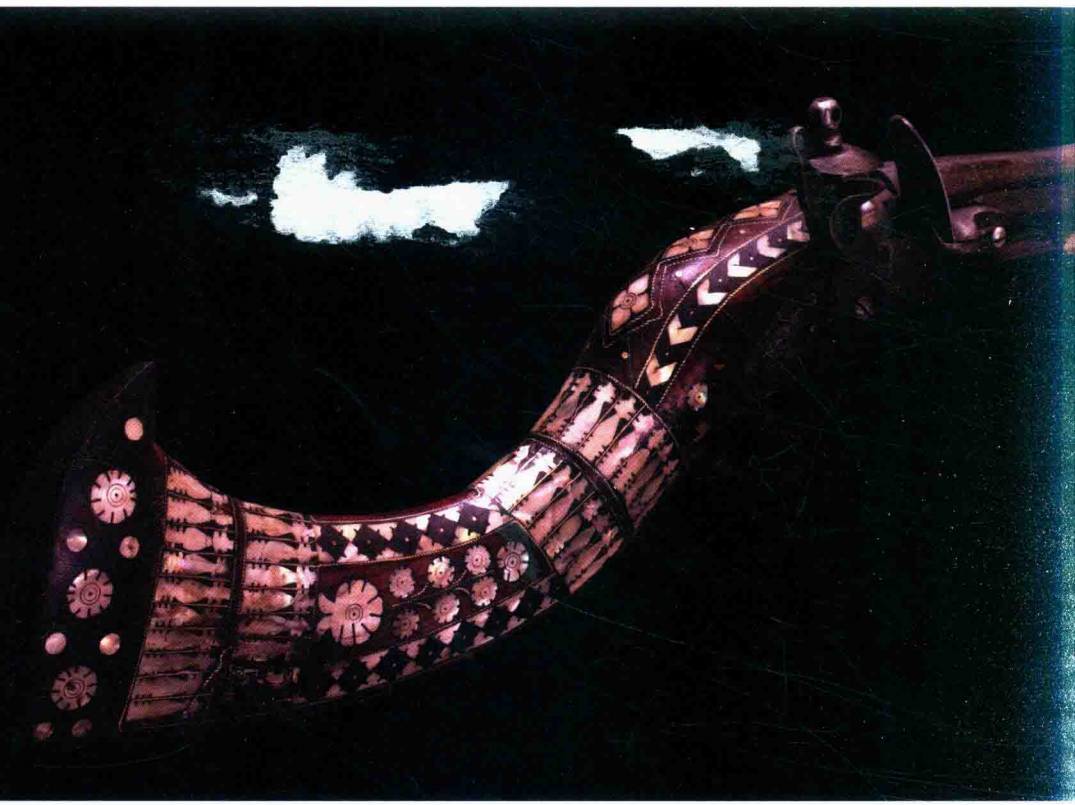
AFGHAN LESSONS

Culture, Diplomacy, and Counterinsurgency



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TO MY FATHER

WHENEVER HUMANITY SEEMS condemned to heaviness, I think I should fly like Perseus into a different space. I don't mean escaping into dreams or into the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach, look at the world from a different perspective, with a different logic and with fresh methods of cognition and verification. The images of lightness that I seek should not fade away like dreams dissolved by the realities of present and future.

Italo Calvino
From *Six Memos for the Next Millennium: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1985–86*

FOREWORD

THIS IS A book about different worlds, different realities. The reality of everyday life in an unreal world. People that need to be looked after, jobs that need to be done, a country that needs to be restored, all from within the necessary confines of an armed camp. And this in the middle of another reality, which we do not understand, full of things forgotten under decades of war. The keys to this reality lie in the past, perhaps lost.

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose garden.

And then there is the reality of policy, and of the massive foreign military resources behind political and civilian objectives. But politics is immune to foreign influence. And foreign armies are not good at dealing with local civilians. And the reality of noble aims—on both sides: this is why they fight—meeting the lives of ordinary people whose aims in their own way are also noble, though much less grand. Mostly these realities exist in parallel, side by side, meeting only in mutual deception, or when bodies are torn apart by bombs.

On the author's bedside table lie the U.S. army counterinsurgency manual and the poems of Rumi, the thirteenth-century mystic, the two best guides to the realities of Afghanistan.

As one of the Afghans in the book says: the wildflower has the luxury of blooming for no reason. This book too is written for no reason but also for its own reasons. That makes it honest. It also means you do not need to read it. But why not?

ROBERT COOPER
Member of the European Council on Foreign Relations and former colleague of the author

PREFACE

I THINK THE colors I saw in my two years in Afghanistan don't exist anywhere else in the world. I saw sunsets that could have come from Photoshop, suns that weren't red, moons that weren't yellow, skies of the clearest blue. But, above all, I saw stars so close they could have been part of the landscape.

I inhaled a scent of apricots like that of my childhood memories, but the balsam, poplar, and sulfur sand were new to me.

