

CROSSING ZERO

The AfPak War at the Turning Point of American Empire

Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould



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CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Prologue: Fort Del Oro 15

THE GREAT GAME FOR CENTRAL ASIA— THEN AND NOW

1. Crossing Zero 21
2. Creating the Taliban 41
3. AfPak: What Is It? 45
4. Obama's Vietnam? 65
5. Metrics 73
6. NATO 79
7. U.S.-Pakistan : A History 85
8. Warlords, the Taliban and Al Qaeda 89
9. Death from Above 105
10. Decrypting the Afghan-American Agenda 159
11. Closing Zero 175
12. Issues, Answers and Recommendations 181

Epilogue 205

Notes 215

Index 243

About the Authors 254

INTRODUCTION

I

In the age of airport full-body security scans, underwear bombers, bulging no-fly and person-of-interest watch lists, it's not every day that a U.S. citizen gets an unsolicited email from the representative of a notorious terrorist stating that they may face legal action for writing well-documented criticisms of his boss. But that is exactly what happened to these two authors on Monday, January 25, 2010. On that day Los Angeles resident Mr. Daoud M. Abedi of the Hesb-i-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) emailed us on behalf of Afghanistan's longest-running warlord, drug trafficker and terrorist, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Abedi's email followed the posting of our essays "Apocalypse of the American Mind,"¹ on Sibel Edmunds' *Boiling Frogs* and "In Afghanistan: Embracing Gulbuddin Hekmatyar Is No Method at All" on *Huffington Post*.² Our online essays addressed the insane possibility, recently reported in the media,³ that in Washington's growing desperation, a known terrorist like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar might be considered a "sane" solution to the U.S. quagmire in Afghanistan. Under Executive Order 13224,⁴ since February 18, 2003 Hekmatyar has been listed as a global terrorist by both the United States State Department and the United States Treasury (which freezes his assets and criminalizes any U.S. support for him). He has also been the intended object of at least one Predator drone attack⁵ and has most recently claimed credit for a deadly assault on French NATO forces fighting in Afghanistan.⁶ So it came as a great surprise that Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and his political party Hesb-i-Islami are not only operating out in the open in the United

States, but are issuing threats (just the way they do in Afghanistan) to anyone who tries to get the word out about the atrocities he is known to have committed.

The order of Abedi's complaints is a window into the mind of one of the world's most notorious terrorists. It is not Hekmatyar's well-documented record as a murderer, terrorist and major drug kingpin that disturbs him. The terrorist-strongman label actually appeals to Mr. Abedi, who in one email asserts that he is "happy he is called a terrorist because what he does for Afghanistan is what George Washington did for the US." Abedi's primary concern is for published reports that "His Excellency" might once have been a member of the nominally communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) as a student in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁷ He is willing to bend time and dozens of well-documented facts in order to protect Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's reputation as a pure, messianic Islamist, lay blame for his bad deeds on communists, Maoists, Afghanistan's King Zahir Shah and assorted foreigners, while denouncing his chief rival, Ahmed Shah Massoud as "the biggest traitor of Afghan politics."

To Mr. Abedi, other people's facts accumulated over the last forty years and compiled by experts are not facts. They are lies. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's critics are wrong because Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is always right, and if he and his Hesb-i-Islami Afghanistan someday come to power, "I promise you, the HIA will call on all these so called experts, and knowledgeable sources to come up and clean what they have written, prove it or apologize to the Afghan and international communities for misleading them, or we will not allow their feet in Afghan soil so they don't do this kind [of] stupidity in the future against other Afghans."⁸

Abedi has been actively negotiating on Hekmatyar's behalf at least since the Obama administration came to power. A May 10, 2009, report in the London *Sunday Times* stated that a representative of Richard Holbrooke, President Barack Obama's regional envoy, had met with "Daoud Abedi, an Afghan-American businessman close to Hekmatyar," and that "the U.S. administration will fund an

Afghan government department to conduct negotiations with the Hesb-i-Islami and the Taliban.”⁹ In the interim, with the help of Abedi, he has begun to rebrand himself as a “moderate fundamentalist with Afghanistan’s best Islamic interest at heart.”¹⁰

