the English-speaking, suit-wearing Afghans who had the king's ear saw in Paul Jones and his fellow American engineers the ideal partners for the transformation of their nation.

For Morrison-Knudsen, the \$17 million project began in the spirit of America's great postwar ambition. "In a country where nails practically were unknown because houses are built of mud, where wheels had not been seen until recent years because camel trains move through country where wheels could not go, a forward-looking government has sought American engineering and construction know-how to bring it irrigation, hydroelectric power and modern roads to truck its potentially great crops to market," the company boasted in a August 1949 employee newsletter. The firm described sending its men to faraway Pacific islands to purchase military-surplus power shovels, tractors, scrapers, and rolling machines that were then shipped via the Panama Canal, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, before commencing a thousand-mile rail-and-truck journey to Morrison-Knudsen's base camp. By that fall, the company predicted, "the waters of the Helmand River ... will be flowing in the great Boghra Canal that the company has dug through the desert wasteland."

But this lush agrarian vision soon ran aground. A Morrison-Knudsen study found that the soil in the new farmland was shallow, and below it lay an almost impermeable layer of subsoil. The Helmand Valley was like a giant planter box without drainage holes. When irrigated by Afghans, who tended to flood their land, water pooled on the surface, and when it evaporated, it left salts in the soil that stunted anything that was cultivated.

The royal government began to develop reservations about the project. Morrison-Knudsen

answer was to expand. Company executives advocated a far more ambitious development program in the valley and the construction of a large dam and reservoir in the upriver hills. The new price tag was \$63.7 million (about \$600 million in 2012 dollars)—more than three times the value of the original contract.

By then Morrison-Knudsen had already spent \$20 million. The “only tangible returns Afghanistan has are one short road, one diversion dam, and one incomplete canal,” the U.S. ambassador in Kabul, Louis G. Dreyfus, Jr., wrote in a cable to the secretary of state. In response to the criticism, the company admitted that “there should have been more ... show for this large expenditure.”

The Afghans couldn't afford a bigger project. Increasing competition from Russian and African karakul pelts had pushed down prices, cutting into Kabul's tax and foreign-exchange revenue. Pakistan, which controlled the principal transit routes linking landlocked Afghanistan to the Arabian Sea, exacted its revenge for the king's Pashtunistan fantasy by restricting and delaying the export of agricultural products, further squeezing the treasury. So the Afghans turned to the Americans once again—this time for a loan.

Impressed with a \$100 million tranche the Export-Import Bank had provided the new state of Israel, the Afghans asked for \$55 million. The request was rejected. The bank was skeptical that the wide-ranging program proposed by the Afghans and Morrison-Knudsen would succeed, citing the challenges of settling nomads, exporting goods through Pakistan, and marshaling an indigenous labor force large enough to perform the proposed work. The Afghans pared back their request, jettisoning small power stations, cotton gins, and spinning machinery for a textile mill. Dreyfus weighed in, warning Washington that the failure to provide the loan was “seriously undermining U.S. prestige.... Abandoned MK camps would stand as monuments of American inefficiency.” Although the bank remained dubious, it eventually gave the Afghans \$21 million.

With American money sloshing in, the engineers sought to get Afghan water flowing. Before beginning the work, Morrison-Knudsen planned to conduct soil and drainage studies of the entire valley—a standard prerequisite for such projects—to avoid ending up with waterlogged tracts. But when the Afghan government dismissed the need for such time-consuming analysis, the company did not object. It believed the venture was simply too big to fail.

Paul Jones soon grew alarmed. Jan Mohammed and his men failed to meet their construction deadlines. Afghanistan had only a few engineers, and most of them had already been hired by the Americans, often to serve as administrators. Morrison-Knudsen did not grasp that until it was too late, in part because the prideful Afghans were slow to admit they could not complete the work they had promised, which included digging the drainage ditches required to keep water from pooling on the farms. Many settlers wound up living in tents, building their own mud-walled homes, and watching their fields turn into marshes.

