

ONE MAN LEFT ALIVE: THE FIRST ANGLO-AFGHAN WAR

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This has been going on for ages. Alexander the Great was there. Then, the English came twice. They all tried to conquer Afghanistan. It did not work out.¹

—General Valentin Varennikov, former Soviet Commander in Afghanistan

Former Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev called it a “bleeding wound.” The decade-long Soviet attempt to occupy and control Afghanistan sapped Soviet morale and was a contributing factor in the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. However, the Soviet Union was not the first superpower to meet stunning defeat in Afghanistan. About 145 years earlier, the mighty British Empire also invaded Afghanistan. Not only would the British fail in their mission to subdue Afghanistan, they would suffer, at the hands of rural tribesmen, one of the most disastrous defeats in British history. What would the British Empire, the superpower of the 19th century, have wanted with a poor, rugged country in Central Asia?

To understand, one must go back to 1815. After Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo in 1815, Great Britain and Russia emerged as Europe’s two main world powers. With its primary colonial rival, France, out of the picture, Great Britain was busily working on

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expanding its network of colonies throughout the world. Although colonies in the Caribbean and Africa no doubt enriched Great Britain, there was one colony that towered above all the others: India. According to one estimate, between 1808 and 1815, annual net financial transfers from India to Britain valued £447,000,² or nearly \$50 million in today's money.³ Clearly, the British would do whatever it took to ensure India's safety. While the British Empire was extending its long arm across the oceans, Russia was happy to have a seat at the world table after being treated as "backwards" for hundreds of years. Seeing the prosperity that Britain was gaining from its colonies, Russia, despite its already massive size, was determined to enlarge its borders. Russia couldn't easily expand westwards without provoking Prussia and Austria. North and east only led to frigid oceans. Therefore, Russia, to expand as it wished, needed to move south into Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 1825, Russia claimed the Kazakh steppe, in modern-day Kazakhstan. Three years later, the Russians took over Armenia. Watching Russia's continued expansion in Central Asia, the British were becoming more and more concerned.

In 1814, even before Napoleon had been defeated, Britain had signed a mutual-defense pact with Persia. The agreement clearly stated that if a European power attacked Persia, Britain would lend either money or military aid. Article 6 of the treaty read, "Should any European power be engaged in war with Persia when at peace with England, his Britannic Majesty engages to use his best endeavors to bring Persia and such European power to a friendly understanding. If, however, his Majesty's cordial interference should fail of success, England shall...send a force from India, or, in lieu thereof, pay an annual subsidy."⁴ In 1828, Persia fought Russia's annexation of Armenia. When Persia asked the British for aid as spelled out in the treaty, Britain, claiming that the treaty's language was ambiguous, refused. Believing that the British had betrayed him, Persia's ruler, ironically, began to explore ties to Britain's main competitor, Russia. Having now alienated Persia, the British decided that they urgently needed to explore other possible alliances in the region. They targeted Afghanistan.

In 1836, Britain decided to send 31-year-old diplomat Captain Alexander Burnes to meet with Afghanistan's ruler, Dost (the honorific title "friend") Mohammed Khan. Burnes was familiar with Central Asia, having undertaken an expedition to Central Asia a few years earlier, during which he met with Dost Mohammed. On this return, Burnes found Dost Mohammed amenable to an alliance against the Russians, but the Dost, more than anything, wanted back the strategic city of Peshawar, which had been taken by the independent Sikh state under Ranjit Singh. There was a complication, however. Ranjit Singh already had his own alliance with the British. Because the Afghans and the Sikhs had historically loathed each other, which was only made worse by the Sikhs' seizure of Afghan territory in 1834, the British could not ally themselves with both the Afghans and the Sikhs.

Captain Burnes recommended that Lord Auckland, governor-general of India, explore an alliance with Dost Mohammed, but Lord Auckland refused to risk a mutually profitable, fairly assured alliance with the Sikhs for only a potential alliance with Afghanistan. Burnes pointed out that Ranjit Singh was old and frail, and that if the Sikhs' respected leader died, there could be no assurance that the new ruler would be friendly towards the British. Burnes also noted that Dost Mohammed was, at heart, pro-British and could make a strong ally. Lord Auckland, though, ignored Burnes's analysis.

Two events in late 1837 would have a significant role in shaping the British policy towards Afghanistan. In November 1837, a Persian army laid siege to the city of Herat, in western Afghanistan, sometimes described as "the gateway to India." Persian attempts to capture Herat weren't all that unusual, as it had a large population of Persian Shiites. This time, however, in addition to the Persian army, the attack was reinforced by Russian troops and led by an official from Czar Nicholas I's court. To the British, this was confirmation for their suspicion that the Russians were interested in Afghanistan, with a possible eye towards India. Luckily for Herat's defense, though, Eldred Pottinger, a young officer for the British East India Company who had been doing

reconnaissance in Herat, offered his help in defending the city.⁵ With Pottinger's aid and skill, the Afghans managed to hold back the combined Persian/Russian army.

The second event that propelled the British down the path to war was when Colonel Ivan Vitkevich, a political agent from St. Petersburg, arrived in Kabul in December 1837 with letters of introduction from Czar Nicholas to Dost Mohammed. When Dost Mohammed met with Colonel Vitkevich, Lord Auckland's worst fears about a Russian-Afghan alliance were realized. However, despite the fact that he had met with the Russian agent, Dost Mohammed was still willing to ally himself with the British and was still reaching out to Lord Auckland with the hopes of an alliance. By this point, however, Lord Auckland was already convinced that Dost Mohammed must be removed from Afghanistan. Auckland intended to establish a new, pro-British king on the throne of Afghanistan, a former ruler named Shah Shuja. Shah Shuja had lost the Afghan throne to Dost Mohammed in 1834, but the British had retrieved him and supported him with a pension in India. Now, Shah Shuja was ready to reclaim his throne courtesy of British arms.

