FT Weekend
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VENUS ENVY
Marlene Dietrich led, women's suits are following
PAGE W9

Charlie did it

The two great events of the last quarter century have been the collapse of communism and the rise of militant Islamism. The two fused in the CIA-backed war of the Afghan mujahideen against the Soviet army – and the fusion was caused above all by a Texas congressman named Charlie Wilson. Did he also help cause 9/11? In this extract from his book, 'Charlie Wilson's War', **George Crile** tells the story

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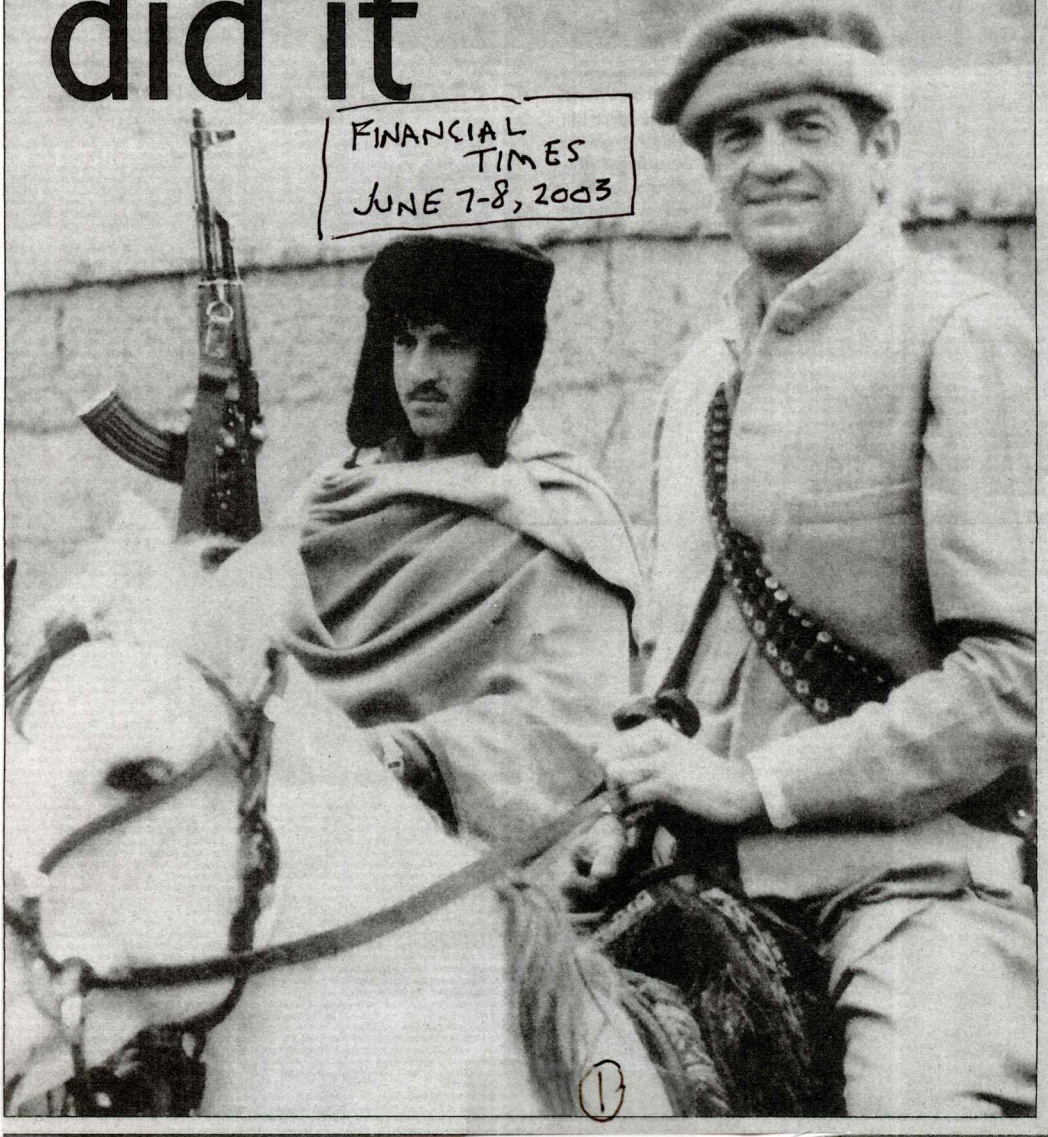

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In the early summer of 1980, Texas Congressman Charlie Wilson walked off the floor of the House of Representatives into the Speaker's Lobby, a rich, wood-paneled room that stretches along the full length of the House floor. A Teletype at one end spewed out stories from AP, UPI and Reuters. Wilson was a news junkie, and he reached down and began reading a story datelined from Kabul.

