

INTO THE
LAND
OF
BONES

ALEXANDER THE GREAT
IN AFGHANISTAN

FRANK L. HOLT

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

I've only to pick up a newspaper and I seem to see ghosts
gliding between the lines.

Henrik Ibsen

THE CROSSHAIRS OF HISTORY

Afghanistan, the world's inexhaustible wellspring of warlords and terrorists, cannot escape the crosshairs of history. In each of the last three centuries, superpowers have trained their sights on this tragic land, determined to impose upon it a new world order successively British, Soviet, and American.¹ Such endeavors usually begin with confidence and end with catastrophe. First, with exuberant expectations, the British Empire gathered in 1838 a grand army to quell the unruly Afghans.² The goal was simply to replace one ruler (Dost Muhammed) with another (the exiled Shah Shuja) more amenable to British interests. "There have been few military campaigns in British history," writes Major General James Lunt, "which were more ineptly planned and

more incompetently executed than the first Afghan War; and that is saying a good deal.”³ These 15,200 soldiers took with them 38,000 servants, together with brass bands, bagpipes, polo ponies, packs of foxhounds, and thirty thousand camels burdened with supplies. The officers of one regiment required two camels just to carry their cigars, and a single brigadier needed sixty beasts to haul his personal belongings. Even so, the expeditionary force soon ran short of provisions and had to pay premium prices for a flock of ten thousand sheep. The army ate everything, including the sheepskins fried in blood. The camels proved less helpful. They died in such numbers that one general pronounced them useless except for burial practice, an ominous remark indeed.⁴

Under General Sir John Keane, the British celebrated some early successes at Kandahar and Ghazni, then reached Kabul in August 1839 (see Map 1). There they placed Shah Shuja on the throne. This foreign intervention, however, stirred growing resentment among the native peoples even as most of the British troops swaggered back to India. Tribal opposition mounted across Afghanistan, erupting disastrously when terrorists butchered a prominent British official named Alexander “Bukhara” Burnes. In January 1842, the empire’s remaining 4,500 soldiers and their 12,000 camp followers retreated from Kabul in a long wintry death-march that only one European survived.⁵ Shah Shuja fell to assassins on April 5, and the country disintegrated into feuding bands led by tribal warlords. Dost Muhammed reclaimed his throne, for what it was worth, and Afghanistan reverted to its original status. But for the making of 15,000 ghosts, nothing at all had changed.

Later in the same century, the British took another turn at taming Afghanistan. Never successful at unifying his nation,

tervention again seemed necessary. The Second Afghan War (1878–1880) commenced with a swift invasion by 33,500 troops on three fronts that promised complete success.⁷ Revenge sweetened the air, but the atmosphere soon changed. Cholera swept through the ranks as daytime temperatures soared above one hundred degrees in the shade. Commanders were warned not to visit troop hospitals because they might not be able to bear the shock of what they would see. Fortunately, the war soon ended—or so everyone thought—in 1879. The British government, conducting two wars at once, was glad to declare its victory in Afghanistan. The cause had been just, the casualties from combat relatively low, and the naysayers happily hushed. But then, as in the previous war, a high British official was butchered in Kabul. Reprisals came swiftly as the angry occupiers rounded up rebels and hung them ten at a time.

The war caught fire again and burned brightly. At the battle of Maiwand (July 27, 1880), a British force of 2,500 men suffered a devastating defeat near Kandahar. Reinforcements under Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Roberts soon arrived, including a mobile city of 10,000 soldiers, over 7,000 camp followers, more than 4,700 horses and ponies, nearly 6,000 mules and donkeys, and over 13,000 other transport animals. The march of this army from Kabul and its triumph at Kandahar made Roberts (“flawless in faith and fame”) a rare hero in the course of this raw and unromantic war; however, in the end, the general warned the West that Afghanistan should be left alone.⁸ He added prophetically: “It may not be very flattering to our *amour propre*, but I feel sure I am right when I say that the less the Afghans see of us the less they will dislike us. Should Russia in future years at-

tempt to conquer Afghanistan, or invade India through it, we should have a better chance of attaching the Afghans to our interests if we avoid all interference with them in the meantime.”⁹

