CHARLIE WILSONS WAR

It wasn't the first time the mujahideen had mounted successful ambushes. The resistance had often hit convoys during Howard Hart's tour. But the Soviets assumed that anytime they moved with armor on the ground and Hinds flying shotgun, their convoys would be essentially invulnerable. Now, Vickers told Gust, it was a completely new ball game. If the muj could mount this kind of ambush regularly, it would throw the Soviets' entire Afghan strategy into a cocked hat.

It didn't take much for Gust to grasp the significance. The 40th Army's strategy called for controlling the major cities as well as maintaining invincible garrisons across the country. Early on, the Soviets had conceded the countryside to the mujahideen. But they'd assumed that from their strongholds they would always be able to move in strength with near impunity to wipe out villages and create free-fire zones and thus slowly grind down the resistance.

What Vickers saw in the Gardez-to-Kabul ambush demonstrated that the Soviets' entire Afghan strategy was vulnerable; this, he argued, was the moment to reinforce success. The Soviets were doing their best to trumpet Khost into a major public relations victory, but Vickers believed that the battle was nothing more than a predictable setback for a guerrilla force. He said the Red Army would now have little choice but to pack up and leave Khost, because if they stayed they would just become a fat target for the mass of guerrillas right across the border in Pakistan. And sure enough, the Soviets and their Afghan allies soon pulled out and the mujahideen moved back in. The supply lines from Pakistan were reestablished, and the war went on.*

The simple truth, as Vickers saw it, was that in this lone encounter the mujahideen had proved that they could become the army of technoguerrillas that he had set out to create. They were the true magical weapons in this war, and he could suddenly see with blinding clarity that they could win.

*No insurgency had ever enjoyed such a range of support: a country (Pakistan) completely dedicated to providing it with sanctuary, training, and arms, even sending its own soldiers along as advisers on military operations; a banker (Saudi Arabia) that provided hundreds of millions in funds with no strings attached; governments (Egypt and China) that served as arms suppliers; and the full backing of a superpower (the United States through the CIA). All of that plus various kinds of support from different Muslim movements and governments, as well as the intelligence services of England, France, Canada, Germany, Singapore, and other countries.

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That fall Vickers and Avrakotos put in requisition orders for hundreds of millions of rounds of rifle and machine-gun ammunition—and that was just for one year. The only real question in Vickers's mind now was whether, for the foreseeable future, the CIA would be able and willing to continue to serve as the arsenal of the holy warriors' increasingly expensive jihad. Around the same time, Charlie Wilson appeared, almost as if on cue, with an almost ludicrous question: "Could you use another $300 million?"

"Try me," Gust said jauntily, fully realizing how strange this question would have seemed coming from anyone other than Wilson. The congressman was operating out of his subcommittee like a political alchemist, looking about for ways to magically expand Gust's budget. On this occasion he had just discovered a $300 million warfare program that the Pentagon had decided to abandon. If the money wasn't spent by the end of the fiscal year, just eight days away, the full $300 million would revert to the Treasury. Charlie told Gust he figured he could persuade the Pentagon to give it up for Afghanistan if the CIA could be convinced to ask for it.

"Reprogramming" Pentagon funds was the way Wilson had paid for all of his special gifts to Gust. But the odds against pulling off such an immense diversion of moneys into a covert program in eight days were immense—by normal standards, quite impossible. Even if anyone at the CIA could be convinced to initiate such a proposal, Gust figured, it would take a minimum of nine months just to move the idea through the Agency's bureaucracy. Everyone would be terrified about asking for such a gargantuan sum. There would have to be elaborate studies commissioned, reports written to justify the money. The White House would have to get into it. The Intelligence Committees would hold hearings. The director would have to testify before both the House and Senate watchdog committees, and then he would have to do it again before the Appropriations subcommittees.

But Charlie Wilson wasn't talking about business as usual in the covert-funding department. He was telling Gust they could push through $300 million (really $600 million with a Saudi matching grant) in eight days if Gust was willing to stop everything and make a run for it. Varennikov had launched his attack on Khost that same September, but in terms of the ultimate fate of the Afghans, the significant contest was unfolding back in Washington as Gust, Charlie, Mike, and the task force threw themselves into an almost impossible race against the clock.

The first obstacle came from an unexpected quarter. "The Pentagon started to bitch about not wanting to give up the money," recalls Wilson, "so I told the comptroller, 'If you don't like giving us the $300 million, how would you like it if we just cut $3 billion from your budget next year?' And I meant it. I told them they didn't just have to get out of the way, they had to get out of the way fast."

Once the Pentagon rolled over, the battle shifted to Congress, where eight separate committees had to be convinced that there was a compelling reason to divert such a huge sum to Langley. The entire exercise would have been impossible if Vickers, in his normal fashion, had not already worked up a budget explaining precisely how he could use this money. The supremely confident GS-11 was now saying that the optimum annual budget for this supposedly secret war was $1.2 billion.

