'A SWEEPING ACCOUNT...ONE OF THE FIRST TO LOOK AT THE WAR AS A WHOLE'
TELEGRAPH

THE GOOD WAR

WHY WE COULDN'T WIN THE WAR OR THE PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

JACK FAIRWEATHER

VINTAGE

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About the Book

In its earliest days, the American-led war in Afghanistan appeared to be a triumph – a ‘good war’ in comparison to the debacle in Iraq. It has since turned into one of the longest and most expensive wars in recent history. The story of how this good war went so bad may well turn out to be a defining tragedy of the twenty-first century – yet, as acclaimed war correspondent Jack Fairweather explains, it should also give us reason to hope for an outcome grounded in Afghan reality.

In *The Good War*, Fairweather provides the first full narrative history of the war in Afghanistan, from the 2001 invasion to the 2014 withdrawal. Drawing on hundreds of interviews, previously unpublished archives, and months of experience living and reporting in Afghanistan, Fairweather traces the course of the conflict from its inception after 9/11 to the drawdown in 2014. In the process, he explores the righteous intentions and astounding hubris that caused the West’s strategy in Afghanistan to flounder, refuting the long-held notion that the war could have been won with more troops and cash. Fairweather argues that only by accepting the limitations in Afghanistan – from the presence of the Taliban to the ubiquity of poppy production to the country’s inherent unsuitability for rapid, Western-style development – can we help to restore peace in this shattered land.

A timely lesson in the perils of nation-building and a sobering reminder of the limits of military power, *The Good War* leads readers from the White House Situation Room to Afghan military outposts, from warlords’ palaces to

insurgents’ dens, to explain how the US and its British allies might have salvaged the Afghan campaign – and how we must rethink other ‘good’ wars in the future.

About the Author

A foreign correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Washington Post*, Jack Fairweather is currently Middle East editor and correspondent for *Bloomberg News*. He lives in Istanbul, Turkey.

ALSO BY JACK FAIRWEATHER

A War of Choice: Honour, Hubris and Sacrifice: The British in Iraq

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The Afghan minister Ashraf Ghani advocated a more limited role for western agencies in reconstructing the country and insisted that Afghans knew best regarding their country's priorities. (Photo courtesy of Staff Sergeant Ryan Crane)

Tom Praster helped set up the first Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan in the eastern town of Gardez. (Photo courtesy of Tom Praster)

Lieutenant General Rob Fry was the British strategist who conceived of the UK deployment to Helmand as a way to get British forces out of Iraq while maintaining the reputation of the British military and the UK's special relationship with America. (Photo courtesy of Rob Fry)