A century later, the Russians did indeed dispatch over 100,000 troops to install a puppet government in Afghanistan (1979–1989).¹⁰ The twentieth century naturally brought new weapons to bear on the tribal warlords, who still controlled the countryside. Land mines killed and crippled Afghan civilians in unbelievable numbers (and still do); Soviet jets, helicopters, and tanks pounded guerilla forces armed and led much as they had been against the British. As before, the invaders seemed certain at first of an easy victory: “It’ll be over in three or four weeks,” Leonid Brezhnev promised Anatoly Dobrynin.¹¹ For years the Soviets had prepared for such an invasion, building useful roads and runways allegedly to help the Afghans, while the West pulled back and put its money into Pakistan.¹² Taking up the cause once espoused by Lord Roberts, the United States finally seized upon this Soviet intervention as a winning endgame in the long cold war. Détente crumbled with President Jimmy Carter’s recall of his ambassador to Russia, a boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games hosted by Moscow, a grain embargo, and a mounting U.S. military budget. On the day of the Soviet invasion, Carter’s national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, advised the president, “We now have the opportunity of giving the USSR its Vietnam War.”¹³ Under President Ronald Reagan, the CIA’s operations in the region became its largest in the world as thousands of Soviets and millions of Afghans fell or fled. American money and munitions kept the mujahideen (jihadist) warlords trained and equipped for their bloody crusade.¹⁴

In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered his famous speech

likening Afghanistan to “a bleeding wound”; this pronouncement signaled Russia’s weakening resolve to dominate Afghanistan. To hasten the outcome, the United States decided later in the same year to supply Stinger antiaircraft missiles to the mujahideen via Pakistan.¹⁵ Terrorists today still have access to aging stockpiles of these dangerous weapons, but at the time the gamble seemed worthwhile: Soviet air losses mounted rapidly to 118 jets and 333 helicopters.¹⁶ The quagmire deepened. Finally, on February 15, 1989, the last Russian soldier retreated across the Amu Darya, leaving behind more than 13,800 Soviet dead as another superpower abandoned its hopes to subdue Afghanistan.¹⁷

For the next twelve years, victorious Afghan rebels struggled for control of the ravaged country. One warlord masquerading as prime minister callously bombarded the capital city on a daily basis, killing some 25,000 of his own people.¹⁸ Nations that had armed and trained these warlords to defeat the Soviets showed little interest in this dismal civil war. Chaos, crime, and corruption took hold and inflamed new resentments against the West. Helpless and hopeless, many Afghans welcomed a stern “law and order” movement touted by a militia of black-turbaned religious students called the Taliban (Seekers).¹⁹ Led by Mullah Muhammad Omar and financed in part by the billionaire Osama bin Laden, who had once assisted the CIA in its transfer of weapons to the mujahideen, the Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996.²⁰ The fighting continued as thirteen other factions, including the Northern Alliance, stubbornly resisted the Taliban; but most of Afghanistan eventually fell under the authoritarian rule of these fundamentalists. Defying the outside world, these extremists blew up the gigantic Buddhas carved in the cliffs of Bamian, beat women senseless who failed to wear their

burqas, and abetted the insidious growth of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization. Then dawned a deceptively fine day in September 2001 that defined a new era among nations. Out of crystalline autumn skies screamed four jetliners on paths of unspeakable destruction. Suddenly the sights of another superpower swung around to Afghanistan.