This was an insanely large sum for a covert operation, particularly given the intense anti-CIA passion then running in Congress. The only reason Vickers and Avrakotos were even able to propose such radical budgets inside the CIA was because of Gust's boss, Near East Division Chief Bert Dunn. In the Agency, Dunn was known as Mr. Afghanistan. He had not only served in Kabul, he spoke the languages, and he was a weapons expert with a great deal of experience working with the military. All of that counted for a lot when an officer like Dunn assumed a post with the equivalent rank of a four-star general with command of an entire division of the world.

Dunn had been Clair George's deputy in the African Division. Clair George, of course, knew Avrakotos intimately and respected his talents. But he also knew how extreme and unpredictable Avrakotos could be, and their relationship was strained. In marked contrast, Dunn was the steady, honest broker, the pro. There was only so much any operations director could cope with; he had to delegate. He had to trust someone. And if Bert said it made sense to add $600 million to the Afghan budget, that was enough for Clair George and probably for John McMahon as well. In this case, even Bill Casey was actively lobbying for the money.

While the Agency stood united, Wilson was operating on the Hill as if he were Gust's mole and the CIA's one-man lobby. The tall Texan was using every opportunity—riding the elevators with other members, walking onto the floor for votes to smoke out what questions might be asked in the different committees, calling Gust to pass on suggested answers.

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By this time, Wilson had become the great educator of Congress on all matters pertaining to Afghanistan. In the Defense Appropriations subcommittee, in conference with the Senate, with Tip O'Neill and the Democratic leadership, with Republican friends like Henry Hyde and archliberal allies like Dave Obey, Wilson was constantly entertaining everyone with riveting stories about what was going on in this secret James Bond world. Gust kept him informed, in part to serve as the Agency's spokesman, and Charlie made it all come alive for everyone.

He would describe the wonder of the CIA's exotic alliances—with Saudi kings and princes serving as bankers, with earnest Communist Chinese offering their weapons to shoot down Soviet Communists. He made Mohammed a living character, not just selling arms but personally ordering weapons from his frontline troops to be sent to the holy warriors. This was the one morally unambiguous crusade of our time, he would say over and over again. Everyone was secretly a part of it—the British, French, Canadian, and German intelligence services; even Singapore was doing its part.

And then he would always bring up the ugly thing that always struck a responsive chord, even if no one else would say it publicly: "This is our chance to send the Soviet young men home in body bags like they sent our boys back in body bags. Let's make this a Vietnam for the Soviets." He always concluded that they—Congress, the House, the liberal Democrats, and his fellow subcommittee members—were the patriots funding this war. Not the great anti-Communist president, not the Pentagon or the CIA or State. It was their war. In conference he might say it was the entire Congress's war. With Tip, it was the Democrats. But in the subcommittee, where it all began, he would look at his eleven colleagues and say that this was their war.

These sophisticated, cautious politicians, even the liberals, were proud men who loved representing the most powerful nation in history, and each felt some primitive chord resonate in them when Wilson talked about this good cause and their right to pay the Evil Empire back. They liked it when he talked about the exotic rule breakers they were funding. They liked it when he personalized the war and made them feel that it was theirs, too.

But Wilson was anything but charming when he met opposition. One of the staffers remembers all too well: "He would cajole, threaten, rant, and

EDITORIAL

The subject who is truly loyal to the chief magistrate will neither advise nor submit to a

In service to Canada, and our allies

U.S. President Donald Trump, Jan. 22, 2026: "We've never needed them. We have never really asked anything of them. You know, they'll say they sent some troops to Afghanistan, or this or that. And they did – they stayed a little back, a little off the front lines."

The 158 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who did not stay back, and who never made it back from Afghanistan:

