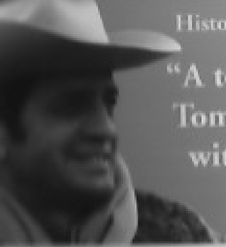

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THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF HOW THE WILDEST MAN IN CONGRESS AND A ROGUE CIA AGENT CHANGED THE HISTORY OF OUR TIMES

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"THE MOST UNBELIEVABLE BOOK . . . IT'S FABULOUS." —DON IMUS

CHAPTER 32

Charlie Wilson's War

A JIHAD TO REMEMBER

No other Americans were in the first-class compartment when the two ISI men boarded the plane and escorted Charlie off before any of the other passengers. This time Zia meant it when he said over dinner that he dearly wished he too could go inside. They agreed that when victory came, the two of them would ride down the main street of Kabul on white horses. "You'll have this memory until the day you die," Zia told Charlie warmly as he said good-bye.

Brigadier Yousaf had brought two different Afghan outfits for Wilson to choose from. This time he'd been ordered to make sure that Wilson got into Afghanistan. It was an even more thankless assignment than the last, since the president expected the ISI to both insert Wilson into a hot combat zone and then to make sure he returned safely.

Charlie was amazed at how tense Yousaf and his men were when they hit the road from Bannh to Miram Shah. Hereditary kidnappers dominate the area. Pakistan has absolutely no control over these tribesmen, and about all the ISI men could do was drive fast and be ready to fight it out. It seemed terribly odd to Charlie that things could be so dangerous just trying to get to the war.

As they approached the border, the scenes Charlie saw gave him the sensation of moving backward in time. They passed through towns that reminded him of stagecoach stops—only there were no women on the streets. The butchers' freshly slaughtered sheep and goats hung on hooks. The tribesmen all carried weapons; most wore black or white cotton turbans; and their eyes blazed like car headlights. It wouldn't do to stare; these were not men to trifle with.

Charlie found himself thinking of life in the Old West as Yousaf told him about the Pashtuns' warrior tradition: How children are taught to withstand pain. How no boy cries after the age of six. Of the towering importance of revenge. How a Pashtun will wait generations, if necessary, to get even. He talked of their astonishing courage and orneriness, their total religious faith and their uncanny marksmanship. Of how little they needed to sustain themselves in the field and how they would bury their fallen comrades in the clothes and in the precise locations in which they'd died. For them there is no greater honor than to be *shaheed*, to die in the jihad.

Wilson had, of course, heard most of this before. But as he watched the spectacle of these people moving before his eyes, it was as if he were hearing it for the very first time—particularly when they came upon the mules and camels assembled for weapons runs inside. "Just acres and acres of camels and mules," Wilson remembers. He was never fully able to express the wonder of seeing this sight at the end of the twentieth century—to actually see and smell and feel the oddness of it, the sense of being in another time and the realization that *this* was the way these people fought their war: with camels and mules. He had known it and talked about it a hundred times, but it was different here, seeing it firsthand.

That was the beginning of Charlie's bright shining moment. He was only in Afghanistan for four days, but he did it all. He actually rode a white horse. He wore the armor of these Muslim knights—a Chitrali hat, *shalwar kameezes*. An elite guard of the Pakistan special forces, dressed as mujahideen, had been sent along to watch over him. Two Stinger teams kept him in sight at all times. Charlie figured that not even Genghis Khan had ever had such bodyguarding.

On the second day Charlie climbed the mountains overlooking Khost with Rahim Wardak, one of the two Afghan commanders chosen to guide him. They were moving from heat into the cold mountain air when it began to sleet, then snow. The Pakistanis told Wardak that Wilson had a terrible heart condition, that he shouldn't walk long distances. They tried to make him ride a horse, but he insisted on walking and he was thrilled when they let him fire a salvo of rockets at a Soviet garrison. This was real. Instead of fighting the Communists with words and legislation, Charlie was blasting a Soviet garrison with a CIA multiple-barrel rocket launcher. His money had bought the weapon and now it was his finger pulling the trigger.

