

DOOMED TO REPEAT

NAME **THE LESSONS OF**

SUBJECT **HISTORY**

EXAM **WE'VE FAILED**

DATE **TO LEARN** GRADE

F



330BC

100BC

400AD

750AD



1840AD



1980AD



2001AD

BILL FAWCETT

EDITOR OF *HOW TO
LOSE A BATTLE*



Doomed to Repeat

The Lessons of History
We've Failed to Learn

BILL FAWCETT

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*To my editor, Will Hinton.
Your insights and suggestions made this so much better. Thank you.*

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[1 Afghanistan, Again?](#)

[2 Terrorism, Still](#)

[3 North of the Sahara](#)

[4 Sub-Saharan Africa](#)

[5 A Plague on All of Our Houses](#)

[6 How You Say it](#)

[7 Speculation and Crashes](#)

[8 Too Much Money?](#)

[9 Unemployment](#)

[10 Depressions and Recessions](#)

[11 Depression and Recession Cures](#)

[12 The Destruction of the Middle Class](#)

[13 Britain, Former Superpower](#)

[14 America and the Roman Empire](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Bill Fawcett](#)

[Back Ads](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

INTRODUCTION

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

— GEORGE SANTAYANA (1863–1952),
THE LIFE OF REASON

The march of history is less a steady stride than a series of stumbles and forward falls.

And the stumbles the United States, Europe, and the rest of the world are taking at the beginning of the twenty-first century are neither new nor unique.

Your great-great-great-grandparents and their leaders had to overcome their own versions of the same problems that you wake up worrying about. In many cases they found a way to fix, or at least survive, all those various woes. That is what this book is about.

Doomed to Repeat looks at many of the worst and most threatening problems society faces today—and that society faced throughout history. These pages are filled with “lessons of the past.”

Each topic in this survey is worthy of an entire library of books. In many cases there are shelves devoted to a topic’s problems and solutions. In fact, if you find a topic that is mentioned here to be of particular interest, go ahead and delve into more comprehensive works on it, or at least read further about it on the Internet.

Despite the title, this is not a book of doom and gloom. The title warns that we need to learn from the past to solve today’s problems, not that they are impossible to overcome. For a tome about the worst disasters, collapses, and perplexing conundrums facing the world today, you might find it surprisingly upbeat. As the author, I make no excuse for the optimistic tone, since this is my own personal interpretation. I choose not only to see the glass as half full, but to have confidence that it can be filled to the rim. If nothing else, knowing that terrorism, depressions, speculation bubbles, arguments about official languages, and attempts to make a nation out of Afghanistan are not new should be reassuring. Our ancestors and forefathers not only survived almost identical challenges to the ones faced today, but many times they dealt with them successfully.

Doomed to Repeat might give you hope. It is a reminder that the current problems, which right now seem to threaten your entire well-being and prosperity, are not insoluble . . . if we can learn from history.

CHAPTER ONE

Afghanistan, Again?

When two armies approach each other it makes all the difference in the world which one owns only the ground it stands on and which owns all the rest. We saw this in the South African conflict, where we owned nothing beyond the light of our campfires, whereas the Boers rode where they pleased all over the country.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL (1874–1965),
THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Often Invaded, Almost Never Conquered

Perhaps the most pressing foreign policy and military problem facing the United States and its NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies in 2013 is dealing with the Taliban and the Islamic extremists in Afghanistan. More accurately, it is the attempt by the United States to create a situation in Afghanistan where that nation will not easily revert to being a breeding ground and refuge for fundamentalist Islamic terrorists. To permanently eliminate that threat, the United States and NATO are striving to assist Afghanistan in becoming a stable nation and, hopefully, a democracy. This is an exercise in what the U.S. State Department calls “nation building.”

The theory behind the policy of nation building suggests that a strong central government will be able to prevent or control the terrorists. A further concern the United States is grappling with is ensuring that, regardless of the ultimate outcome in Afghanistan, the Islamic fundamentalist movement, called the Taliban, is unable to return to power. The group actively hosted and supported the al-Qaeda network and other terrorist groups when it was in control of Afghanistan.

On the day this chapter was written, the BBC World News headline read “Kabul Wakes Up to More Fighting.” This headline could have been used hundreds of times during the last three millennia. There are many things about today’s Afghanistan that make it one of the most difficult places in the world to turn into a unified and stable nation. Part of the problem is that the rural population is hard to reach. They are mostly illiterate (the literacy rate was 18.7 percent for males and 2.8 percent for females in 1978, and has improved only a little since) and often antagonistic, even to neighboring tribes. Another concern is the Afghan tribesmen’s history of fanatical resistance to any foreign presence in the valleys. This tradition goes back nearly three millennia. Even today, there are few cities and very little infrastructure, such as roads or electrical grids.

In the past thirty years, both of the world’s most powerful nations, the United States and Russia, have been deeply involved in that country. Both entered, at least partially, with the best of intentions. In the past two thousand years, a dozen nations have conquered Afghanistan only to find out that it was almost impossible to hold. The reason for this is the geography of the land, very little of which is flat. If you look at even a simple topographical map of Afghanistan, what you see is mountains and

more mountains.

These mountains, and the valleys between them, both dominate and separate the region. This is reflected in the lives and allegiances of the people. There is not much national identity among the tribalized and locally loyal Afghan peoples. A look at the languages spoken inside Afghanistan shows half a dozen completely different tongues. Because of Afghanistan's mountainous landscape, even a language that is spoken by hundreds of thousands is broken up, with pockets of one tongue isolated inside an area dominated by another.

These are not local accents or dialects, but completely separate languages. Like languages, loyalties are local, because until very recently the connections between the main groups were limited by language, culture, and the difficulties presented by the mountain barriers. In many parts of the world, this division into separate groups is referred to as "tribalism." Some of the Afghan tribes have millions of members, but many remain loyal to their own ethnic group rather than embracing any concept of a "nation" of Afghanistan. This lack of national identity leads to the real problem that was first faced by the USSR and now the United States. To turn Afghanistan into a democratic nation, it first has to become a nation. But both history and geography oppose this result.

There is one historical fact that has to be remembered as America attempts to build a lasting democratic nation out of a land that holds half a dozen major, and numerous minor, ethnic groups that are geographically and culturally separate: that more complications occur because the wide range of views on Islam can divide those within a tribe. While most of the Taliban are Pashtun, only the most reactionary among that tribal group, a minority, support them. The government in Kabul, which the Taliban has sworn to destroy, is also heavily Pashtun. So Afghanistan is a "nation" whose boundaries were set not by tradition, not based on culture or trade, not even based upon history. The closest thing that there has been to an Afghan nation was the relatively short-lived Durrani Empire. It was much larger than the current country, and was itself dominated by only one of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan, as we know it on a modern map, was in no way based on an already existing country or even a shared culture or awareness. Britain decided and imposed where the borders would be to create what was considered "Afghanistan." This was simply an imperial administrative region created with no regard for the languages, cultures, loyalties, or antagonisms of the "natives" who lived there. It was designed not for the people but to make life easier for European bureaucrats. To simplify the administration, the British lumped a number of very different cultural and tribal areas into one unrelated mass with nothing in common but being controlled by the same British governor.

