

IN THE TATTERED, cargo-strewn cabin of an Ariana Afghan Airlines passenger jet streaking above Punjab toward Kabul sat a stocky, broad-faced American with short graying hair. He was a friendly man in his early fifties who spoke in a flat midwestern accent. He looked as if he might be a dentist, an acquaintance once remarked. Gary Schroen had served for twenty-six years as an officer in the Central Intelligence Agency's clandestine services. He was now, in September 1996, chief of station in Islamabad, Pakistan. He spoke Persian and its cousin, Dari, one of Afghanistan's two main languages. In spy terminology, Schroen was an operator. He recruited and managed paid intelligence agents, conducted espionage operations, and supervised covert actions against foreign governments and terrorist groups. A few weeks before, with approval from CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, he had made contact through intermediaries with Ahmed Shah Massoud, the celebrated anti-Soviet guerrilla commander, now defense minister in a war-battered Afghan government crumbling from within. Schroen had requested a meeting, and Massoud had accepted.¹

They had not spoken in five years. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, as allies battling Soviet occupation forces and their Afghan communist prox-

ies, the CIA had pumped cash stipends as high as \$200,000 a month to Massoud and his Islamic guerrilla organization, along with weapons and other supplies. Between 1989 and 1991, Schroen had personally delivered some of the cash. But the aid stopped in December 1991 when the Soviet Union dissolved. The United States government decided it had no further interests in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile the country had collapsed. Kabul, once an elegant city of broad streets and walled gardens tucked spectacularly amid barren crags, had been pummeled by its warlords into a state of physical ruin and human misery that compared unfavorably to the very worst places on Earth. Armed factions within armed factions erupted seasonally in vicious urban battles, blasting down mud-brick block after mud-brick block in search of tactical advantages usually apparent only to them. Militias led by Islamic scholars who disagreed profoundly over religious minutia baked prisoners of war to death by the hundreds in discarded metal shipping containers. The city had been without electricity since 1993. Hundreds of thousands of Kabulis relied for daily bread and tea on the courageous but limited efforts of international charities. In some sections of the countryside thousands of displaced refugees died of malnutrition and preventable disease because they could not reach clinics and feeding stations. And all the while neighboring countries—Pakistan, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia—delivered pallets of guns and money to their preferred Afghan proxies. The governments of these countries sought territorial advantage over their neighbors. Money and weapons also arrived from individuals or Islamic charities seeking to extend their spiritual and political influence by proselytizing to the destitute.

Ahmed Shah Massoud remained Afghanistan's most formidable military leader. A sinewy man with a wispy beard and penetrating dark eyes, he had become a charismatic popular leader, especially in northeastern Afghanistan. There he had fought and negotiated with equal imagination during the 1980s, punishing and frustrating Soviet generals. Massoud saw politics and war as intertwined. He was an attentive student of Mao and other successful guerrilla leaders. Some wondered as time passed if he could imagine a life without guerrilla conflict. Yet through various councils and coalitions, he had also proven able to acquire power by sharing it. During the long horror of the Soviet occupation, Massoud had symbolized for many Afghans—especially his own Tajik people—the spirit and potential of their brave resistance. He was above all an independent man. He surrounded himself with books. He prayed piously, read Persian poetry, studied Islamic theology, and immersed himself

in the history of guerrilla warfare. He was drawn to the doctrines of revolutionary and political Islam, but he had also established himself as a broad-minded, tolerant Afghan nationalist.

That September 1996, however, Massoud's reputation had fallen to a low ebb. His passage from rebellion during the 1980s to governance in the 1990s had evolved disastrously. After the collapse of Afghan communism he had joined Kabul's newly triumphant but unsettled Islamic coalition as its defense minister. Attacked by rivals armed in Pakistan, Massoud counterattacked, and as he did, he became the bloodstained power behind a failed, self-immolating government. His allies to the north smuggled heroin. He was unable to unify or pacify the country. His troops showed poor discipline. Some of them mercilessly massacred rivals while battling for control of Kabul neighborhoods.²

Promising to cleanse the nation of its warlords, including Massoud, a new militia movement swept from Afghanistan's south beginning in 1994. Its tattered, eye-shadowed leaders declared that the Koran would slay the Lion of Panjshir, as Massoud was known, where other means had failed.