This was not a free ride for the congressman, however, and before long the garrison's artillery was answering back, shells bursting close enough to fill the air with dirt and pebbles. This sent the combat-hardened Pakistani colonel into a panic. To Wardak's amazement, Colonel Mujahed leaped onto Charlie and pushed him to the ground. "I think someone told him he would be shot if anything happened to Charlie," Wardak says, adding that the entire Pakistan special forces contingent was in a state of constant tension those days, ready on a second's notice to hurl themselves into the defense of their charge. In marked contrast, the mujahideen, with their total faith in Allah's will, acted as if the shells were not bursting by their sides. They just kept walking.

For Wilson these real-life combat moments were at once terrifying and exhilarating. The adrenaline allowed him to keep up with these inexhaustible mountain men, and on the outside, at least, he maintained a soldier's calm. Ironically, the only time he almost lost it came when he and Wardak approached a mujahideen stronghold on a hillside over Khost.

The Afghans, acting as if they were being attacked, issued forth great cries of "*Allahu Akbar*" and went on the offensive. "They just opened up with all their small arms," remembers Wilson. "It just scared the shit out of me and I was already pretty anxious." Even Wardak acknowledges that it felt very much as if the mujahideen were shooting right at them. But it was all meant as a friendly gesture—thousands of joy shots fired as a salute in honor of the great patron's arrival.*

Only once did Wilson come close to embarrassing himself in front of the warriors. They had decided it would be an insult to their guest if they failed to bring down a Hind while he was there, so they initiated a noisy rocket barrage of the nearby garrison to draw the gunships to come out looking for them.

Wilson had lived with the nightmare of the Hind too long not to be spooked by the thought of one of them sweeping in to napalm or rocket or machine-gun him to death. Two were now overhead but high up. Charlie, helped along by his Pakistani protectors, scrambled for cover behind a rock.

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*When Yousaf found out about it later he was furious, complaining about all the mule trips it would take just to replace the bullets wasted in that one gesture. But no one could do anything about it; it was the price the Afghans demanded for fighting.

The Stinger operators, however, stood tall on the high ground. They were furious at the congressman's companions, hurling insults at them and demanding that they get into the vehicles and drive up and down the road to kick up dust and lure the Hinds back in for the kill.

It was the only time Wilson drew rank. He had no conviction about there being a place in Paradise for him, so he sternly told the commander, "If you're doing this for me, please stop." By now the aircraft had passed, and the Afghans did not interpret Wilson's words as an act of cowardice. That was inconceivable. They assumed he was just trying to protect their pride for having failed to bring down a beast in front of his eyes.

Only later did Wilson fully appreciate the significance of what he had witnessed. The tables had been turned in this war. He was moving with an army of technoguerrillas swaggering about the Hindu Kush looking for the opportunity to take on the biggest and baddest the Soviets had to offer.

It's hard to fault Wilson for seeing only good in these men. Most American reporters were also dealing in two-dimensional portraiture when they sought to describe the Afghans. But in the dream Wilson was walking through, these were men without flaws. "Goodness personified" is the way he described Commander Haqqani, the fundamentalist mullah who guided him around Khost.

The curious thing about Wilson's romance with these warriors is that he never got to know any one individual mujahid. Deep down, he probably understood that he didn't dare; the magic might wear off. These were people whose language he did not speak, whose religion he did not share, and whose ordinary way of life, had it been imposed on Trinity, Texas, would have turned him into a revolutionary against them. But being with them in their mountains, as they defended their way of life, put Wilson in touch with a people who existed for Americans in the twentieth century only in the world of myths and legends.

There was a profound calmness to these men. They didn't move quickly, but they always moved deliberately. They turned together toward Mecca to pray to their god five times a day, but their faith was somehow an individual affair. Even young boys seemed transformed when they spoke of their religion. It was hard for Wilson not to admire and almost envy their faith. When they spoke, it was as if they were revealing divine truths. They were fighting Allah's battle against the atheists. They told him it was Allah who had caused Charlie Wilson to come to Paktia province to accept the hospitality of His most faithful mullah, Jalaluddin Haqani. It was the miracle of God that He had put kindness and mercy in the heart of the American congressman. "We had stood alone at first against the Soviet invader with bare hands. It is the bravery of the Afghan people that has attracted the foreigner to help."

