The Empire Stopper

By Rod Nordland, published on August 29th 2017 in The New York Times

A group of British officers in Afghanistan in 1878. Credit John Burke/Science & Society Picture Library, via Getty Images

When the American author James A. Michener went to [Afghanistan](#) to research his work of historical fiction, "Caravans," it was 1955 and there were barely any roads in the country. Yet there were already Americans and Russians there, jockeying for influence. Later, the book's Afghan protagonist would tell an American diplomat that one day both America and Russia would invade Afghanistan, and that both would come to regret it.

Michener's foresight was uncanny, but perhaps that is not terribly surprising. Afghanistan has long been called the "graveyard of empires" — for so long that it is unclear who coined that disputable term.
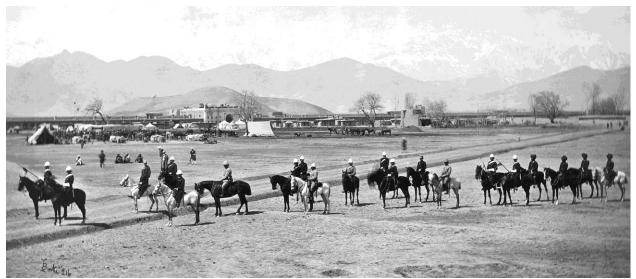
In truth, no great empires perished solely because of Afghanistan. Perhaps a better way to put it is that Afghanistan is the battleground of empires. Even without easily accessible resources, the country has still been blessed — or cursed, more likely — with a geopolitical position that has repeatedly put it in someone or other's way.

In the 19th century there was the Great Game, when the British and Russian empires faced off across its forbidding deserts and mountain ranges. At the end of the 20th century it was the Cold War, when the Soviet and American rivalry played out here in a bitter guerrilla conflict. And in this century, it is the War on Terror and a constantly shifting Taliban insurgency, with President Trump promising a renewed military commitment.

Wars of the last three "empires" to invade Afghanistan coincided with the age of photography, leaving a rich record of their triumphs and failures, and an arresting chronicle of a land that seems to have changed little in the past two centuries.

The British Empire

Over an 80-year period, the British fought three wars in Afghanistan, occupying or controlling the country in between, and lost tens of thousands of dead along the way. Finally, exhausted by the First World War, Britain gave up in 1919 and granted Afghanistan independence.
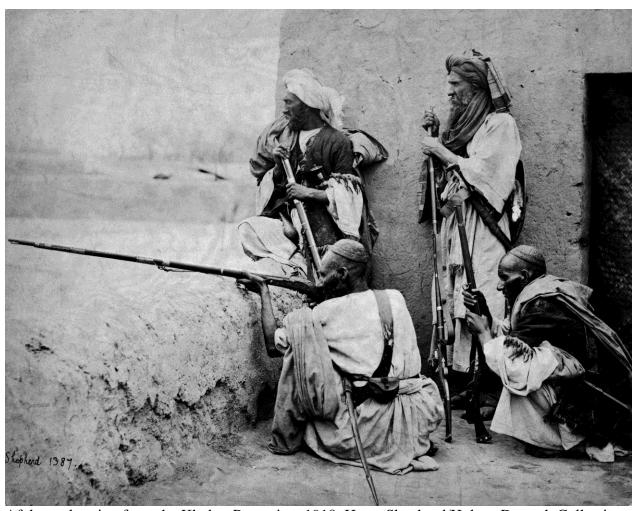

Frederick Sleigh Roberts, a British officer, and his staff in Afghanistan, circa 1880. John Burke/Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

It is striking, looking at these photographs, how little the rural Afghan landscape has changed between the early 19th and 21st centuries. The mud-walled fortifications of those days can still be seen throughout the country, and some of them are still in use as military facilities today. The fort in Kabul during the British occupation in 1879, shown below, looks very much like the famous Qala-i-Jang fortress in northern Afghanistan where the century's first American combatant, a C.I.A. agent, was killed in 2001.

British troops in occupied Kabul in 1879. John Burke/Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

Afghans shooting from the Khyber Pass, circa 1910. Harry Shepherd/Hulton-Deutsch Collection, via Getty Images
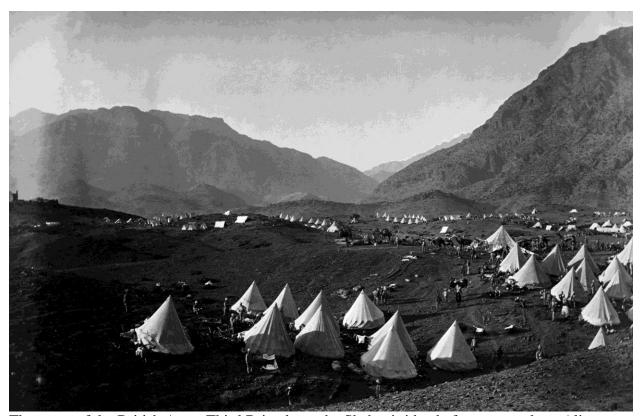
Kabul after its capture in 1929 by Nadir Khan, who would rule Afghanistan for the next four years. Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis, via Getty Images

The insurgents' dress, and even that of many pro-government militiamen, has changed little from the British period.