The fact that Afghanistan is an artificially joined land whose borders were imposed from the outside is the basis for many of this nation's modern problems. While some sense of national identity was developed by educated and urban Afghans as a result of the Soviet invasion, the rural population of Afghanistan, about 80 percent of its twenty-one million citizens, still has only a weak sense of national identity and a strong sense of tribal loyalty. For many, their national leaders don't even speak the same language.

When they think of someone who is an Afghan, most people picture one of the Pashtun, who live in the south of the country. They are the most numerous of the many tribes, comprising 42 percent of the population. But even at that size, they are not a majority of the population. The Tajik comprise 27 percent of the population, while six other distinct ethnic groups each make up between 2 percent and 10 percent of the Afghan peoples. The center of Afghanistan is split by the magnificent Hindu Kush mountain range. These mountains have divided the country linguistically and culturally, and have encouraged the development of several different and often traditionally antagonistic tribes. The northern part of Afghanistan contains the Uzbeks, Turkmen, and Tajiks, whose culture is Turkic and

more closely related to that of adjacent nations (including Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and even Iran) than to that of the nationally dominant Pashtun. Between these groups are the Hazaras, who live in the mountains and valleys in the center of the nation. They have their own culture and generally join with the northern peoples to resist Pashtun control of the nation as a whole. There are also a number of smaller ethnic groups, including the Nuristanis of the Hindu Kush, who often have light, even blond hair and pale eyes. This diverse and physically separated population is another barrier to the residents of Afghanistan looking past their local needs and viewing their nation as a whole. This ethnic split is demonstrated today in everything that happens in this artificially joined land. The disparities were reflected by an AP news story, dated April 12, 2010, which stated:

Pakistan's northwest has also been in the headlines lately because of a proposal before Parliament to change the name of the North West Frontier Province to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The name change was pushed by the Awami National Party, a Pashtun nationalist group that leads the provincial government in the northwest.

While internationally we see a border and parts of two nations, many of the Pashtun peoples still see only their tribal lands, regardless of which group of outsiders claims parts of it. The article continued:

Many non-Pashtun groups in the northwest have opposed the idea, and hundreds of protesters took to the streets in Abbottabad, some of whom were armed, according to the police.

Police fired tear gas and bullets into the crowd after they attacked two police stations and torched several vehicles, killing seven people and wounding more than 100 others, said local police official Asif Gohar Khan.

So the geography has been both the protector and the divider of this part of the world. Divided by mountains and joined by narrow passes and long valleys, most of its people identify with their area and ethnic group and not with Afghanistan as a nation.

Afghanistan has always been inviting to conquerors. This land of high mountains and natural barriers has long been an easy country to invade, with its few natural borders and a population concentrated in separate valleys. The area has also proven time after time to be a nearly impossible land to hold. In the sixth century BCE, Cyrus the Great added much of the area to his Persian Empire. The tribes acknowledged him, but the reality was that, outside of the trade cities, this meant virtual nothing. It remained a part of the Persian Empire for almost 250 years until Darius III was defeated by Alexander of Macedon.

In 331 BCE, Alexander the Great won the battle of Gaugamela, and by doing so he ended the Persian Empire, taking control of all its land. After losing that battle, Darius fled across what is today Afghanistan—not because it was a place where he was welcomed, but because even then it was a hard land to travel through or pursue someone across. Alexander himself followed with parts of his army, sometimes leading as few as five hundred horsemen in the pursuit. This went on for weeks and gave the new emperor his first look at the rugged mountains and valleys of the Hindu Kush. Alexander never did catch up to the fallen Persian emperor. Eventually, Darius was betrayed and killed by his own generals and the few soldiers who remained. Alexander and his army returned to Babylon to enjoy the fruits of their victory.

Alexander returned to Afghanistan the next year to ensure the area's loyalty. During his pursuit of Darius, he had discovered that, with the Persians gone, the violent and divided tribes and cities

considered themselves independent. And that independence complicated the Macedonian king's plan for a new conquest. Alexander could not leave with the threat those warlike tribes represented poised over the heart of the new empire. He had to win control, or at least subdue the region, before he could lead his army against India. The Macedonian leader found, as the United States is finding out today, that he had to conquer not a single country, but rather each valley and the numerous fortified mountaintops and cities. He spent almost a year of his short life doing this. All of widespread Persia fell to him after the one battle, but it took numerous battles and sieges for him to gain control of what is today's Afghanistan.

Once the country was conquered, or perhaps more accurate, reconquered, Alexander was able to easily dominate the satraps of southern Afghanistan. However, the areas in the north proved difficult even to one of history's greatest military geniuses. Having conquered the entire Persian Empire in less than five years, Alexander the Great had to spend more than a year in near constant warfare to defeat each northern Afghan city or stronghold individually. While doing so he received some of his most serious injuries, including a chest wound he nearly died from. Yet by the end of 329 BCE, the northern Afghan areas were in revolt against Macedonian rule and had to be subdued once more.

Upon his death, Alexander's empire broke up, and each valley or ethnic group was again fairly independent during the chaos of the Successor Wars.

In one way, Alexander gained more from his conquest of northern Afghanistan than most invaders have since. It was there, in 328 BCE, that he met the daughter of Oxyartes, a local Bactrian chief. Roxsana (her name has been anglicized to Roxanne) was said to have been a brilliant, beautiful, and alluring woman. Certainly Alexander was more than smitten with her, and in 327 BCE, they married. She was sixteen years old at the time. This was not Alexander's only marriage. The Macedonian conqueror had already adopted the Persian tradition of having several wives. This tradition of polygamy was really part symbolic political alliance and part hostage taking. Of course, the marriage to Roxanne did ensure the loyalty of the formerly rebellious Bactrian region and the support of her father's troops.

Alexander and Roxanne had a child, Alexander IV, born after Alexander had died. He was considered to be Alexander the Great's heir. But in the chaos of the Successor Wars that followed Alexander's death at the age of thirty-three, mother and child became pawns of Cassander, who controlled Macedonia and much of Greece. He claimed to rule as Alexander IV's guardian, but in 310 BCE, he ordered for both mother and son to be killed.

After Alexander the Great's death, there was no effort made to maintain a united Afghanistan. The four governors Alexander had appointed were virtually independent of one another, and the Empire was divided among the rival Macedonian commanders. They ruled from cities whose names are now unfamiliar to Americans: Kabul, Sistan, Qandahar, and Baluchistan.

From the beginning, the mountainous geography dividing the lands known today as Afghanistan dictated the nature of the residents and of any war fought against them. The leaders of the two great early empires—the only two real empires of their age—had to conquer this land city by city and valley by valley. Even then, the land was divided among many ethnic groups. Some, like Bactria, became allies, while others never accepted foreign rule. Both empires found the conquest difficult and their control quickly faded once they could not enforce their commands.

The Allied forces in Afghanistan today face many of the same problems as did Cyrus and Alexander—the very nature of the people and geography. There is no unified whole. Afghanistan may be a nation on the map, but not in the minds of its citizens. The land has always divided its people. The residents of each valley are more concerned with their own region than with the very abstract concept that it is

part of a greater whole. The primitive conditions of most of the country mean that each valley village is a self-contained entity. The dominant group, the Pashtun, is from the largest and richest valley.