Charlie Wilson moved about the hills of Afghanistan those four days in February as if under a spell. There were dinners in caves surrounded by men with beards and guns and centuries of heroism behind them. They ate lamb and yogurt and the flat Afghan bread. There was tea and talk of the different ways of killing Russians. Charlie was in the cave with the descendants of men who had stood their ground as Alexander's armies moved into the Khyber Pass. Who had chased the British invaders down and, according to legend, murdered every last one but the messenger. And best of all, he was now one with these men of destiny as they looked with contempt on the army of the Evil Empire, knowing that victory would be theirs.

On his last morning, hundreds of mujahideen came to Haqani's post to say good-bye to the congressman. Before leaving, Charlie posed on a white steed with three of these warriors next to him. The picture captured the last pure moment of the fairy tale: Charlie Wilson's war.

When Brigadier Yousaf came to take the congressman back to General Akhtar and President Zia, he noticed something different about the American. His men told him of Wilson's valor and endurance—of how he had impressed even the mujahideen. Yousaf, who was not wild about Americans, couldn't help but be taken by this one. "He was a brave man, full of energy, a man who dominated the scene," the general says. "I had a lot of respect for him. He wanted to take revenge for American blood spilled in Vietnam."

Yousaf, like the Afghans, admired this impulse of Wilson's. In the brigadier's culture, revenge is one of the highest categories of manly virtue. But what attracted him most about Wilson was the old cowboy business. "I had seen lots of cowboy movies when I was a young boy—too many of them," he says. "The cowboy was a tough guy who always stands for justice. Who is prepared to shoot left and right at any time. Who would go out to fight against the cow thieves or to get revenge of his father or go out against the Apaches. You know, superior somehow and always alone. He fights for the weak people. All the possible good qualities you find in a warrior, you find in a cowboy, with a little bit of the showoff included."

For Charlie Wilson the trip had been his rite of passage. "I felt I had entered the ranks of the initiated," he recalls. "I had dinner right afterward at Army House with Zia and Akhtar. Zia got all carried away about how he wanted to get in there and fight them himself. He was particularly jealous when I told him the muj had let me fire some of the volleys. I was most grateful to Zia and Akhtar for letting me do this. It had been far more than I had expected."

Milt Bearden's first words to Wilson were harsh. He told the congressman that what he had done was unconscionable. He had placed the entire program in jeopardy, and everyone was very upset. Having made his statement for the record, the exuberant station chief then laughed loudly and demanded that Wilson tell him everything. Charlie recounted his adventure to Bearden and then said he had tried to find one thing wrong with the program. He had asked every Afghan what they needed and what they were not getting, and he had not been able to find so much as a flaw. Never in his entire career in government had he encountered a program so perfect.

Bearden had a special treat for Wilson. The station chief believed in inspiring the troops, and so he had arranged to build what he called the Stinger Museum. Every spent gripstock that had shot down a Soviet aircraft had been brought back and mounted on a wall, with the famous lines from Kipling inscribed on a huge plaque: "When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains . . ."

Charlie was the first to be taken to see this temple of Soviet doom. There Bearden had assembled a delegation of ISI officers and mujahideen. With great solemnity, the station chief, on behalf of the CIA, the ISI, and the Afghan freedom fighters, presented Charlie with the spent gripstock from the Stinger that Engineer Ghaffar had used to bring down the first Hind. It was mounted beautifully on a dark mahogany frame. Charlie had it sent back on a McCollum flight and hung it over the door to his office—a dull green tube that meant so many things to this very complicated man. It was the silver bullet of the Afghan war. Others could claim they were the ones responsible for the Stinger. But to Milt Bearden, to Akhtar, Zia, and the Afghans, the first Stinger belonged to the congressman from East Texas. It was to serve as an explanation for the uninitiated that behind those doors sat the real magical weapon of the Afghan jihad.