In early 1838, Lord Auckland began responding to Dost Mohammed's hopeful overtures with a series of demands. In March, Auckland sent Dost Mohammed a virtual ultimatum: "You must desist from all correspondence with Persia and Russia; you must never receive agents from [them] or have aught to do with [them] without our sanction; you must dismiss Captain Vitkevich with courtesy; you must surrender all claims to Peshawar... In return for this, I promise to recommend to the Government that it use its good offices with its ancient ally, Maharaja Runjeet [Ranjit] Singh...."⁶ Understandably, Dost Mohammed felt this was a one-sided arrangement. In hopes of forcing the British to offer him a better deal, the Afghan ruler began to meet with Colonel Vitkevich in more earnestness. To Lord Auckland, this was final proof of Dost Mohammed's infidelity.

In October 1838, Lord Auckland issued his Simla Manifesto, which falsely claimed that Dost Mohammed had made an

unprovoked attack on Ranjit Singh.⁷ Lord Auckland sent one of his most trusted advisers, William Macnaghten, to meet with Ranjit Singh, to begin making plans for the restoration of Shah Shuja. From the first, though, it was clear that Ranjit Singh didn't have in mind what the British had in mind. The British first proposed that Ranjit Singh would furnish the manpower needed to restore Shah Shuja to his throne. In return Shah Shuja would abandon all claims to Afghan territory that had been taken by the Sikhs. However, Ranjit Singh declined this offer. Instead, he insisted that in addition to the terms proposed by Macnaghten, British soldiers would accompany the Sikh army and that once Shah Shuja regained power, he would pay a generous annual subsidy to the Sikhs. Macnaghten readily agreed to this proposal. However, when Shah Shuja heard about the arrangement, which Macnaghten told him that he was expected to agree to, he was furious. Shah Shuja detested paying a tribute to the Sikhs, the Afghans' historical enemies, and even worse, he balked at entering his own country with the help of the Sikhs.

Having determined that the Sikhs were not going to be of much value, the British were making final preparations for their invasion of Afghanistan. They decided on a force of 20,000 soldiers,⁸ dubbed "The Army of the Indus." Tagging along were some 38,000 camp followers.⁹ The British extravagance on campaign was amazing. One senior officer needed 80 camels to carry his personal belongings alone.¹⁰ In December 1838, the invasion force set out from India under the command of General Sir John Keane. Sir William Macnaghten, Lord Auckland's longtime political agent, was given the position of British envoy to Shah Shuja's court. The First Anglo-Afghan War had begun.

At the start, some prescient individuals doubted that the restoration of Shah Shuja would be ultimately successful. Mountstuart Elphinstone, who led the first British expedition to Afghanistan in 1809, predicted, "I have no doubt you will take Candahar and Cabul; but for maintaining him [Shah Shuja] in a poor, strong and remote country among a turbulent people like the Afghans, I own it seems to me to be hopeless."¹¹

From the beginning, the British had troubles in Afghanistan. As soldiers and camp followers entered Afghanistan through the Bolan Pass, hostile tribesmen stole provisions. Temperatures soared well past 100 degrees Fahrenheit. With so many mouths to feed, and with tribes refusing to sell food for anything other than exorbitant prices, the British soon ran out of supplies and drinkable water. When Alexander Burnes, who was sent ahead to procure food, managed to return with 10,000 sheep, the British breathed a sigh of relief.

In early May 1839, the British arrived at the first major Afghan city on their route: Kandahar. The British were hoping that Shah Shuja would be joyously welcomed by the Afghans, but this proved not to be the case. Only about 100 Afghans turned out to witness Shah Shuja's triumphant parade into Kandahar. As Captain George Lawrence commented, "Shah Shooja was formally installed here as king of Affghanistan [sic], without, however, any symptom of the interest or enthusiasm which we were led to expect on the part of his subjects."¹²

The next major challenge that the British faced was the mighty fortress of Ghazni, defending the route between Kandahar and Kabul, Afghanistan's capital. Ghazni, renowned throughout Central Asia, crowned a tall hill and had walls 60 feet thick. The British, underestimating the size and strength of the fortress, had left their siege artillery back in Kandahar, and now had only one field gun, too small to have any impact. To make matters worse for the British, the fortress at Ghazni was defended by a garrison of about 3,500 men commanded by one of Dost Mohammed's sons. Another son commanded some 5,000 cavalry in the vicinity of Ghazni. However, the British were the beneficiaries of a piece of extraordinary luck. One of the fort's defenders defected to the British and told them the weakest link in Ghazni's formidable defenses: the Kabul Gate.

On the morning of July 23, 1839, a company of engineers, led by Lieutenant Henry Durand of the Bengal Engineers, piled 300 pounds of gunpowder against the Kabul Gate. Behind them was a storming party led by Brigadier Robert Sale and Colonel

William Dennie. As the gunpowder went off, the storming party charged into the gaping breach. After some initial confusion, which included Brigadier Sale being wounded, the British took control of the mighty fort. The victory was tremendous. The British had lost a total of 17 men killed and 165 wounded while the Afghans had suffered more than 500 dead.¹³ More importantly, though, Afghan morale was ruined. Dost Mohammed, stunned that the British had taken Ghazni so quickly at such a small loss of life, found his support melting away. Dost Mohammed fled Kabul and retreated into the mountainous passes of the Hindu Kush. As an article in the *London Gazette* read, "It appears that the news of the quick and determined manner in which we took possession of Ghuznee, completely paralyzed the population of Cabool and Dost Mahomed's army; and that, on the evening of the 2d ultimo, all his hopes were terminated by a division in his camp, and the greater part of his army abandoning him; and finding that our army was fast advancing upon him, and that all opposition with the slender force which remained with him would be but useless, Dost Mahomed fled..."¹⁴