But Hekmatyar’s coercive brutality is not moderate. According to published reports, during the 1980s Hekmatyar’s Hesb-i-Islami developed a reputation for attacking moderates and raiding caravans of arms and supplies of other forces as well as relief organizations such as Doctors Without Borders.¹¹ According to author Steve Coll, Hekmatyar attacked his rival Ahmed Shah Massoud so often during his climb to power as the CIA’s favorite in the 1980s that Washington “feared he might be a secret KGB plant whose mission was to sow disruption within the anti-communist resistance.”¹² According to press reports, Hekmatyar was not viewed as the most aggressive anti-Soviet guerrilla and “not feared so much by the communists as by his allies,” who believed his commanders were saving their men and weapons to establish Hesb-i-Islami as the dominant organization once the Soviets departed.¹³ That analysis proved correct.

The history of attempting to work with warlords like Hekmatyar has consistently proven to be nothing but bad for the Afghan people, the region and the United States as well. A 1988 report by Henry Kamm for the *New York Times* summed up what was then common knowledge about the potential for a government run by Hekmatyar. “He advocates a radical program that rejects a return to the traditional ways of Islam that dominated Afghanistan during the monarchy that was overthrown in 1973. . . . ‘We want a pure Islamic state in Afghanistan,’ said ‘Brother’ Hekmatyar as his associates refer to him. ‘Before 1973? That was never an Islamic system. It was completely against Islam.’”¹⁴

Nick Grono and Candace Rondeaux of the International Crisis Group in Belgium wrote in January 2010:

One of the warlords who may soon star in the new U.S. efforts to rebrand fundamentalists as potential government partners is Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a brutal Afghan insurgent commander

responsible for dozens of deadly attacks on coalition troops. As a mujahedeen commander during the civil war in the 1990s Hekmatyar turned his guns on Kabul, slaughtering many thousands of Afghans, with his militias raping and maiming thousands more. . . . Doing deals with Hekmatyar, or others like him, is a mistake. . . . Instead of entering into alliances of convenience with the most undesirable of local powerholders, the international community, and the Afghan government, would gain by holding warlords like Hekmatyar accountable for past abuses, and ending the climate of impunity that has allowed so many of them to flourish within and outside the government.¹⁵

On March 23, 2010, Carlotta Gall reported in the *New York Times* that Afghan President Hamid Karzai had welcomed a delegation of Hekmatyar's Al Qaeda- and Taliban-connected Hesb-i-Islami in Kabul, headed by his representative, Mohammed Daoud Abedi. "Though the insurgent group Hesb-i-Islami or Islamic Party operates under a separate command from the Taliban, it has links to the Taliban leadership and Al Qaeda and has fought on a common front against foreign forces in Afghanistan."¹⁶

The delegation was reported to have presented Karzai with a fifteen-point peace plan that included the withdrawal of foreign troops, to which Abedi claimed the Taliban would agree. According to the report, "Mr. Abedi described their reception in Kabul as 'fabulous' and said 'the president was very, very gentle, very, very friendly.'"¹⁷

In the final analysis, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has never been successful at anything other than creating chaos and bloodshed. For over forty years, through his ruthlessness, brutality, foreign financial backing and unceasing public relations campaigns, he has clung to his messianic dream of a "pure Islamic state" while most of his contemporaries have perished. If he and his agents assume a role in the Afghan government, with the volumes of deeds that are known about him, it is certain that he will demand more than just apologies

from the people on whom he calls. Should he come to power and gain his dream as part of Obama's AfPak strategy, the administration will have opened Afghanistan, as well as itself, to a very dark messiah.

II

The year 2011 marks ten full years since the United States invaded Afghanistan and overthrew the uncooperative Saudi- and Pakistani-backed government of the Taliban. It has been over thirty years since the former Soviet Union overthrew a quasi Marxist-Maoist-oriented regime in Kabul. For many who have followed the course of developments in Afghanistan and know something of its complicated history, the 2001 U.S. invasion was seen as the opportunity for the international community to give Afghanistan the chance at democracy, peace and independence that it had been denied following the 1989 withdrawal of the U.S.S.R.'s Red Army and the 1992 collapse of the Marxist government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

It would be impossible to exaggerate the conceptual, managerial, political, military, moral and ethical failures that characterized the war orchestrated under President George W. Bush. Had the administration set out to design a plan that would fail at every juncture, radicalize the entire region, protect and even strengthen the Pakistan military's link to terrorism and establish the requisite conditions for a Taliban-Al Qaeda resurgence, it would look no different than it does today. Afghanistan's potential for peace, stability and development was the Bush administration's to squander, and they squandered it.