I saw men dressed like figures in a Nativity tableau, and women in chadors chatting on cell phones, and a three-year-old girl who seemed content to be barefoot in the snow.

I ate at a tavern where the cold froze the water in our glasses. In another, the waiters spun into trances to the sound of Sufi music on the radio.

I watched convoys of international forces terrorize the city's streets, heedless of old men on their bicycles and the children popping out of every nook and cranny.

I saw a fighting dog with a human foot between its jaws and a gang of screaming kids trying to drag the foot from the dog as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I flew on all sorts of military aircraft, some as high as four-story buildings, and on combat helicopters where I discovered that motion sickness is worse than seasickness.

I found the highest concentration of white Toyota Corollas per square mile. A golf course without a single blade of grass. The world's only art school without paints or brushes.

I understood why the Afghans always defeated the British and why even the Russians, in the end, were forced to retreat, and over time I became pessimistic.

I saw military commanders at work who were so ballsy that I immediately agreed with those who write that war is too serious a business to leave it entirely in their hands.

I met international operators who thought they knew everything, when they knew nothing, and diplomats I wouldn't trust to run a restaurant, let alone the foreign policy of a nation.

I understood that wars can be random, unavoidable, necessary, that they can drag on for reasons other than those for which they began, but that they're never right even when it seems that they are.

I met the world's most elegant head of state, and I watched warlords rubbing their feet and scratching their ears with ballpoint pens as they sat on parliamentary benches.

Now I can tell the sound of a rocket-propelled grenade from a mortar; I can figure out if an explosion occurred less than half a mile away; and watching how the smoke rises, I can tell if it was a car bomb or a landmine.

I watched just how much human beings can endure, like trained animals. For example, I once saw a father sitting in a bunker in the middle of the night, dressed in a helmet and flowery boxers, sipping cardamom tea as he spoke on a cell phone to someone on the other side of the world, studying his tapered hands from time to time, as if he were checking out a manicure—but for the rest, it seemed nothing was up.

In a mountain village, I met a nomad swathed in a blanket, crouched on a kind of column capital, just as I'd read in a book.

I thought that if someone like Robert Byron came here now, he'd certainly have written some caustic comments on the international community's "counterinsurgency" and "comprehensive approach."

Now I know the meaning of "clear, hold, and build," and why the military just doesn't get along with humanitarian workers.

I know the difference between tribal and global, planetary jihad and minor local conflicts, Taliban and all other insurgents. I learned that postmodern wars are no longer won or lost.

I came to appreciate that for Afghans the fact that a woman wears a burqa is irrelevant, because they recognize her by her ankles.

I learned what it means when two men walk hand in hand, and that the sexual revolution reached into the heart of Asia long before it arrived in the West.

I read the ancient poems of Rumi and the modern verses of Sayd Bahodine Majrouh; I visited the Herat Ansari tomb and listened to stories about the worship of fire and of goats. I discovered that the East is more mysterious than we might think, and that cultural globalization doesn't exist, which reassures me deeply. I spoke with many Afghans who mistrust Westerners and many of the latter who nevertheless trust Afghans.

With my own ears I heard a U.S. officer ask a superior what time he had to be at the 8:30 briefing, and I argued endlessly, usually to no avail, with the international military at the gate who insisted on searching Afghan government officials whenever they came to the base for meetings.

At times I could have screamed, but I never lost my patience or showed exasperation in front of colleagues and staff, even when I saw things I found absolutely unbearable. Only when suicide bombers blew themselves up at the gate of our base, one hundred yards from my home, killing seven people and injuring my press officer, did I tremble imperceptibly.

I met people I'll never forget, with whom I shared incredible moments. I cared deeply for the colleagues, staff, civilians, and soldiers I came to know, particularly Hamid and Jawid, the Afghan boys who kept house and cooked for me. From the very beginning I developed total admiration for the carabinieri of the Tuscania Regiment, who kept me safe: their manner of construing service and sacrifice would be worthy of a book in itself.


UZBEK-
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TAJIKISTAN
CHINA
Mary
TURKMENISTAN
Termiz
Faizabad
JOWZJAN
BALKH
KUNDUZ
Shibirghan
Mazar-e
Sharif
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Ludhiana
IRAN
HELMAND
KANDAHAR
NIMROZ
Quetta
BALOCHISTAN
Abbreviations
Cities
A. Asadabad
B. Bazarak
J. Jalalabad
K. Khost
M. Mahmud-e Raqi
P. Pul-e 'Alam
Provinces
K. Kapisa
KA. Kabul
LA. Laghman
LO. Logar
Capital
Major city/province capital in Afghanistan
0
100 Miles

CONTENTS

ONE

HOW I ENDED UP IN AFGHANISTAN

FEBRUARY–JULY 2008

I WAS APPOINTED NATO's senior civilian representative for Afghanistan in early May 2008. It was sheer chance really, a combination of events. With the fall of the Prodi administration in February, I had to look for another job after two years as deputy diplomatic adviser to the prime minister. At the same time, NATO's secretary general was looking for a new personal representative in Kabul, and the Italian Foreign Ministry had decided to put forward one of its diplomats for the position, so that secured me a place on the list of candidates. I was keen; I was looking for a new challenge to sink my teeth into, and I looked forward to the interview.