Much more important to an Afghan is the success of his local area and his ethnic group. As it was when Alexander the Great had to conquer each individual city and fort, they still think of themselves as Pashtun or Tajik, not Afghan. They are more citizens of their villages, or at most provinces, than of their nation. This has meant that control of one part, or even many of its cities, does not mean that the entire nation has been pacified. The Bactrian people, whose descendants still occupy parts of northern Afghanistan, were Macedonian allies only through the decision of their local leader and because Alexander had married that leader's daughter. When Alexander died that tie was lost and their loyalty ended. In their minds they had never been part of Alexander's empire; it was just Bactrians following their tribal chief. Nor has time diminished the ethnic rivalries every conqueror has had to overcome. Like the Bactrians more than two thousand years ago, many of the farmers in the Herat or Kunduz provinces do not think of themselves as being part of a whole and have no tradition of loyalty to those who rule in Kabul.

A look at the two more recent attempts to dominate Afghanistan, those of the British and then the Russians in the nineteenth century, can shed a good deal of light on the situation facing the Russian and American armies in the twenty-first century.

A Very British Disaster

In the late eighteenth century, the two superpowers of that day, Russia and England, both took an interest in Afghanistan. The British, having completed the conquest and domination of India, were likely more than a little overconfident. Afghanistan seemed weak, poor, and divided when compared to the much more populated and prosperous Raj they already controlled. This led them to believe that they could easily and quickly replicate their success in Afghanistan. The Russian Empire also was becoming a major military power as the czars first westernized their armies.

The story of the diplomatic competition for empire known as the "Great Game" and the subsequent British disaster really began earlier, when an impressive leader, Ahmad Shah (who reigned from 1747 to 1773), loosely united Afghanistan. His empire actually extended beyond Afghanistan's current boundaries, stopping only where it reached mountains or empty deserts. It was known as the Durrani Empire, after Ahmad Shah's clan, which, as is usual with Afghan leaders, was his power base. Ahmad Shah's empire was much poorer and more thinly populated than other nearby kingdoms. It thrived primarily due to the loot taken as it expanded and from raiding adjacent kingdoms. But the richest area they raided, India and modern-day Pakistan, was becoming part of the British Empire and was too strong to attack. This meant that when the expansion stopped, so did the income needed to maintain an army and administer Ahmad Shah's new empire.

When Ahmad Shah died, the empire was inherited by his son, Timur, but the feudal system that had worked for his father began to fail. Soon the Durrani Empire was in constant need of money and unable to improve the land or educate its people. When every family member is needed just to produce enough food for survival, there is not time or money left for education or the arts.

Timur was the opposite of Ahmad in almost every way. He was basically an inept wastrel. Still, the Durrani Empire was strong enough to survive twenty years of Timur's reign. When he died, he left behind an empire that was much smaller than his father's, along with twenty-three sons and no named heir.

The scramble among his sons for the throne further debilitated the impoverished empire. Different ethnic groups and tribes supported different sons. Each followed the allegiances of their local chiefs. Control was finally won by the fourth son, Zemaun. His success was due mostly to the support and efforts of a powerful noble, Poyndah. But Zemaun soon proved no better than his father. He too was more interested in enjoying the position than in leading his kingdom. Worse yet, by the standards of the proud Afghan nobles, he was ungrateful and disloyal. Zemaun failed to reward, in any way, the man who helped place him on the throne, instead showering sycophantic court followers with wealth and titles.

It is rarely a good idea to both further impoverish your empire with high living and then alienate a large portion of the most important soldiers and warriors. The divided and tribal nature of Afghanistan again determined what happened. The real power in the empire was the local chiefs, who were part of it only in so far as they gained for the wealth and power it gained them, and only when it suited them—and they no longer gained anything from local advantage. Soon, virtually all of the various tribes and leaders ceased to be allies or under Durrani control. Zemaun needed to find a way to once more regain their loyalty. To accomplish this he needed wealth, which meant loot. So, the new emperor turned to the Afghans' traditional method of restoring wealth: invading India.

The attempted raid was a dismal failure. Zemaun was unable to raise and pay for more than a small force of twelve thousand disheartened and poorly armed soldiers that included less than five hundred cavalry. With his "army," Zemaun pranced along India's border, but was wisely afraid to actually enter any part of the country. The soldiers knew that they could not face highly trained sepoy and European Regulars in the British garrisons. And since Zemaun's soldiers had no sense of loyalty beyond their paychecks, he soon found that they were unwilling to fight at all.

But all of the posturing with thousands of potential invaders attracted the notice of the Honourable East India Company in Calcutta. India was becoming part of the British Empire, or at least in its area of control, and the quasi-governmental East India Company was the tool the British used to control it. The private company had its own army (commanded by Regular officers "on leave"), ambassadors, and forts, and was tied closely to the British government. The company also controlled the major ports and directly ruled many of the provinces and cities. It was, for all intents, a tool of Whitehall, but it maintained the fiction of being a private concern until it was simply dissolved by the government decades later when it lost its use as a cat's-paw. The company was responsible for both maintaining order within India and protecting much of the frontiers.

The warlike tribes of Afghanistan had been raiding into India for centuries. Not understanding just how inept and powerless the grandson of Ahmad Shah really was, the British had to take the threat seriously. From their side of the border the danger of an invasion by thousands of fierce Afghan raiders seemed ominous. So, in 1797, when the new governor-general arrived from London to take over control of the subcontinent while Zemaun was putting on his show, everyone was expecting the Afghans to sweep south as they always had. After all, Ahmad Shah had himself cut a swath of pillage and conquest that led the Afghan tribal warriors deep into India only forty years earlier. The British did not know just how hollow the Durrani threat had become, and felt they had to react.

There was also a very real fear that an Afghan invasion would set off a revolt inside India. The British had just consolidated much of their control, and many Indians were very restive. Most of the remaining Indian nobles could see the threat and conspired to drive out the British. There were millions of Indians being dominated and exploited by just tens of thousands of British. The East India Company had to show the people that they could protect India from Zemaun or any other invaders. So they took the threat seriously and prepared to respond with force.

The East India Company had to react, or at the very least appear to send a force to protect India from the potential threat in order to quell internal unrest. The Indian tradition was that the ruler had to defend the land and, in particular, stop the Afghan raiders. If the English were seen to be unable to do this they would lose legitimacy in the eyes of the entire population. Revolt by the millions of Indians against the thousands of British would follow. The Company began to prepare their local forces to resist what appeared to be a real threat. But neither the Company officials nor the very concerned Indian peoples—who had heard from their parents about the fierce Afghan warriors—understood that this threat was hollow.

By the time the British had amassed a real defense army, the threat was gone. All of the delays and useless marching probably helped undermine what little credibility the third Durrani emperor had. After weeks of posturing at the border, he lost control of his empire completely. Zemaun really only controlled the men he paid. All other Afghan warriors were loyal to their tribal chiefs. Revolts by the larger tribes had forced Zemaun to turn his army around and fight, unsuccessfully, to retain his throne. The tribal chiefs then placed a series of other “emperors” on the Imperial throne, but kept the real power themselves. During the next few years, first Zemaun’s cousin, Mahmaoud, then his cousin’s brother, Soojah, became emperor. By the end of Soojah’s reign, what little power the central government of the Durrani Empire once had simply faded.