Private Richard Anthony Green, April 17, 2002
Corporal Ainsworth Dyer, April 17, 2002
Sergeant Marc Daniel Léger, April 17, 2002
Private Nathan Lloyd Smith, April 17, 2002
Corporal Robbie Christopher Beerenfenger, Oct. 2, 2003
Sergeant Robert Alan Short, Oct. 2, 2003
Corporal Jamie Brendan Murphy, Jan. 27, 2004
Private Braun Scott Woodfield, Nov. 24, 2005
Corporal Paul James Davis, March 2, 2006
Master Corporal Timothy James Wilson, March 4, 2006
Private Robert Howard Costall, March 29, 2006
Corporal Matthew David James Dinning, April 22, 2006
Lieutenant William Montague Turner, April 22, 2006
Corporal Randy Joseph Payne, April 22, 2006
Bombardier Myles Stanley John Mansell, April 22, 2006
Captain Nichola Kathleen Sarah Goddard, May 17, 2006
Corporal Anthony Joseph Boneca, July 9, 2006
Corporal Francisco Oliver Gomez, July 22, 2006
Corporal Jason Patrick Warren, July 22, 2006
Corporal Bryce Jeffery Keller, Aug. 3, 2006
Corporal Christopher Jonathan Reid, Aug. 3, 2006
Private Kevin Yves Royal Dallaire, Aug. 3, 2006
Sergeant Vaughan Ingram, Aug. 3, 2006
Trooper Patrick James Pentland, April 11, 2007
Master Corporal Anthony Mark Klumpenhouwer, April 18, 2007
Corporal Matthew Jonathan McCully, May 25, 2007
Master Corporal Darrell Jason Priede, May 30, 2007
Trooper Darryl James Caswell, June 11, 2007
Private Joel Vincent Wiebe, June 20, 2007
Corporal Stephen Frederick Bouzane, June 20, 2007
Sergeant Christos Karigiannis, June 20, 2007
Corporal Cole Daniel Bartsch, July 4, 2007
Captain Jefferson Clifford Francis, July 4, 2007
Corporal Jordan James Anderson, July 4, 2007
Captain Matthew Jonathan Dawe, July 4, 2007
Private Lane William Thomas Watkins, July 4, 2007
Master Corporal Colin Stuart Francis Bason, July 4, 2007
Private Simon Maurice Serge Longtin, Aug. 19, 2007
Master Corporal Christian Joseph Thomas André Duchesne, Aug. 22, 2007
Master Warrant Officer Mario Michel Christian Mercier, Aug. 22, 2007
Major Raymond Mark Ruckpaul, Aug. 29, 2007
Corporal Nathan Hornburg, Sept. 24, 2007
Private Michel Richard Lévesque, Nov. 17, 2007
Corporal Nicolas Raymond Beauchamp, Nov. 17, 2007
Sergeant Gregory John Kruse, Dec. 27, 2008
Warrant Officer Gaétan Joseph Francis Maxime Roberge, Dec. 27, 2008
Trooper Brian Richard Good, Jan. 7, 2009
Sapper Sean David Greenfield, Jan. 31, 2009
Corporal Joseph Dany Olivier Fortin, March 3, 2009
Warrant Officer Dennis Raymond Brown, March 3, 2009
Corporal Kenneth Chad O'Quinn, March 3, 2009
Trooper Marc Hani Dlab, March 8, 2009
Trooper Corey Joseph Hayes, March 20, 2009
Master Corporal Scott Francis Vernelli, March 20, 2009
Corporal Tyler Crooks, March 20, 2009
Trooper Jack Bouthillier, March 20, 2009
Trooper Karine Marie Nathasha Blais, April 13, 2009
Major Michelle Linda Mendes, April 23, 2009
Private Alexandre Jacques Péloquin, June 8, 2009
Corporal Joseph Robert Martin Dubé, June 14, 2009
Corporal Nicholas Ashley Bulger, July 3, 2009
Master Corporal Charles-Philippe Michaud, July 4, 2009
Corporal Martin Mario Joannette, July 6, 2009
Master Corporal Patrice Yvon Audet, July 6, 2009
Private Sébastien Joseph Gérard Omer Courcy, July 16, 2009
Corporal Christian Bobbitt, Aug. 1, 2009
Sapper Matthieu Joseph Pierre Gilbert Allard, Aug. 1, 2009
Corporal Jean-François Drouin, Sept. 6, 2009
Major Joseph Yannick François Stephane Pépin, Sept. 6, 2009
Corporal Patrick Joseph Lormand, Sept. 13, 2009
Corporal Jonathan Joseph Sylvain Couturier, Sept. 17, 2009
Lieutenant Justin Garrett Boyes, Oct. 28, 2009
Sapper Steven Henry Marshall, Oct. 30, 2009
Lieutenant Andrew Richard Nuttall, Dec. 23, 2009
Sergeant Kirk Garret Taylor, Dec. 30, 2009
Private Garrett William Chidley, Dec. 30, 2009
Corporal Zachery Wilfrid McCormack, Dec. 30, 2009
Sergeant George Rudolf Mick, Dec. 30, 2009
Sergeant John Wayne Faught, Jan. 16, 2010
Captain Francis Cecil Paul, Feb. 10, 2010
Corporal Joshua Caleb Baker, Feb. 12, 2010
Corporal Darren James Fitzpatrick, March 20, 2010
Private Tyler William Todd, April 11, 2010
Petty Officer 2nd Class Douglas Craig Blake, May 3, 2010
Private Kevin Thomas McKay, May 13, 2010
Colonel Geoffrey Stephen Parker, May 18, 2010
Trooper Larry John Rudd, May 24, 2010
Sergeant Martin Rene Goudreault, June 6, 2010
Sergeant James Patrick MacNeil, June 21, 2010
Private Andrew Christopher Alexander Miller, June 26, 2010
Master Corporal Kristal Lee-Anne Giesebrecht, June 26, 2010
Sapper Brian James Collier, July 20, 2010
Corporal Brian Neil Calvin Pinksen, Aug. 30, 2010
Corporal Steve Joseph Léo Martin, Dec. 18, 2010
Corporal Yannick Scherrer, March 27, 2011
Bombardier Karl Manning, May 27, 2011
Master Corporal Francis Reginald Roy, June 25, 2011
Master Corporal Byron Garth Greff, Oct. 29, 2011

In service to Canada, and our allies.

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