The article described hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Afghanistan as Soviet helicopter gunships leveled villages, slaughtered livestock, and killed anyone who harbored guerrillas resisting the occupation. What caught Wilson's attention, however, was the reporter's conclusion that the Afghan warriors were refusing to quit. The article described how they were murdering Russians in the dead of night with knives and pistols, hitting them over the head with shovels and stones. Against all odds, there was a growing rebellion under way against the Red Army.

It would have been a sobering insight for the Communist rulers if they could have followed what happened in the few minutes after Wilson finished reading the Associated Press dispatch. The mysterious force in the US government that was destined to hound the Red Army with a seemingly limitless flood of ever more lethal and sophisticated weapons was about to be activated.

No one, however, was paying attention, not even in the American government, when Charlie Wilson picked up a phone and called the Appropriations Committee staffer who dealt with "black appropriations", the CIA funds. Wilson had just been named to the Defense Appropriations subcommittee. He was now part of the band of twelve men in the House responsible for funding CIA operations.

The congressman knew enough about the eccentric workings of the subcommittee to know when a member can act alone to fund a program. "How much are we giving the Afghans?" he asked. "Five million," said the staffer. There was a moment's silence. "Double it," said the Texan. So far as anyone can tell, no congressman prior to Charlie Wilson had ever moved unsolicited to increase a CIA budget. From the beginning of the Cold War, Congress had granted that exclusive right to the president. Wilson so easily crossed the line into this covert arena that no one stopped to question his right to be there or worry about the precedent he might be setting. It would be another two years before he would return to put this precedent to the test. But this is where he first demonstrated that there could be another power center in the American government, one that could act in a way that was totally unpredictable to drive a US covert policy.

Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's historic North-West Frontier, is the last stop before Afghanistan on the famed Grand Trunk Highway, which originates in New Delhi. It's a historic smugglers crossroads, an intrigue-filled city that was home to the British colonial army, which maintained garrisons there and which Rudyard Kipling immortalized in his poems and novels. By 1982 it had also become the not very secret center of the Afghan resistance. All the Americans who would later make this passage to Peshawar experienced the same giddy sensation of entering a time warp. It's like being inside a beehive – a whirl of turbans, beards, ox-drawn wagons, brightly painted buses; motor scooters turned into rickshaws and driven by Pashtun tribesmen.

Peshawar was only thirty miles from the Afghan border and minutes from the sprawling refugee camps. There were hidden storehouses, and Afghan commanders living behind walled compounds surrounded by armed bodyguards. This was home to the leaders of

Continued on page W2

continued from page W1

mujahideen military parties that the US Central Intelligence Agency and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) had created to organize the war effort. But no one offered to take Wilson to visit these secret warriors. He hadn't yet earned the right to pass freely into that world. His schedule on his first trip to Peshawar called for the traditional tour of the UN-supported refugee camps, a scene that appalled everyone who came to Peshawar: millions of proud Afghans living in mud huts without running water or the ability to feed themselves. In the month of his visit twenty thousand more had poured in – young boys and girls dressed in bright tribal clothing; the women with their faces covered. All brought horror stories of what had caused them to flee their country. In particular they talked of helicopter gunships that hovered over their villages, hounding them even as they fled. It began to dawn on Wilson that there were only Afghans in this part of Pakistan and that he was witnessing an entire nation in flight from the Communists. What especially caught his attention that day was the absence of men – no teenagers, not even forty or fifty year olds. He was told they were all fighting in the jihad.

It was at his next stop, the Red Cross hospital on the edge of Peshawar, that he lost his heart to the Afghans. The doctors sat with Wilson at the bed of a young boy and explained that his hand had been blown off by a Russian butterfly mine designed to look like a toy. This threw Wilson into a rage. A young Afghan who had stepped on a land mine explained he was proud of his sacrifice. "He told me his only regret was that he couldn't have his feet grown back so he could go kill Russians."