From the outset, Washington's Afghan problem was largely threefold. First there was the absence of an adequate understanding of Afghanistan's history, its people, their needs and how to provide for them. Prior to the Soviet invasion of 1979, Afghanistan had been one of the poorest countries on earth, with a per capita income of under \$200 dollars a year and an infant mortality rate of almost 50 percent. After nearly thirty years of war, Afghanistan had been

reduced to a Stone Age subsistence, its already impoverished population traumatized, displaced and occupied by an army of savage religious extremists exported by Pakistan, calling themselves the Taliban—“seekers of the light.”

In 2001, the solutions appeared simple and straightforward. Security, food, irrigation and electricity topped the list of needs, followed by roads and housing. Despite its poverty, prior to the Soviet invasion of 1979 Afghanistan had been largely self-sufficient in food production.¹⁸ A few hundred million dollars shrewdly managed and carefully distributed at a grassroots level could have provided a solid foundation for recovery. Instead, the rapacious and incompetent mishandling of the country’s reconstruction monies, the confused misapplication of counterinsurgency/counterterrorism doctrine and a telltale weakness for ignoring Pakistan’s open support for the Taliban, spelled disaster. After eight years and billions spent, the Bush administration’s efforts by 2009 had amounted to the virtual collapse of governance in much of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the spread of religious violence throughout the region and the ascent of a narco-funded criminal enterprise global in scope. This is the legacy that has become President Obama’s war.

Washington’s second major issue regarding Afghanistan is Pakistan. Originally carved from British India in 1947 with two wings, West Pakistan (Punjab, Baluchistan, Sindh and the North West Frontier) and East Pakistan (Bengal, today’s Bangladesh),¹⁹ the country has suffered an identity crisis from its inception. The name itself derives from initials of the various states from which it was composed: Punjab, Afghania, Kashmir, Sindh, Tukharistan and the suffix -stan, from Baluchistan.²⁰ The Persian word *pak*, which means “pure,” was also said to have influenced the meaning, rendering the concept of Pakistan to its adherents as a “land of the pure.” With a northern border within a stone’s throw of Soviet Central Asia and adjoining Communist China as well as the strategic port of Karachi on the Arabian Sea, Pakistan’s purity was of less importance than its strategic location, and the country was quickly brought into the fold of the U.S. Cold War machine.

But instead of putting Pakistan at an advantage relative to its South Asian neighbors India and Afghanistan, America's military embrace had the effect of freezing Pakistan into a special relationship that discouraged the nation's democratization and secular development while at the same time encouraging a radical pan-Islamization that now threatens to tear both Pakistan and Afghanistan apart.

Most analysis of Pakistan's seemingly schizophrenic behavior toward the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has focused mainly on the Pakistani military's support for the Taliban's Islamic extremism. But the struggle with Afghanistan's Pashtun tribes for control of Central Asia precedes Russian, U.S. and British involvement, the Cold War, the Great Game and even the creation of Islam itself.

India's ethnic Punjabis and Afghanistan's Pashtuns have been warring enemies for more than 2,000 years. Their historical relationship is one of abiding hatred, as the Punjabis aspire to their former glory as Mughal overlords and the Pashtuns seek the reunification of their national tribal lands denied to them by the British in the nineteenth century. Today they fight the same war under different flags, with political Islam acting as the vector, but the deadly and destructive drama has taken on new dimensions.

According to an analysis put forward on the Web site of India's Cinema Rasik,²¹ the growing upheaval in Pakistan isn't about Islam but about the rising anger of the Pashtun tribes who have been forced to live under the rule of Pakistan's Punjabi military since 1947.