Two weeks later, Shah Shuja and the British entered Kabul unopposed. However, as in Kandahar, a lack of enthusiasm toward Shah Shuja was clearly apparent among Kabul's residents. Despite their earlier plans to crown Shah Shuja and then leave Afghanistan, it became clear to the British that unless a permanent presence was maintained in Afghanistan, Shah Shuja would shortly be toppled from power. However, with Lord Auckland back in India demanding to cut costs, General Keane led most of the British soldiers back to India, leaving just two brigades to guard Kabul, a division to garrison Kandahar, and smaller forces in Ghazni, Quetta and Jalalabad to maintain lines of communication.¹⁵

Since the British had decided to establish a semi-permanent garrison in Kabul, they needed some sort of shelter for their troops and camp followers. The obvious choice was the Bala Hissar, a massive palace/fortress that was the dominant landmark in Kabul. However, Shah Shuja objected to the British sharing the Bala Hissar, as having British soldiers guarding his own palace

would further weaken Shah Shuja's prestige among his subjects. Macnaghten overruled his officers to appease Shah Shuja, and the British began construction on their own fort, or cantonment.

The location and construction of the cantonment was atrocious. Lieutenant Vincent Eyre wrote, "Our cantonment at Cabul, whether we look to its situation or its construction, must ever be spoken of as a disgrace to our military skill and judgment."¹⁶ The cantonment was constructed in a low, swampy plain that was commanded by hills on all sides. By means of fortifications, the British had only a mud wall that was waist high in some places.¹⁷ Even worse, the British decided to build a separate fort to house all of their supplies, including food and medicine. If this second fort could be captured or cut off from the main cantonment, the British would face serious supply problems.

Still, at the time, the British had little to worry about. Afghanistan, thanks to generous subsidies paid by the British to tribal chiefs, was in a state of peace. More importantly for the British, their invasion of Afghanistan to keep it out of Russian hands seemed vindicated when they learned that a Russian expedition of 5,000 men had set out for Khiva, in modern day Uzbekistan. However, the British soon learned that the Russian attack on Khiva was a complete disaster. The Russians began their campaign in November, and, unfortunately for them, encountered the worst winter in years. A few months later, the Russians staggered home without firing a single shot, having lost 1,000 men.

Throughout 1840 and early 1841, Afghanistan continued to remain relatively quiet, at least on the surface. Minor uprisings did occur, but these were put down quickly. However, two significant events occurred. First of all, in November 1840, Dost Mohammed surrendered to Sir Macnaghten, which was completely unexpected. Macnaghten wrote in a letter back to India that appeared in the *London Gazette*, "I was returning from my evening ride and, within a few yards of my own residence in the citadel, when a single horseman galloped [sic] up to me, and having satisfied himself that I was the Envoy and Minister, told me that Dost Mahomed Khan was arrived and sought my protection. Dost

Mahomed Khan rode up to me and alighted from his horse."¹⁸ Dost Mohammed was eventually exiled to India, where, in a twist of irony, he occupied Shah Shuja's former house!

The second event destined to play an important role in upcoming events was the arrival of a new commander in April 1841: Major-General William Elphinstone.¹⁹ Why Elphinstone was chosen for the job is still a mystery to most historians. The general was almost 60, suffering from severe gout and dysentery and had not held a field command since Waterloo more than 25 years earlier.

Despite the calm, some thought that the British could not hope to hold Afghanistan. An article that appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* was strangely prophetic. The article read, "Still, though Affghanistan [sic] may be for the moment tranquil, our prospects there are far from cheering...we are hated as both strangers and infidels, and as the interested supporters of an unpopular dynasty; and any disaster which befell our arms, any material reduction of the army of occupation, would be followed by an instant and universal revolt of all the tribes."²⁰

Even General Sir William Nott, the commander of the British garrison in Kandahar, predicted a British disaster in Afghanistan. He wrote in a letter, "In the meantime, all goes wrong here. We are become hated by the people, and the English name and character, which two years ago stood so high and fair, has become a bye-word...Unless several regiments be quickly sent, not a man will be left to note the fall of his comrades."²¹

In the middle of 1841, the first signs of open rebellion started to show. In the summer of 1841, Sir Macnaghten, responding to calls to cut costs, halved the annual subsidy paid to the powerful Ghilzai tribe of eastern Afghanistan. Thus far, the Ghilzais had completely refrained from harassing the hundreds of convoys that passed through their territory to and from India. However, the Ghilzais felt betrayed by Macnaghten's action, and they began to attack supply convoys, making the area unsafe for travel. This occurred at a most inconvenient time for Macnaghten, who had just been named President of Bombay, the second-most

prestigious position in British India.²² However, a plan was soon decided upon: Brigadier Sale's troops which were returning to India anyway, would clear the rebellious Ghilzais out of the way. Then, Sir Macnaghten and Brigadier Sale's wife, Florentia, would return to India. However, the second part of this plan would never be carried out. Afghanistan was about to erupt into uncontrollable violence.