Wilson was somehow not the same man when he returned to Congress. He was bigger now. He was in a world of men and women who operate only with words and in committee—funding legislation or telling real men of action what they can't do. But now he was no longer just responsible for funding an exotic, important foreign policy. Now, in the minds of his colleagues, it really was becoming Charlie Wilson's war. Charlie was personally fighting the Russians. They were talking about him on his white horse.

The Democrats, meanwhile, had been reduced by Ronald Reagan to a party of whining naysayers. While Wilson had been off on his adventure, the Democrats had been on national television attacking the CIA and the Reagan administration for Iran-Contra. But no political party likes to be identified only as opposing policy. With Afghanistan, Charlie was giving them something they could claim credit for. This was the good war. It was also Congress's war. And, mainly, it belonged to the House.

Just at this time, Charlie's old adversary Steve Solarz saw the picture of Wilson on the white horse with a bandolier of machine-gun bullets strapped across his chest. Solarz, who is an avid reader of the Flashman historical novels, experienced one of those "aha!" moments: Charlie Wilson was a dead ringer for the books' hero.

"This is you," he told Charlie when he gave him a copy to read. It was actually not a very flattering tribute. The hero, Colonel Harry Flashman, is nothing short of a cad—an Englishman obsessed with chasing women, a coward at heart who owes his remarkable rise to fame and glory to astonishing coincidence, good luck, and the occasional surfacing of extraordinary talent and virtue.

Flashman can be found at the Charge of the Light Brigade, thinking that he is running away from the battle until he learns that he is in fact riding right into the ranks of the enemy. Then, as in every drama in the Flashman series, the charming, dissolute, skirt-chasing rogue, having gotten himself by mistake into the thick of a noble challenge, performs with astonishing courage and effectiveness.

Whether dealing with Otto von Bismarck, with the British army in China, or with the sorry expeditionary force that wanders into Afghanistan in 1848, Flashman is the ultimate antihero, a man forever doing the right thing for the wrong reason. No matter how dissolute or poorly intentioned he is most of the time, there always comes a moment when he rises to become a true hero. But the sad truth about Flashman is that if he had things his way, he would simply have frittered away his life in pursuits that would win him the disrespect and contempt of any organization that employed him.

Curiously, Charlie took immediately to the Solarz analogy and declared that he was indeed Flashman. It may be that he liked the cover; Flashman was, after all, a man caught up in great historical dramas. Even if he were a lout at heart, he did come through in the pinch, and Charlie found it easier to make this identification with his Afghan role than he did trying to define himself in a serious vein. He was just not able to dwell on himself as a hero without first loudly proclaiming that it was a lie. He actually began promoting the Flashman image. He created his own elite club of "Flashman's Raiders." Those he chose to initiate into this inner circle would get copies of the novels and a leather jacket with the club's name embroidered on the back. He even wrote to Gust at Langley describing the new organization and granting his old friend honorary membership.

Very much in the spirit of Flashman and to Sweetums's distress, Charlie began drinking again. It didn't seem to matter all that much. He was keeping it under control, and altogether things were at last going very, very well.

Even though no one was yet predicting victory, the CIA's battlefield reports were amazing. The mujahideen had even run an operation over the border, crossing into what Bill Casey had called "the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union," where tens of millions of Muslims lived. The Agency was terrified that this kind of provocation inside the Soviet Union might precipitate a fearsome response. Still, it showed how brazen the mujahideen had become.

In Geneva, the State Department had begun claiming that the Russians seemed genuinely interested in negotiating a way out. And then the law of the unexpected struck in the Achilles' heel of the whole program. In July, just after Congress had passed legislation authorizing a new aid package to Pakistan, a man widely believed to be Zia's agent, Arshad Pervez, was caught in Philadelphia trying to buy twenty-five tons of a specialty steel alloy vital to the building of a nuclear bomb.