Beyond the worry about a Durrani attack destabilizing India, the British were concerned with a European threat that spurred them to deal with the last of the Durrani emperors. For almost a decade England had been at war with Napoleon’s France. Napoleon had made it clear that he understood much of England’s wealth and power came from her colonies, particularly India. British diplomacy’s major goal was to make sure that it would be nearly impossible for Napoleon to invade India. To ensure that Afghanistan would not become a French ally, a British delegation arrived in the Durrani capital of Kabul in 1809. By the time they had established themselves, new messages were delivered from Calcutta: The mission was no longer important. Any chance of France invading India was gone, blocked by Wellington’s string of victories against Napoleon’s forces in Spain. The British delegates were ordered to not negotiate anything substantial. So both Soojah Shah and the Company merely professed their friendship and signed a meaningless agreement. When it became apparent Soojah’s hold on the throne was weakening, the delegation took his advice and returned to British-controlled Hindostan, which was, incidentally, the area Zemaun had planned to invade and pillage to save his treasury. Within six months, Soojah, having lost the support of the tribal leaders, fled to British India where he was granted a comfortable stipend and a villa. The British kept him for the simple reason that someday he might be of political value as a figurehead or to justify Company intervention in Afghan affairs. In fact, a few years later the British did use Soojah to justify their invasion of Afghanistan. This was during the era when diplomats and spies fought hidden battles in exotic places. It was the embodiment of why the Prussian general and author Carl von Clausewitz had defined war as being “an extension of politics.” At this point, it will not surprise anyone to learn that diplomacy during this time period was often referred to as the “Great Game.” The control of the wealth of the Orient was the primary diplomatic, and occasionally military, goal for Russia, England, and France.

Once Napoleon was defeated, the Great Game featured the British working hard to contain an expansionist Russia. By 1838 the Russian Empire was expanding both west and south and was soon occupying or controlling many weaker nations such as Uzbek, Turkmenistan, and Tajik (tribal lands to the north of Afghanistan). Seeing this, the British became concerned that the czar was getting too close to India. Russia’s need to control or occupy the nations along its southern border, including the many new republics there, and the West’s desire to separate these same new nations from Moscow

can be seen as a continuation of the Great Game.

Russia had already made a pawn of Persia, modern-day Iran, and Persian forces were already chewing away parts of what remained of the hollow Durrani Empire. The British felt they had to act before Russia gained control of Afghanistan. So on the pretext of returning an aging Soojah to his “rightful throne,” the British Army of the Indus, several thousand strong, marched into Afghanistan. What resistance the British met was quickly defeated. Even fortified cities that many felt were impregnable by Afghan attack fell quickly to the Irish Lieutenant General John Keane’s modern army. Again Afghanistan proved easy to conquer initially.

By August 1839, the British had placed Soojah on the throne in Kabul. Some of the British units were recalled to India. But the Europeans were acting as if Afghanistan were a European nation, ruled from its capital by a central authority. They soon found out that this was not the way the Durrani Empire really worked. It quickly became apparent that Soojah had no real popular support, even among his former tribesmen, and only British arms maintained his position. Their treaty with Soojah meant nothing, but not understanding the tribal and divided nature of the country, the British thought that controlling the Durrani capital was the same as controlling the entire land. They soon and painfully found that the tribal leaders, not their paid-for emperor, had the loyalty of their people. After easily conquering most of Afghanistan, what remained of the Army of the Indus was unable to hold it.

By 1841, tribesmen from all over the region had joined a rebel army led by Mohammed Akbar, the son of the Afghan ruler the British had deposed to put Soojah back on the throne. With a large portion of the army sent back to India, it was apparent by 1841 that the remaining British garrison in Kabul was too small to control the country or even keep open the road to India. The situation was made worse by indecisive leadership. It soon became obvious that they could not even hold Kabul, where a number of the surviving English civilians had gathered under the protection of their army.

Kabul had little food and was indefensible. Before the city was even hard-pressed, an agreement was reached between Mohammed Akbar and the British governor to allow for the safe withdrawal of all British forces and dependents. But the Afghan tribesmen had no intention of letting the English just walk away. The long column of 4,500 soldiers and 12,000 dependents and civilians was attacked almost from the time it left Kabul. The slaughter was constant and relentless. Badly outnumbered and strung out along the road, the Europeans had no chance. Exactly one soldier, himself wounded, survived to tell what happened. It was the greatest loss of soldiers in one battle in British colonial history, and with hundreds of women and children killed it also was the worst single loss of life that the British suffered during the entire colonial era.

England responded with a series of punitive raids, but never again tried to occupy Afghanistan. The country remained tribal with the Durrani “emperor” careful to not challenge the tribal chiefs. Ironically, in 1857 the current Durrani ruler, Dost Mohammad, actually invited a British army back into Kabul in hopes of using it to counter an invasion threat by the Persians. The only time Afghanistan was unified in the past thousand years was under Ahmad Shah, and that was a charismatic construct based on one man being followed by the tribal leaders, rather than having any power in his own right. Once he died, the empire quickly degenerated into a shadow with no real intrinsic authority.

The full Army of the Indus was undefeatable, but the portion they left behind after completing their “conquest” was unable to hold Afghanistan. From 1837 to 1841, the British acted as if the Durrani Empire was a national state in the European model. In reality, Afghanistan was then still as tribal and divided as when Alexander had to subdue the land city by city and valley by valley two thousand years earlier. The English thought having their pawn as the emperor would give them control of all of Afghanistan. Instead, it gave them exactly nothing. Eventually, almost twenty thousand men, women

and children paid a terrible price for the mistake.

The Game Continues

The British impetus for invading Afghanistan had been to do so before the Russians did. Seeing the fate of the British, the Russians learned and did not themselves invade at that time . . . so in an iron way that British goal was achieved. But almost a century and a half later, the Soviet Union, under the Communists, tried again to dominate Afghanistan. The big opportunity came in 1979. The Republic of Afghanistan, a democracy, had been established in 1973, but the attempt at democracy had failed. The two traditional problems of ethnic strife and corruption had immediately weakened the central government. This was the result of the same problem every central authority has had from Alexander's successors to the later Durrani emperors: when your loyalty is to your ethnic group and not the central government, there's the temptation to exploit any position in the central government for the benefit of yourself or your own tribe, even at the expense of that government. During the six-year experiment with democracy, few resisted the temptation. By 1979, the Afghan republic's officials had become so universally corrupt and ineffective that they alienated most of the different ethnic groups, including many Pashtun, whose fellows controlled much of the new government. The result was that the Communist Party, under the moderate Nur Muhammad Taraki, was voted in as the best alternative to fix the mess. Taraki was a practical politician and a friend of Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

Taraki attempted to balance the concerns of the two major Afghan ethnic groups: the Khalqis (his own group) and the Pashtun. He even split the seats on his cabinet equally between them, but this led only to more infighting. There was also a constant challenge to Taraki's leadership by another member of the Khalqis faction, Hafizullah Amin. When Amin finally achieved power, most reports agree that he had Taraki killed in his sleep. Securely in control after Taraki's death, Amin, a hard-line Communist, pushed the party line by consolidating private farms into collectives and demanding women's rights. This antagonized the farmers and was contrary to the traditional Islamic role for women. In a matter of days he had alienated many of the most influential men and all of those who were devout Muslims. Opposition in all forms began to organize. It was not long before Amin clamped down on both his ethnic and political opponents. Within a few weeks, *Time* magazine headline read: "30,000 Imprisoned and 2,000 Executed." Not surprisingly, Amin's attempts to radically remake Afghanistan, right after taking power, resulted in massive unrest. The more numerous Pashtun were united in their opposition.