The Af-Pak situation began in 1893 when the British-led Indian Army conquered South Afghanistan (the part of Afghanistan below the Khyber Pass) and forced the partition of Afghanistan into North and South. . . . The main aim of the Pashtun Taleban used to be to reconquer North Afghanistan and unite all of Afghanistan under Pashtun rule. The American presence in North Afghanistan and the determination of the Obama administration have convinced the Taliban that America will not leave Kabul. So the Pashtun Taliban

have decided to move south towards the plains of Pakistani Punjab, a much richer prize than impoverished Afghanistan.²²

Pakistan's humiliating defeat in its 1971 war against East Pakistan continues to haunt Pakistan's predominantly Punjabi military establishment. Born as a Bengali struggle for more autonomy and political rights, the conflict elicited a brutal response from Pakistan that transformed it into a war with India, severed East Pakistan from Pakistan and created the independent nation of Bangladesh. Following the war against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Pakistan used the Mujahideen and subsequently the Taliban to settle old scores with India and control Afghanistan. But as the state of Pakistan becomes increasingly weak and the Taliban movement grows increasingly strong, the relationship becomes dangerously unstable.

By setting the poorly trained, poorly equipped Pashtun Frontier Corps against the Pakistani Taliban after 9/11, Pakistan's generals temporarily avoided a direct Punjabi/Pashtun confrontation like the one that created Bangladesh. But as Taliban cells recruit and multiply inside the Punjab—setting up their own Pashtun-controlled “Punjabi Taliban” among the Punjab's disillusioned youth—a new dynamic has taken hold that threatens to redefine the rules of the game. Cinema Rasik notes:

The racial contempt of the Pakistani Panjabi Generals is making them blind to the realities on the ground. The Pashtun Taliban are getting recruits and building a Panjabi Taleban sub-movement. This combination is rapidly making inroads into rural Punjab and seems poised to take over some semi-urban areas in Punjab. When they succeed, the Pakistani Panjabi Generals will find that their soldiers are not willing to fire on their rural Panjabi brothers.²³

Washington's third major issue regarding Afghanistan is Washington itself. In fact, the politics of both Afghanistan and Pakistan over the last sixty years have been so entwined in Washington's

vast web of special interests that the Obama administration's new AfPak policy could just as easily be termed WaAfPak. Burdened by a hulking bureaucratic structure created at the outset of the Cold War, Washington moved onto the politically complex, multi-ethnic, sectarian South Asian stage in 2001 with all the grace, speed and sophistication of a lumbering 1947 Buick Roadmaster. In its dealings with the complexities of Central and South Asian politics, it continues to exhibit an inability to negotiate even the most rudimentary twists and turns of the new Great Game.

In recognition of the crisis created under the Bush administration's auspices, the Obama administration immediately named veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke the new special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, while for the first time allocating more money to the Afghan war than to the war in Iraq.²⁴

A team of experts, headed by Brookings Institution Fellow and retired CIA expert on South Asia Bruce Riedel, was tasked with developing a workable new strategy for expanding the war from Afghanistan into Pakistan. In a radio interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Trudy Rubin on September 9, 2008, Riedel gave voice to the concerns that would lead the Pakistan side of the Afghan equation to take precedence in any new administration's thinking.

I think Pakistan is the most dangerous country in the world today, because all of the nightmares of the twenty-first century that should concern Americans come together in Pakistan in a unique way. This is a country with nuclear weapons. This is a country with a history of proliferating nuclear technology. This is a country that has fought four wars with its neighbor, and at least one of those wars went very close to becoming a nuclear war. This is a country that has been the host of numerous terrorist organizations and is today the safe haven and stronghold of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization. This is a country also awash in drugs—narcotics—and this is a country where the clash between reactionary Islamic extremism and democracy is being fought out literally in front of us. All of

those issues come together in this one place like nowhere else in the world. That's why it's so important to Americans.²⁵

Following the election of Barack Obama, the resulting policy—formed with the help of Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) expert Barnett Rubin—emerged as “AfPak” (classic bit of Washington-acronym-speak). But no sooner had the outlines of this much-awaited strategy emerged than criticism arose from both left and right over just how this new policy would play out.

