# "Little America" Revisited:

# Successes and Failures in the Development of a Major Irrigation System in Southern Afghanistan

# A Problem of Priorities and Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. had numerous regional development programs in Helmand province of Afghanistan for three plus decades (1946-1979) which transformed the region from a limited subsistence agricultural area to a major cash-cropping, double-cropping region. Since then, many have referred to this enormous undertaking as a failure. This paper outlines what the region was in the ancient past, the context of some of the modern developments, examines some of the differing goals and priorities of the various organizations involved, and draws conclusions about "successes" and "failures." While passing judgment is subjective, closer inspection of context leads to better understanding.[1]

Past and recent references to "Little America" in the media and academia tend to imply negative connotations to the ethnocentric focus of Helmand development.[2] Should an effort that used modern technology and brought radical change and ideas into a traditional culture necessarily be negative? Was the "Little America" the U.S. created really a stain on the desert? Much of what was accomplished in that relatively distant period continues to function today. While costly and

complex, the developments of that period more than met initial Afghan goals and expectations.

## IN THE BEGINNING

The work in Helmand Province starting in 1946 by the Morrison-Knudsen Construction Company of Boise, Idaho (MK) was not the genesis of development work in this region. The Kandahar/Helmand/Nimroz region along the Arghandab and Helmand Rivers has been inhabited and has used irrigation farming since at least the Bronze Age. Following the Bronze Age, many famous visitors passed through the region including Alexander the Great, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (who had his winter palace near the present city of Lashkar Gah), Genghis Khan, Tamerlane and Babur, to name a few. This region was part of several central Asian empires throughout the millennia. Some visitors built, some destroyed. In the modern era, several other powers have tried unsuccessfully to develop and/or subdue the region and its peoples with force: the British, the Soviets and the Americans.

Into the 14th century this region was well-developed and highly populated thanks to the extensive irrigation systems which included a dam on the Helmand River in what is now the province of Nimroz.

> "Many theories are given to explain the disappearance of this vast civilization but most historians argue that successive hoards of invaders from the north and the west destroyed the large cities and major irrigation canals. It is widely believed that the depredation first by Genghis Khan followed by Tamerlane resulted in such a loss of life and out-migration of the population from the area that the remaining inhabitants were unable to mobilize the manpower required to (re-build and) keep the irrigation systems in operation." And "...what was once supposedly the "bread basket" of Central Asia was by the 20th century vast barren or scantly vegetated lands affected to varying degrees by salts, alkaline, groundwater and erosion."[3]

Apparently Tamerlane, enraged by local resistance, destroyed the Helmand River Dam, the associated irrigation system and annihilated much of the population.[4] And so ended the extensive habitation of Nimroz where today the widespread ancient ruins, remnants of the irrigation system and foundations of the dam still can be seen. But also today in the same area, Charborjak District, the new Kamal

Khan Dam is under construction by a Tajik firm and could irrigate 40,000 acres of land and produce 8.5 megawatts of electricity when the project is completed.

## WHY DEVELOP HERE?

Long-term boundary and water disputes erupted between Persia and Afghanistan in the early 1900s. The British were the arbitrators. This dispute became one of the reasons for the start of the re-development of this region.[5] Both countries began irrigation development along the Helmand River in hope of setting water rights precedents.[6] In Afghanistan this meant reviving or improving some of the ancient irrigation systems. That it took until 1973 for a water treaty between the two countries to be signed is an indication that negotiations were complicated. And the Iranians are objecting to the construction of the new Kamal Khan Dam.

Aside from the Iranian water rights problem, the Afghan government's move to re-develop this backward region had two other purposes: economic and political. The first was to increase land use and agricultural production in this previously thriving area. The second was to actively encourage settlement by providing land for landless farmers and sheep herding nomads with the expectation of increased security and taxes.

"Between 1910 and 1914, the Afghans began to develop parts of an old canal system (off the Helmand River) to be known as the Saraj Canal,"[7] located in the Sanguine district, with elements reaching as far south as the Arghandab River. But even with these early repairs of the Saraj Canal, there were problems of water shortage during summer when the Helmand River runs shallow, and worse during periods of drought. Consideration was given to moving the intake further upstream or building a storage dam near Garmab, some two kilometers south of Kajaki Dam.[8] But funding and technology were the problems. By the 1930s the Afghans hired both German and Japanese engineers for technical assistance. Work began, using hand labor, to rehabilitate both the Saraj intake and a section of an ancient canal of what was to become the Boghra Canal. The advent of World War II ended foreign technical assistance but the work continued under the direction of a Cornell University-trained Afghan engineer, S. W. Shah. It was this engineer who changed the location of the intake and the canal alignment to what it is today. By 1946 he directed the completion of some 26 km of canal and no doubt had a say in the selection of Morrison-Knudsen Construction Company (MK) as the next foreign contractor on the scene. MK was a large, well established and well known

international contractor. One of their successes by this time was the construction of Boulder (Hoover) Dam.[9]

With the expectation of a long-term involvement, MK established Morrison-Knudsen Afghanistan (MKA). Looking for easier movement of heavy construction equipment, they undertook improvement of the highway from the Pakistani border through Kandahar (the first MKA headquarters) to Girishk and south into the project areas. It was innovative that this was to be the first Afghan irrigation system to use modern heavy equipment for construction.[10] Equipment like bulldozers, graders and draglines were shipped from the US to the port of Karachi, Pakistan and by land to Helmand. Most of the control gates along the Boghra Canal were cast in a Denver, Colorado foundry and many remain in use today.