Intervention came quickly and with new weaponry. Within a month, a thick alphanumeric soup of sophisticated aircraft boiled above Afghanistan. Crews aboard B-1 and B-52 bombers spewed tons of munitions into the mountain hideouts of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Joining the fray were EA-6 Prowlers, F-14 Tomcats, F-15 Eagles, F-16 Falcons, F-18 Hornets, A-10 Thunderbolts, MC-130 Talons, KC-135 Stratotankers, UH-60 Black Hawks, HH-53 Jolly Green Giants, AC-130 Spectre gunships, and even RQ-1 A/B Predator drones flown by absentee pilots seated at computer screens in Riyadh.²¹ Stirring the pot were but a handful of Special Forces on the ground. Unlike the 100,000 Soviet invaders airlifted in the twentieth century, or the immense traveling cities dispatched by the British in the nineteenth, America and its coalition partners relied upon space-age technology to fight an asymmetrical war in and above Afghanistan.²² Rather than pack their cigars on camels, U.S. pilots could reach the battlefield at Mach 1 and return that same day for a smoke at their bases a thousand miles from central Asia. Even so, a few American personnel found themselves on Afghan ponies, fighting low and slow as if back in the regiments of Lord Roberts. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld proudly proclaimed the horseborne assault on Mazar-i-Sharif “the first U.S. cavalry attack of the twenty-first century.”²³ In the opinion of General Tommy Franks, the image of those horsemen seemed as iconic as the

Marines raising Old Glory on Iwo Jima: “It was as if warriors from the future had been transported to an earlier century.”²⁴ The tactic worked, and brought the latest superpower its first victory in the war. The Taliban fled, al-Qaeda soon abandoned its main terrorist training camps, and foreign invaders sanctioned—once again—the regime of a friendly ruler in a rebellious land.

The complete history of this latest invasion has not, of course, been written.²⁵ So far, one senior U.S. intelligence official (notably anonymous in his critique) claims that “the conduct of the Afghan war approaches perfection—in the sense of perfectly inept.”²⁶ For his part, the general in command of the war declared even its worst engagement (Operation Anaconda) to be “an unqualified and absolute success.”²⁷ Fresh battle lines are already being entrenched in books even as the real combat continues. What happens next none can say, although the past warns us that early triumphs in Afghanistan might yet end tragically. The fighting and humanitarian crises continue; many of the enemy’s leaders and warlords remain at large or lurk in the shadows as momentary allies.²⁸ Assassinations still occur with unsettling frequency in Kabul and other cities. Anarchy torments the countryside while NATO boasts but three working helicopters to perform its mission.²⁹ Calls for more troops go unanswered. As early as the summer of 2003, Americans began openly to question whether U.S. forces were spread too thin, giving al-Qaeda and the Taliban too much hope that yet again the West might fail in the long run to make any lasting difference in Afghanistan.³⁰ Nearly every day, the news from central Asia stirs up painful reminders. The hoofbeats of our anachronistic cavalry have awakened the spirits of another time and kicked the dust from their

tombs. Here and there, at Kandahar and Kabul, Herat and Begram, the desolate posts of the British and Soviet dead have become datelines again in tragic stories of war and occupation.

Few people today realize just how long this has been going on. The invasions led by Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States stretch across centuries and carry us from an age of mules and muskets to one of helicopters and cruise missiles. Yet these modern struggles in Afghanistan are merely the latest phase of something far more ancient, a calamity thicker in ghosts than almost any other in history. Genghis Khan, “the atom bomb of his day,” devastated the region when his Mongol hordes rode through in the thirteenth century *c.e.*³¹ Tamerlane followed in the fourteenth century, and Babur (founder of the Moghul dynasty) in the sixteenth. In what has been called “the great hiving-ground of world-disturbers,” these medieval wars presaged the modern misfortunes of Afghanistan.³² One recent study, however, traces the problem back even further, to the fifth century *c.e.*: “The breakdown of law and order following the invasion of the White Huns perhaps initiated that self-reliant parochialism which is at the root of the fierce tribal and microgeographical independence and mutual hostility which characterizes the structure of Afghan society in recent centuries. Even the unifying influence of Islam [since the seventh century] has been unable to break down this attitude.”³³ This broad frame of reference across fifteen centuries says a lot about the continuity of certain conditions in Afghanistan, but it still falls short of the truth by at least eight hundred years. The long rhythms of Afghan history do show some periods of relative calm during which cities grew, trade routes pulsed, irrigated agriculture expanded, and the arts flourished, but between each renaissance we find an era of ruin