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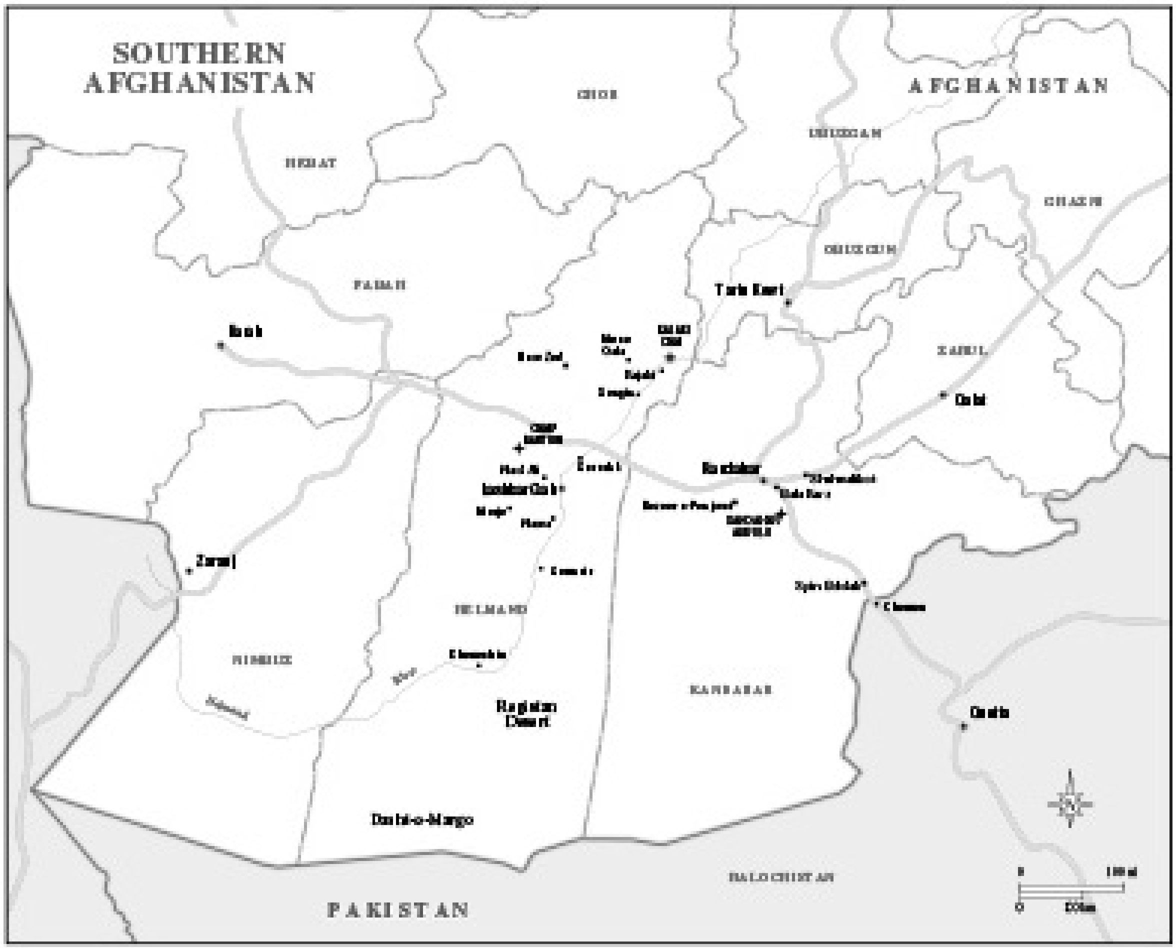
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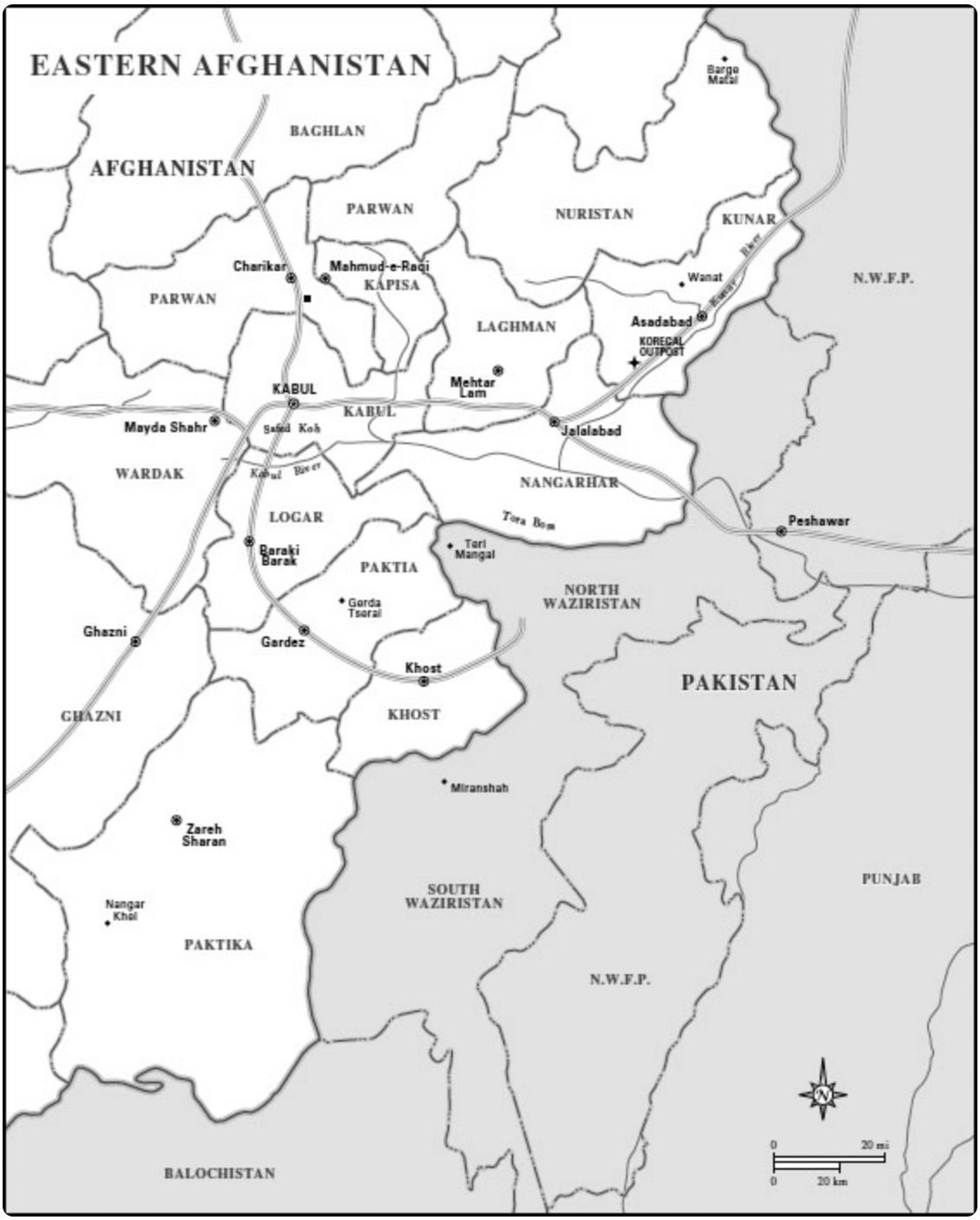