Before the new President had even set foot in the oval office a chorus of American voices emerged warning that Afghanistan would soon become Obama's Vietnam and calling for the United States to immediately withdraw its forces. They questioned whether the United States ought to be pursuing an Afghan-Pakistan war at all.

In keeping with the old Cold War business-as-usual approach, Riedel's plan actually reflected earlier British preferences for shifting the balance of concern away from Afghanistan to Pakistan altogether²⁶ while calling for Afghanistan's government to accommodate Pakistan's security concerns.²⁷ This came despite the fact that Pakistan, with the CIA's assistance,²⁸ had created the Taliban as an Afghan invasion force in 1992, and for eight years Al Qaeda and the Taliban had maintained Pakistan as a refuge and relied on its military to sustain the insurgency against U.S. and NATO troops.

Other voices, once again mainly British, sought to re-institute a failed Clinton-era policy of separating “moderate” Taliban from “extremist” Taliban or to establish an “acceptable” Afghan dictator²⁹ such as noted drug lord and admitted terrorist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

This, it was argued, would appease the Islamic right wing and gain Saudi Arabian support³⁰ while allowing the United States to focus on doing the only thing it apparently did well: decapitating Al Qaeda's suspected leadership with Predator drone missile strikes.

Employing Afghanistan's drug-dealing warlords was nothing new for Washington. It had elevated Pakistan's drug-warlords to Beltway cult status vis-à-vis *Charlie Wilson's War* during the Soviet

occupation and insisted on including them in the new Afghan government in 2002.³¹ Numerous observers, including Pakistan's president, Asif Ali Zardari, maintained that Washington had a hand in the Taliban's creation as well,³² standing by as they rolled over Afghanistan in league with Al Qaeda and Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI) in the late 1990s.

America's multitude of policy mistakes in Afghanistan have mystified many from the beginning. In a February 2, 2009, article in the online edition of the *Times* of London, the international community's High Representative in Bosnia, Paddy Ashdown, accepted responsibility for the Afghan fiasco, admitting that "we are trying to win in Afghanistan with one twenty-fifth the troops and one fiftieth of the aid per head in Bosnia. . . . [T]he real problem is not President Karzai, it's us."³³

None of these voices reflected the deeper historical and political issues that made the Afghanistan-Pakistan war unique. They also disregarded a responsibility on the part of the United States to undo the damage it had created by seeding the region with terrorism in its anti-Soviet war of the 1980s. In fact, little of the political dialogue surrounding Washington's growing obsession with the Afghan-Pakistan war was based on an agenda-free assessment of the situation. It was instead grounded in a well-financed campaign of special interest politics, K Street lobbying efforts³⁴ and a resurgence of anti-Russian Reagan-era disinformation, kept on life support by a hard core of aging Cold War bureaucrats³⁵ and their embedded media acolytes.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 initiated a golden era for Washington. It diverted U.S. citizens' attention from the cultural introspection made necessary by the social upheavals surrounding the Vietnam War. It wrongly vindicated a corps of neo-conservative defense intellectuals whose reputations had been deservedly tarnished by the U.S. defeat in Vietnam and paved the road for the Reagan Agenda and the rise of the New Right. In a heartbeat, the U.S.S.R.'s invasion of Afghanistan restored the Cold

War and justified the introduction of World War II-size increases in the defense budget. But most of all, Afghanistan helped to re-establish a simplistic, good-vs.-evil mythology that had been laid waste by Vietnam.

As the Soviets settled into their long war against terrorism on their southern border, a propaganda campaign aimed at the American public was set up to keep the “evil empire” pinned down in its own Vietnam and the United States rooting for the people who were doing it; the fiercely religious “freedom fighters.”³⁶

As seen from this 1930s Hollywood perspective, one grafted straight from Britain’s nineteenth-century colonial experience (U.S. officials in Kabul in 1981 jokingly referred to Dan Rather as Gunga Dan), Afghanistan was and is an untamable land, filled with wild and irrepressible tribes whose codes and traditions have stood unchanged since medieval times.