On the night of November 1, 1841, a mob surrounded the house of Sir Alexander Burnes. Of the British, Burnes was particularly despised because he was unscrupulous about having affairs with Afghan women. At first, the mob just consisted of men whom he had personally offended. Over time, though, the mob's ranks swelled with people who just hated the British presence. Burnes stood on his balcony and tried to reason with the crowd, promising them gold from the adjacent treasury if they would disperse. Mohan Lal, Burnes's secretary, wrote, "Now about 200 people assembled on all sides, and Sir Alexander Burnes, from the window of his upper room, demanded the insurgents to pacify themselves, and promised a handsome reward to all."²³ However, Burnes's proposal was rejected, and the mob started screaming for Burnes's blood. Eventually, Burnes gave the order for his bodyguard to fire, but by then it was much too late. According to most accounts, Burnes was approached by a mysterious Afghan who offered to lead Burnes to safety if he would don Afghan clothes. Burnes, out of other alternatives, agreed, but as soon as they were outside, the mysterious Afghan denounced Burnes to the crowd. Burnes, along with his brother and the commander of Burnes' bodyguard, Captain William Broadfoot, were gruesomely killed by the mob. The enraged Afghans proceeded to burn down Burnes's house and loot £17,000 from the treasury.²⁴ Ironically, Burnes had been warned the day before that the pot was about to boil over. As Lady Florentia Sale wrote in her diary, "It is further worthy of remark, that Taj Mahommed Khan went to Sir Alexander Burnes the very day before the insurrection broke out and told him what was going on. Burnes, incredulous, heaped abuse on this gentleman's head."²⁵

Despite their momentary success, the Afghans were in great danger. The British, from their cantonment, could clearly hear and see the violence in Kabul. A strong show of force could have ended the revolt, but General Elphinstone could not decide whether or not to commit troops. The Afghans were afraid that the British would, indeed, come to nip the rebellion in the bud. In fact, the two leaders of the revolt had their horses saddled and their belongings packed in saddlebags, ready to flee at a moment's notice.²⁶ However, due to Elphinstone's indecision, the Afghans gained confidence and momentum. In the end, Shah Shuja was the only person who acted on that fateful night. Shah Shuja sent his best troops to drive away the mob, but, trapped in Kabul's narrow streets, the men suffered heavy casualties. The British had missed a golden opportunity to solidify their position, but now it was too late. As Lt. Vincent Eyre wrote, "Such an exhibition on our part taught the enemy their strength—confirmed against us those who, however disposed to join in the rebellion, had hitherto keep aloof from prudential motives, and ultimately encouraged the nation to unite as one man for our destruction."²⁷ Even worse, most of their Afghan allies deserted at this display of indecision. Eyre wrote, "The unwelcome truth was soon forced upon us, that in the whole Affghan [sic] nation we could not reckon on a single friend."²⁸

Across the country, emboldened by British incompetence, tribesmen rose in revolt. What started out as a rather small demonstration in Kabul was now a national rebellion. Worst of all for the British, warriors from every corner of Afghanistan flocked to Kabul to besiege the foreigners and infidels.

At this point, the British realized the sheer measure of their folly in the design and construction of their cantonment, as well as their outdated weaponry. Afghan marksmen, among the best in the world, commanded the nearby heights and could easily pick off unwary soldiers or camp followers. These snipers used jezails, matchlock muskets that were slow-firing but accurate at 800 yards.²⁹ As Lady Sale, an astute observer of military affairs, wrote, "They [the Afghans] fire from rests; and then take

excellent aim; and are capital riflemen, hiding behind any stone sufficiently large to cover their head, and quietly watching their opportunities to snipe off our people.”³⁰ The British, by contrast, were armed with Brown Bess muskets, which had been standard issue in the American Revolution and were only effective up to about 150 yards.

However, the British faced even worse problems than the crack Afghan sharpshooters. On November 3, 1841, just two days after the death of Sir Alexander Burnes, Afghan cavalry attacked the vulnerable fort that contained all of the British food, medicine, and clothing supplies. After a brief defense, the fort’s commander told General Elphinstone that unless he was given a powerful force of reinforcements, the fort would have to be abandoned. Elphinstone, instead of sending one strong force, sent four small forces. Predictably, these forces were all stopped short of the fort, which was subsequently abandoned. The loss of the fort was both an immense blow to the British and a major rallying point for the Afghan rebellion. As Lt. Eyre wrote, “It is beyond a doubt that our feeble and ineffectual defence of this fort, and the valuable booty it yielded, was the first fatal blow to our supremacy at Cabul.”³¹

For the next several weeks, the Afghans engaged the British in skirmishes, but no major fighting occurred. However, on November 23, the British launched a major attack on the strategic position of the Beymaroo Heights, from which Afghan sharpshooters were wreaking havoc on the cantonment. The attack was a complete disaster. The British, fearing Afghan cavalry, formed their infantry into squares. This was fine for resisting cavalry, but Afghan sharpshooters, stationed on the nearby hills, simply fired into the mass of troops. While the British were under fire, a force of *ghazis*, or fanatical religious warriors, hit the British flank. The British fled in disarray back to the cantonment, but their commander, Brigadier John Shelton, succeeded in rallying the men.³² The British countercharged to regain the Beymaroo Heights, with the battle soon turning into a gunfight between the British and the Afghans. Not surprisingly, the Afghans, with their highly accurate jezails, soon gained the upper hand, and British casualties started

to mount. In a final, devastating blow, another force of *ghazis* attacked the British flank. This time, the British fled for good. As Captain George Lawrence wrote, “I could see from my post our flying troops hotly pursued and mixed up with the enemy, who were slaughtering them on all sides; the scene was so fearful that I can never forget it.”³³ Lieutenant Vincent Eyre remembered “the slaughter of the soldier, the loss of officers, the evident panic in our ranks.”³⁴ The British were only saved from total annihilation by the goodwill of one of the Afghan commanders, who could have easily overrun the cantonment but chose not to.

Unknown to the British, however, another powerful Afghan witnessed the battle. Twenty-five year old Akbar Khan, one of Dost Mohammed’s sons, had arrived in Kabul the day before at the head of a strong party of cavalry.