It was dramatically worse than the Kryton-trigger affair of 1985. This time there was a Solarz amendment on the books that would force the White House to stop all aid. There was no realistic way to avoid it: Congress was going to cut Zia off, and Solarz was the first to alert Wilson to this likelihood when he informed him on the floor of the House about what his Pakistani friends had done now. "I believe Steve told me about Pervez with some glee," recalls Charlie.[*]

Wilson would later call his subsequent efforts to save Zia's military aid "my greatest achievement in Congress." Perhaps he remembers it this way because he is at heart a political artist and can assess the value of an accomplishment by the difficulty of the task. Everything else he had accomplished had been carried out in the shadows and behind closed doors. Here he had to operate publicly against a coalition of virtuous liberals. He had the thankless task to trying to defend the right of a Muslim dictator to break U.S. law in order to build an Islamic bomb while still qualifying for massive U.S. foreign aid. And he had to do it in the name of protecting a massive CIA killing-war.

On the face of it, this was a lost cause. U.S. policy was firmly committed to nuclear nonproliferation. A law had clearly been violated. The president had no choice but to trigger the Solarz amendment and cut off Zia's aid. Even if Reagan claimed a national security waiver, Congress was now committed to enforcing its own law.

But Wilson would end up forcing his colleagues to abandon their pretense of ethical deliberation. For this lone issue, he would strip Congress down to a body that operates solely on the basis of power and horse trading. Here, he would call in every chit and, to the horror of his liberal friends, win.

As Wilson and the CIA saw it, all might be lost if the United States publicly slapped Zia in the face and withdrew its aid. They knew that without Zia running Pakistan by martial law, there could be no Afghan war. Officially there was no Pakistani involvement with the mujahideen, but the population of Pakistan certainly knew about it and didn't like it. The Soviets were bombing their borders, sponsoring terrorist attacks. There were three million Afghan refugees and tens of thousands of armed warriors in Pakistan. And all of this at a time when Pakistan had to worry about a new war with India. The only reason Zia was able to maintain the loyalty of his army in the continuation this policy was because of the billions he was receiving in U.S. military and economic aid. If that was taken away, all bets were off.

At the Pakistan embassy over dinner, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski confronted Steve Solarz with a question: "Steve, what are your objectives in cutting off aid to Pakistan? Because if you do, I foresee the following things happening: one, the Afghan resistance collapsing and the Soviets triumphing; two, the present government in Pakistan will disappear; and three, you'll have an anti-American government in Pakistan in possession of the bomb. Is that what you want?"

But for Solarz and fellow Democrats dedicated to nuclear nonproliferation, the issue had gone beyond debate. A law had been violated and a Muslim dictator was thumbing his nose at America. Solarz summoned the CIA to closed hearings and expressed outrage at what he saw as a pattern of gross violations by Pakistan. A brilliant young CIA analyst delivered devastating testimony at these hearings, which Wilson attended simply "to try to intimidate Steve a bit." Lurking behind Wilson's presence was always the threat of retaliation against India. But none of that mattered with the Pervez outrage.

Charlie had been worried about Pakistan's aid package well before the Pervez incident. That February in Islamabad he had told Zia that he couldn't hold the line alone anymore. "I told him that the antinuclear and disarmament forces were becoming increasingly strident, that he now had the third biggest AID program, and that I was having troubles with Obey. Solarz was holding hearings. Glenn and Pressler were getting adamant in the Senate. I said it was all going to come to a head that fall in the appropriations bill and I needed a pit bull to help me."

Zia responded by hiring a friend of Charlie's, the devilishly effective lobbyist Denis Neill. "There's no one in his class," Wilson explained. "He had made all the contributions to the Appropriations and Foreign Affairs members. He had courted the staff. That's where Denis wrote the book. Hill and Knowlton are great at social stuff, but that's not what wins these kinds of fights. In the Foreign Operations Committee in the middle of the night, you know who sends in pizza and beer. It's Denis. He's always in the wings. He can't go in but he's there."