The Soviets had been touting Afghanistan as an example of how being a Communist nation could help a country develop. They continued to bring in doctors, engineers, and teachers, and build schools, hospitals, and public buildings. But within months, Amin's hard-line and ethnocentric approach undermined the feeling of goodwill that the Soviets' efforts had established over many years. In 1979, the KGB assassinated Amin with the hope that much of the resistance was to him as an individual. It wasn't. Amin was replaced by Babrak Karmal. This put the future leaders of Afghanistan on notice as to the fate should they be more loyal to their ethnic group, in this case the Khalqis, than to Moscow.

The Soviets were anxious to support what they still perceived as a major Communist showcase and success. They also feared that the overthrow of the Communist government in Afghanistan would inspire unrest among the Islamic populations in the neighboring Soviet republics. In reaction, Moscow greatly increased the number of military advisers assisting Karmal. They poured in aid and took more direct interest in assisting the government in Kabul to suppress unrest. But even the large

number of Soviets—including special forces—was unable to stop a growing popular revolt. The limited number of elite units simply could not be in enough places to make a difference or hold enough ground to protect their puppet government. Virtually every leader beyond a few of the Khalq and hard-line Communists felt that the government in Kabul was controlled by the USSR. In addition, the hard-line Communist antagonism to religion drove the most religious in every tribe to resist.

Soon it became clear that, like the British in 1841, the government in Kabul no longer controlled more than a few cities. On December 25, 1979, Soviet army forces poured across the border and began securing the country, ostensibly at the request of Mohammed Habibullah, the next man they had handpicked to be president. Within weeks there were eighty-five thousand Soviet combat soldiers and airmen in Afghanistan. The intention was to overwhelm the growing opposition with both the number of troops and technology.

It should be noted that 1979 was barely four years after the Americans pulled out from the extended disaster that was Vietnam. If any lesson was learned by the Red Army from the American loss, it must have been the wrong one. Surprisingly, many of the officers who helped to extend and orchestrate the American failure in Vietnam were the same ones who were in command in Afghanistan. The Russians had supported and advised the guerrilla war fought by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. They had armed, trained, supervised construction, built SAM missile sites, and even provided satellite and other intelligence to the North Vietnamese. Eventually, they faced irregular troops armed in the same way by the Americans. It is hard not to say that they should have known better, having recently been on the other side of the equation.

The revisionist reason for invading that is now popular in Russia is that they were in Afghanistan trying to control the drug fields and trade. The real reason is much murkier. To begin, Brezhnev was upset over the murder of Taraki, whom he held in high regard. He blamed Amin and was anxious to take real control of the nation. The Politburo, the leaders of the Communist Party in Moscow, saw Afghanistan not only as a chance to keep a Communist government in power, but also as a way to expand their control in a vital border area. Afghanistan is central to the Middle East, bordered not only by three parts of the Soviet Union, but also by Iran and Pakistan. It even has a small connection to China. Controlling this central Asian location had been the goal of the Russian governments—first under the czar and then under the Communists—for more than two centuries. The Soviet leaders also felt that controlling Afghanistan would be a visible crack in the much-too-successful American diplomatic program of “containing the expansion of Communism” begun while Harry Truman was president. And in contrast to how America fared in Vietnam, those in control in Moscow were convinced that by treating the diverse peoples of Afghanistan well they would be successful in winning them over. The country was poor and illiterate, and the USSR’s wealth and teachers could change that. They believed that the Red Army would be welcomed for the benefits it could bring and the stability it offered. This was true in that the Soviet troops initially met little resistance as columns led by tanks swarmed into Afghanistan. Like the British in 1837, the Soviets had no trouble deploying troops around the countryside and occupying the cities. Also like the British, they quickly found that once the warlords and tribal leaders had decided to oppose them, there was nothing they could do to completely suppress the revolt.

The British were driven out of Afghanistan after four years and over twenty thousand deaths. The Red Army spent a decade in Afghanistan, with an estimated seventy-five thousand fatalities and many times that number wounded or maimed. Gradually, the attitude and missions changed from nation building to occupation and punitive actions. More than a million Afghans were killed—basically one out of ten in a population of thirteen million. The Soviets failed to win over the different tribes. The

failed to curtail the drug trade. They failed to effectively occupy anything but a few cities. They failed in every way, and that has left a scar on the Russian military as deep and pervasive as the one Vietnam left on the United States. By spring of 1989, there were no Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. Without Soviet support, only a few cities were controlled by the Communist government . . . and not for long.

Even a superpower could not, in a decade, subdue or control the diverse peoples of Afghanistan. The only success the Red Army achieved had been shared by all of the past invaders of the mountainous nation: the normally violently opposed ethnic groups united, but only against them. This time, the United States supported the insurrection in a reversal of roles from Vietnam, but with the same effect. They provided advisers, training, and medical supplies, and worked with the Pakistanis to create military bases from which the Russians could be challenged. Eventually the CIA supplied high-profile weapons, such as Stinger missiles, to the Afghans. These nullified the powerful helicopter-borne Soviet forces and took away the USSR's edge on mobility in the mountainous country. Ten years after invading an impoverished and backward nation, the modern, incredibly powerful Red Army, having virtually unlimited support and resources, retreated from Afghanistan. By February of 1989 the last soldier of the Red Army was gone and the most radical of the resistance groups, the Taliban, had begun to take control.

America's Turn

On October 7, 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom was launched in Afghanistan by the United States and its allies. It consisted primarily of arming and coordinating a number of "friendly" warlords in a push to take control of the country from the Taliban. This strategy worked, but it also had the effect of reinforcing the local power of the tribal and ethnic leaders. With each valley independent and self-supporting, there was no strong need for what a centralized government could provide. This holds true even if that government weren't one of the most corrupt in the world. This lack of national identity is why working through the local warlords was so effective and why doing this reinforced their power, which may have actually slowed the process of the American effort to turn Afghanistan into a single democratic nation.

Cyrus, Alexander, the East India Company, the Red Army, and now the American army have all entered Afghanistan with little resistance, but none have easily occupied the country. There are many parallels in the problems and actions of all four world powers spread over three millennia. The first three invaders failed to maintain control of what they had conquered. The last is still awaiting history's judgment. The Americans are different in one way: from the beginning, they have stated that they have no intention of remaining in Afghanistan. Having demonstrated in Iraq that the United States lives up to that promise, the question remaining is this: Will this stated intention remove enough opposition so that the nation-building effort can finally succeed?

A lot of questions have been answered by history, and the challenges faced by NATO in Afghanistan have been clarified. But many remain unanswered. Perhaps technology will overcome the factors of navigating terrain that have stymied so many armies in the past. While other armies have been called in to settle what is effectively, again, a civil war, does the religious fanaticism of the Taliban mean that more moderate Afghan fighters will at least remain neutral? Or perhaps that won't matter, and the Afghan people will react traditionally, with dogged resistance, to the new invader. After three thousand years of regular invasions, Afghans' antipathy toward any foreign power's soldiers being anywhere on their land runs deep in the culture. That alone may explain the strange belligerence shown by the soldiers and officials of the "friendly" Afghan government toward the American troops.

assisting them. When uniformed Afghan soldiers fire at American troops or support rioters, they are doing what has been the norm for generations: joining ranks against any and all outsiders. It is simply part of a tradition ten times older than the United States itself.

