



His Majesty Shah Shoojah-ool-Moolk

ROAD TO GANDAMAK

Afghanistan's Wars and the Lessons of History

By William Dalrymple

In 1843, shortly after his return from the battlefields of the First Anglo-Afghan War, the army chaplain in Jalalabad, the Reverend G. R. Gleig, wrote a memoir about the disastrous expedition of which he was one of the few survivors. It was, he wrote, “a war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it. Not one benefit, political or military, has been acquired with this war. Our eventual evacuation of the country resembled the retreat of an army defeated.”¹

Gleig had a point. In the spring of 1839, the British had invaded Afghanistan for the first time. Nearly twenty thousand British and East India Company troops poured through the passes and re-established on the throne Shah Shuja ul-Mulk, grandson of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the man usually said to be the founder of the Afghan state. On the way in, the British faced little resistance. But after little more than two years, the Afghans rose in answer to the call for jihad and Afghanistan exploded into rebellion. The First Anglo-Afghan War ended in Britain's greatest imperial disaster of the nineteenth century: an entire army of what was then the most powerful military nation in the world routed and destroyed by poorly equipped tribesmen.

For the Victorians, the “signal catastrophe” of the 1841 Retreat from Kabul became the great symbol of imperial hubris, but also, like Dunkirk a century later, of gallantry against the odds: William Barnes Wollen's celebrated painting of the *Last Stand of the 44th Foot*—a group of ragged but doggedly determined soldiers on the hilltop of Gandamak standing encircled behind a thin line of bayonets, as the Pashtun tribesmen close in—became one of the era's most famous images, along with *Remnants of an Army*, Lady Butler's oil of the alleged last survivor, Dr. William Brydon, arriving before the walls of Jalalabad on his collapsing nag.

◁ Portrait of Shah Shuja of Afghanistan, 1842.
Louis and Charles Haghe/ National Army Museum

It was in the winter of 2006, just as the latest neo-colonial adventure in Afghanistan was beginning to turn sour, and the commentators were predicting new Gandamaks, that I had the idea of writing a history of Britain's first failed attempt at controlling Afghanistan. After an easy conquest and the successful installation of a pro-Western puppet ruler, the regime was facing increasingly widespread resistance. History was beginning to repeat itself.

The closer I looked, the more the West's first disastrous entanglement in Afghanistan seemed to resemble the neo-colonial adventures of our own day. For the war of 1839 was waged on the basis of doctored intelligence about a virtually non-existent threat: information about a single Russian envoy to Kabul was exaggerated and manipulated by a group of ambitious and ideologically driven hawks to create a scare—in this case, about a phantom Russian invasion. As John MacNeill, the Russophobe sent as British ambassador, wrote from Tehran: "We should declare that he who is not with us is against us... We must secure Afghanistan."² Thus was brought about an unnecessary, expensive, and entirely avoidable war.

These parallels are not just anecdotal, they are substantive: Shah Shuja, so I learned, was a Popalzai, from the same sub-tribe as President Hamid Karzai, while his principal opponents were the Ghilzai tribe, who today make up the bulk of the Taliban's foot soldiers; the Taliban leader Mullah Omar is from the Ghilzai's Hotak ruling clan, as was the leading resistance fighter, Mohammad Shah Khan, who supervised the slaughter of the Kabul army in the Khord Kabul in 1841. The same tribal rivalries and the same battles were continuing to be fought out in the same places 200 years later under the guise of new flags, new ideologies, and new political puppeteers. The same cities were garrisoned by foreign troops speaking the same languages, and were being attacked from the same rings of hills and the same high passes.