The Afghan government eventually asked Morrison-Knudsen to take charge of all of the engineering work. That, of course, required more funding, so the king's men had to return to the United States to ask for another loan. They got it, largely because of Cold War fears in Washington: If it did not pay, Moscow would, and that would allow the Soviets, who were already active in northern Afghanistan, to gain a critical foothold in the south.

Morrison-Knudsen caused its share of problems too. When the Export-Import Bank eliminated the incentive bonuses that had been promised by the Afghan government, the firm's work slowed. Later on, the company took several construction shortcuts and eliminated parts of the project that would come to be seen as vital, including groundwater surveys and road improvements.

In an attempt to increase oversight of the effort, the king created a new bureaucracy, the Helmand Valley Authority, and gave it responsibility for implementing the grand development scheme. The president of the authority was accorded a place in the king's cabinet, so that he could resolve disputes between various ministries that were hindering settlement activity. Washington also became more involved. Heeding Ambassador Dreyfus's warning that America's reputation was at stake in Helmand, President Harry Truman's administration dispatched a team of U.S. advisers in 1952 under his Point Four assistance program, which aimed to blunt Soviet influence in the developing world. One of the team's first tasks was to find a suitable town to house the Americans and Afghans working for the new Helmand Valley Authority.

While the team was tromping around the valley, Paul Jones's two-year contract with Morrison-Knudsen ended. He departed in January 1953, convinced that the drainage problems would soon be surmounted. Afghanistan, he believed, would become "the star of Asia."

The team eventually determined that a plot along the river not far from Qala Bost, the ancient Ghaznavid arch, was the best site, in part because it was situated near a grove of trees. An engineer, Frank Patterson, drafted a report with specifications for the "harmonious new town—where to put the roads, schools, parks, market, and HVA center. He identified eighteen public buildings (among them a board of trade, a tourist office, and an archaeological museum) and ten commercial buildings (including a cinema and a clubhouse). He even described the width of various roads—residential streets were to be seven yards across, while main boulevards were to be twice as wide—and what sorts of trees should line them. Homes, he noted, should be designed without compound walls to "give a visual effect of openness."

The area had long been called Lashkar Gah—"army barracks" in Persian—because it was where the Ghaznavid kings had quartered their troops. Patterson wanted to name the new community Town of Helmand. The Afghans said Lashkar Gah was just fine.

Soon, however, the Afghans came up with a new name. They started to call the place Little America.

"It was an enchanting time," recalled Rebecca Ansary Pettys, who was among the first residents. She lived there for six years starting in 1958, when she was twelve years old. Her father, Amanuddin Ansary, was an Afghan who had received a doctorate from the University of Chicago and brought back a Finnish-American wife. He moved his family from Kabul at the request of the king, who wanted Ansary to put his American education to use in Helmand.

For the first few years, Pettys was schooled in a neighbor's home with the help of a correspondence program from Baltimore and the expertise of those in the town. Her father taught geology, one of the engineers gave physics lessons, the American wife of another Afghan official organized English classes. Pettys dressed as any American girl in the late

1950s would: knee-length frocks, saddle shoes, barrettes in her hair. When classes were over she and her friends rode bicycles and gathered in one another's homes to listen to Elvis Presley and the Everly Brothers on 45 rpm records. They drank lemonade and ate ice cream. They frolicked in the community pool (where boys and girls could swim together), played ball by the river, and swatted balls on the tennis court. Once a week they would head to the nearby Morrison-Knudsen camp, where Paul Jones had lived, to watch movies. "Everything about our lives was American," she said.

One day, Rebecca drove with her father across the desert to see the construction of the canals. He explained how the project aimed to transform Helmand province and, by extension, Afghanistan. But all she saw was an arid and denuded landscape. Then she visited the Qala Bost arch on the outskirts of Lashkar Gah. She recalled her history lessons, and suddenly it all made sense to her. Her daddy was trying to return Helmand to its verdant past.