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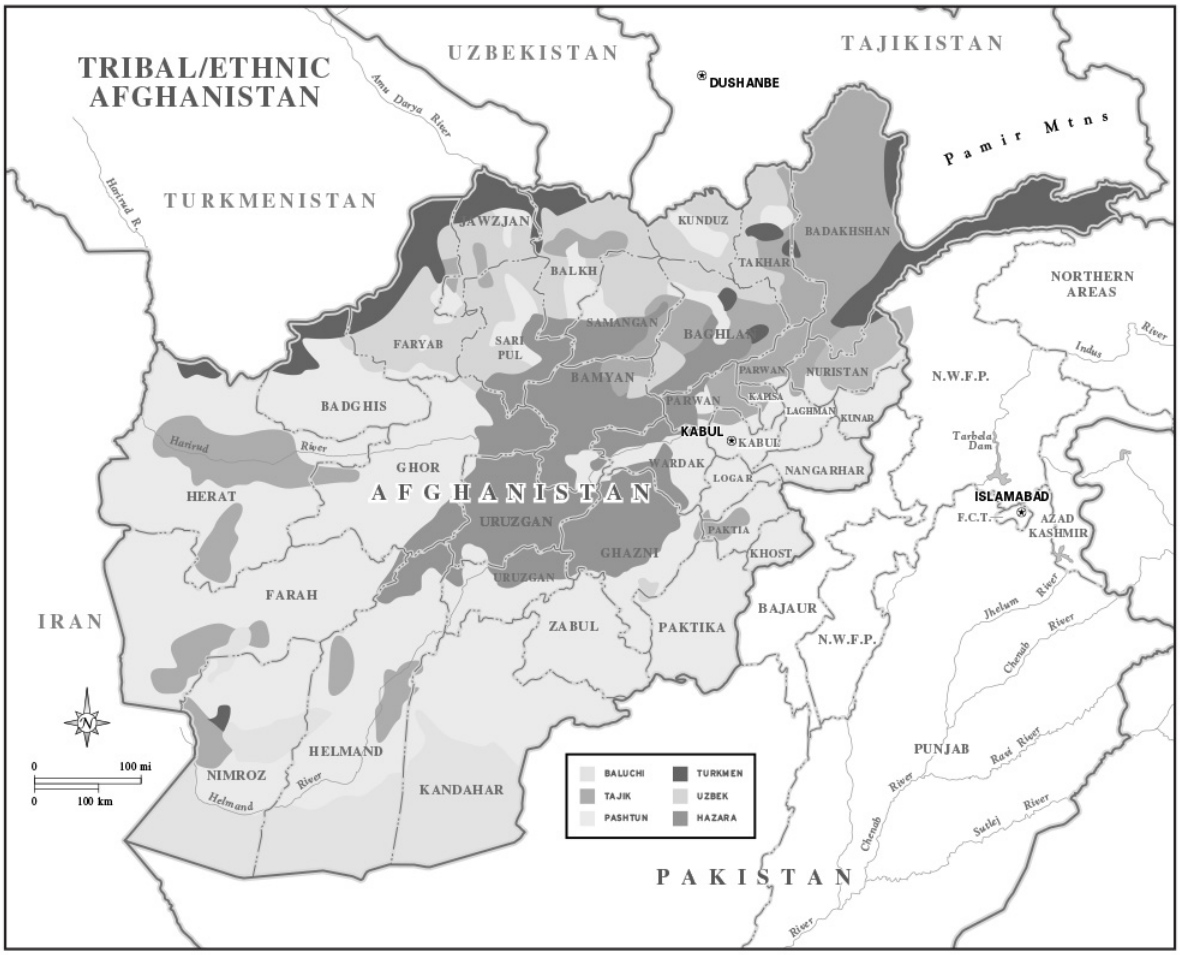
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For my girls,
Chrissy, Amelie and Marianna