They traveled behind white banners raised in the name of an unusually severe school of Islam that promoted lengthy and bizarre rules of personal conduct. These Taliban, or students, as they called themselves, now controlled vast areas of southern and western Afghanistan. Their rising strength shook Massoud. The Taliban traveled in shiny new Toyota double-cab pickup trucks. They carried fresh weapons and ample ammunition. Mysteriously, they repaired and flew former Soviet fighter aircraft, despite only rudimentary military experience among their leaders.

The U.S. embassy in Kabul had been shut for security reasons since late 1988, so there was no CIA station in Afghanistan from which to collect intelligence about the Taliban or the sources of their newfound strength. The nearest station, in Islamabad, no longer had Afghanistan on its Operating Directive, the official list of intelligence-gathering priorities transmitted each year to CIA stations worldwide.³ Without the formal blessing of the OD, as it was called, a station chief like Gary Schroen lacked the budgetary resources needed to recruit agents, supply them with communications gear, manage them in the field, and process their intelligence reports.

The CIA maintained a handful of paid agents in Afghanistan, but these were dedicated to tracking down Mir Amal Kasi, a young and angry Pakistani who on January 25, 1993, had opened fire on CIA employees arriving at the agency's Langley headquarters. Kasi had killed two and wounded three, and then fled to Pakistan. By 1996 he was believed to be moving back and forth to

Afghanistan, taking refuge in tribal areas where American police and spies could not operate easily.

The CIA's Kasi-hunting agents did not report on the Taliban's developing war against Ahmed Shah Massoud except in passing. The job of collecting intelligence about political and military developments in Afghanistan had been assigned to CIA headquarters in faraway Virginia, lumped in with the general responsibilities of the Near East Division of the Directorate of Operations.⁴

This was hardly an unusual development among U.S. government agencies. The U.S. Agency for International Development had shut down its Afghan humanitarian assistance program in 1994. The Pentagon had no relationships there. The National Security Council at the White House had no Afghan policy beyond a vague wish for peace and prosperity. The State Department was more involved in Afghan affairs, but only at the middle levels of its bureaucracy. Secretary of State Warren Christopher had barely commented about Afghanistan during his four years in office.⁵

MASSOUD sent a close adviser named Massoud Khalili to escort Gary Schroen into Kabul. To make room for cargo desperately needed in the landlocked capital, Ariana Afghan had tipped most of the passenger seats out of their airplanes to stack the aisles with loose boxes and crates, none of them strapped down or secured. "It's never crashed before," Khalili assured Schroen.

Their jet swept above barren russet ridges folded one upon the other as it crossed into Afghanistan. The treeless land below lay mottled in paler tones of sand brown and clay red. To the north, ink black rivers cut plunging gorges through the Hindu Kush Mountains. To the south, eleven-thousand-foot peaks rose in a ring above the Kabul valley, itself more than a mile high. The plane banked toward Bagram, a military air base north of Kabul. Along the surrounding roads lay rusting carcasses of tanks and armored personnel carriers, burned and abandoned. Fractured shells of fighter aircraft and transport planes lined the runway.

Officers in Massoud's intelligence service met the plane with four-wheel-drive vehicles, packed their American visitor inside, and began the bone-jarring drive across the Shomali Plains to Kabul. It amazed some of them that Schroen had turned up with just a small bag tossed over his shoulder—no communications gear, no personal security. His relaxed demeanor, ability to speak Dari, and detailed knowledge of Afghanistan impressed them.

Then, too, Schroen had been known to turn up in the past with bags full of American dollars. In that respect he and his CIA colleagues could be easy men for Afghan fighters to like. For sixteen years now the CIA had routinely pursued its objectives in Afghanistan with large boxes of cash. It frustrated some of Massoud's intelligence officers that the CIA always seemed to think Massoud and his men were motivated by money.

Their civil war might be complex and vicious, but they saw themselves as fighters for a national cause, bleeding and dying by the day, risking what little they had. Enough untraceable bills had flowed to Massoud's organization over the years to assure their comfortable retirements if they wished. Yet many of them were still here in Kabul, still at Massoud's side, despite the severe risks and deprivations. Some of them wondered resentfully why the CIA often seemed to treat them as if money mattered more than kin and country. Of course, they had not been known to refuse the cash, either.