Along with the construction of the Boghra Canal, MKA established offices and facilities in Kandahar, Girishk, and a heavy equipment shop/yard in Chah-i-Anjir. It was in this period that Helmand Province was established as a separate political unit from Kandahar and that the Helmand Valley Authority (HVA) was established as a regional development authority. As the canal systems were under construction, MKA re-identified the need for storage dams on the Arghandab and the Helmand to provide year-around water for irrigation and periods of drought. This required a loan from the Import-Export Bank that pressured to establish a better organized effort. The model for HVA apparently was based on the USA's Tennessee Valley Authority with integrated responsibilities for agriculture, irrigation, land settlement, health, education, highways and roads. Here was the birth of "Little America."

## LITTLE AMERICA

Along with all the scattered political and development responsibilities, there was a perceived need for the establishment of a central HVA and provincial administrative center… a town in the newly established province of Helmand. Girishk, an established town on the main highway between Kandahar and Heart, was considered too distant from most activities of the irrigation development and land settlement schemes. A U.S Technical Cooperation Service (USTCS) employee, Frank E. Patterson, wrote a justification and provided the lay out for a new town in 1953, which he wanted to name Helmand, on the banks of the Helmand River just north of Sultan Mahmud's ruined winter capital of *Kala Bist.*[11]

Physical construction of the new town, actually named Lashkar Gah, began around the late-1950s following Paterson's plan and included:

- A complex of HVA, government and provincial offices (including a soils lab), warehouses and an equipment yard.

- Government and contractor housing of U.S. standards with running water and flush toilets. Most of the housing was set on lots with lawns but no walls separating the units as found in most Afghan towns.

- A hospital and health-training center.

- A complete system of schools - primary through high school.

- An hotel with swimming pool and tennis court.

- A large contractor guest-house/American Community Center for short-term staff including a restaurant, bar and movie room.

- A town gravity flow irrigation system with water pumped from the Helmand river to keep this desert escarpment green and allow newly planted pine trees that now lined most of the streets to thrive.

- An initial market area of shops with room for expansion.

- A central mosque with blue tile dome.

- Government land set aside for the eventual expansion of the town.

- Lashkar Gah was one of the few towns with a central deep well gravity fed drinkable water system, and a sewer system that emptied in the Helmand River.

HVA or "Little America," with the unprecedented and expanded government responsibilities of the integrated development program, more than adequate funding and modern living facilities in what had been a very backward region of the country, attracted some of Afghanistan's most gifted administrators, many of whom later became government ministers.

Lashkar Gah, once a piece of flat clay desert and ancient ruins on MKA's arrival in the area in 1946, blossomed and prospered as a farm market town. It continues to feed the world but now with its illegal opium rather than, as in the past, its wheat, cotton, corn, mung bean, melons and peanuts. This predicament is to some degree thanks to the subsequent misdirection in the 2000's.[12] Lashkar Gah's population was 9,844 in 1968-69[13] and estimated as 201,546 in 2006, which likely did not include the mass of foreigners both civilian and military.[14] Today it is faced with massive problems of providing public services like drinkable water and sewage disposal amidst this recent surge of expansion. But it does meet one of the USAID criticisms of the earlier developments: Lashkar Gah has become a primary market town for a profitable international cash-crop: opium.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Over three plus decades from 1946, this vast and ambitious regional development program accomplished much:

- Construction of the largest irrigation system in the country: three canals of 138 miles not including Saraj canal or Arghandab; 2 major intake structures off the Helmand River; some 150,000 acres of irrigated land with several hundred miles of drains.

- Construction of a small 3-generator hydro-electric plant on the upper reaches of the Boghra Canal that supplied limited power to the region's towns and some villages.

- A network of highways and roads constructed, reconstructed and improved.

- Establishment of a foreign construction company's facilities in 4-5 different locations needed to design and complete the planning and construction work; all facilities were turned over to the Afghan government in the end.

- Construction of two major earth-filled dams, one in Kandahar, one in Helmand, to ensure year around irrigation water for double cropping with plans for hydro-electric power.

- Construction of the hydro-power station at Kajaki dam and a network of power lines taking electric power to Kandahar, Lashkar Gah and adjacent towns, settlements and rural areas.

- Establishment of a government bureaucracy capable of organizing and running a large irrigation and integrated provincial development program without equal in this under-developed country.

- Creating and training a functioning agriculture research and extension service with several experimental farms involved in the introduction of high-yielding varieties of wheat and corn - the "Green Revolution" of the early 1970s - and the start of the modern "Afghan breadbasket" when many areas of the country faced drought. There was also an associated agricultural credit system established and fertilizer program.