As I pursued my research, I discovered the degree to which the same moral issues that are chewed over in the editorial columns today were discussed in the correspondence of the First Anglo-Afghan War: should you try to "promote the interests of humanity," as one British civil servant put it in 1840, and champion social and gender reform, banning traditions like the stoning to death of adulterous women; or should you just concentrate on ruling the country without rocking the boat? Do you intervene if your allies start boiling or roasting their enemies alive? Do you try to reform the blasphemy laws or attempt to introduce Western political systems? As the first Great Game spymaster Sir Claude Wade warned on the eve of the 1839 invasion, "There is nothing more to be dreaded or guarded against, I think, than the overweening confidence with which we are too often accustomed to regard the excellence of our own institutions, and the anxiety that we display to introduce them in new and untried soils. Such interference will always lead to acrimonious disputes, if not to a violent reaction."³

Likewise, just as the British inability to cope with the rising of 1841 was a product not just of the leadership failures within the British camp, but also of the breakdown of the strategic relationship between the British envoy and Shah Shuja, so the strained and uneasy relationship of the International Security Assistance Force leadership with President Karzai has been a crucial factor in the failure of the latest imbroglio. Here the U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke to some extent played the role of Sir William Macnaghten.

When I visited Kabul in 2010, the British Special Representative, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, described Holbrooke as “a bull who brought his own china shop wherever he went”—a phrase that perfectly summed up Macnaghten’s style 174 years previously. Cowper-Coles’ analysis of the failure of the current occupation in his book *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West’s Afghanistan Campaign* reads astonishingly like a critique of the failures of the 1840s: “Getting in without having any real idea of how to get out; almost wilful misdiagnosis of the nature of the challenges; continually changing objectives, and no coherent or consistent plan; mission creep on a heroic scale; disunity of political and military command, also on a heroic scale; diversion of attention and resources [to Iraq in the current case, to the Opium Wars then] at a critical stage of the adventure; a poor choice of local allies; weak political leadership.”⁴

Moreover, the poverty of Afghanistan has always meant that it has been impossible to tax the Afghans into financing their own occupation. Instead, the cost of policing such inaccessible territory soon exhausts the occupier’s resources. Today the United States is spending more than \$100 billion a year on military operations in Afghanistan: it costs more to keep Marine battalions in two districts of Helmand than the United States is providing to the entire nation of Egypt in military and development assistance. Then, as now, the decision to withdraw troops has turned on factors with little relevance to Afghanistan, namely the state of the economy and the vagaries of politics back home.

For the Afghans themselves, the British defeat of 1842 became a symbol of freedom from foreign invasion, and of the determination of Afghans to refuse to be ruled ever again by any foreign power. The diplomatic quarter of Kabul is still named after the Afghan leader who oversaw the rout of the British in 1842: Dost Mohammad’s son, Wazir Akbar Khan. It is also a measure of the parallels between that war and today’s that one of the main NATO bases in Afghanistan was named Camp Souter after one of the only survivors of the last stand at Gandamak, Thomas Souter, who wrapped his regimental colors around him to prevent them being captured, and was taken hostage by the Afghans who assumed that such a colorfully clothed individual must command a high ransom.

History never repeats itself exactly, and it is true that there are some important differences between what is taking place in Afghanistan today and what took place

during the 1840s—most importantly, Karzai has tried to establish a broad-based, democratically elected government which, for all its many flaws and prodigious corruption, is still much more representative and popular than the Sadozai regime of Shah Shuja ever was.

Nevertheless due to the continuities of the region's topography, economy, religious aspirations, and social fabric, the failures of 170 years ago do still hold important warnings for us today. As George Lawrence, a veteran of that first war, who was taken hostage during the retreat, wrote to the London *Times* just before Britain blundered into the Second Anglo-Afghan War thirty years later, "a new generation has arisen which, instead of profiting from the solemn lessons of the past, is willing and eager to embroil us in the affairs of that turbulent and unhappy country... Although military disasters may be avoided, an advance now, however successful in a military point of view, would not fail to turn out to be as politically useless... The disaster of the Retreat from Kabul should stand forever a warning to the Statesmen of the future not to repeat the policies that bore such bitter fruit in 1839–42."