Wilson moved from bed to bed, undone by the carnage but increasingly aware why most of them were there. Not one of them complained about their lost limbs. But every one of them described their fury at the Russian gunships. And to a man, they asked for only one thing – a weapon to bring down this tool of Satan. Wilson wanted desperately to give something to these warriors and, before leaving, he donated a pint of his own blood.

His next stop was a meeting with a council of Afghan elders, hundreds of whom were waiting for him in a huge colorful tent. "I told them that they were the most courageous people in the world and I said, 'We're going to help you. None of your families will suffer from lack of shelter and food.' I pledged that their soldiers would not be left to die in agony and that we would give them millions in humanitarian assistance."

An old man rose to respond. He told Wilson he could keep his bandages and rice. What they needed was a weapon to destroy the gunships. These old men were no different from the young warriors in the hospital. They were all fixated on the Russian Mi-24 Hind helicopter. It was at this moment that Charlie Wilson realized he was in the presence of a people who didn't care about sympathy. They didn't want medicine or charity. They wanted revenge.

And they got it – courtesy of Charlie Wilson. When the last Soviet soldier walked out of Afghanistan on February 15 1989, there were many who echoed the words of Pakistan's military leader General Zia ul-Haq: "Charlie did it". Not the least of these was the CIA itself, which four years later treated Congressman Wilson to a rare honour inside its headquarters in Langley, Virginia. On a large screen on the stage of the auditorium was that very quotation, and beneath it the words: "President Zia ul-Haq explaining the defeat of the Russians in Afghanistan." Throughout the 1980s the Afghan mujahideen were America's surrogate soldiers in the brutal guerrilla war that became the Soviet Union's Vietnam, a defeat that helped trigger the subsequent collapse of the Communist empire. Afghanistan was a secret war that the CIA fought and won without debates in Congress or protests in the street. It was not just the CIA's biggest operation, it was the biggest secret war in history. In the course of a decade, billions of rounds of ammunition and hundreds of thousands of weapons were smuggled across the border on the backs of camels, mules, and donkeys. At one point over 300,000 fundamentalist Afghan warriors carried weapons provided by the CIA; thousands were trained in the art of urban terror. Before it was over, some 28,000 Soviet soldiers were killed.

It was January 1989, just as the Red Army was preparing to withdraw its last soldiers from Afghanistan, when Charlie Wilson called to invite me to join him on a fact-finding tour of the Middle East. I had produced a CBS *60 Minutes* profile of Wilson several months earlier and had no intention of digging further into his role in the Afghan war. But I quickly accepted the invitation. The trip began in Kuwait, moved on to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and then to Saudi Arabia – a grand tour that took us to all three of the countries that would soon take center stage in the Gulf War.

When our commercial flight back to Baghdad was canceled, Gust Avrakotos, the CIA agent who had worked closely with Wilson, managed to get us on to a lavish Boeing 707 owned by a Saudi religious leader by telling him about Wilson's role in the Afghan war. In Riyadh, a royal receiving party met us at the airport. A caravan of brand-new white Mercedes-Benzes, complete with police escort, swept us off to the palace for a meeting with the king's brother, Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan. After tea, Wilson delivered his message: he had come to thank the Saudi royal family for its extraordinary generosity in matching the Americans dollar for dollar in Afghanistan. It became clear that the gratitude went both ways when Wilson was shown to his quarters several hours later. "We want you to know, Mr. Congressman," the prince's aide said, "that these are larger quarters than we provided for George Bush. Mr. Bush is only the vice president. You won the Afghan war."

Throughout the Muslim world, the victory of the Afghans over the army of a modern superpower was seen as a transformational event. But back home, no one seemed to be aware that something important had taken place and that the United States had been the moving force behind it. Any chance of an American appreciation

Above: Barbara and George Bush joking with fellow Texans Charlie Wilson and former governor Ann Richards

Right: Charlie Wilson with Jalaluddin Haqani. Once the CIA's favourite commander, after 9/11 he became a prime target of US military forces who believed he was harbouring Osama bin Laden

Below:Charlie with CIA agent Gust Avrakotos on a trip to buy weapons for the jihad

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for the Afghan miracle was fast disappearing, as one incredible event after another began to unravel the Soviet eastern bloc. That August, Lech Walesa and his movement pushed aside the Communists and took power in Poland. Then in November, the ultimate symbol of Communist oppression, the Berlin Wall, came down. It was just nine months after the Red Army's humiliating retreat from Afghanistan, and the dominoes were now falling in central and eastern Europe. As Charlie Wilson saw it, his Afghans had played a decisive role in helping to trigger and hasten the collapse of the Communist eastern bloc. More than a million Afghans had died, and no one had ever thanked them for their sacrifice.