brought on or exacerbated by the parochialism, tribalism, fierce independence, and mutual hostility mentioned above. These social conditions, not to mention the physical challenges of a harsh terrain and environment, stretch back as far as our earliest written sources will carry us. In these respects, the twenty-first century C.E. differs very little from the fifteenth or fifth C.E. or even the fourth B.C.E.

A DEEPER PERSPECTIVE

What George W. Bush has called “the first war of the twenty-first century” actually began on a different autumn day more than twenty-three hundred years ago, when Alexander the Great launched the initial invasion by a Western superpower to subdue Afghanistan and its warlords.³⁴ Accounts of that campaign read eerily like news from our own day. Alexander, too, acted in the context of a larger Middle East crisis inherited from his father. King Philip II of Macedonia (reigned 359–336 B.C.E.) left his son an unresolved conflict against a major powerhouse based in what is now Iraq.³⁵ For many years, the Greeks had felt threatened by a regime whose palaces, power, and propaganda seemed to embody everything that divided the peoples of Europe from Asia. Philip’s nemesis was the Persian Empire of the Achaemenid kings. Often despised and demonized by the Greeks, Persia had gobbled up the great powers of the past (the Egyptians, Lydians, Chaldaeans) as well as many lesser principalities (those of the Hebrews, Arabs, Phoenicians). The rulers of Persia took the title “King of Kings” to announce their authority over a wide range of local princes, chiefs, and potentates. Back in the fifth century

B.C.E., 120 years before the reign of Philip, Persian forces had even invaded Greece by marching through the domain of Macedonia to attack Athens and other city-states. Celebrated battles punctuated that epic struggle at Marathon, Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea. Herodotus became the Father of History by recounting this epic showdown.³⁶