They delivered Gary Schroen to one of the half-dozen unmarked safe-houses Massoud maintained in Kabul. They waited for the commander's summons, which came about an hour before midnight. They met in a house that had once been the residence of Austria's ambassador, before rocketing and gun battles had driven most of Europe's diplomats away.

Massoud wore a white Afghan robe and a round, soft, wool Panjshiri cap. He was a tall man, but not physically imposing. He was quiet and formal, yet he radiated intensity.

His attendant poured tea. They sat in dim light around a makeshift conference table. Massoud chatted in Dari with Khalili about their visitors, his background, what Khalili knew of him.

Massoud sounded skeptical about the CIA's request for this meeting. The agency had ignored what Massoud and his men saw as the rising threat posed by the radical Taliban. There were some in Massoud's circle who suspected that the CIA had secretly passed money and guns to the Taliban. America had been a friend to Massoud over the years, but a fickle friend. What did the agency want now?

"You and I have a history, although we never met face to face," Schroen began. He was not going to make accusations, but in truth, it was not an altogether happy history.

In the winter of 1990, Schroen reminded Massoud, the CIA had been working closely with the commander. Massoud operated then in the mountains of northeastern Afghanistan. Kabul was controlled by President Najibullah, a beefy, mustached former secret police chief and communist who

clung to power despite the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. Moscow backed Najibullah; U.S. policy sought his defeat by military force. The Soviets supplied vast amounts of military and economic aid to their client by road and air. Working with Pakistan's military intelligence service, the CIA had come up with a plan that winter to launch simultaneous attacks on key supply lines around Afghanistan. CIA officers had mapped a crucial role for Massoud because his forces were positioned near the Salang Highway; the main north-south road leading from the Soviet Union to Kabul.

In January 1990, Gary Schroen had traveled to Peshawar, Pakistan. One of Massoud's brothers, Ahmed Zia, maintained a compound there with a radio connection to Massoud's northeastern headquarters. Schroen spoke on the radio with Massoud about the CIA's attack plan. The agency wanted Massoud to drive west and shut down the Salang Highway for the winter.

Massoud agreed but said he needed financial help. He would have to purchase fresh ammunition and winter clothing for his troops. He needed to move villagers away from the area of the attacks so they would not be vulnerable to retaliation from the regime's forces. To pay for all this, Massoud wanted a large payment over and above his monthly CIA stipend. Schroen and the commander agreed on a one-time lump sum of \$500,000 in cash. Schroen soon delivered the money by hand to Massoud's brother in Peshawar.

Weeks passed. There were a few minor skirmishes, and the Salang Highway closed for a few days, but it promptly reopened. As far as the CIA could determine, Massoud had not put any of his main forces into action as they had agreed he would. CIA officers involved suspected they had been ripped off for half a million dollars. The Salang was a vital source of commerce and revenue for civilians in northern Afghanistan, and Massoud in the past had been reluctant to close the road down, fearing he would alienate his local followers. Massoud's forces also earned taxes along the road.

In later exchanges with CIA officers, Massoud defended himself, saying his subcommanders had initiated the planned attacks as agreed that winter, but they had been stalled by weather and other problems. The CIA could find no evidence to support Massoud's account. As far as they could tell, Massoud's commanders had chosen to sit out the battles along the Salang.

Schroen now reminded Massoud about their agreement six years earlier, and he mentioned that he had personally handed over \$500,000 to Massoud's brother.

"How much?" Massoud asked.

"Five hundred thousand," Schroen replied.

Massoud and his aides began to talk among themselves. One of them quietly said in Dari, "We didn't get \$500,000."

Massoud repeated his earlier defense to Schroen. The weather in that winter of 1990 had been awful. He couldn't move his troops as successfully as he had hoped. He lacked adequate ammunition, despite the big payment.

"That's all history," Schroen finally said.

Massoud voiced his own complaints. He was a deliberate, cogent speaker, clear and forceful, never loud or demonstrative. The CIA and the United States had walked away from Afghanistan, leaving its people bereft, he said. Yes, Massoud and his colleagues were grateful for the aid the CIA had provided during the years of Soviet occupation, but now they were bitter about what they saw as an American decision to abandon their country.