Wilson had always told his colleagues that Afghanistan was the one morally unambiguous cause that the United States had supported since World War II. But with the departure of the Soviets, the war was anything but. By 1990 the Afghan freedom fighters had suddenly and frighteningly gone back to form, re-emerging as nothing more than feuding warlords obsessed with settling generations-old scores. The difference was that they were now armed with hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of weapons and explosives of every conceivable type. The justification for the huge CIA operation had been to halt Soviet aggression, not to take sides in a tribal war – certainly not to transform the killing capacity of these warriors.

Wilson proposed a billion-dollar US aid package to begin rebuilding Afghanistan and did his best to rally support. He set off for Moscow to see what could be done to end the surrogate war that continued to rage. The Russians were pumping an estimated $3 billion a year into Afghanistan to prop up the puppet government led by Najibullah, while the CIA, with Saudi matching funds, maintained the enormous flow of weapons to the feuding warlords.

Andre Kozyrev, the future Russian foreign minister, told Charlie that the United States and Russia now had a common interest in stabilizing Afghanistan and particularly in preventing radical Islamic elements from taking power. The Soviets' preoccupation, Kozyrev explained, was Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the mujahideen leader who had so impressed the Afghans' American champions and whose close ties to Pakistan's ISI made him the leading recipient of CIA weaponry. Kozyrev insisted that Gulbuddin's brand of militant Islam was just as dangerous to America as it was to the Soviet Union – a point Charlie had heard frequently that year from his own side.

In the second year after the Soviet withdrawal, Wilson delivered another $250 million for the CIA to keep its Afghan program intact. With Saudi matching funds, the mujahideen would receive another half a billion dollars to wage war. The expectation was that they would join forces for a final push to throw out the Soviet-backed Najibullah regime, restore order, and begin the process of rebuilding. The Agency even sent word to Wilson that as an act of gratitude for the renewed budget, the mujahideen planned to take Jalalabad by June 1, Charlie's birthday. It didn't happen. Instead the Najibullah forces held, as the Afghans bickered and disgraced themselves by massacring prisoners.

Finally, on April Fools' Day, 1991, there was good news from the front – very good news. Wilson learned that his favorite commander, Jalaluddin Haqani, had "liberated" Khost. The first major Afghan city was now in the hands of the freedom fighters, and it was in no small measure due to the introduction of a series of lethal new weaponry provided by Wilson. Soon after, I accompanied Wilson's administrative assistant, Charlie Schnabel, to meet up with Haqani and take stock of how the mujahideen were conducting themselves as they began to reclaim their country. The stories we heard once we reached Pakistan were alarming. The mujahideen were hijacking US AID trucks, making regular runs impossible. At Friday prayers, the mullahs were inflaming their followers with accounts of Western NGO volunteers teaching Afghan women to wash with soap. In Peshawar, the American consul relayed a particularly horrific account of one of Gulbuddin's many outrages. A few months earlier he had sought to "liberate" Khost by shelling the civilian population of the city. None of this attracted any real attention in the world press, which had either forgotten about or lost interest in Afghanistan – in spite of the fact that the CIA and KGB were continuing to mount the largest covert Cold War battle in history. For all practical purposes, the Cold War was over, and it seemed as if the United States and Russia had come to share roughly the same long-term goals in Afghanistan. The only logical explanation for why the two superpowers were now funding this mysterious war of the tribes was the force of inertia.

That spring, Wilson was surprised to hear that the administration was not putting in a request for more money. On September 30, 1991, the end of the fiscal year, the flow of weapons, ammunition, and supplies that the mujahideen had so dearly loved would stop. But for Charlie Wilson, there was something fundamentally wrong with his war ending then and there. The president might want to end the war, but it wasn't his war to end. It had always been Congress's war, and just because there was disarray at the CIA didn't mean Congress should step back. That was the essence of the appeal Wilson made to his highly reluctant colleagues on the House Intelligence Committee when they met to consider the annual budget. Incredibly, he carried the day, securing $50 million a quarter for his cause. With the Saudi contribution, that meant another $400 million a year for the mujahideen. The secret appropriation was hidden in the $298 billion defense bill for fiscal year 1992. When it was presented for a vote, no one but the interested few noticed the $200 million earmarked for the Afghans. And so, as the mujahideen were poised for their thirteenth year of war, instead of being cut off, it turned out to be a banner year. They found themselves with not only a $400 million budget but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen.