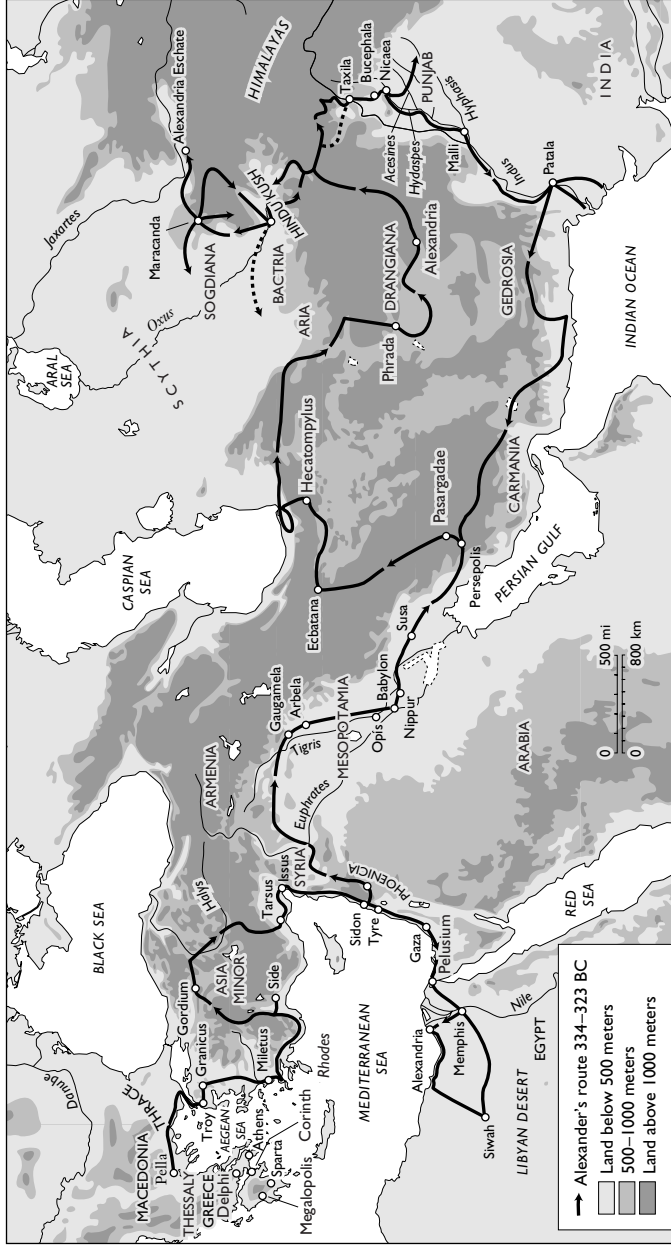
Macedonia and its related Greek neighbors often did not get along, but the specter of the Persian Empire overshadowed their differences and, in the fourth century, drove them together in a makeshift alliance led first by Alexander's father. Philip was a seasoned war veteran who took equal pride in his diplomatic expertise. He surrounded himself with an aggressive staff of generals and advisors who shared his vision of the world. Together they mapped out a bold plan to invade Persia using Macedonian troops backed by a coalition of Greek states (the so-called League of Corinth).³⁷ In 336 B.C.E., Philip sent an expeditionary army into the western fringes of the Persian Empire; he intended to follow at the head of a much larger force. The objective seems to have been relatively straightforward: push back the frontiers of the Achaemenid Empire and cripple the Persian king's military power without necessarily crushing him.

Philip's son took a much harder line and put no limits whatever on his own mission in the Middle East. When Philip fell to an assassin's dagger in 336 B.C.E., before reaching Persia himself, Alexander held the Persians partly to blame. Rightly or wrongly, he later accused the Achaemenid king of sponsoring turmoil in Greece and of financing the plot against his father's life.³⁸ Young Alexander therefore made it clear that regime change was to be the new goal of his war against Persia. Before that could tran-

spire, however, Alexander needed to rally his nation and rebuild his father's old alliance through incentives and intimidation (on the ancient sources, see the appendix).

Philip's assassination had pitched the world onto a wobbly new axis, but Alexander somehow kept it spinning. He began his reign under a vexing cloud as some opponents openly questioned his right to take office. It was a dangerous time for a disputed succession. Alexander naturally relied upon many of the senior advisors and officers of his father's administration to help him through this crisis. Barely twenty years old, Alexander had next to restore allegiance to the Panhellenic (all-Greek) league, because a few wavering states publicly doubted the untested new king's experience and abilities. Between 336 and 334 B.C.E., reluctant allies were chastised and, when necessary, punished.³⁹ The war against Persia, Alexander announced, would be renewed. In fact, an aggressive preemptive policy would be put into play throughout the Middle East. Alexander made it clear that Persia's King Darius III must disarm and surrender or risk a fight to the finish. Under no circumstances could the alleged tyrant keep his throne.

True to the demands of his time, Alexander personally led his troops through the harrowing battles and sieges that toppled the regime of Darius. Macedonian kings led by example at the forefront of their armies, enduring all the risks of every ill-advised assault while earning all the renown for every brilliant success. More than any other battlefield commander in history, Alexander stayed ahead in this unforgiving ledger of leadership. At the Battle of the Granicus River in 334 B.C.E., he survived a brisk bout of hand-to-hand combat that smashed his helmet and killed his horse (see Map 2). His followers surged into the enemy ranks and