"Look, we're here," Schroen said. "We want to reopen the relationship. The United States is becoming more and more interested in Afghanistan." It may be a year, Schroen told them, or maybe two years, but the CIA was going to return. That's the way things are moving, he said. One concern in particular was now rising: terrorism.

FOUR MONTHS EARLIER, in May 1996, Osama bin Laden, the seventeen-year-old son of a Saudi Arabian billionaire, had flown into Afghanistan on his own Ariana Afghan Airlines jet. Unlike the CIA, bin Laden could afford to charter a plane for personal use. He brought with him scores of hardened Arab radicals fired by visions of global Islamic war. He arrived initially in Jalalabad, a dust-blown Afghan provincial capital east of Kabul, where he was welcomed by local warlords who had known bin Laden as a rebel philanthropist and occasional fighter during the anti-Soviet jihad.⁶

He had returned to Afghanistan this time because he had little choice. He had been living in Sudan during the previous four years, but now that government had expelled him. The United States, Egypt, and Algeria, among others, complained that bin Laden financed violent Islamic terrorist groups across the Middle East. To win international favor, the Sudanese told bin Laden to get out. His native country of Saudi Arabia had stripped him of citizenship. Afghanistan was one of the few places where he could find asylum. Its government barely functioned, its Islamist warlords marauded independently, and its impoverished people would welcome a wealthy sheikh bearing gifts.

These were much rougher accommodations than the urban compounds

and air-conditioned business offices that bin Laden had enjoyed in Khartoum, and when he arrived in Afghanistan he seemed to be in a foul mood, angry at those he held responsible for his exile. That summer bin Laden for the first time publicly sanctioned large-scale violence against Americans.

In August he issued an open call for war titled "The Declaration of Jihad on the Americans Occupying the Country of the Two Sacred Places," meaning Saudi Arabia, where more than five thousand U.S. soldiers and airmen were based. Bin Laden asked his followers to attack Israelis and Americans and cause them "as much harm as can be possibly achieved."

Bin Laden also released a poem he had written, addressed to the U.S. secretary of defense, William Perry:

O William, tomorrow you will be informed

As to which young man will face your swaggering brother

A youngster enters the midst of battle smiling, and

Retreats with his spearhead stained with blood

He signed the document "From the Peaks of the Hindu Kush, Afghanistan."

The CIA had been tracking bin Laden for several years. When he lived in Sudan, a team of CIA officers working from the U.S. embassy in Khartoum had surveilled him. The agency at that time assessed bin Laden mainly as a financier of other terrorists.⁸ In January 1996 the CIA had recommended closing the U.S. embassy in Khartoum because of fears that bin Laden's group might attack CIA officers or U.S. diplomats. As the embassy shut, the CIA opened a new Virginia-based unit to track the Saudi.⁹

After bin Laden published his bloodcurdling poetry from Afghanistan, CIA headquarters and its Islamabad station traded cables about whether a meeting in Kabul with Massoud might help, among other things, to reestablish intelligence collection against bin Laden now that he had set himself up in "the Peaks of the Hindu Kush."

There were reasons to be skeptical about the value of such a liaison with Massoud. Most CIA officers who knew Afghanistan admired Massoud's can-niness and courage. But episodes such as the \$500,000 Salang Highway payment signaled that Massoud's innate independence could make him an unpredictable ally. Also, while Massoud was not a radical Islamist of bin Laden's type, he had welcomed some Arab fighters to his cause and maintained contacts in extremist networks. Could Massoud and his intelligence service become reliable partners in tracking and confronting bin Laden? Opinion within the CIA

was divided in September 1996. It would remain divided for five years to come, even as the agency's secret collaborations with Massoud deepened, until a further September when Massoud's fate and America's became fatally entwined.

Langley had provided Gary Schroen with no money or formal orders to open a partnership with Massoud on terrorism. The CIA unit that worked on bin Laden had supported his visit, and its officers encouraged Schroen to discuss the terrorism issue with Massoud. But they had no funding or legal authority to do more. Schroen did have another way, however, to revive the agency's relationship with Massoud: Stinger missiles.