The British knew as well as the Afghans that they were beaten. A few days after the battle, Afghan envoys met with Sir Macnaghten to discuss possible peace terms. However, from a British perspective, the Afghans were unreasonable from the start. The Afghans demanded an unconditional surrender and relinquishment of all British weapons.³⁵ Macnaghten still believed, despite considerable evidence to the contrary, that the Afghans were stupid and that he could convince them to make a favorable deal. Macnaghten’s goal was to pit Afghan against Afghan, as Akbar Khan and others vied for supremacy in the political vacuum that was Kabul.

Negotiations continued for several weeks, with both sides unwilling to make concession. An agreement was finally reached on December 11 between Macnaghten and the Afghan chiefs. However, unbeknownst to the rest of the Afghan chiefs, Sir Macnaghten was doing some double dealing with Akbar Khan. On December 22, Akbar Khan proposed a new plan to Macnaghten. The plan stated that the hated Shah Shuja could remain as ruler, as long as Akbar Khan was given the position of vizier, or chief adviser. Additionally, instead of departing in the brutal Afghan winter, the British would be allowed to peacefully leave the country the following spring. This seemed too good to be true for

Macnaghten, and indeed it was. Some of Macnaghten's closest friends in the cantonment warned Macnaghten that this was just a treacherous plot. George Lawrence, Macnaghten's secretary, asked Macnaghten if there was not a risk of treachery. Macnaghten replied, "Treachery! Of course there is; but what can I do? The General [Elphinstone] has declared his inability to fight, we have no prospect of aid from any quarter, the enemy are only playing with us, not one article of the treaty have they fulfilled, and I have no confidence whatever in them."³⁶

The next day, December 23, 1841, Sir William Macnaghten departed the cantonment. Along with Macnaghten were three officers, including Captain Lawrence. Protecting the group was a small cavalry patrol of only 10 men. As Macnaghten and the officers got near the hill on which Akbar Khan was waiting, the cavalry patrol returned to the cantonment. Macnaghten, who supposed the agreement to be a secret between himself and Akbar Khan, was surprised at the number of Afghans present. As Captain Lawrence wrote:

I had on first arriving remarked to Sir William the unusually large number of armed Affghans [sic] congregated around us, and suggested his requesting Akbar Khan to send them to a distance, as the meeting was confidential. The Envoy, in consequence, mentioned the subject to Mohamed Akbar, who said, 'Oh, we are all in the same boat....' Scarcely were the words uttered, when my pistols were snatched from my waist, the sword drawn from the scabbard, and my arms pinioned.... I turned round and saw the Envoy, with his head down in the declivity, struggling to rise, and his wrists locked in the grasp of Mohammed Akbar, horror and consternation being apparent in his face.³⁷

While Sir William Macnaghten was being dragged away by Akbar Khan, Lawrence and the other two officers were ordered by friendly chiefs to mount up behind them. It was very lucky for the men that they did, because the Afghan crowd closed in, demanding the infidels' blood. One officer, Captain Robert Trevor, either fell or was dragged from his horse, and was immediately hacked to death by the mob. Captain Lawrence and the other officer were whisked away to a jail, which almost surely saved their lives.

Meanwhile, Macnaghten was still struggling with Akbar Khan. A few moments later, pistol shots rang out. Exact details of the Envoy's death vary. Akbar Khan later told the British that he had not meant at all to kill Macnaghten, but only wanted to keep him as a hostage to ensure Dost Mohammed's safety. To the Afghan chiefs, though, he told a different story. Akbar claimed to have outsmarted Macnaghten and took personal credit for his death.³⁸ Whichever account is more accurate, Macnaghten's corpse, missing its arms, legs, and head, was later found hanging in Kabul's bazaar.

After Sir Macnaghten's murder, the top political officer was now a sick and wounded Eldred Pottinger, the "Hero of Herat." For some time, Pottinger had been tirelessly advocating an immediate march from the vulnerable cantonment to the well-guarded Bala Hissar. However, the inept Elphinstone kept finding reasons why this action should not be taken. Finally, the Afghans, realizing their vulnerability, destroyed the one bridge that would make such a move possible. Now, Pottinger had the thankless job of dealing with an untrustworthy adversary who held all the cards.

The British were desperate, and Akbar Khan knew it. In early January 1842, the British and Akbar Khan agreed on a peace treaty. All of the British cannons would be handed over, and all the other British garrisons in Afghanistan would also withdraw. In exchange, Akbar Khan would escort the British to the Indian frontier, and the British themselves would not be harmed. On January 6, the British army commenced its retreat with 4,500 soldiers and 12,000 assorted camp followers.

As soon as the British left the cantonment, the Afghans swarmed into it, looting and burning. More ominous, however, was the fact that the Afghans opened fire on the British rearguard as soon as they had left the cantonment.

The retreat from Kabul soon turned into a running battle. Hugh snowdrifts and subzero temperatures made sustained marching nearly impossible, and, paralyzed by the cold, many of the men got frostbite and could not use their weapons. Supplies, especially food and clothing, were running extremely low. Despite Akbar

Khan's assurances, the British were fired upon by hundreds or thousands of hostile tribesmen lining the passes. Afghan cavalry swept down and indiscriminately slaughtered unarmed camp followers as well as soldiers. As Lt. Eyre wrote, "Fresh numbers fell at every volley, and the gorge was soon choked with the dead and dying... The Affghans [sic] now rushed down upon their helpless and unresisting victims sword in hand, and a general massacre took place."³⁹ In the first five days of marching from the cantonment, some 12,000 of the 16,500 initial force had perished.⁴⁰

The lucky ones were those handed over to Akbar Khan as hostages. Some of these included Captain Lawrence, Lieutenant Eyre, Lady Sale, and General Elphinstone. Despite his treacherous behavior to the rest of the British, Akbar Khan treated his captives well, presumably because his father, Dost Mohammed, was still in British custody in India.