2. The world of Alexander

routed the Persian forces. A year later at the Battle of Issus, Alexander suffered a thigh wound while leading the victorious charge that broke the ranks of Darius's huge army and forced the enemy to flee. During the capture of Gaza in 332 B.C.E., a catapult missile hit Alexander in the shoulder.⁴⁰

Through all such duress, Alexander fought the Persians at close range in a conspicuous display of Homeric-style machismo. Darius, too, fought boldly at the head of an army that vastly outnumbered the Macedonians and Greeks, but Alexander proved the better tactician on every occasion.⁴¹ This was never truer than at Gaugamela (near modern Irbil in Iraq) in 331 B.C.E., where Alexander routed his royal opponent for the final time. Darius fled into hiding, but his palaces fell one by one to the Greek and Macedonian invaders, who marveled at their opulence. How, they wondered, could a leader so wealthy and pompous command a military that proved so much less dangerous than expected? Even so, the victors remained uneasy about Darius's escape, and there were still remnants of the Persian grand army that had to be rounded up and disarmed. These matters preoccupied Alexander and his allies even as another crisis matured farther to the east. The Greeks and Macedonians were slow to appreciate the threat posed in what we now call Afghanistan, and reluctant to make this problem their top priority.

Known in antiquity as Bactria, Afghanistan emerged as a danger zone in direct response to Alexander's mounting power throughout the Middle East. From the perspective of the native peoples, Alexander and his followers represented an intrusive, alien culture offensive to local traditions.⁴² Alexander was later decried as an "unbeliever" who brought evil to the East and drenched the land with blood.⁴³ Many Persians rejected

Alexander's claims of legitimacy as a liberator; they questioned the sincerity of his efforts to respect Persian religion and to promote a true partnership with local princes.⁴⁴ So, as the invaders battled deep into what is modern-day Iraq, and their forces occupied the entire region, Bactria became the refuge of what Alexander called, in turn, a rogue regime that harbored warlords and terrorists. Using rhetoric that still resonates today, Alexander denounced these men as lawless savages, the enemies of civilization. In what he called a new and dangerous world, Alexander warned his followers that these resourceful criminals would continue to exploit differences of religion, language, and culture to rouse attacks against innocent victims. They must be confronted with overwhelming military force, and stopped; their leaders must answer—dead or alive—for their crimes.⁴⁵ Not to act was to jeopardize the safety of Greece itself. "This is a noble cause," proclaimed Alexander to his armed forces, "and you will always be honored for seeing it through to the end."⁴⁶ Then, backed by unbridled support, the most powerful leader of the time led the most sophisticated army of its day against the warlords of Afghanistan. Ask those ancient Greek and Macedonian ghosts to reflect upon our situation today, and they might feel strangely at home. The old dictum "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" (The more things change, the more they remain the same) ought to be the official motto of Afghanistan.

When in turn the British, Russians, and Americans each seized Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, they occupied a city founded by Alexander himself and still bearing the Arabic version of his name. When U.S. troops charged on horseback against the Taliban strongholds of Mazar-i-Sharif, they rode past the crumbling walls of Alexander's main camp, and the cap-

ital of the Greek kingdom that endured there for centuries. When American newspapers printed datelines from Ai Khanoum accompanied by photographs of a Northern Alliance gun emplacement on the heights of this remote village, practiced eyes could see the ruins there of an ancient city where Greek settlers once wrestled in the gymnasium, watched tragedies in the theater, worshiped the gods of their ancestral pantheon, and warred for control of Bactria for nearly nine long generations.⁴⁷ This book moves back and forth between modern Afghanistan and ancient Bactria to tell the story of an extraordinary place and the people who have struggled there. Its purpose is to place our present ordeal into a broader perspective, to provide a useful historical and cultural background for those who ask: Into what long history have we suddenly thrust ourselves and our armed forces? On what sort of ground—savage, sacred, or civilized—have we pitched our tents and taken our stand against terrorism?