The Stinger had first been introduced to the Afghan battlefield by the CIA in 1986. It was a portable, shoulder-fired weapon that proved durable and easy to use. Its automated heat-seeking guidance system worked uncannily. CIA-supplied Afghan rebels used Stingers to down hundreds of Soviet helicopters and transport aircraft between 1986 and 1989. The missile forced Soviet generals to change air assault tactics. Its potency sowed fear among thousands of Russian pilots and troops.

After Soviet troops left, the CIA fretted that loose Stingers would be bought by terrorist groups or hostile governments such as Iran's for use against American civilian passenger planes or military aircraft. Between 2,000 and 2,500 missiles had been given away by the CIA to Afghan rebels during the war. Many had gone to commanders associated with anti-American radical Islamist leaders. A few missiles had already been acquired by Iran.

President George H. W. Bush and later President Bill Clinton authorized a highly classified program that directed the CIA to buy back as many Stingers as it could from anyone who possessed them. Congress secretly approved tens of millions of dollars to support the purchases. The program was administered by the Near East Division of the CIA's Directorate of Operations, which oversaw the Islamabad station. Detailed record-keeping based on missile serial numbers had allowed the CIA to keep fairly close count of the Stingers it handed out. But once the weapons reached Afghanistan, they were beyond auditing. In 1996 the CIA estimated that about six hundred Stingers were still at large.¹⁰

The agency's repurchase program had evolved into a kind of post-Cold War cash rebate system for Afghan warlords. The going rate per missile ranged between \$80,000 and \$150,000. Pakistan's intelligence service handled most of the purchases on a subcontract basis for the CIA, earning an authorized commission for each missile collected.¹¹ In part because airpower did not figure much in the grinding civil war then being fought in Afghanistan,

commanders holding the missiles proved willing to sell. The total cash spent by the CIA on Stinger repurchases during the mid-1990s rivaled the total cash donations by other sections of the U.S. government for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan during those years. The Stinger repurchases may have improved aviation security, but they also delivered boxes of money to the warlords who were destroying Afghanistan's cities and towns.

Ahmed Shah Massoud had yet to turn over any missiles and had not received any funds. The CIA now hoped to change that. This was a key aspect of Gary Schroen's mission to Kabul that September. If Massoud would participate in the Stinger roundup, he could earn cash by selling his own stockpiles and also potentially earn commission income as a middleman. This revenue, some CIA officers hoped, might also purchase goodwill from Massoud for joint work in the future on the bin Laden problem.

IN THEIR DIM MEETING ROOM, Schroen handed Massoud a piece of paper. It showed an estimate of just more than two thousand missiles provided by the CIA to Afghan fighters during the jihad.¹²

Massoud looked at the figure. "Do you know how many of those missiles I received?" He wrote a number on the paper and showed it to Schroen. In a very near hand Massoud had written "8." "That was all," Massoud declared, "and only at the end of the fight against the communist regime."

Later, after Schroen reported his conversations by cable to several departments at headquarters, the CIA determined that Massoud was correct. It seemed incredible to some who had lived through the anti-Soviet Afghan war that Massoud could have received so few. He had been one of the war's fiercest commanders. Yet for complicated reasons, Pakistan's intelligence service, the CIA's partner in supplying the anti-Soviet rebel, distrusted Massoud and continually tried to undermine him. Massoud also had shaky relations with the Islamist political party that helped channel supplies to him. As a result, when the war's most important weapon system had been distributed to Afghan commanders, Massoud had received less than 1 percent, and this only in 1991.

The CIA now wanted Massoud to sell back his own stored missiles; he still had all eight of them. They also wanted him to act as an intermediary with other commanders across the north of Afghanistan. The Pakistani intelligence service had few connections in the north and had repurchased few Stingers there. Schroen told Massoud that they could use his help.

He agreed to take part. He would sell back his stockpile and begin seeking Stingers from subcommanders and other Afghan fighters he knew, he told Schroen. He suspected that some of his allied commanders would be willing to sell for the prices on offer. Schroen and Massoud worked out a logistics plan: The Stingers would be gathered initially under Massoud's control, and when enough had accumulated to justify a trip, the CIA would arrange for a C-130 transport plane to fly out clandestinely to pick them up.