The Good War

Why We Couldn’t Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan

Jack Fairweather

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

‘UNLIKE OTHER WARS, AFGHAN WARS BECOME SERIOUS ONLY WHEN THEY ARE OVER.’

—Olaf Caroe

Note on text

Quotations attributed to individuals are from their own recollections, except where endnotes indicate another source. Subsequent quotations from the same individual without footnotes indicate that the same source is being used.

I have sought to protect the identities of special forces personnel and intelligence officials except when their names are already in the public domain or they are no longer serving. For Pashtu and Dari names and places I have sought to use the most common transliterations.

Prologue

The Mask of Anarchy

HAMID KARZAI OFTEN walked around the circle of his small garden in the palace grounds. Most evenings he could be found, head down, his hands clasped behind his back, striding in measured paces. He liked to keep fit, to ease the tension of a hundred meetings, to dwell on the past. This evening in early 2014 was no different.

The palace itself was a sweeping complex of hulking stone structures, round houses and even a quaint Victorian mansion set in eighty acres of grounds protected by high walls and barbed wire. Karzai had opted to live in a humbler concrete building, constructed by one of Afghanistan's former princes in the 1960s, that contained its own courtyard. His guards usually stood to one side under the foliage of a cypress tree, trying not to intrude on these private moments as Karzai paced the worn earth. In the final years of his presidency his walks had become longer than usual as he worked through a particular source of angst.

As he paced, he could see an American surveillance blimp overhead, one of the helium-filled balloons with an array of cameras that had proliferated across the city, and which provided the US contractors operating them with the remarkable ability to peer into nooks and crannies. Some Afghans ascribed near-magical powers to the balloons. One rumour in the south was that the Americans had trained mice to run up the cable connecting the balloon to the

surveillance station, make notes on what they saw, then run back down to tell their US overlords.[1] Others feared the blimps were emitting harmful rays that filled their heads with Western fantasies while they slept, and that women were particularly susceptible.