However disgraceful the mujahideen's conduct was in the following months, in April 1992 they managed to stop fighting one another long enough to take Kabul. Once again Charlie felt vindicated. He had stayed the course and allowed the victory that belonged to the Afghans to

occur. But then everything became ugly. By August Gulbuddin Hekmatyar was outside of the capital, with his artillery shelling the positions of his former comrade in arms Ahmad Shah Massoud. Kabul, which had survived the entire Afghan war relatively intact, was suddenly subjected to intense urban warfare. Before it was over, close to 40 percent of the housing was destroyed, the art museum was leveled, the palace ravaged.

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Under normal circumstances, such misuse of American resources should have led to a scandal or at least entered the American consciousness as an issue of concern. But the anarchy in Kabul was completely overshadowed by the historic events sweeping the world. In December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. People were now referring to the United States as the world's lone superpower.

For the men who ruled the CIA, Afghanistan was acknowledged as the main catalyst that helped trigger these historic changes. Flush with the glory of tumbling dominoes and convinced that the Afghan campaign had been the key to it all, the Directorate of Operations led a ceremony on a sunny humid June day in 1993 to recognize the man who had made it possible. Without Charlie Wilson, Director James Woolsey said in his comments, "history might have been hugely different and sadly different". No other member of Congress, indeed no outsider, had ever been singled out by the CIA for such an accomplishment.

What no one involved anticipated was that it might be dangerous to awaken the dormant dreams and visions of Islam. Which is, of course, exactly what happened. There were many early warnings well before Charlie's award at Langley. In January of that year, a young Pakistani, Mir Aimal Kasi, walked down the line of cars at the gates of the CIA and calmly murdered two officers before escaping to Pakistan where he was embraced as a folk hero. A month later a bomb went off in the car park of the World Trade Center. What emerged from the smoke was a clear indication that some of the veterans of the Afghan campaign now identified America as their enemy. As early as a year before at Khost, a haunting portrait of the future was already in place: battle-hardened Afghan mujahideen, armed to the teeth and broken down into rival factions – one of the largest being a collection of Arab and Muslim volunteers from around the world. Pakistan's former intelligence chief, Hamid Gul, maintains that over the course of the jihad, up to thirty thousand volunteers from other countries had come into Pakistan to take part in the holy war. What now seems clear is that, under the umbrella of the CIA's program, Afghanistan had become a gathering place for militant Muslims from around the world, a virtual Mecca for radical Islamists. As early as the Gulf War, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, long the main recipient of CIA weaponry, had articulated his belief that the United States was seeking world domination and control of Muslim oil. The man Charlie once described as "goodness personified", Jalaluddin Haqani, had long been a gateway for Saudi volunteers, and for years the CIA had no problem with such associations. Osama bin Laden was one of those volunteers who could frequently be found in the same area where Charlie had been Haqani's honored guest. As the CIA's favorite commander, Haqani had received bags of money each month from the station in Islamabad. The presumption at Langley had been that when the United States packed its bags and cut off the Afghans, the jihad would simply burn itself out. Perhaps that policy would have worked out had it been only weapons that we left behind. But the more dangerous legacy of the Afghan war is found in the minds and convictions of Muslims around the world. To them the miracle victory over the Soviets was all the work of Allah – not the billions of dollars that America and Saudi Arabia poured into the battle, not the ten-year commitment of the CIA that turned an army of primitive tribesmen into technoholy warriors. The consequence for America of having waged a secret war and never acknowledging or advertising its role was we set in motion the spirit of jihad and the belief in our surrogate soldiers that, having brought down one superpower, they could easily take on another.

The morning of September 11, 2001, broke bright and shining in the nation's capital. As was his custom before leaving for work, Charlie Wilson walked out on to his terrace to take in the spectacular view. A call from a friend interrupted his morning ritual: "Do you have your television on?" The sight of the World Trade Center in flames stunned him, but like most Americans, he assumed it had to have been a horrendous accident. Some ten minutes later he was watching when the second plane appeared on screen and flew straight into the second tower. A sickening realization gripped him: it had to be the work of terrorists, and, if so, he had little doubt that the killers were Muslims.