Roof of the World

We in the West may have forgotten the details of this history that did so much to inform and mould the Afghans' hatred of foreign rule, but the Afghans have not: in village after village on my Afghan travels I found that the names of all the participants in the drama were still alive as if the event had taken place two years ago, not two centuries. In particular Shah Shuja remains a symbol of quisling treachery in Afghanistan: in 2001, the Taliban asked their young men, "Do you want to be remembered as a son of Shah Shuja or as a son of Dost Mohammad?" As he rose to power, Mullah Omar deliberately modelled himself on Dost Mohammad, and like him removed the Holy Cloak of the Prophet Mohammad from its shrine in Kandahar and wrapped himself in it, declaring himself like his model Amir al-Muminin, the Leader of the Faithful, a deliberate and direct re-enactment of the First Anglo-Afghan War, whose resonance was immediately understood by all Afghans.

On my extended visits to Afghanistan to research my book, in 2009 and 2010, I was keen to see as many of the places and landscapes associated with the First Anglo-Afghan War as was possible. In the course of the initial research I visited many of the places associated with the war. In Herat I paid my respects to the grave of Shah Shuja's nemesis, Dost Mohammad, at the Sufi shrine of Gaza Gagh. On arrival in Kandahar, the car sent to pick me up from the airport received a sniper shot through its back window as it neared the perimeter; later I stood at the shrine of Baba Wali on the edge of town and saw an IED (improvised explosive device) blow up a U.S. patrol as it crossed the Arghandab River, then as now the frontier between the occupied

zone and the area controlled by the Afghan resistance. In Kabul I managed to get permission to visit the Bala Hisar, once Shah Shuja's citadel, now the headquarters of the Afghan Army's intelligence corps, where reports from the front line are evaluated amid a litter of spiked British cannon from 1842 and upturned Soviet T-72 tanks from the 1980s.

I particularly wanted to retrace the route of the British forces' retreat of January 1842 and get to Gandamak, the site of the British last stand, where all but a few of the remaining British soldiers were slaughtered.

The route of the retreat backs on to the mountain range that leads to Tora Bora and the Pakistan border, the Ghilzai heartlands that have always been—along with Quetta—the Taliban's main recruiting ground. I had been advised not to attempt to visit the area without local protection, so eventually set off in the company of a regional tribal leader who was also a minister in Karzai's government: a mountain of a man named Anwar Khan Jagdalak, a former village wrestling champion and later captain of the Afghan Olympic wrestling team, who had made his name as a Jami'at-Islami Mujahideen commander in the jihad against the Soviets in the 1980s.

It was Jagdalak's Ghilzai ancestors who inflicted some of the worst casualties on the British army of 1842, something he proudly repeated several times as we drove through the same passes. "They forced us to pick up guns to defend our honor," he said. "So we killed every last one of those bastards." None of this, incidentally, has stopped Jagdalak from sending his family away from Kabul to the greater safety of Northolt in north London. On the day we were to drive to Gandamak, I had been told to report at seven in the morning to Jagdalak. Threading my way through a slalom of checkpoints and razor wire surrounding his ministry, I arrived to find Jagdalak being hustled into a convoy of heavily armoured SUVs by his ever-present phalanx of bodyguards, walkie-talkies crackling and assault rifles primed.

Jagdalak drove himself, while pick-ups full of heavily armed Afghan bodyguards followed behind. As we headed through the capital, evidence of the failure of the current occupation lay all around us. Kabul remains one of the poorest and scrappiest capital cities in the world, despite the United States pouring around \$100 billion in aid into Afghanistan.

We bumped along potholed roads, past the blast walls of the U.S. Embassy and the NATO barracks that have been built on the very site of the British cantonment of 170 years ago, then headed down the zigzagging road into the line of bleak mountain passes that link Kabul with the Khyber Pass.

It is a suitably dramatic and violent landscape: fault lines of crushed and tortured strata groaned and twisted in the gunpowder-colored rockwalls rising on either side of us. Above, the jagged mountain tops were veiled in an ominous cloud of mist. As we

drove, Jagdalak complained bitterly of the Western treatment of his government. "In the 1980s when we were killing Russians for them, the Americans called us freedom fighters," he muttered as we descended the first pass. "Now they just dismiss us as warlords."

We left the main road at Sarobi, where the mountains debouch into a high-altitude ochre desert dotted with encampments of Ghilzai nomads, and headed into Taliban territory; a further five pick-up trucks full of Jagdalak's old mujahideen fighters, all brandishing rocket-propelled grenades and with faces wrapped in their turbans, appeared from a side road to escort us.