Karzai knew the balloons were in the sky in part to protect him, and there was a time when he would have been reassured by their presence. It was he who had brought the Americans to the country, knowing that they alone possessed the wealth and power to rebuild Afghanistan. He had always seen himself as the father of the nation, a bold reformer who could transform his shattered country. Indeed, Karzai's most frequent complaint throughout the thirteen-year war was that the West wasn't doing enough to fulfil their shared vision.

The war, Karzai had freely professed to the world in the early days, was a righteous struggle against the forces of chaos and disintegration. The same evil that had perpetrated the attacks in New York and Washington was responsible for tearing apart his own country in the preceding years. He wanted more troops, more aid experts and development consultants, and more defence contractors and NGO workers. Poor and benighted countries like his, he had publicly argued, needed this paraphernalia of nation-building to join the modern world. Karzai's call to drag Afghanistan into the light, establish a democracy and uphold the rule of law had captured the mood in Washington after 9/11.

Yet when the money had flowed and the soldiers surged, they had not quelled the deadly violence gripping the country. American forces battled a resurgent Taliban, and the Afghan civilians Karzai believed he was helping were caught in the crossfire. Over the course of 2007 there were at least 1,633 casualties, a threefold increase on the year before.[2] By 2013 two hundred Afghan civilians were dying each month in the fighting, and thousands more had fled

their homes or had their livelihoods destroyed.[3] The refugee camps outside the Afghan capital of Kabul were overflowing.[4]

At first Karzai had been sure he was somehow to blame for not doing enough to temper American firepower or steer the reconstruction process.[5] In the long, grinding middle stretch of the war he fell into what appeared to be a fog of depression. US diplomats who worked alongside him noticed a change in his countenance, mood swings and erratic behaviour. Rumours spread in the Western press that he was addicted to heroin or was on serious medication. According to those who knew him, he became susceptible to real and imagined maladies and increasingly locked himself away in the palace.[6] He appeared to be waging an inner battle to prove to himself and his countrymen that he wasn't to blame for the past thirteen years of bloodshed and mayhem.[7]

Only in the long perambulations at the end of his presidency did Karzai recognise what he saw as an incontrovertible truth: the blame for the mounting pile of war dead lay with the outsiders. Karzai hadn't wrecked the country; rather, the Westerners had betrayed the ideals of the Good War they had subscribed to together. The West had never seen him as a genuine partner, he now understood. How else to explain their high-handed treatment of him? When he demanded that the US stop its aerial bombing, he was defied. When he asked to be informed of all American military operations, generals sometimes briefed him, but frequently he was ignored. Washington continued to side with Pakistan – even though that country appeared to support the insurgency – and President Barack Obama presumed to conduct negotiations with the Taliban without involving Karzai. The Afghan president came to believe that he was no more than a tool to service the real aim of the West: permanent instability in

his country, so that Afghanistan's natural resources could be plundered.[8]

The thought of being a puppet of the US and its British allies seemed to gnaw at him.[9] At times, he wished he could smile and dismiss their obsequious blue-eyed ambassadors and generals with their proud talk of the war dead.[10] In darker moments, he told advisers, he dwelled upon his predecessors' success at driving out invaders at the tips of their soldiers' spears. A favourite poem of his was Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy', a cry for freedom against the bonds of tyrannous overlords, which he cited to one visiting journalist.[11]

But if this narrative frustrated him it also lent him a new sense of purpose. He told his confidants that he should have stood up to the West sooner.[12] He began to see himself not as the leader who had allowed the foreigners in, but as the man who had extracted from them what he could and was now pushing them out. At the end of his presidency, Karzai was a man reborn. He seemed to bound into meetings with visiting dignitaries, tribal chiefs, even American diplomats. They might accuse his government of corruption or his family of controlling the opium trade and stealing almost a billion dollars from Kabul's national bank, but he told colleagues he no longer cared.[13]