Seen from this perspective, men such as Ahmed Shah Massoud were and are still lionized as Afghan heroes,³⁷ despite a wealth of historical evidence revealing their philosophical grounding in a very un-Afghan, antimodernist, misogynist extremism, massive narcotics trafficking and an extensive history of horrific war crimes against fellow Afghans. From this perspective, the people of Afghanistan reject the modern world and long to remain a strictly conservative fundamentalist society, making any efforts to introduce a Western-style democracy a senseless waste of U.S. taxpayers’ money.

Missing from this picture is any hint that a modern Afghanistan was emerging before the Soviet invasion, that its secular secondary schools graduated over twenty thousand students each year³⁸ and that a growing number of its women worked alongside men in government and business to bring Afghanistan into the twentieth century. Missing from the argument is the abundance of evidence that Afghanistan’s drive toward modernity was thwarted not by the backwardness of its rural tribes (which, if it were true, would apply equally to U.S. ally Pakistan), but by outside forces from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and China, who were bent on subduing the country and bending it to their purposes. The

Afghanistan of today is a product of the policies of those countries and the globalist geopoliticians who framed them, not the internal policies of any pre-Soviet Afghan government. Yet the Afghan and Pakistani people continue to bear the blame for it, and to this day suffer the consequences.

It can be assumed that somehow, in the swamp of human rights violations, terror and counterterror, violations of international law, military-corporate ambitions and the expanding numbers of civilian casualties brought on by it, in the massive heroin trade that now leads the world and in the resurgence of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in both nuclear-armed Pakistan and fragile Afghanistan, some species of outside plan or “Great Game” is still at work. Afghanistan, the crossroads of ancient civilizations and trade, remains a coveted crossroads for oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian basin to India, Pakistan and China. Texas oilmen, Saudi sheiks and Islamist jihadis found common cause with the Taliban as the shock troops for energy conglomerates in the 1990s and most likely still do. But should the current political situation in these two countries continue to erode, new levels of violence and instability will make the past seem only a mild prologue to the crisis that is to come.

At the time of this writing, the term AfPak has shifted from being a catchword to being the official designation for an expanded war that cannot be won militarily. Whether the United States can achieve success will depend on whether Washington can realign its objectives to meet the needs of the Afghan and Pakistani people. If, however, AfPak is another thinly disguised effort to maintain an imperial presence in South Central Asia by working with a status quo of Afghan warlords, corrupted police and an extremist-compromised Pakistani military, it will be another predictable link in a long chain of legendary Washington miscalculations.

Prologue: Fort Del Oro

In 1577, one ship of an Elizabethan fleet—piloted by a notorious English pirate and slave trader named Martin Frobisher—filled with what was thought to be gold bullion brought back from North America, smashed on the isolated, rocky western coast of Ireland at a place known as Smerwick. According to author Benjamin Woolley, the mission was intended to find the fabled Northwest Passage to China as part of a “Protestant adventure that would rival the Catholic quest as well as enrich the queen’s treasury.”¹ The “gold”—which was soon revealed to be nothing more than iron pyrites (fool’s gold)—spilled from the broken ship’s hull, littering the base of the cliffs. An Irish rebel captain by the name of James Fitzmaurice raised a fort at the summit of the cliffs and named it Fort Del Oro, (Fort of Gold) to mock the Queen’s greed and her vain quest to challenge Rome for wealth and power beyond the seas. Fitzmaurice’s family, the Geraldines, had been in conflict with London over land and authority since initiating the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the twelfth century.²

The coming of the Reformation to England earlier in the sixteenth century had turned 400 years of border disputes and jurisdictional feuding into holy war. In 1580, the Holy See in Rome sent an army of Italians and Spaniards to help the Geraldines, under the authority drafted by the “Just War Doctrine,”³ to help fight the Queen’s Protestant forces. By some strange serendipity, this “army” soon found itself with its back to the sea at Fort Del Oro, and after the soldiers surrendered, the entire group was massacred and the bodies thrown onto the rocks below by an army commanded by Walter Raleigh. A few years later, Raleigh would attempt to establish the first British colony in the New World, Virginia, in honor of Queen

Elizabeth, his virgin queen. Along with the sinking of the Spanish Armada in 1588, Fort Del Oro turned the tide for the English and their quest for colonies, wealth and power. But Frobisher's failure to find gold in the West encouraged London to turn to the East. And in the final day of the year 1600, a company was chartered by Queen Elizabeth I and granted a monopoly to compete with Portugal by bringing goods acquired in India back to England.