Even when Afghanistan is technically united, stability is hardly common. A list of recent Afghan governments strains both credulity and grammar. Since World War I, Afghanistan was first ruled by monarchs, from 1919 until 1964; then there was a constitutional monarchy for another decade; and finally there was a republic that lasted only six years, followed by a Communist state. But the Communists were unable to rule or even maintain order over the many warlords and tribes. Finally they had to call in the Soviet army in 1979. This was followed by ten years of Soviet occupation, a civil war from 1990 to 1996, and then the Taliban theocracy. In 2001, having perhaps learned from history, NATO worked with the warlords and drove the Taliban out of most of the country. Since then the Taliban has been replaced by a NATO-supported central government whose effectiveness varies greatly among provinces.

The good news might be that such a long list of very different governments over such a short time shows that Afghanistan certainly can and has changed . . . which is not the same thing as achieving stability. The bad news is that establishing a long-lasting, democratic nation capable of sustaining itself involves changing three millennia of attitudes, ethnic animosities, and tradition. In some ways the NATO approach, with a set departure date and efforts to actually improve the quality of the government in Kabul, offers a chance to succeed where many others have failed. It does take into account the basis of most resistance to outside influences. Pushed by the West, the current Afghan government is even gingerly attempting to root out some of the corruption that both results from and reinforces the national identity problem. NATO leaders have acknowledged all of these problems, but it remains to be decided whether they will succeed in overcoming the ethnic and religious strife that has kept Afghanistan divided.

CHAPTER TWO

Terrorism, Still

I was called a terrorist yesterday, but when I came out of jail, many people embraced me, including my enemies, and that is what I normally tell other people who say those who are struggling for liberation in their country are terrorists. I tell them that I was also a terrorist yesterday, but, today, I am admired by the very people who said I was one.

— NELSON MANDELA (1918-)
ON *LARRY KING LIVE*, MAY 16, 2000

The Roots of Terrorism

A terrorist is someone who engages in actions that create terror for political purposes. The U.S. government's official legal definition of terrorism (U.S. Code Title 22, Ch. 38, Para. 2656f[d]) "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." Here, we are going to look at the classic roots of terrorism, its modern evolution, and how we may or may not be applying many of the lessons of the past in today's struggle. But to do that in less than several hundred volumes, we need to limit the definition of a terrorist.

To count as a true terrorist attack, the violence must be personal. Civilians are hurt, not "nations." When thousands of people, acting together, instill terror and ruin on another nation, it is called a war. So the term here is meant to describe the actions of individuals and small groups only. These groups may be part of a larger faction, but they number, at most, a few dozen people for any one action.

This definition of terrorism includes literally hundreds of groups over the past two millennia. Certainly during the American Revolution, the loyal Tories, who were often beaten and burned out or driven from their homes by the Committees of Correspondence or rebel militia, would call what happened to them terrorism. So have the Arab Palestinians, who suffered a similar fate two hundred years later. Since terrorism is intended to inspire fear among those opposing the perpetrators, and such acts certainly did, a number of American and Zionist patriots who later became national leaders have to be included on any historically accurate list, despite the cause's eventual success. This makes the point that terrorism can work to drive away others, while at the same time destabilizing a nation. There is no question that today's weapons give even a few fanatics the ability to put hundreds or even millions of lives at risk. C-4, dirty bombs, and anthrax increase their threat, but the nature of the terrorist has not changed. Today, terrorism might feel like a modern problem. It isn't. Whether you picture a terrorist as a Bolshevik throwing a Molotov cocktail into a crowd or a member of al-Qaeda flying a plane into a building, they are part of a tradition that likely goes back as far as there have been governments and rulers.

Daggerman

The poorly dressed man tried to look casual as he moved through the temple. The air beneath the high, brightly painted ceiling was filled with the smells of incense and sweat. As usual, there was a crowd. Some gathered around the rabbis as they spoke, others bartered with the merchants lined up along the polished walls. The carvings and wall hangings depicted scenes from the Book. The man recognized the well-known image of Abraham about to sacrifice his son. The dagger depicted looked very much like the one he had hidden in his sleeve. Perhaps this was a sign, the man thought. Well, no angel was going to save the traitor.

For the slightest moment he wondered if what he was about to do was sacrilege. He was in a most holy place. His steps faltered, then continued. The real sacrilege here was what the evil men from the West had done to all of this holy land and to all of those around him who had been seduced from their true faith by the comfort and wealth of the West.

He had been told that this man's death would be a sacred act, one worth sacrificing his own life for. That had been five days ago, just before he had left the village. Now the time had come to show he was a true patriot.

He repeated to himself that what he would soon do was right and just. The oppressors of his people were the godless, the ones who had no true faith. He would be hailed as a martyr and guaranteed eternal happiness.

Tightening his shoulders, the man pushed through the crowd toward his target. To the men he walked past he looked like just another worshipper, a young man from a small town who was a bit overwhelmed by Jerusalem, nervous and not too well dressed.

The patriot was relieved to see that the fat merchant he had been sent to kill had set up his table in the expected place. It was a cleverly carved table now unfolded near a door in the far-left corner of the outer temple.

The door was bolted on the other side. He had tried it the day before. It would not provide any means of escape, but the open area in front of it would allow him to actually step behind the table and take the man whom he was to make a deadly example of.

A few steps farther and the beginnings of doubt appeared. The young man feared failure more than the consequences of success. He had practiced the killing stroke for weeks, but only on straw men and one bleating sheep. One swift blow and the deed should be done. He had to succeed. He had sworn before his family and the elders, promised before the Creator that he would strike even if he had to die to do it. They had praised him as a martyr fighting to regain the land of his people. If he failed there was no going back. The disgrace would be worse than dying. He would be known as a coward and an apostate. Neither he nor his family would ever be forgiven, ever be welcome.

For too long his people had been controlled by the evil empire and its lackeys. They had stolen his people's land so that they could build roads and sinfully rich homes. And his people were forced to do the invader's bidding. Once his family had owned a farm not far from this very temple, but now it was covered with the homes of unbelievers and foreigners. The thought of dying no longer made him hesitate; it just summoned an anger that hastened his steps.

The man recalled how his father had died a martyr years before. His family, now residing in Galilee, the home of the resistance, had been sworn enemies of the occupiers for three generations. There had never been any question as to what his future held. He had spent the previous months learning to use weapons and studying the words of the prophets. There was no question in his heart that dying a martyr would earn him a special welcome and comfort. Failure would be blasphemy.

He approached the target. Being noticed by the heavily armed soldiers would make his a purposeful sacrifice. ~~This man became rich by selling goods to the evil empire, and for that he was to be made an example of.~~

The merchant did not notice the young man as he approached.

The man's long robe chafed his skin and felt damp. With an intake of breath he stepped to the side and then behind the traitor's table.

The doomed merchant turned and then must have known. His eyes went wide and he opened his mouth to yell.