Afghanistan had always fascinated me and, more than ever, it was now at the center of the international stage. Moreover, the role of civilian representative of the leading organization (even if it was military in nature) present in the country promised to be interesting, especially since the international community was relentlessly demanding a political solution to the crisis.

My father encouraged me and this was of fundamental importance; in the past we had never discussed my choice of overseas postings, and I had simply informed him when it was all decided. This time, however, leaving Italy would be different because he had just been diagnosed with a form of stomach cancer and had been given a very poor prognosis.

In some aspects, my father was like my grandfather, and in turn my grandfather was like all those who had experienced a war and its aftermath. Work for my father and generations before was virtually the be-all and end-all, and when a big opportunity came your way, you grabbed it with both hands without giving it too much thought. My father made me understand this while we were having dinner together, the evening

after he'd started his chemotherapy. We were talking about skiing, as we always did, when out of the blue he told me he was sure they'd offer me the job, and that I'd be doing the right thing if I accepted it.

IN EARLY APRIL I was selected for an interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, secretary general of NATO. We spoke for half an hour; I was very frank and to the point, mainly because I felt the "right chemistry" was there. I told him I knew very little about Afghanistan, but I did have good multilateral experience and I knew the mechanisms used by the international community in crisis situations. I also told him that a few years earlier, in the Balkans, I'd already met Kai Eide, the Norwegian diplomat who had begun to coordinate international civilian activities on behalf of the United Nations and with which NATO would be working in Kabul.

De Hoop Scheffer knew that I'd had a similar assignment in the Balkans a few years before, working for Javier Solana, high representative for European Union common foreign and security policy. He was also hopeful that an Italian diplomat would have more of a chance of winning Afghan trust, since—as I later discovered—NATO was struggling in that respect, to say the least.

A couple of weeks later I got a call from Ambassador Giampiero Massolo, the Italian Foreign Ministry's secretary general; he confirmed that I'd been given the assignment and it was time to start packing.

That afternoon I went to browse the bookshops in the center of Rome. In the evening I had dinner with my mother, and then I went to the cinema with my partner, Francesca, to see *The Kite Runner,* a movie based on Khaled Hosseini's bestseller. Francesca had hoped for a different decision and wasn't at all happy about a relationship that in a few days' time would be conducted on Skype.

Before we went into the cinema, I texted Kai Eide in Kabul to tell him I'd got the job and how happy I was that we'd be working together. When the movie was over, I turned the cell back on and found his reply, "We'll make a good team!" which sounded encouraging and was an incentive to prepare myself as best I could.

IN THE WEEKS before my departure, just like anyone else given an international assignment of any importance, I embarked on the crucial "tour

of the capitals," visiting the key countries of the Atlantic Alliance to gather suggestions on how to proceed once I got to Kabul and to seek the required political support.

I went to Washington, Ottawa, Paris, London, and Berlin. I also went to Ankara, to meet the former Turkish foreign minister, Hikmet Çetin, who had held the position I was about to take over a few years earlier and had maintained a close relationship with President Hamid Karzai and many other Afghan leaders.

In Paris I made my first appearance at the side of NATO's secretary general during the international Afghanistan donor conference of June 12, 2008. Immediately afterward I spent a week at NATO headquarters in Brussels, meeting my new co-workers. It was a frenetic time, during which I tried to absorb as much information as possible, establish contacts, and make an inventory of important issues: how I was going to get International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military to co-exist with United Nations and European Union civilian staff; how to achieve the gradual empowerment of Afghans for the management of reconstruction projects; how to support the political process for the upcoming 2009 presidential elections that were supposed to confirm the country's democratic consolidation, and so on.

Despite the crazy schedule, I was as euphoric as I always am when I'm getting ready to leave. I didn't feel responsible for anything. I was in a kind of limbo, and suddenly it was as if everything else in life was no longer my concern. The mere prospect of crossing a border and settling in a distant country had swiftly erased the duties and concerns of everyday life. Not that I'd be lacking for responsibilities in Afghanistan. If anything, there would probably be more. Yet there was a sense of lightness that floated over the preparations for my departure, as if the venture wasn't really directly related to me, or perhaps it was too immense for me to relate it directly to myself. I suspect my face betrayed my satisfaction, because in the days leading up to the trip, my colleagues at Palazzo Chigi kept repeating that I looked like the cat that had lapped up all of the cream. I have to be honest. I was pleased with this opportunity, although perhaps those around me did not feel the same.

My mother had begun to focus and was concerned by the alarming news she was hearing about Kabul. She said I was reckless, that I needed to grow up and lacked any inkling of what it feels like to be a parent.