Ansary had been tapped for the job by his longtime friend Abdul Kayeum, who had been appointed vice president of the Helmand Valley Authority by the king. The two men had been among the first five Afghan students given royal scholarships to study in the United States. They lived together in the same Chicago boardinghouse, and Kayeum also married a woman he met in America. Both men wanted to plow what they had learned back into their native land and plant the seeds of a more prosperous future atop centuries of poverty.

The town developed in the way Frank Patterson had outlined, with perpendicular streets, almost-identical white stucco houses, and lush front lawns. Neighbors could wave at one another because, unlike in every other part of the country, tall walls did not ring each compound. The imposing HVA headquarters building sat along the river. Many of the American engineers who arrived after Paul Jones brought their wives and children from small towns in California, Texas, and Colorado. Most of them had worked on massive postwar irrigation projects in the American West for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. To them, Afghanistan was yet another adventure, but with hefty bonuses for serving in a hardship post.

Except that it was not really all that hard. The town store sold cold cans of Coke and packaged food that had been shipped from the United States along with American staples: books, blue jeans, toothpaste. Before the town hospital opened, Dr. Murphy's clinic treated all manner of exotic ailments with American medicines. The clubhouse featured nightly card games and a Filipino barkeeper who mixed gin and tonics. There were weekly square dances and regular dinner parties where everyone got tipsy. On weekends, the adults lounged on front porches or under the gazebo at the pool. Servants did all of the cooking, cleaning, and gardening.

In its early years, the town was just two blocks wide and eight blocks long. The Americans, along with the Kayeums and the Ansarys, lived in a four-block-long row of stately homes. Afghan administrators and clerks lived in a stretch of more modest bungalows. The natives who worked as cooks, gardeners, and houseboys lived in a village outside Little America and were admitted into the town only during the day. But the Afghan government did not chafe at the segregation. The king's ministers and advisers saw the town as the Americans did: a modern community that village dwellers would soon aspire to create for themselves.

The historian Arnold Toynbee visited Lashkar Gah when Rebecca and her brother, Tamir, lived there, finding it "a piece of America inserted into the Afghan landscape." He observed

that “American-mindedness is the characteristic mark of the whole band of Afghan technicians and administrators who are imposing Man’s will on the Helmand River.... The new world they are conjuring up out of the desert at the Helmand River’s expense is to be an America-in-Asia.”

In 1959, Kayeum held up the example of Little America to help persuade the king’s cousin and prime minister, Mohammed Daoud Khan, to allow all Afghan women to cast off the veils. Unlike in almost every other part of the country, Afghan women in Lashkar Gah never donned the all-covering chaderi, which forced the wearer to talk and see through a mesh window. In his town, Kayeum told the prime minister, Afghan women even wore bathing suits in the presence of men at the community pool. The prime minister, in turn, swayed the king. At that year’s independence parade, the wives and daughters of the royal family and other high government officials appeared on the reviewing stand with their faces uncovered. Although several religious leaders opposed the gesture—some were arrested after preaching against the regime—the king and the prime minister held fast to their view that there was no basis in the Koran for the veiling of women.

In Little America, the decision encouraged Kayeum and Ansary to attempt even greater social change. When the Helmand Valley Authority set up a public school in the town, Rebecca’s father figured she should attend with the boys. She arrived wearing a long black skirt, a white shirt, and a head scarf, and despite fears of a violent reaction from the inhabitants of nearby villages, her first days were free of incident. The next week, Abd Kayeum’s eldest daughter, Rona, joined Rebecca. Then two Afghan clerks decided to send their girls as well. The Lycée Lashkar Gah became Afghanistan’s first coeducational school.

For many of the boys at the school, the experience was far more jarring. They were plucked from nearby villages by the government in an effort not just to educate them but to introduce them to a new way of life. Tamim Ansary remembered it this way:

A jeep full of soldiers would screech into a village. A government rep would hop out and order the village headman to line up the young men. When they had assembled, he would ask them a few questions and make his choices on the spot: “You, you, and you—get your stuff. You’re going to school.” Then the jeep would roll on to the next town and the new students would be shipped to Lashkar Gah, where they were sprayed for lice and issued gray woolen outfits. So it was that most of my eighth-grade classmates were men in their twenties who dressed like Maoist infantry.