The Pervez arrest had come at an awkward time. Thanksgiving was upon them. But the two old pros decided they had to win converts from different political persuasions who could argue their case. Zia agreed to receive a delegation, and Charlie began twisting arms, calling members' wives, promising the experience of a lifetime. Finally he put together a delegation of seven key members and their wives, who'd agreed to spend Thanksgiving in Pakistan. The fire-breathing conservative Bob Dornan, the much-respected California liberal George Brown, and the former all-American basketball player Tom McMillen were included in the group. Wilson had chosen members others would listen to.

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[*] These two engaged in an annual face-off on this issue, with Wilson always attending Solarz's hearing with the explicit objective of spoiling his tea party. In February 1988 this is how he began his testimony: "Incidentally, Mr. Chairman, before we start, I would like to congratulate all of the friends of India on their acquisition of the peaceful nuclear submarine that has just arrived [from the Soviet Union]."

Charlie knew exactly how his colleagues would react to the training camps. The idea was to make them fall in love with the mujahideen, to feel the patriotic drama under way and recognize that Pakistan's bomb issue was really about whether these freedom fighters were going to be abandoned. The congressmen were predictably impressed by the courage and ferocity and faith of the warriors. They might even have been somewhat transported by donning mujahideen outfits for the trip to the secret training camps and then watching Wilson give blood, shaming some of them into following suit.

By now Peshawar was filled with American volunteer doctors and nurses being funded by Crandall. The atmosphere was electric. But it was at the official state dinner that Wilson and Zia performed their magic for the delegation.

The ugly unspoken issue was the Islamic bomb, and when Wilson stood up he confronted the issue in his own uniquely outrageous manner. "Mr. President, in history I have three heroes. Winston Churchill, President Lincoln, and President Zia ul-Haq." He looked directly at his colleagues before he continued. "But for Zia's presence at the helm of Pakistan, the history of mankind and the free world would be different. After consolidating their gain in Afghanistan, the Russians would have fulfilled their centuries-old dream of reaching the Indian Ocean and dominating the world." And then he addressed the bottom line: "Mr. President, as far as I'm concerned you can make all the bombs you want because you are our friends and they, the Indians, are our enemies. But not all Americans feel the same way, and there are some questions, Mr. President, that you have to answer because this issue is getting hot."

A solemn Zia now approached the rostrum, his glasses and a prepared speech in hand. Charlie's intuition pulled him back to his feet: he didn't want a canned performance, so he complained that since he had not had the benefit of glasses or a speech, nor should the president of Pakistan.

"My friend Mr. Charles Wilson," Zia began, "has complained that I should not use my glasses or notes because he has neither on his person. So I cannot be unfair to my esteemed friend Charlie. And since he has taken away my official brief I will speak from my heart."

The dictator ordered the servants to leave the banquet hall and had his aide-de-camp bolt the doors from the inside. Zia was not above lying in the interest of Islam, particularly when it came to such things as the bomb. But his words this day had the ring of sincerity to them.

He spoke of the dilemma of a loyal husband making assurances to his wife. "Sometimes she must rely on his word. She can't always ask for proof." His country's nuclear program was exclusively for peaceful purposes. He asked that they accept his word: Pakistan had no intention of building a delivery system.

He then began a moving history of what he and Charlie and their two countries had done together. He spoke of the valor of the Afghans and the significance of the moment. "Now, if at this stage our American friends cut us off or threaten to cut off aid then it would be a betrayal of history, and the judgment of history would be very severe on those who take this decision. We did not accept the conditions of America"—he was referring to when he'd rejected Jimmy Carter's aid program as "peanuts"—"at the early stage, so how can Americans expect us to do so at this stage when we have bled the Russians nearly unconscious? Whether there is American aid or not we will continue to fight. We'll continue to fight, and I don't know how much more cost in human lives and limbs we will have to pay. So please go back and assure my American friends and all those who are now insisting that we should succumb to American pressure that Pakistan is not ready to accept any conditional elements. The task may be difficult, but with Mr. Charlie Wilson on Capitol Hill it is not impossible."