At the village of Jagdalak, on January 12, 1842, the last 200 frostbitten British soldiers found themselves surrounded by several thousand Ghilzai tribesmen; only a handful made it beyond the holly hedge. Our own welcome was, thankfully, somewhat warmer. The proud villagers took their old commander, now a government minister, on a trip through hills smelling of wild thyme and wormwood, and up through mountainsides carpeted with hollyhocks and mulberries and shaded by white poplars. Here, at the top of the surrounding peaks, near the watchtower where the naked and freezing sepoys had attempted to find shelter, lay the remains of Jagdalak's old mujahideen bunkers and entrenchments from which he had defied the Soviet army. Once the tour was completed, the villagers feasted us, Timurid style, in an apricot orchard at the bottom of the valley: we sat on carpets under a trellis of vine and pomegranate blossom, as course after course of kebabs and raisin *pulao* were laid in front of us.

During lunch, as my hosts casually pointed out the site of the holly-oak barrier and other places in the village where the British had been massacred in 1842, we compared our respective family memories of that war. I talked about my great-great-uncle, Colin Mackenzie, who had been taken hostage nearby, and I asked if they saw any parallels with the current situation. "It is exactly the same," said Jagdalak. "Both times the foreigners have come for their own interests, not for ours. They say, 'We are your friends, we want to help.' But they are lying."

"Whoever comes to Afghanistan, even now, they will face the fate of Burnes, Macnaghten, and Dr. Brydon," agreed Mohammad Khan, our host in the village and the owner of the orchard where we were sitting. Everyone nodded sagely into their rice: the names of the fallen of 1842, long forgotten in their home country, were still common currency here.

"Since the British went we've had the Russians," said one old man to my right. "We saw them off too, but not before they bombed many of the houses in the village." He pointed at a ridge full of ruined mudbrick houses on the hills behind us.

"We are the roof of the world," said Khan. "From here you can control and watch everywhere."

“Afghanistan is like the crossroads for every nation that comes to power,” agreed Jagdalak. “But we do not have the strength to control our own destiny. Our fate is determined by our neighbors.”

It was nearly five o’clock in the afternoon before the final flaps of naan bread were cleared away, by which time it became clear that it was now too late to head on to Gandamak. Instead we went that evening by the main highway direct to the relative safety of Jalalabad, where we discovered we’d had a narrow escape. It turned out that there had been a battle at Gandamak that very morning between government forces and a group of villagers supported by the Taliban. Nine policemen had been killed and ten taken hostage over a dispute about opium poppies. The sheer size and length of the feast and our own gluttony had saved us from walking straight into an ambush. The battle had taken place on exactly the site of the British last stand of 1842.

The following morning in Jalalabad we went to a jirga, or assembly, of Ghilzai tribal elders, to which the greybeards of Gandamak had come, under a flag of truce, to discuss what had happened the day before. As Predator drones took off and landed incessantly at the nearby airfield, we chatted over a pot of green tea. “Last month,” said one tribal elder from Gandamak, “some American officers called us to a hotel in Jalalabad for a meeting. One of them asked me, ‘Why do you hate us?’ I replied, ‘because you blow down our doors, enter our houses, pull our women by the hair, and kick our children. We cannot accept this. We will fight back, and we will break your teeth, and when your teeth are broken you will leave, just as the British left before you. It is just a matter of time.’”

“What did he say to that?”

“He turned to his friend and said, ‘If the old men are like this, what will the younger ones be like?’ In truth, all the Americans here know their game is over. It is just their politicians who deny this.”

“These are the last days of the Americans,” said the other elder. “Next it will be China.”

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- 1 G. R. Gleig, *Afghanistan: The Beleaguered Brigade—An Account of Sale’s Brigade During the First Afghan War* (Leonaur, 2008), 182.
 - 2 James A. Norris, *First Afghan War: 1838–1842* (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 161.
 - 3 “Wade to the Governor General,” *Auckland Papers*, Add Mss 36474 (31 January 1839), British Library.
 - 4 Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul* (HarperPress, 2011), 289–90.