One of the books inspired by that period was "Flashman," the first in a series of historical novels by the Scottish author George MacDonald Fraser. The book's hilarious eponymous character, Flashman, is a caddish rake and self-described coward who manages to be the lone survivor of the Battle of Gandamack, arguably the British army's worst ever defeat. Flashman is, of course, fictional, but he has a thoroughly modern eye when he describes the nature of the British war against the Afghans.

"There were scores of little petty chiefs and tyrants who lost no opportunity of causing trouble in the unsettled times," Flashman recounts. "Our army prevented any big rising — for the moment, anyway — but it was forever patrolling and manning little forts, and trying to pacify and buy off the robber chiefs, and people were wondering how long this could go on."

The camp of the British Army Third Brigade on the Shahgai ridge before an attack on Ali Masjid, in 1878. The attack on the fort was the opening battle of the Second Afghan War. John Burke/Science & Society Picture Library, via Getty Images

Sir Louis Cavagnari, British envoy to Afghanistan, photographed on his way to Kabul in July 1879. Two months later he was killed during an Afghan uprising in Kabul. This led to the war of 1879. Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis, via Getty Images
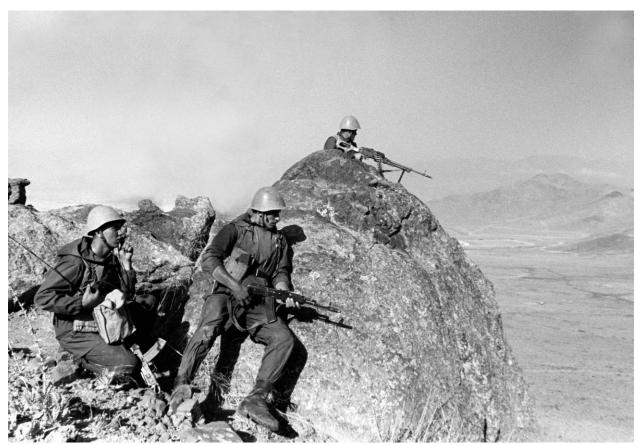
The Bala Bug near Kabul during the Second Afghan War in 1878. John Burke/Getty Images

The British lost that Battle of Gandamack, but they were back in the next fighting season exacting vengeance, and eventually defeated the Afghans. It was for many of them a sobering experience.

A British Army chaplain, G. R. Gleig, who witnessed it, called it "a war begun for no wise purpose, carried on with a strange mixture of rashness and timidity, brought to a close after suffering and disaster, without much glory attached either to the government which directed, or the great body of troops which waged it. Not one benefit, political or military, was acquired with this war."
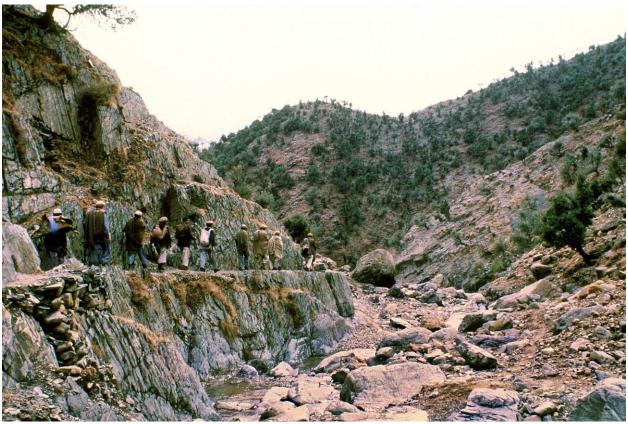
Sovietstan

The Soviet Union spent the postwar period pacifying and modernizing its Central Asian republics with great success. But it was mistaken in assuming that the same program could stick in Afghanistan. The Soviets invaded in 1979 to try to quell a brewing civil war and prop up its allies in the Afghan government, and they limped out in 1989.