At the airport later, when the Pakistani press asked for comments, Wilson deferred to his liberal colleague George Brown. It was part of Charlie's political artistry to know when to yield and to let the issue become Brown's, not his.

Back in Washington, however, only one congressman stepped forward to lead the battle. With Denis Neill by his side, Charlie was now moving through the congressional directory calling every person he had ever done anything for. "This is payback time," he would say. It was that basic. He was calling in his debts.

Neill offers the best explanation of why Charlie (and he) finally pulled off their victory at 5 A.M. in the House-Senate conference. "Most of Congress is about words and debating, and you can never really resolve anything. But Appropriations is simply about money and it's very practical." The trade-offs were explicit: Charlie wanted money for Zia. He wanted his colleagues to give him the money. He had done it for them before; he would do it for them again. "Are you with me or are you with Solarz?" is the way he put it to each of his colleagues. Everyone knew that Charlie would remember forever which side they chose.

The morning of the showdown, Charlie Schnabel, who had come in to the office early, long before anyone else, picked up the phone, which would not stop ringing. It was Zia calling simply to pass on encouragement: "Tell Charlie to put on his wrestling togs and do battle."

At stake were hundreds of millions of dollars. Pakistan had become America's third biggest aid recipient after Israel and Egypt, and the battle to cut it off culminated at the House-Senate conference that night. As Denis Neill described it; "The Joint Conference is like a poker game. To be a real player you have to know what you're doing. You have to know how to read the other players, and you have to know when to make your move." When the game began, the master lobbyist could only sit outside the door and wait to see how his ace would fare.

Wilson's profound difficulty that night was that the anti-Pakistan coalition on the committees had the votes to defeat him. Understandably, they wanted and repeatedly asked for a straight up-and-down vote, but Charlie used his first maneuver to trump them. He was, in effect, able to set the agenda insofar as aid to Pakistan was concerned because he had a deal with subcommittee chairman Dave Obey. The first thing he had done was to make sure the divisive issue would not be brought up until the very end, when members would be tired and eager to get home. Secondly, he knew that Obey would find a way not to permit a direct vote.

David Obey didn't like Zia or his bomb one little bit, but he owed Wilson. Charlie was the chairman's secret instrument for maintaining discipline and control of the subcommittee. Charlie wasn't exactly a conservative. He was, in fact, a liberal when it came to domestic matters—civil rights, women's issues. But on gun control, anti-Communism, and defense, he was a hard-liner second to none. And that permitted him to position himself as an honest broker for Obey with the conservatives. With Charlie on board, Obey could always report out a full bill without having to worry about it being opened up on the floor. He thus avoided the risk of losing all of the horse trading and consensus building that had gathered those endless line items into a semblance of coherence. That's what Wilson gave to Obey, but it was a two-way street; on this occasion it meant the chairman had to hold his nose and champion Charlie's bomb-hungry Muslim despot.

"I'd never seen the chairman let another member dominate an issue like that," recalls staffer Steve Goose, who became increasingly distraught at what he saw as a mind-bending power play on Wilson's part. Goose had walked in certain that the liberal coalition, his boss Bob Mrazek, had helped organize was going to cut Zia's aid. "We had the votes, and we had the law on our side."

By 3 A.M., however, Charlie had already pulled off a legislative miracle, with a large portion of the administration's original funds restored to Pakistan. But Wilson still wasn't happy, and neither Obey nor Obey's Senate counterpart, Chairman Daniel Inouye, were willing to risk his anger. They both realized that Wilson was prepared to go to the floor if he didn't get what he wanted.

That was the second trump card Charlie held that night. He and Neill believed that if they took the issue to the floor, they had the votes to win. For Obey and Inouye, there could be no greater nightmare than to fail to report out a complete bill. Anarchy would break out if the two chambers began voting on each individual line item.

And so the late-night and now early-morning poker game of bets and bluffs continued, with Inouye repeatedly putting the question to Wilson: "Will you accept a compromise?"

"No, I can't live with that."

That was all he said—time after time, as the senator and Obey tried to force him to make some compromise: "No, I can't live with that."