Meanwhile, the rest of the troops and camp followers were trying to reach safety in India. However, it was not to be. As the troops and camp followers reached the Jugdulluk Pass, they found a terrible surprise. The Afghans had constructed, across the entire length of the pass, a barrier some six feet high consisting of prickly bushes and tree branches. As Lady Sale wrote, "Here two barriers had been thrown across the road, constructed of bushes and branches of trees.... The enemy, who had waited for them in great force at this spot, rushed upon the column, knife in hand."⁴¹

At this point, it became every man for himself. From the barrier at Jugdulluk Pass, two weary groups of men emerged alive. The larger group made a last stand at the village of Gandamak, where, despite their heroic defense, all were killed or captured.

On January 13, 1842, the remaining group stopped at the village of Futtehabad. When one soldier, Captain Bellew, approached the village asking for food, the villagers sounded an alarm, and scores of warriors poured out of concealment. As Dr. William Brydon, who was one of the unfortunate party, later wrote, "Captain Bellew said he would go and enquire into the state of the country... In about a quarter of an hour he returned again and said he was afraid he had ruined us, as from the village, which was

on a mound, he could see the cavalry coming up on all sides."⁴² The villagers reassured Captain Bellew that they were friendly, but when Captain Bellew returned, he was immediately shot. Of the group's approximately dozen men, only five got away safely. Three of them soon rode ahead to a fate that remains unknown. Dr. Brydon's companion, who was wounded, decided to hide in a cave and hope for later rescue. The doctor continued by himself, desperately hoping to reach the British garrison at Jalalabad.

After riding by himself for a while, Dr. Brydon encountered a group of about 20 Afghans by the side of the road. Luckily for him, the Afghans were unarmed, and only pelted him with stones as he rode past. A little while later, Dr. Brydon encountered another Afghan, who was armed with a jezail. The Afghan shot at the doctor, but only succeeded in snapping his sword and wounding his pony. Before the Afghan could fire again, the doctor was out of range.

Before long, Dr. Brydon spotted a small party of cavalry in the distance. Believing them to be a British patrol from Jalalabad, Dr. Brydon eagerly rode toward them. However, as he got closer, Dr. Brydon realized that the men were Afghans. They immediately sent a horseman to deal with the unfortunate doctor. As Dr. Brydon later wrote, "He passed me, but turned and rode at me again. This time just as he was striking, I threw the handle of the sword at his head, in swerving to avoid which, he only cut me on the back of the left hand. Feeling it disabled, I stretched down the right to pick up the bridle. I suppose my foe thought it was a pistol, for he turned at once and made off as quick as he could."⁴³

Despite his momentary success, Dr. Brydon's condition was dire. He was wounded in four places, his pony near death, and still an unknown distance away from Jalalabad. To Dr. Brydon's immense good fortune, he was closer to Jalalabad than he had thought, and a British cavalry patrol did discover him. The Doctor was brought into the city and fed and cared for. Beacon fires were lit on Jalalabad's walls and bugles were sounded to bring in survivors, but after a few days, it became clear that Dr. Brydon was the only one to get through.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, back in India, a new governor-general had taken over. Lord Ellenborough was immediately concerned with winning back British prestige in Afghanistan and teaching the Afghans a lesson. To that end, the new governor-general sent Major-General George Pollock to reinforce Brigadier Sales' beleaguered troops under siege in Jalalabad, where Akbar Khan had taken personal command. Meanwhile, the forces of General Sir William Nott were clearing the Afghans from the Kandahar area. But the hawkish Ellenborough now got cold feet. Worried about mounting costs and the possibility of another massacre, and feeling that he had done enough to restore British prestige, Ellenborough ordered Generals Pollock and Nott to withdraw to India.⁴⁵

Both men, determined to avenge their late comrades, were furious when they heard the news. They protested loudly, saying that at the time, they could not retreat to India via the most direct route. They could, however, retreat to India via Kabul! Ellenborough, faced with the news that Parliament did *not* view the recent successes as a balm to the earlier disasters, amended his orders, allowing Pollock and Nott to retreat through Kabul. The two armies became known jointly as "The Army of Retribution." The march soon became a race, with both generals vying to reach Kabul before the other. Along the way, Pollock, by going in the reverse direction, encountered the grim scene of the slaughter of Elphinstone's column. An army chaplain observed, "The narrow path by which they moved was strewn with the remains of Elphinstone's army. One upon another laid the dead; some of them reduced to the conditions of mere skeletons; other clothed, and with the features still so entire, that by many of their old acquaintances they were recognised."⁴⁶ Pollock, who had much less distance to cover than Nott, arrived in Kabul first, on September 15, 1842. He immediately blew up Kabul's grand bazaar and executed "perpetrators" of the rebellion.

At the same time, a company of cavalry was sent to rescue Akbar Khan's hostages, which included Lady Sale, Lieutenant Eyre and Captain Lawrence. Akbar Khan, knowing if taken alive he would face a fierce penalty from the British, fled into the moun-

tains. For the most part, the hostages were soon reunited with their loved ones. One who did not, though, was General Elphinstone. The sick and inept commander had died in April. Another key figure who died in April was Shah Shuja, who was assassinated by his own godson.⁴⁷

After the British marched back through Afghanistan's treacherous passes to India, life in Afghanistan returned to a state of relative normality. Dost Mohammed was released from India, and, with British blessing, returned to his country to resume his rule. Remarkably, Dost Mohammed lived until 1863, maintaining cordial relations with the British almost the whole time.