The East India Company's ships arrived at the Indian port of Surat in 1608. As an emissary of King James I, Sir Thomas Roe reached the court of the Mughal Emperor in 1615. Trading posts were established along the east and west coasts of India, with Calcutta, Bombay and Madras becoming major centers. But the more the Company expanded into the interior of India, the more rapacious it became.

In 1717, the Company acquired a royal dictat or *firman* from the Mughal Emperor that exempted the Company from the payment of custom duties in Bengal. Then, in 1757, the Company transformed into something new and unusual when one of its private military officials, Robert Clive, defeated Prince Siraj-ud-daulah of Bengal at the battle of Plassay.⁴ Author Nick Robins writes:

The turning point came in 1757, when one of its more unscrupulous executives, Robert Clive, deployed the company's private army, a healthy dose of bribes and ingenious fraud to defeat the nawab of Bengal at the battle of Plassay. In the looting that followed, Clive netted £2.5 million for the company, and £234,000 for himself, equivalent today to a £232 million windfall for his employers and a cool £22 million success fee for himself. Historical convention views Plassay as the first step in the creation of the British empire in India. But it is perhaps better understood as the company's most successful business deal.⁵

A few years later the Company gained control of the Mughal Emperor's *diwani* (tax system)—“a bit like Wal-Mart running the Internal Revenue Service in today's United States. With this acqui-

sition began the systematic drain of wealth that would continue under corporate control until 1858, and thereafter under the British Raj until 1947.”⁶

The draconian transformation from mercantile enterprise to freewheeling corporate state in India meant a windfall for the Company and its London stockholders, but it spelled disaster for the people of Bengal. Company agents plundered the formerly wealthy Indian province and left it destitute. A famine in 1769–70 took the lives of one-third to half of the population, which the company did nothing to prevent or alleviate.⁷

Despite its growing expertise at wealth extraction through trade, taxation and the assumption of state powers, the company’s massive military expenditures caused it to seek a bailout from London. The India Bill, also known as the Regulating Act of 1773, placed the Company’s authority under greater parliamentary control and established the office of Governor-General. Over time, the East India Company absorbed the whole of India, either through military conquest or simply the power of indirect rule. Scholar Vinay Lal writes, “Lord Dalhousie’s notorious doctrine of lapse, whereby a native state became part of British India if there was no male heir at the death of the ruler, was one of the principal means by which native states were annexed; but often the annexation, such as that of Awadh [Oudh] in 1856, was justified on the grounds that the native prince was of evil disposition, indifferent to the welfare of his subjects.”⁸

From the outset, the East India company’s success in India was a source of devastation for Afghanistan. Historian Vartan Gregorian writes:

The cultural and economic isolation of Afghanistan was aggravated by the discovery of maritime routes between Europe and the East. The opening of these routes, which were safer, cheaper, and in many respects faster, greatly undermined the monopolistic position of Central Asia and Afghanistan as transit trade centers and the region was soon reduced to a secondary position in world trade. The prosperity of many urban

centers in Afghanistan was permanently threatened and the cause of feudalism strengthened by the consequent weakening of the merchant class.⁹

The East India Company's impact on Afghanistan was often a source of public and political outrage in London as well. The Company's outrageous practices were attacked by Adam Smith in his *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*,¹⁰ as well as by the philosopher Edmund Burke, who argued that "Indian governmental corruption had to be resolved by removing patronage from interested parties," which led to impeachment proceedings against Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of Bengal.¹¹ The Company was often excoriated for its out-of-control behavior, and the British government was unwilling or unable to stop it. A report by the East India Committee in London written during the First Anglo-Afghan war in 1839 states, "This war of robbery is waged by the English Government through the intervention of the Government of India (without the knowledge of England, or of Parliament and the Court of Directors); thereby evading the checks placed by the Constitution on the exercise of the prerogative of the Crown in declaring war. It presents therefore a new crime in the annals of nations—a *secret war!*"¹² (emphasis in the original).