The dagger that was fastened under the loose sleeve of the young believer's left arm came free, and with a graceful sweep he brought the long knife up and plunged it into the traitor's heart. Blood poured down the iron blade as it slid between the merchant's ribs, soaking the front of his robe. It felt warm and smelled different from that of the sheep the young man had killed.

The only sound that came out of the traitor's open mouth was a sighing gurgle.

For a long moment the killer heard nothing. He was overwhelmed with relief that he had proved worthy. Then the screams of those nearby swelled. Soon it seemed everyone was yelling and pointing at him.

This he had not rehearsed. For a moment he froze. Then he saw the soldiers; in that instant he decided to go down fighting. Taking a half-step back, the killer raised the long blade and then thrust forward.

He never completed the blow. The weapons of half a dozen soldiers tore into him. There was a moment of terrible pain as the killer fell backward to land on top of his victim. He had not expected that becoming a martyr would hurt so much. Then the soldier's weapons struck again, better aimed this time, and the pain ended.

Beginnings

There is an irony to that story of terrorism and assassination. It could be a fairly reasonable representation of a resident of today's Palestine making an attack on a Jewish merchant. It is a scene similar to those that actually occurred for more than a century in Jerusalem and the other cities of Judea. But although it takes place in Israel, it is not today's Israel. Both the victim and the terrorist were Jews living more than two thousand years ago. The evil empire was Rome and the terrorist was a member of the Sicarii.

Israel, known then as Judea, had been free since driving out the Seleucid Empire, and it was restored as an independent nation in 160 BCE. But part of the price of freedom had been making an agreement with the Roman Empire. By 40 BCE, Rome controlled Israel in almost every way that mattered except its name, as it remained an "allied nation" rather than a province. When an outright revolt against Roman domination, led by Judas of Galilee (not to be confused with Judas Iscariot), in the year 6 CE was crushed, the Sicarii was formed. Their goal wasn't to attack the Romans—this they generally left to the Zealots, armed Jewish rebels who traveled in large numbers and attacked Roman soldiers and civilians in what we would today call a guerrilla war. Rather than use open, small-scale warfare, the assassins targeted those whom they felt were too close or too supportive of the Roman occupation. To do this they would hide daggers, called *sicae* in Latin, up the sleeves of their loose robes, and once near their targets, they would stab them. There was no way to distinguish a Sicarius from the general population. Anyone could be a Sicarius, and this added to the terror they invoked. The purpose was simply to terrorize anyone and everyone who considered cooperating with the Romans. This is the

same technique used by the Vietcong on village elders, as well as in Iraq when the insurgency targeted those assisting the American occupation, such as interpreters or friendly government officials. The Sicarii's targets were almost always other Jews. Yes, one of the first detailed historical records of terrorists is one of Jews terrorizing other Jews, and it takes place in the same real estate that is today Israel and Palestine.

We know of the Sicarii from a somewhat biased source. They are described in some detail by a man who first was known as Joseph ben Mattathias. He was originally a Zealot who helped lead the revolt against Rome in 70 CE. As a Zealot leader, he once tried to broker peace between the Zealots and Rome. When that failed, he changed sides and became a historian who eventually moved to Rome and took the name Flavius Josephus, Flavian being the family name of the current emperor. (Yep, he sold out big-time, and for him personally, it worked.) Josephus was, in fact, the very model of the men the Sicarii targeted. This may partially explain why he moved to Rome and stayed there. His account of the Jewish War, written in 78 CE, is history's main, and almost only, source of information on the terrorists he called the Sicarii. It is likely that the actual terrorist group did not use a Latin name and that during their sixty years of assassinations, there were actually several small groups, each with its own name. *Sicarii* is the linguistic equivalent of "anarchists" or "terrorists."

So what happened to the Sicarii? Certainly, the Romans, the kings, and their appointed governors actively sought out and suppressed these terrorists with varying degrees of success. Rome had good intelligence services and ruthless inquisitors. But what finally ended the Sicarii's campaign of terror was a success followed by a terrible failure. While the Sicarii were terrorizing the locals, the Zealots (in Hebrew, *kana'im*) focused on driving out the Romans. They organized themselves as a military force, and at their height controlled virtually all of the cities of Judea. They gained popular support when Florus, the Roman governor of Judea, stole a large amount of silver from the Temple in Jerusalem, in 66 CE. When the Syrian governor, Cestius Gallus, took the Zealots too lightly and sent south a small, poorly trained force of legionnaires (who were more accustomed to garrison duty than fighting a Zealot army), the Zealots actually defeated the Roman legion. That success was also the undoing.

Rome ruled by intimidation. Even more important than not allowing anyone to revolt, Rome could not tolerate or forgive being handed a military defeat. The illusion of being undefeatable was what allowed an empire that never fielded more than fifty legions (at most, three hundred thousand soldiers) to thrive, and at this time they had fewer than forty to dominate the Mediterranean world.

The revolt started when Florus broke a basic Roman rule. Rome dominated its known world not only with force but also by knowing better than to unnecessarily antagonize those it ruled. But the governor, who shared a general Roman contempt for the Jewish peoples, stole a large amount of silver from Temple treasure. This outraged the Jews. They rose up and wiped out the relatively small Roman garrison in Jerusalem. The revolt spread until all of Judea had thrown out the Romans and pillaged the homes and warehouses of many formerly favored Gentiles. Hundreds of Romans were killed or had to flee. This is when the governor of Syria sent his legionary force. However, the legion's commanders were arrogant and assumed that the Jews were a disorganized mob who would flee at the sight of a Roman soldier. Instead it was the Syrian troops who were defeated and routed.

Since the defeat of a legion was an example Rome could not afford to let stand, they reacted strongly. Judea was a poor backwater area, but what if somewhere important, like Egypt or Greece, got ideas? The response was to send in sixty thousand crack legionnaires, led by their best general, Titus, who would later become the Roman emperor. The three legions (V Macedonica, XV Apollinaris, and XII Fulminata) landed on the Galilean coast and spread through the area that was the heart of the

revolt: Galilee. The Romans were plainly making an example of the Jews as they killed or enslaved more than one hundred thousand in Galilee alone. Those Jews who survived this attack fled Jerusalem, where the moderate leaders knew they could not defeat the new legions and tried to make peace with Rome. Those moderates soon died at the hands of the Sicarii or the mobs urged on by the more radical revolutionaries.

By 68 CE, no leader in Jerusalem was left alive who would even suggest moderation or peace. The Zealots themselves were split and ill prepared. The different parts of Jerusalem were jealous and controlled by the leaders of the various factions. Few were good military leaders and some were simply irrational. One group of fanatics even destroyed most of the food stored in the city just as the siege began. This was done with the foolish assumption that the people would fight harder and inspire divine intervention sooner. Before long, the countryside around Jerusalem was controlled by the Romans. When they finally put Jerusalem under siege, the result was inevitable and tragic. This is the point in time when Flavius Josephus went to Titus and tried to negotiate peace. When it failed, he chose to stay with the Romans.

Jerusalem fell in a series of bloody attacks, and the last of the Zealots retreated to an upper fortress and held out until the Romans built siege towers. Not only did Judea lose all independence and become a province, but the Second Temple was destroyed, and Flavius maintained that hundreds of thousands more Jews died or were sold into slavery. The elimination of the Jewish moderates by their own people doomed Jerusalem and the Second Temple. This destruction then spelled the end of the Sicarii. The last of the Zealots—almost a thousand men, women, and even children—died in the mountain fortress of Masada after a three-year siege.