Instead, at every opportunity he took delight in denouncing the West's betrayal of Afghanistan. The Americans hadn't come to fight al-Qaeda, he would intone. They had sought to wage war against the country and its people. 'The West wanted to use Afghanistan,' Karzai told the *New York Times* in November 2013, 'to have bases here, to create a situation whereby in the end Afghanistan would be so weak that it would agree to a deal in which Afghanistan's interests will not even be secondary, but tertiary and worse.'[14]

Now that he could see – and speak – clearly, Karzai appeared intent on redeeming himself in the eyes of his

people by ridding Afghanistan of these foreign powers. He had refused to sign an agreement with the US military that would let them stay beyond 2014. It would be one of the final acts of his presidency. Yet even this gesture of independence had a hollow ring.

The Americans were already scaling back their presence and dismantling their vast war machine. The flow of money was ebbing, and the troops were going home. Beyond the palace walls, Kabul was emptying of Westerners; their mansions, once the scenes of lavish parties, were shuttered and quiet. Outside the city, soldiers were packing up their patrol bases for the last time. Karzai would not get to oust the Americans and their allies; they were doing that themselves.

The West has reached its own conclusions about the nature of its intervention in Afghanistan. By 2014 the war was already one of the most costly in American history.[15] While there had been significant improvements in Afghans' lives, including greater access to basic health care and a sevenfold increase in the number of children attending school, the costs in blood, money and political capital far outpaced these gains: $100 billion had been spent on American aid. Yet only an estimated 15 per cent of this money had reached its intended recipients.[16] The rest was siphoned off by Western agencies, warlords, local contractors, petty criminals and, at times, even the Taliban. Thousands of projects from power plants to turbines to refrigerated food depots had been abandoned, left half finished, or destroyed as Western forces withdrew.

The Afghan people had suffered greatly: 32,000 had perished in suicide bombings, missile strikes, mortar attacks and shootings with more dying each week. The United Nations estimated that the fighting had forced at least 600,000 from their homes, many to end up in refugee camps and shanty towns outside Kabul and other major cities.[17] In southern Afghanistan, a third of all children were

acutely malnourished, with famine-like conditions affecting much of the area.[18] Hanging over the country was the prospect that the Taliban would return and reignite the country's civil war. Then there were the Western casualties: 3,400 – mostly soldiers – had died in Afghanistan by the beginning of 2014.[19]

The Good War had gone badly. The question was what, if anything, could be salvaged of the shattered ideal that Western military intervention had promised to deliver to Afghanistan and other dark corners of the world. When US soldiers had arrived in October 2001, their mission in President George W. Bush's War on Terrorism was simple: punish those responsible for the worst attack on American shores since Pearl Harbor and ensure that they couldn't harm the nation again. The enemy, in their eyes, was clearly defined: al-Qaeda and the Taliban government, which had refused to hand over Osama bin Laden and dismantle the shadowy terrorist group's training camps in southern Afghanistan. As Bush famously divided the world in his speech to Congress on 20 September 2001, justifying the war: 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.'

The US quickly routed al-Qaeda and threw the Taliban from power in December 2001. With the war seemingly over, US special forces mopped up the remnants of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the mountains. Washington then turned its attention to Iraq. The United Nations was left to assemble an interim government in Kabul and lead a cohort of aid agencies that wanted to spend billions on rebuilding the country. Many in the international community saw the Taliban not just as a security threat but as an affront to those closely held ideals of human rights, democracy and the free market. Images of Afghan women clad in full-body veils became symbols of the past that the aid world was sure the country was leaving behind. Afghanistan's status as one of the poorest nations on earth was frequently cited as further evidence of the need to act. The Good War, in the

soaring rhetoric of this idealism, was more than a necessary act of retaliation; it was a test case for humanitarian intervention, and aid workers' ability to transform the lives of oppressed people in the developing world.