We cannot answer such questions without facing up to a few challenges. First, it does no good to whitewash the present or the past. War is an ugly business, one of the most repugnant actions to which we humans regularly resort en masse. This is why every group convinced of its necessity works so hard to justify it to others. We rally to the conviction that a given alternative would be even uglier: terrorism, tyranny, starvation, or whatever else the abstracted enemy might be. When war looks like the lesser evil, we can embrace it warmly as though it at least has a good heart beneath its horrid exterior. To that end, we historically have found our greatest heroes in war, giving courage and sacrifice their most recognizable milieu in matters military rather than artistic, political, or philanthropic. Whatever else war might achieve for good or ill, whether in victory or in defeat, its extreme

nature produces heroes whose glory helps us to ennoble the conflict. We need to believe that brave soldiers do not die for nothing, a sentiment that lies behind some of the grandest and most moving speeches ever made, such as Lincoln's remarks at Gettysburg and Pericles's oration at Athens. If lost lives were worth something, then the struggle that claimed them must be worthier still.

The emotional process is understandable, but wars and warriors thereby become difficult to judge dispassionately, much less to criticize. We meet that crisis head-on when we try to understand objectively the war in Afghanistan waged by Alexander, one of history's most heroized leaders. Alexander deserves our admiration for many of his personal qualities, such as his bravery, tactical genius, and tenacity. But to glorify the king and his conquests beyond their due cannot help us today: that path only blinds us to harsh realities that are easier to forget than to face again. If, for example, we indulge in the kind of ersatz history popular just a generation or so ago, we would see Alexander's invasion through the wistful eyes of men like Sir William Woodthorpe Tarn (1869–1957).⁴⁸ This gentleman-scholar argued tirelessly that Alexander was a high-minded prince of peace who was the first human to believe in the unity and brotherhood of all mankind. The wars conducted by Alexander had no base purposes such as egomania or greed, but rather the heartfelt desire to bring love and the benefits of a superior civilization to the wretched natives of ancient Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Military conquest never had a kinder, gentler, or nobler objective than the one attributed by Tarn to Alexander: "Alexander's aim was to substitute peace for war, and reconcile the enmities of mankind by bringing them all—all that is whom his arm could

reach, the people of his empire—to be of one mind together: as men were one in blood, so they should become one in heart and spirit.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, Tarn insisted that in one place, and one place only, his hero’s dream of peace and world brotherhood eventually came true: that place was allegedly Afghanistan!

The charming past recreated by Tarn answered all his wishes for the kind of world he could not himself enjoy in the first half of the violent twentieth century.⁵⁰ Tarn’s worshipful vision of Alexander’s world remains popular today in some circles, but it ill serves those who want an honest appraisal of the past as a signpost for the future.⁵¹ Tarn’s sanitized and sanctified account of Alexander’s campaigns in and around Afghanistan must give way to the uglier version presented in these pages. Beneath the whitewash, bloodstains run deep.

Second, we must acknowledge that the wars waged in Afghanistan by Alexander, Britain, the Soviet Union, and now the United States share some salient features that may not bode well for our future. For example, all these invasions of Afghanistan went well at first, but so far no superpower has found a workable alternative to what might be called the recipe for ruin in Afghanistan:

1. Estimate the time and resources necessary to conquer and control the region.
2. Double all estimates.
3. Repeat as needed.

Afghanistan cannot be subdued by half measures. Invaders must consider the deadly demands of winter warfare, since all gains from seasonal campaigns are erased at every lull. Invaders must

resolve to hunt down every warlord, for the one exception will surely rot the fruits of all other victories. Invaders cannot succeed by avoiding cross-border fighting, since the mobile insurgents can otherwise hide and reinforce with impunity. Invaders must calculate where to draw the decisive line between killing and conciliation, for too much of either means interminable conflict. Finally, all invaders so far have had to face one more difficult choice: once mired in a winless situation, they have tried to cut their losses through one of two exit strategies:

1. Retreat, as did the British and Soviets, with staggering losses.
2. Leave a large army of occupation permanently settled in the area, as Alexander did.