"I didn't know what to think, but figured if I got downtown I could learn more." By then Wilson had retired from Congress and was working as a lobbyist, with Pakistan as one of his main accounts. At 9:43 am, half an hour after the first attack, he was driving across the Fourteenth Street Bridge with the windows up and news radio blasting so loud that he didn't hear the explosion that rocked the Pentagon less than a mile away.

For five straight nights he watched, until the fires were finally put down and the smoke cleared. He didn't know what to make of it all at first. When the photographs of the nineteen hijackers appeared in newspapers across the country, he took some comfort in pointing out that they were all Arabs, not Afghans. "It didn't register with me for a week or two that this thing was all based in my mountains."

The American public rallied behind the president when he launched his "war on terror". But almost everyone seemed confused about who the terrorists were, and all but clueless to explain why they hated the United States so much. The question is not so difficult to understand if you put yourself in the shoes of the Afghan veterans in the aftermath of the Soviet departure. Within months, the US government "dis-

covered" what it had known for the past eight years – that Pakistan was hard at work on the Islamic bomb. (The dirty little secret of the Afghan war was that Zia had extracted a concession early on from Reagan: Pakistan would work with the CIA against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and in return the United States would provide massive aid but would agree to look the other way on the question of the bomb.) But with the Russians gone, sanctions were imposed and all military and economic assistance was cut off. A fleet of F-16s that Pakistan had already purchased was withheld. Within a year, the Clinton Administration would move to place Pakistan on the list of state sponsors of terrorism for its support of Kashmiri freedom fighters. The Pakistan military had long been the surrogates for the CIA, and every Afghan and Arab mujahid came to believe that America had betrayed the Pakistanis. And when the United States kept its troops (including large numbers of women) in Saudi Arabia, not just bin Laden but most Islamists believed that America wanted to seize the Islamic oil fields and was seeking world domination. By the end of 1993, in Afghanistan itself there were no roads, no schools, just a destroyed country – and the United States was washing its hands of any responsibility. It was in this vacuum that the Taliban and Osama bin Laden would emerge as the dominant players. It is ironic that a man who had had almost nothing to do with the victory over the Red Army, Osama bin Laden, would come to personify the power of the jihad. In 1998, when bin Laden survived $100 million worth of cruise missiles targeted at him, it reinforced the belief Allah had chosen to protect him against the infidels.

It's not what Charlie Wilson had in mind when he took up the cause of the Afghans. Nevertheless, in spite of 9/11 and all the horrors that have flowed from it, he steadfastly maintains that it was all worth it and that nothing can diminish what the Afghans accomplished for America and the world with their defeat of the Red Army: "I truly believe that this caused the Berlin Wall to come down a good five, maybe ten, years before it would have otherwise. Over a million Russian Jews got their freedom and left for Israel; God knows how many were freed from the gulags. At least a hundred million Eastern Europeans are breathing free today, to say nothing of the Russian people. It's the truth, and all those people who are enjoying those freedoms have no idea of the part played by a million Afghan ghosts. To this day no one has ever thanked them.

"They removed the threat we all went to sleep with every night, of World War III breaking out. The countries that used to be in the Warsaw Pact are now in Nato. These were truly changes of biblical proportion, and the effect the jihad had in accelerating these events is nothing short of miraculous." The story of Charlie Wilson and the CIA's secret war in Afghanistan is an important, missing chapter of our recent past. Ironically, neither the United States government nor the forces of Islam will want this history to be known. But the full story of America's central role in the Afghan jihad needs to be told and understood for any number of reasons. Clearly it's not helpful for the world of militant Islam to believe that its power is so great that nothing can stop it. But the danger exists for us as well. It may not be welcomed by a government that prefers to see the rising tide of Islamic militancy as having no connection to our policies or our actions. But the terrible truth is that the group of sleeping lions that the United States roused may well have inspired an entire generation of militant young Muslims to believe that the moment is theirs.

Edited extracts from 'Charlie Wilson's War' by George Crile, published in the US by Grove Atlantic Inc ($26) and in the UK under the title 'My Enemy's Enemy' by Atlantic Books Ltd (£17.99)

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