They discussed bin Laden. Massoud described the Saudi's puritanical, intolerant outlook on Islam as abhorrent to Afghans. Bin Laden's group was just one dangerous part of a wider movement of armed Islamic radicalism then gathering in Afghanistan around the Taliban, Massoud said. He described this movement as a poisonous coalition: Pakistani and Arab intelligence agencies; impoverished young students bused to their deaths as volunteer fighters from Pakistani religious schools; exiled Central Asian Islamic radicals trying to establish bases in Afghanistan for their revolutionary movements; and wealthy sheikhs and preachers who jetted in from the Persian Gulf with money, supplies, and inspiration. Osama bin Laden was only the most ambitious and media-conscious of these outside sheikhs.

The eastern area of Jalalabad where bin Laden had initially arrived had now fallen into turmoil. By one account the Afghan warlord who had greeted bin Laden's plane in May had been assassinated, leaving the Saudi sheikh without a clear Afghan sponsor.¹³ Meanwhile, the Taliban had begun to move through Jalalabad, overthrowing the warlords there who had earlier been loosely allied with Massoud. It was a volatile moment.

Schroen asked Massoud if he could help develop reliable sources about bin Laden that might benefit them both. The CIA hoped Massoud could reach out to some of the commanders they both knew from the 1980s who were now operating in the eastern areas where bin Laden and his Arab followers had settled. Massoud said he would try. This is a beginning, Schroen told him. He did not have funds at this stage to support these intelligence collection efforts, but he said that others in the CIA would want to follow up and deepen cooperation.

The meeting broke up around two in the morning. The next day Schroen took a sightseeing drive to the Salang Tunnel, a vivid rock passage between Kabul and northern Afghanistan, eleven thousand feet above sea level. His bumpy four-hour journey took him along sections of the road that he had spent the CIA's \$500,000 in a futile effort to close.

Massoud's aides saw him off on his return Ariana Afghan flight, his small

bag slung on his shoulder. They were glad he had come. Few Americans took the trouble to visit Kabul, and fewer still spoke the language or understood Afghanistan's complexities as Schroen did. Massoud's intelligence officers believed. Uncertain about where this CIA initiative had come from so suddenly, they speculated that Schroen had planned his own mission, perhaps in defiance of headquarters.

Still, if it was a beginning, Massoud's advisers thought, it was a very small one. They were in a brutal, unfinished war and felt neglected by the United States. They needed supplies, political support, and strong public denunciations of the Taliban. Instead, the CIA proposed a narrow collaboration on Stinger missile recovery.

One of Massoud's advisers involved in the meeting with Schroen would later recall an Afghan phrase that went, roughly translated, "Your mouth cannot be sweet when you talk about honey; you must have honey in your mouth." CIA officers might speak promisingly about a new clandestine relationship with Massoud focused on Stingers and terrorism, but where was the honey?

AHMED SHAH MASSOUD suffered the most devastating defeat of his military career less than a week after Schroen's departure.

Taliban forces approached from Jalalabad, apparently rich with cash from bin Laden or elsewhere. On September 25 the key forward post of Sarobi fell to white-turbaned mascara-painted Taliban who sped and zigzagged in new four-wheel-drive pickup trucks equipped with machine guns and rockets. At 3 P.M. on September 26, at a meeting with senior commanders at his armored division headquarters on Kabul's northern outskirts, Massoud concluded that his forces had been encircled and that he had to withdraw to avoid destruction.¹⁴ His government forces retreated to the north in a rush, dragging along as much salvageable military equipment as they could. By nightfall the Taliban had conquered Kabul. A militia whose one-eyed emir believed that he had been selected by God to prepare pious Muslims for glory in the afterlife now controlled most of Afghanistan's territory, most of its key cities, and its seat of government.

In Washington a spokesperson for the State Department, Glyn Davies, announced the official American reaction from a briefing room podium: "We hope this presents an opportunity for a process of national reconciliation to begin," she said. "We hope very much and expect that the Taliban will respect

the rights of all Afghans and that the new authorities will move quickly to restore order and security and to form a representative government on the way to some form of national reconciliation." Asked if the United States might open diplomatic relations with the Taliban government, Davies replied, "I'm not going to prejudge where we're going to go with Afghanistan."¹⁵

It was the sort of pabulum routinely pronounced by State Department spokesmen when they had no real policy to describe. Outside a few small pockets of Afghan watchers in government and out, there was barely a ripple about the fall of Kabul in Washington. Bill Clinton had just begun campaigning in earnest for reelection, coasting against the overmatched Republican nominee, Bob Dole. The Dow Jones Industrial Average stood at 5,872, up nearly 80 percent in four years. Unemployment was falling. American and Soviet nuclear arsenals, which had once threatened the world with doomsday, were being steadily dismantled. The nation believed it was at peace.