These aims were little more than rhetoric at first, but they contained the seeds of almost certain failure. To begin with, the Americans – from their political leaders down to their soldiers – had dangerously conflated al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The two groups had similarities, of course, but they differed in vital ways. Al-Qaeda was primarily made up of Arab nationals who believed in global jihad to advance their fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. By contrast, the Taliban's ambitions were strictly limited to controlling their communities. They drew their values from the conservative mores of the Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan, and thus they could not be defeated by force of arms alone. A long and subtle process of education would be needed to change the mindsets of those who supported them.

In addition, America and its allies, who until that point had played a limited role in the international reconstruction effort, came to believe that to eliminate the terrorist threat and alleviate Afghans' suffering, the West needed to play a more activist role in creating a strong, democratic state. At the same time this nation-building agenda needed to be backed by more forces to combat the returning Taliban. This approach at once sidelined Afghanistan's post-Taliban political leaders and threatened to overwhelm their fragile government with aid projects the country could not support or realise.

The warriors and liberals responsible for managing the war and its aftermath were critically out of touch with the political reality of the country they were attempting to pacify and the nature of the people they were attempting to help. Only as the conflict smouldered and slowly began to reignite did it become clear to the Americans and their chief

allies, the British, that they had misconceived their intervention in this complex and unforgiving country.

The result of America's failures in Afghanistan, following the debacle in Iraq, has been to fundamentally shift how Washington and allied nations view their relationship to the developing world, thus completing a cycle that began with defeat in Vietnam in the 1970s. The lesson from that bloody war in South-East Asia – to steer clear of military action overseas – was largely observed. During the first Gulf War, the US was prepared to drive Iraqi forces out of Kuwait but not to seek Saddam Hussein's removal. Washington also avoided intervention in the Balkans and Rwanda until public outcry over the slaughter in those countries prompted a rethink.

Yet after the Kosovo conflict in 1999 and particularly after 9/11, politicians and the army showed a growing readiness to intervene in the name of values rather than national interest, an urge that became overwhelming when the two strands ran together. Both the Left and the Right united in the first decade of the twenty-first century to rid the world of bin Laden's aberrant strain of Islam and save Afghanistan from its own fundamentalist adversaries.

This is the story of how the world's most powerful leaders plotted to build a new kind of nation in Afghanistan that was pure fantasy. It is the story of how those leaders pinned their hopes on a marginal tribal leader and failed to heed his prescient advice, and how he in turn outplayed them. It is the story of why the long-suffering Afghan people rejected salvation from a global army of would-be rescuers. And finally it is the story of how the promise of a new military doctrine was ended by the Good War in Afghanistan and what it means for the future of Western military action in the developing world.

PART I

THE MISSING PEACE
2001–2003

1

The Wrong Kind of War

THE GAPING HOLE in the Pentagon was still smouldering when Air Force One landed in Washington DC late on the afternoon of 11 September 2001. Businesses throughout the capital were shuttered and the streets were deserted. The few people who ventured outside had a hurried, feral look.

Hours earlier, two planes had crashed into the Twin Towers in New York and a third had slammed into the Department of Defense headquarters, just across the Potomac River from the National Mall. A fourth had ploughed into a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing everyone on board but sparing its target, which was presumed to be either the White House or the US Capitol. By the time President George W. Bush returned to the capital from an appearance in Sarasota, Florida, the immediate threat of another attack seemed to have passed, but fear and shock lingered throughout the country.

For an hour, Bush locked himself away in a small study with his chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, to prepare for a televised address that evening. Bush knew that what he said before the cameras would define his presidency.

As soon as Bush had heard about the second plane that morning in a Sarasota kindergarten classroom, he had reached a conclusion that was to have profound consequences: he must declare war to unite a grieving