Neither option seems acceptable to the United States, which must therefore learn from its predecessors' mistakes and seek another path.

That process must take into account the same problems encountered throughout Afghan history, beginning in antiquity. As one scholar has adroitly observed in a study of Alexander's cities, "the requirements of imperial rule in Central Asia are laid down by nature, and were as valid in the time of Alexander (and earlier) as in that of Queen Victoria."⁵² Alexander therefore drew a timeless map of the region, both politically and militantly, which still can be recognized spread across planning tables in modern military headquarters. But that is only the beginning. Alexander's reputation as a military genius, though richly deserved, cannot mask some of the miscalculations he pioneered in Bactria. He led his men into a war whose mission necessarily evolved. This

often confused his troops and contributed to great disappointments. Morale suffered as men realized that they had been given false expectations about the nature of the resistance and the timetable for their return home to their families. In Bactria, allies and enemies were often indistinguishable until it was too late. Alexander's soldiers had been trained to wage and win major battles, but the king now shifted them into new and uncomfortable roles: they juggled awkwardly the jobs of conqueror, peacekeeper, builder, and settler. One minute they were asked to kill with ruthless and indiscriminate intensity, the next they were expected to show deference to the survivors. Enemies might suddenly become allies and exercise authority over Macedonians and Greeks. Some of Darius's generals and satraps (governors) regained power as Alexander's appointees. Alexander was the first ruler to underestimate the deleterious effect of such a conflict on his armed forces.

Third, let us not forget that Afghanistan has always been an inherently unstable territory. Even now, it barely qualifies to be called a nation in any conventional sense. Sure, it has (at times) a figurehead leader, flag, currency, and provisional constitution, but its traditions of local independence overwhelm all grander political notions. After all, Afghanistan is a collection of peoples who speak three times more languages (over thirty) than there are paved airfields (ten) in an area the size of England and France. It is an impoverished land with little to lose by resisting foreign intruders. Only 12 percent of the land is arable, and even then its main crop, opium, is illegal. Most of the population lacks access to safe water and sufficient food. Malnutrition has been a constant. About a quarter of the population has malaria, and per-

haps half suffer from tuberculosis. The life expectancy for Afghans remains less than forty-five years. Poor but proud and defiant, the people there are not intimidated easily. The vaunted power of the West has little leverage beyond the immediate range of its weapons.⁵³

In Afghanistan, a little rebellion always goes a long way. A force composed of a mere 10 percent of the population can use the rugged terrain and hostile climate very effectively against larger, better-armed forces. And that insurgent 10 percent, forever present, can swell in an instant to 90 percent or more. Nor can the populace be cowed by capturing its heartland. Afghanistan has no center to speak of, and no clear edges. Afghanistan's few large cities all perch on its periphery: Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, Herat in the west, Kandahar in the south, and Kabul in the east. They all lie nearer to other nations than to each other. Indeed, many segments of the population feel a closer kinship to ethnic groups outside Afghanistan than to compatriots within. The borders are nominal, not natural. They are porous to such a degree that rebels can easily drift across and regroup among friendly brethren. Under these conditions, whether cities fall or not, an invader can never really know who is winning the war.

That explains why we stand today (albeit for different reasons) where the Soviets did in 1980, the British in 1879 and 1839, and even the Greeks and Macedonians in 329 B.C.E. To see our way forward, we must first take a long look back. For recent history, that task is relatively simple. Accounts of the British and Soviet experience in Afghanistan are numerous, and some analysts have made good use of them. Unheroized historical studies of

Alexander's invasion are considerably rarer, though no less vital. The events of 9–11 and their aftermath have given new urgency to that research, and this book is one result. The following pages provide a fresh look into Alexander's invasion; this book is written for those who seek a millennial perspective on one of the defining conflicts of our time.