In Afghanistan and neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Davies's words and similar remarks by other State Department officials that week were interpreted as an American endorsement of Taliban rule.

The CIA had not predicted the fall of Kabul that September.¹⁶ To the contrary, a station chief had been permitted to fly solo into the capital several days before it was about to collapse, risking entrapment. Few CIA officers in the field or at Langley understood Massoud's weakening position or the Taliban's strength.

Just a few years before, Afghanistan had been the nexus of what most CIA officers regarded as one of the proudest achievements in the agency's history: the repulsion of invading Soviet forces by covert action. Now, not only in literal terms but in a far larger sense, Afghanistan was not part of the agency's Operating Directive.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL following the Cold War's end was no less steep in, say, Congo or Rwanda than it was in Afghanistan. Yet for Americans on the morning of September 11, it was Afghanistan's storm that struck. A war they hardly knew and an enemy they had barely met crossed oceans never traversed by the German Luftwaffe or the Soviet Rocket Forces to claim several thousand civilian lives in two mainland cities. How had this happened?

In history's long inventory of surprise attacks, September 11 is distinguished in part by the role played by intelligence agencies and informal secret networks in the preceding events. As bin Laden and his aides endorsed the

September 11 attacks from their Afghan sanctuary, they were pursued secretly by salaried officers from the CIA. At the same time, bin Laden and his closest allies received protection, via the Taliban, from salaried officers in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate.

This was a pattern for two decades. Strand after strand of official covert action, unofficial covert action, clandestine terrorism, and clandestine counterterrorism wove one upon the other to create the matrix of undeclared war that burst into plain sight in 2001.

America's primary actor in this subterranean narrative was the CIA, which shaped the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan during the 1980s and then waged a secret campaign to disrupt, capture, or kill Osama bin Laden after he returned to Afghanistan during the late 1990s. In the two years prior to September 11, the CIA's Counterterrorist Center worked closely with Ahmed Shah Massoud and other Afghans against bin Laden. But the agency was unable to persuade most of the rest of the U.S. government to go as far as Massoud and some CIA officers wanted.

In these struggles over how best to confront bin Laden—as in previous turning points in the CIA's involvement with Afghanistan—the agency struggled to control its mutually mistrustful and at times toxic alliances with the intelligence services of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The self-perpetuating secret routines of these official liaisons, and their unexamined assumptions, helped create the Afghanistan that became Osama bin Laden's sanctuary. They also stoked the rise of a radical Islam in Afghanistan that exuded violent global ambitions.

The CIA's central place in the story is unusual, compared to other cataclysmic episodes in American history. The stories of the agency's officers and leaders, their conflicts, their successes, and their failures, help describe and explain the secret wars preceding September 11 the way stories of generals and dog-faced GIs have described conventional wars in the past. Of course other Americans shaped this struggle as well: presidents, diplomats, military officers, national security advisers, and, later, dispersed specialists in the new art termed "counterterrorism."

Pakistani and Saudi spies, and the sheikhs and politicians who gave them their orders or tried in vain to control them, joined Afghan commanders such as Ahmed Shah Massoud in a regional war that shifted so often, it existed in a permanent shroud. Some of these local powers and spies were partners of the CIA. Some pursued competing agendas. Many did both at once. The story of September 11's antecedents is their story as well. Among them swirled the

fluid networks of stateless Islamic radicals whose global revival after 1979 eventually birthed bin Laden's al Qaeda, among many other groups. As the years passed, these radical Islamic networks adopted some of the secret deception-laden tradecraft of the formal intelligence services, methods they sometimes acquired through direct training.

During the 1980s, Soviet conscripts besieged by CIA-supplied Afghan rebels called them *dhikhi*, or ghosts. The Soviets could never quite grasp and hold their enemy. It remained that way in Afghanistan long after they had gone. From its first days before the Soviet invasion until its last hours in the late summer of 2001, this was a struggle among ghosts.