Despite Dost Mohammed's forgiveness, others did not forget the debacle so quickly. The Sikhs were one of these. Just as Alexander Burnes had predicted, after Ranjit Singh's death, infighting tore apart the Sikh state. After witnessing Britain's disaster in Afghanistan, the British aura of invincibility in Asia was forever shattered. Not surprisingly, Ranjit Singh's ultimate successor was decidedly less friendly to the British, and after aggression on both sides, war broke out in 1845. The bloody war ended the next year, with the British annexing part of the Sikh territory. Another fierce war was fought two years later, and this time, the British took the rest of the Sikh lands and added it to the growing size of British India.

Another consequence of the First Anglo-Afghan War was that it contributed to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The Sepoy Mutiny was a rebellion by the Indians against their British rulers. The sepoys, native soldiers recruited and trained by the British East India Company and who had borne the brunt of the casualties in Afghanistan, were unhappy with their cavalier treatment by the British. After withstanding years of abuse, the sepoys began to consider rebellion after experiencing first-hand the British weakness during the First Anglo-Afghan War. In fact, some of the first sepoy units to revolt were those who had served in Afghanistan!⁴⁸ Although it ultimately failed, the Sepoy Mutiny came very close to driving the British out of India, which could have dramatically changed history.

Despite their stunning and remarkable defeat in the First Anglo-Afghan War, the British fought two more wars with Afghanistan, one from 1878-1881, and another in 1919. The Second Anglo-Afghan War was almost as bad for the British as the first, as they lost large amounts of men and money. Both the Second and Third Anglo-Afghan Wars were mainly fought over control of Afghanistan's foreign policy. Britain still feared Russian attacks on India, and when Afghanistan's ruler resisted giving control of Afghanistan's foreign affairs to Britain, the British declared war.

The First Anglo-Afghan War will go down as one of history's most stunning military defeats. As former soldier and historian John William Kaye wrote in his 1851 account of the war, "No failure so total or overwhelming as this is recorded in the page of history. No lesson so grand and impressive is to be found in all the annals of the world."⁴⁹ However, this war should never have been fought at all. If Lord Auckland had compromised with Dost Mohammed, who sincerely wanted an alliance with the British, instead of stubbornly setting his mind on invasion, the British could have had a stronger ally than Shah Shuja at a much lower cost. Kaye commented, "If, instead of expelling Dost Mohammed [from his principality, we had advanced him a little money to raise, and lent him a few officers to drill, an army, the Persians would not now be lining the walls of Herat. But, instead of strengthening the Afghans, we have weakened them. Instead of making them our friends, we have made them our implacable foes."⁵⁰

According to Afghan oral tradition, Dr. Brydon, the sole survivor of the retreat from Kabul, was deliberately allowed to escape "so that he might return to his own people and tell of the ferocity and bravery of the Afghan tribes. Battered Dr. Brydon was spared as a warning to the British: leave Afghanistan, and never come back."⁵¹

The British, of course, disregarded this warning. In addition to the Army of Retribution, the British returned to fight two more wars in Afghanistan before finally leaving the region in 1919. Russia, the other major contender for Afghanistan, also did not heed this warning. In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan

seeking, as the British had before, to establish a friendly "buffer state" in the region. In both cases, the European armies easily conquered the main cities in Afghanistan and installed a puppet ruler. However, the Soviets, like the British, were unable to exert dominance over the rural areas of Afghanistan, which were hotbeds of resistance. In both instances, fiercely religious Afghan warriors declared a jihad against the infidels and used guerilla tactics that ran counter to the British and Soviet military strengths. After the foreigners pulled out of Afghanistan, both puppet rulers were soon assassinated, and civil war broke out.

Is the U.S. now also failing to heed the warning? Like the British Empire and the Soviet Union, the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow an unfriendly government. Like the British and the Soviets, the U.S. quickly took control of Afghanistan's major cities but, more than nine years later, continues to struggle to maintain control of Afghanistan's rural areas and mountainous regions. Like the British and the Soviets, the U.S. cannot easily counter the guerilla tactics used by the Afghan resistance and has had, at best, mixed success in forging stable alliances with the tribal chiefs who control much of the countryside. Eventually, the U.S., too, will leave Afghanistan. On what terms and with what lasting results remain to be seen.

The First Anglo-Afghan War was neither the first nor the last attempt by a powerful foreign invader to bend Afghanistan to its will, but the Afghan people have proved uncompromising in their independence. Ahmad Shah Massoud, a leader of Afghanistan's Northern Alliance before his assassination in 2001, aptly noted, "We will not be a pawn in someone else's game, we will always be Afghanistan!"⁵²



¹ Valentin Varennikov, interviewed on The True Story of Charlie Wilson The History Channel, December 28, 2007

² David Clingingsmith and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "India's De-Industrialization Under British Rule: New Ideas, New Evidence," Harvard Institute of Economic Research, Discussion Paper Number 2039 (June 2004) p. 11, <http://www.economic.harvard.edu/pub/hier/2004/HIER2039.pdf>

³ Lawrence H. Officer, "Purchasing Power of British Pounds from 1264 to 2007," MeasuringWorth.com, 2009, <http://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/>

⁴ John William Kaye, History of the War in Afghanistan: From the Unpublished Letters and Journals of Political and Military Officers Employed in Afghanistan Throughout the Entire Period of British Connexion with That Country (London: Richard Bentley, 1851) p. 645

⁵ Stephen Tanner, Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002) p. 135

⁶ Quoted in Karl Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999) p. 85

⁷ John Waller, Beyond the Khyber Pass: The Road to British Disaster in the First Afghan War (New York: Random House, 1990) p. 127

⁸ Most of these were British East India Company sepoy or native Indian troops, not British regulars. Throughout the remainder, when referring to the "British" militarily, I am also including the sepoy.

⁹ These included blacksmiths, cooks, laundrywomen, merchants, prostitutes, etc.