The Paradox

We must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda.

— MIKHAIL BAKUNIN (1814–1876) , RUSSIAN ANARCHIST

After World War I, the nations of the world, encouraged by President Woodrow Wilson, formed an organization whose purpose was to settle future national disputes without warfare. This was the League of Nations. In 1937, the League's official definition of terrorism was "all criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or a group of persons or the general public."

One of the goals of a terrorist is to get a reaction, preferably an overreaction. In French, this is known as *propagande par le fait*, which translates as "propaganda by the deed." The colorful French term for a terrorist is *agent provocateur*, because the response provoked is more important than the action itself. Terrorists don't just bomb buildings to disrupt the work going on in the offices inside. The intention is to force an official response that negatively affects the general population. This also demonstrates that the government cannot keep civilians safe. By forcing the TSA ruling to have passengers remove their shoes to be X-rayed by airport security, the Shoe Bomber, Richard Reid, succeeded even as he failed. Even though he was such a blundering incompetent that he could not even light his own fuse, billions of shoes have been removed in airports because of his attempt to blow up a plane. That is the irony for a free nation combating terrorism. Even a reasonable response can encourage the terrorists to act again, hoping for an unreasonable response that will divide the people.

from their government.

To encourage political or social change, the terrorist needs to force the majority opinion to go from moderation to revolution. If things are even just “okay” in their lives, most people would prefer the status quo. Terrorists have to create a situation where the response of the government is such that radicalizes the majority. But to do this they often attack and kill those in the very group they claim to be working for . . . because it is, in their minds, necessary for the greater good. The military version of this same attitude is “collateral damage.” Even attacks on government officials or “collaborators” are as much for the response they can generate as they are for the physical damage that they cause. That is why terrorists’ targets are those with symbolism—ones that will get a strong emotional or political reaction—such as a financial center, like the Twin Towers on 9/11. By this standard, strangely, that attack was incredibly successful. It got a powerful response, probably just not the one that al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or Osama bin Laden expected. Ten years later, that response has continued and cost Bin Laden and most of his commanders their lives. The Arab terrorists stated in their communications to each other that the morally weak and self-indulgent Americans would be intimidated by the attack, but instead the reaction resulted in continuing resolution.

The Real Assassins

The word “assassin” conjures up images of sinister Arabs with silly beards that they constantly stroll while threatening innocent maidens. In truth, the real and original mercenary murderers who were called by that name were the Hashishiyya, a group founded in Persia during the eleventh century. The Assassins—a European term derived from the name Hashishiyya—were a highly organized terrorist organization dedicated to returning control of the Islamic world to the Shiite sect. They operated throughout the Arab world and on rare occasions in the newly formed Crusader states for almost two centuries. Their targets were mainly other Muslims. They even made two attempts on the life of the famous Muslim general Saladin, on one occasion wounding the warrior and on another killing one of his advisors, the Amir Khumartakin, when he recognized them in Saladin’s camp.

The name given to them by others, Hashishiyya, refers to the myths involving them and the potent drug hashish. Yet in all the contemporary accounts from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, there is no mention of the Assassins actually using any drugs before an attack or in their fortresses. Also, the Assassins were not the nemesis of the Crusaders. They were based primarily in Syria and what is now called Iran. There they bedeviled the Sunni rulers. The Assassins were also not above taking pay for murder. It is very possible that they worked more often under hire of the Christian Crusaders than against them. Members of the Assassins often lived, with permission, on Christian lands and paid taxes to Christian lords. There was even a brief discussion of having all of the Assassins convert to Christianity.

The true twelfth-century Assassin would be sent after a target. Usually, just one was sent, but occasionally teams of two to four. They would spend several days studying the habits of their target and then strike when the victim was most vulnerable. The Assassins were the bogeymen of the European nobility. If they ever really did assassinate anyone in Europe, no one could prove it. There has been a persistent belief that Assassins were responsible for stabbing Conrad I of Outremer (King of Holy Lands) two days before he was crowned. Because the killing occurred in Jerusalem, this may be true. But there are no real examples of assassinations anywhere in Europe itself. Since the Assassins were dedicated to restoring Shiite rule, not conquering the Christians, there was little appeal for the religious terrorists to widen the scope.

Christian knights who protected pilgrims going to Jerusalem returned home with tales of Hasan-Sabbah, the Old Man of the Mountain, and his band of drug-crazed murderers. His Assassins were said to be unrelenting fanatics and cunning killers. They claimed that if an Assassin died before killing a target, another was sent to finish the job, and if needed, another and then another. Templars would regale a party they were guarding with stories of Assassins, armed with swords, dropping from dark ceilings or hiding under the desert sands. Like most war stories, the reality appears to be much less dramatic than the telling. These false stories also likely encouraged the pilgrims to appreciate, with donations, the knights who were protecting them. But to the many Sunni nobles and officials that the Hashishiyya did kill, they were very real and very deadly terrorists. By the 1300s, the word “*assassino*” was already in common use in Italy, whose city-states like Venice continued to trade with the Arab nations, and was used to describe anyone who killed someone of note or wealth.

Based in a Shiite kingdom in what is now northern Iran, the Assassins carried out their murders for more than two centuries. The Sunni response was the execution of anyone suspected to be connected to the Assassins. Likely their actions also brought about increased alienation and distrust for those Shiites living in the Sunni cities. Since alienating their base from their target is a terrorist’s goal, this they were a success (the gulf between Sunni and Shiite remains wide and occasionally violent even now). For all of their notoriety, the Shiite Assassins never did succeed in destabilizing the Muslim lands. Assassinations never brought down any of the Sunni rulers. The Sunni dynasty, so hated by the Assassins, fell not to them, but later to the Mongols, who swept over Baghdad in 1258 and Syria in 1260. Even then, that was cold comfort to these early terrorists, since a year earlier, in 1257, their fortress and base in Alamut had been destroyed and the organization broken by the advancing Mongols.

Along with these insights into the nature of what was the most powerful and well-organized terrorist cult in historical times, there is another lesson: The use of terror for political and religious purposes has been a major factor throughout Islamic history. And the most fanatic assassins were not just religious zealots; they were determined to undermine the Persian and Syrian governments.

Modern Terrorism

Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible.

— MAXIMILIEN DE ROBESPIERRE (1758–1794)

The terrorist as we know him today is often state-sanctioned, though of course not officially approved of. State-sanctioned terrorism is considered a weapon used by weak nations against the more powerful ones. There is little the government in Iran can publicly do to the United States, and few direct actions can be taken by the Palestinian leadership against Israel, so those states encourage and supply terrorists to attack the stronger nations. Where nations are not directly vulnerable, the citizens are. This is why terrorists mostly target jets and not army bases, and why Palestinians send rockets into Israeli towns and not at border posts—because civilian targets are more open to attack and only through the disabling or destruction of such targets are powerful nations harmed not just physically, but much more greatly emotionally and in morale.

Whether homegrown or shipped in, terrorists have been a serious concern for over two millennia. Terrorist acts have started wars, ended negotiations, and affected the everyday lives of almost everyone in the world. If you want a good demonstration of how much terrorism affects everyone, just

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