Members of the elite Soviet 103rd Airborne division on guard on a hilltop in 1988. Mikhail Evstafiev/Reuters

The Soviets brought schools and roads, civil institutions and freedoms for women. But their occupation was unbearable to a generation of Afghan insurrectionists who declared a holy war and enjoyed the extensive support of the United States, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

It was a brutal war, on all sides. "Two Steps from Heaven," a novel by the Russian writer Mikhail Evstafiev — himself one of the "Afgantsy," as Soviet veterans of that Afghan war are known — describes a set of arrangements amid perpetual conflict that seem conspicuously familiar today: "As the years passed, numerous military installations grew up on the territory adjacent to the palace. A compound covered several square kilometers. It was guarded assiduously against the Afghans and, as was to be expected, Soviet power reigned supreme in that one specific part of Kabul."

Anti-Soviet resistance fighters in the mountainous Kunar Province near the Pakistani border in 1980. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mujahedeen rebels in the mountains in Kunar Province in May 1980. Associated Press

Mujahedeen rebels checking Soviet weapons in 1988. Robert Nickelsberg/Liaison, via Getty Images

"The distance between the Afghans and the Soviets was measured in centuries," Evstafiev wrote. "A man felt safe and secure only inside the garrison, surrounded by barbed wire, tanks and machine guns; fate had strewn Soviet military divisions all over Afghanistan, they were like islands in an ocean, lonely, far from the mainland."

The Soviets left the Afghan landscape permanently disfigured with the bombed-out husks of tanks, and the earth itself seeded with more mines than anywhere else on the planet. When their client state in Kabul collapsed, what ensued was years of bitter civil war that destroyed many of the cities, and led to the rise to power of the Taliban in 1996.

Soviet armored vehicles being loaded onto trains in Termez, Uzbekistan, after being withdrawn from Afghanistan in 1988. V. Kiselev/Sputnik, Associated Press

Afghan rebels inspected the wreckage of a Soviet-built helicopter gunship they claimed to have shot down near the Pakistani border in 1988. Sayed Haider Shah/Associated Press

A Soviet soldier carrying luggage toward a train near Termez in 1989. Sergei Karpukhin/Reuters

Soviet troops withdrawing from Afghanistan in 1989. Sovfoto/UIG, via Getty Images

The American Century

The first American military battle of the 21st century was fought in Afghanistan shortly after the events of Sept. 11, 2001. After nearly 16 years of fighting a shifting host of militant groups and the new Taliban insurgency, and now even a local affiliate of the Islamic State, there is no clear end on the horizon.

American soldiers boarding a transport helicopter in Kunduz in 2011. Damon Winter/The New York Times

That first battle, fought at the Qala-i-Jangi fort, featured American personnel on horseback, using lasers to guide bombs released from jet aircraft.

Since then more than a million American servicemen and women have served in Afghanistan; 2,400 of them lost their lives, along with another 1,100 NATO and other coalition allies killed. Afghan security forces lose three or four times that number just in a year now; the conflict killed more than 3,000 Afghan civilians in the past year, as well. American fatalities this year have totaled only 11, most of them Special Operations troops on counterterrorism missions. Other NATO fatalities: zero.

Soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division during an ambush by Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan in 2006. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Army engineers blowing up a house behind a field of marijuana in Kandahar Province in 2010.
Christoph Bangert for The New York Times

Marines cleared an area in Marja that had been a source of ambushes in 2010. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Soldiers recovering an armored vehicle that was hit by an explosive device in Kunduz Province in 2010. Damon Winter/The New York Times

By 2010, as American military numbers rose to 100,000, American and other coalition troops were in every one of the 34 Afghan provinces, often scattered — as the Soviets had been — in isolated fortresses. Now they are mostly restricted to a few major bases, and their numbers are estimated at around 12,000, including an influx of perhaps another 4,000 from President Trump's military commanders. The Afghan security forces, at the same time, have peaked at around 330,000 — roughly the same size they were during the Soviet period.

Special Forces soldiers rushed a wounded Afghan soldier to a helicopter in Kandahar Province in 2010. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Members of the 101st Airborne Division in Paktia Province in 2013. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Northern Alliance fighters on the way into Kabul in 2001 executed a Taliban fighter. Tyler Hicks for The New York Times

Northern Alliance soldiers keeping watch on a Taliban-controlled village in 2001. Tyler Hicks for The New York Times

Many years after he had researched "Caravans," James Michener was asked which country he would most want to revisit. His answer was Afghanistan, which his American diplomat character had described as "one of the world's great caldrons."

"I remember it as an exciting, violent, provocative place," Michener wrote. "Almost every American or European who worked there in the old days says the same."

And in these days, too, Americans seem committed to return to Afghanistan for many years to come.

"We are with you in this fight," the American military commander, Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., told Afghans on Thursday. "We will stay with you."

The American century in Afghanistan is far from over; its book has not been written yet.