¹⁰ Martin Ewans, Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002) p. 45

¹¹ Quoted in Waller, p. 128

¹² Sir George Lawrence, Reminiscences of Forty-Three Years in India (London: John Murray, 1874) p. 11

¹³ Tanner, p. 142

¹⁴ London Gazette 2045, no. 19784 (October 30, 1839) p. 6

¹⁵ Ewans, p. 46

¹⁶ Vincent Eyre, The Military Operations at Cabul, Which Ended in the Retreat and Destruction of the British Army, January 1842, With a Journal of Imprisonment in Affghanistan (London: John Murray, 1843) p. 34

¹⁷ Peter Hopkirk, The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia (New York: Kodansha International, 1990) p. 245

¹⁸ William Macnaghten, Letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, published in the London Gazette January 9, 1841, p. 8

¹⁹ Major-General William Elphinstone was a cousin of Mountstuart Elphinstone, who was previously quoted in footnote 10.

²⁰ "Results of Our Affghan [sic] Conquests," Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine 50, no. 309 (July 1841) p. 161, under <http://books.google.com/books?id=bKY-p1MMDzAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=blackwod%27s+Edinburgh&lr=&ei=s0GjR57VI4zQiQh2jJC3Cg#PRA4-PA161,M1>

²¹ J.H. Stocqueler, Memoirs and Correspondence of Major-General Sir William Nott, G.C.B., Commander of the Army at Candahar, and Envoy at the Court of the King of Oude (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1854) pp. 256-257

²² Meyer and Brysac, p. 94

²³ Mohan Lal, Life of the Amir Dost Mohammed Khan of Kabul: With His Political Proceedings Towards the English, Russian, and Persian Governments, Including the Victories and Disasters of the British Army in Afghanistan (London: Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1846) p. 404

²⁴ Tanner, p. 1616

²⁵ Florentia Sale, A Journal of the First Afghan War ed. Patrick Macrory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 21

²⁶ Hopkirk, p. 242

²⁷ Eyre, p. 27

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 29

²⁹ Meyer and Brysac, p. 98

³⁰ Sale, pp. 44-45

³¹ Eyre, p. 44

³² Tanner, pp. 170-171

³³ Lawrence, p. 93

³⁴ Eyre, p. 116

³⁵ Waller, p. 227

³⁶ Lawrence, p. 117

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119

³⁸ Tanner, p. 125

³⁹ Eyre, p. 218

⁴⁰ Meyer and Brysac, p. 103

- ⁴¹ Sale, p. 124
- ⁴² William Brydon, "Dr. Brydon's Ride," Appendix I in A Journal of the First Afghan War ed. Patrick Macrory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 166
- ⁴³ Brydon, p. 167
- ⁴⁴ Tanner, p. 187
- ⁴⁵ Hopkirk, p. 272
- ⁴⁶ G.R. Gleig, Sale's Brigade in Afghanistan, With an Account of the Seizure and Defence of Jellalabad (London: John Murray, 1846) p. 173
- ⁴⁷ Meyer and Brysac, p. 105
- ⁴⁸ Hopkirk, p. 292
- ⁴⁹ Kay, p. 669
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 670
- ⁵¹ Ben Macintyre, "Written Again in British Blood," Times Online July 7, 2006, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/ben_macintyre/article684268.ece
- ⁵² "Quotes from Afghan Personalities of Yesterday and Today," Afghanistan Online, <http://www.afghan-web.com/history/quotes/html>. Ahmad Shah Massoud, a leader of Afghanistan's anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, was assassinated by al Qaeda operatives two days before September 11, 2001.

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The Crusade of Nicopolis

Much larger was the Crusade of Nicopolis. In 1395, King Sigismund of Hungary (1387-1437) sent a desperate plea for assistance to the French court. Charles responded enthusiastically with money and men, and he urged his subjects to contribute their time and money to the cause. Both Popes endorsed the proposed crusade and issued indulgences for whichever troops recognized them. Many Burgundian and German barons also joined the expedition. The troops rendezvoused in 1396 at Buda, where they were joined by Sigismund and his armies. It was an impressive force, one of the largest crusades ever assembled.

In a council of war, the King of Hungary argued for a cautious advance into Turkish territory, but the knights, eager to cover themselves with glory, would not hear of it. They wanted to follow the example of the First Crusade, fighting the infidel directly and winning conquests all the way to Jerusalem. The crusaders crossed the Danube into Bulgaria, where they took a few small towns. Next they laid siege to Nicopolis, a well-fortified town overlooking the Danube. Sultan Bayazid I (1389-1402) was prosecuting his own siege at Constantinople when he heard of Nicopolis's distress. At once, he marched his forces to meet the crusaders. The two sides had armies of equal size but unequal quality. Unlike the Christians, Bayazid's men were well disciplined and under a unified command. The sultan took up a position on a hill and waited. Sigismund again counseled caution, but the French and Burgundian knights insisted on an immediate attack. They also demanded the honor of leading the assault.

The thunder of the Frankish charge echoed in the valley outside Nicopolis as the brightly adorned knights galloped toward the Turkish lines. Quickly and decisively, they defeated the Turkish light cavalry. Beyond was a forest of wooden stakes driven into the soil to break up a charge. When the knights dismounted and began removing the stakes, archers approached and showered arrows down on them. The Franks fell ferociously on the archers, who ran up the hill to safety. On foot, the knights pursued them. As they crested the hill, they found an unexpected sight. Waiting for them was the sultan himself with his elite Turkish cavalry and Serbian army. The flower of chivalry turned tail and ran back down the hill, but it was too late. The Turks advanced in good order, crushing the crusading army. The defeat was total. Most of the crusaders were captured or killed; a few escaped into the woods. Those barons who could arrange ransoms were allowed to go free. The rest, about three thousand in all, were stripped naked, tied together with ropes, and led before Bayazid, where they were decapitated.

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