It was an extraordinary effort, and as Inouye's frustration level began to rise, an element of unreasonableness came to mark Wilson's position. He was not bending an inch.

In Afghanistan earlier that year, Wilson had caused Brigadier Yousaf to see him as the lone cowboy standing up for the mujahideen. Now in the U.S. Capitol, this tall Texan in his bright striped shirt, with his trademark epaulets and suspenders, was once again standing alone—this time on the battlefield where he did his real fighting in the Afghan war. He was not acting as just another congressman seeking money for a campaign contributor; Charlie had a covenant to fulfill. For him this was a deeply moral issue. He could feel the responsibility of speaking for the million Afghan dead, for the six million who had been displaced, for the army of freedom fighters just then going into battle with America's true foe. He was not about to let anyone take this war from him, from Zia, from the Afghans. This night he stood his ground and won.

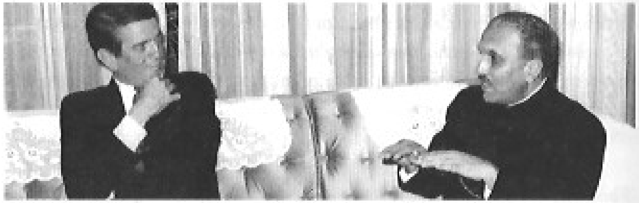
And so Zia remained the honored ally. The mujahideen continued to shoot down Soviet aircraft at a rate of one a day. The full force of the training and of the Vickers mix of weapons was surfacing, and it was clear that time was on the side of the holy warriors.

The all-night joint conference was not the sort of incident that would ever be recorded in a chronicle of a war. But it can be argued that the great event of the Afghan war in those critical last weeks of 1987 and the first few days of 1988 was what didn't happen in Washington because Charlie Wilson triumphed.

The decision may well have already been taken in Moscow to end the Red Army's unhappy occupation. No matter what the outcome at the joint conference, the Soviets might have moved to withdraw anyway in precisely the same time frame. But perhaps not. All one can say is that Washington's strongest suit so far was its demonstration that for once it was committed for the long haul. When Zia survived the aid cutoff battle, there were no hopeful signs left for the hard-liners in the Kremlin. In fact, they were now facing a movement that no one knew how to cope with.

It was at this time that Eduard Shevardnadze drew his unexpected intimate, George Shultz, aside at Geneva to tell him secretly that the Kremlin had reached a decision to withdraw. Barring the unforeseen, Charlie Wilson's war was about to end.

CHAPTER 33



Charlie and Zia ul-Haq

THE PRICE OF GLORY

It was an ordinary Sunday in Pakistan, the second workday of the week, as in all Muslim countries. The early-morning streets of Islamabad and nearby Rawalpindi had the usual mix of Third World and First World activities: vendors, colorful motor scooters, men going into mosques, boys carrying tea trays, schoolchildren sitting in disciplined rows, government buildings opening for business.

And then the world seemed to split wide open. Shrapnel tore into buildings, glass shattered, people were maimed indiscriminately. A half mile from what appeared to be the epicenter of the first explosion, strange apparitions were seen screaming through the air, tearing apart cars as they moved along highways. There was wave after wave of explosions as the thundering blasts seemed to feed on themselves, and a mushroom cloud of dark smoke and fire billowed thousands of feet into the sky. Confusion seized the population, who believed that the capital was under attack.

In the panic, rumors began to fly. Everyone knew that India had some kind of nuclear device. The more sophisticated presumed it was the Red Army taking its revenge. Many seemed sure that the Israelis had just bombed Pakistan's secret nuclear facilities. Still others insisted it was the CIA. Curiously, only this last speculation came close to the truth.

Milt Bearden's Islamabad station had not, of course, launched this attack. But every one of those exploding weapons killing Pakistanis that day had come directly from the CIA. The source of the disaster was a stockpile of some ten thousand tons of ordnance haphazardly stored at the Ojhiri military camp, just between the capital and Rawalpindi. The