When word of the coed school reached the mullahs in Kandahar, a far more conservative city than Kabul, they resolved to put an end to the nascent women’s liberation movement. At Christmastime that year, a mob rampaged through Kandahar, killing a few people and burning down a new girls’ school, before government troops smothered the insurrection. Kayeum would learn later that the revolt had been part of a broader plot to attack American and progressive Afghans across the south. The residents of Lashkar Gah survived only because the rebels in Kandahar had started before the appointed time, allowing authorities to round up conspirators plotting attacks in Helmand. Rebecca and the other children were petrified and their fear only grew a few days later, when they went to the Morrison-Knudsen camp for movie night. The film was about the anticolonial Mau Mau uprising in Kenya.

Although the plotters were imprisoned and some were executed, the government responded

by slowing its modernization drive. Officials in Kabul were concerned that the mullahs could easily organize another attack. But Kayeum did not want to relent. If the government did not continue its efforts to remove the veil and educate women, he argued, people would conclude the clergy had won. When his fellow Afghans would not listen, he warned Americans of the danger he saw in ceasing reform efforts. In a 1962 meeting with the wife of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation chief in southern Afghanistan, he said he had noticed an Afghan farmer observing a team of American technicians “with a very strange expression on his face” according to a U.S. Embassy memo written at the time. When he asked the farmer what he was thinking, “the man told Kayeum that as he looked at the Americans, the thought came to him that the land upon which they were standing was cursed because the foot of the infidel had touched the land.... He then predicted to Dr. Kayeum that within twenty years, the entire Helmand Valley would be a wasteland because of the tinkering by the infidels.” But the embassy dismissed Kayeum’s concerns about such extremist thinking, writing in a cable that he “exaggerated the dangers to the American community in the south.”

The anger at the social changes the government sought could not be separated from growing frustration among the new farmers about the quality of their land. To lure the hundreds of miles from their ancestral homes, the government had told them they would receive cropland so fertile that they would soon grow wealthy. But their fields yielded less and less each year as salts accumulated in the soil. By the mid-1960s, farmers in Nad Ali, one of the first tracts to be developed by Morrison-Knudsen, reported that their harvests were a quarter of what they had been in the first year. In other parts of Helmand, reductions ranged from a half to two-thirds. Morrison-Knudsen’s claim that a larger irrigation project would resolve the initial problems of waterlogging and salinity had proved false. The grand project to make the desert bloom was failing.

As the first signs of trouble appeared in the early 1950s, the Afghan government began complaining to U.S. diplomats in Kabul. As dissatisfaction increased, the embassy urged the State Department to commission an independent study of Morrison-Knudsen’s work. The U.S. International Cooperation Agency, charged with implementing the Point Four program, hired the Tudor Engineering Company of San Francisco. In 1956, it issued a lengthy report that largely absolved Morrison-Knudsen and predicted that farm incomes would rise once the project was completed. It accused the Afghans of “unrealistic expectations” and noted that “the quality of workmanship is excellent.” What the Afghans did not know at the time was that the Tudor Company was part of Morrison-Knudsen. Its office address was the same as that of Morrison-Knudsen’s Afghanistan division: 74 New Montgomery Street in San Francisco.

The Tudor report failed to appease the Afghans. In 1959, the king’s government terminated its contracts with Morrison-Knudsen. The firm was replaced by American technicians funded by the International Cooperation Administration, who advised an Afghan-run construction unit that inherited all of Morrison-Knudsen’s equipment. The Bureau of Reclamation joined the effort soon thereafter, dispatching a team of hydrologists and soil engineers to Helmand. In 1961, the ICA was incorporated into the newly created U.S. Agency for International Development. Salvaging the irrigation project quickly became one of USAID’s top priorities.

The new specialists discovered a fatal flaw in the design of the main canal. Had it been



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