- This region of double-cropping, cash-cropping Helmand farmers evolved into a center of mechanized farming with 1,000+ tractors by 1975, now re-supplied from Massy-Ferguson tractor factories in both Pakistan and Iran. The use of oxen plow-power became rare in this region.

- Planning and construction of a new, 20th century provincial capital, Lashkar Gah.

- Established an experimental chicken farm and dairy herd of Brown Swiss with an associated mobile artificial insemination program. With Peace Corps support there were weekly scheduled visits through the rural areas to up-grade the health and quality of local dairy herds.

- Construction of the Bost cotton gin with a British technical assistance team to help organize and train farmers to produce cash-crop cotton for the international market. From nothing, cotton became the second most important cash-crop in the region by 1975. It had an associated credit system for fertilizer. To keep up with farmer production the British built a second cotton gin in the late '70s in Girishk, which the U.S. later bombed.

- Established a functioning land settlement program that settled 10,000+ families (one third of which were previously sheep herding nomads) mostly

on newly developed clay desert land in Nad-i-Ali and Marja, and continued into the late '70s.

- Established a functioning primary through high school system of education, rural and urban, including at least four high schools in the central districts and an agricultural high school in Darwishan.

- Built the largest heavy equipment yard in the country capable of overhauling, repairing and maintaining a variety of heavy equipment through several generations of development projects. Included was a small foundry capable of producing some spare parts. A generation of mechanics, surveyors and other technical personnel were trained into the 1970s. Some of these men were still working into the 1990s. As of 2005 this facility was still functioning to keep some of the now ancient heavy equipment running despite minimum tools, spare parts and personnel.

- Established an initial semi-government construction company (trained by MKA to replace themselves) called the Helmand Construction Unit (HCU). This later developed into a national company, the Helmand Construction Company (HCC) that, among other things, built the Kunduz irrigation system beginning in 1969, as well as continued to expand, improve and maintain the irrigation system, roads and infrastructure of HAVA.

Needless to say, the complexities of these developments were both costly and fraught with delays of technical and bureaucratic nature but they were accomplished. Can all this be considered a development failure?

## INTERNATIONAL SOURCES OF CRITICISM

This extensive long-term development program beginning with MKA and continued with U.S. technical assistance that included USAID, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec) and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (SCS), to name a few, was costly and at times became an easy political target both internally and internationally.

Most of the development period, 1950s-70s, was amidst the Cold War when the U.S. and the Soviets were competing for influence. The leftists and communists in the Afghan government spoke gloriously for the Soviets and criticized the U.S.

influence.[15] The U.S. was chosen to help build the Helmand irrigation system. The Soviets responded with developing the Nangahar irrigation system which included importing top soils into some rocky areas.[16] The construction of the national circular highway was divided between the U.S. and the Soviets, with most of the north constructed by the Soviets while the key Kabul to Kandahar highway (and the branch to Chaman on the Pakistan border) was constructed by the U.S. The U.S. highway used asphalt with "Irish bridges" on many wash crossings. The Soviet highways used reinforced concrete with bridges capable of carrying future Soviet tanks, as Louis Dupree pointed out.[17]

As noted earlier, the Iranians continually objected to and criticized the construction of the central Helmand irrigation system assuming (correctly) that it would reduce the available Helmand River water flowing into Iran. This criticism continued into the Taliban government days during a major drought. The Taliban were accused of damming up the Helmand River to keep water from Iranian use. Actually they were trying to meet the needs of the farmers of the primary irrigation system at a time of water shortage. During one late 1990s episode of drought, the Taliban closed off the intakes of the Boghra and Darwishan Canals to force water down river to water- short areas in both Afghanistan and Iran.

## INTERNAL SOURCES OF CRITICISM

With the construction in the early 1950s of the Arghandab Dam in Kandahar province and the improved associated irrigation system, several border districts of Kandahar were administratively added to HVA, and became the Helmand-Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA). As an Afghan governmental organization in Helmand, HAVA was unlike any other in the country. It received a more concentrated level of development funding (foreign and Afghan) than other areas. Public services like health and education were funded by and reported to local HAVA rather than to their home ministries. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, these districts came under the jurisdiction of the Helmand governor who was also the president of HAVA. This radical change from the traditional government structures caused political jealousies and subsequent accusations of project failure. The fact remains - the services were some of the best in the country. The farmers of the development regions greatly benefited from most of these changes. The perceptions of failure depended upon whom you asked.

The development and extensive funding were criticized also because the primary focus was a Pashto-speaking area. Ignored was the fact that virtually all ethnic groups in Afghanistan were represented in the region due to the land settlement program.

While criticism came from many directions for many different reasons, the developments followed a plan that resulted in creating one of the most agricultural productive regions of the country. The smart, innovative, cash-crop farmers who produced two cash-crops a year, thanks to the Helmand River and the Kajaki and Arghandab dams, themselves created a sphere of great political influence.

From the beginning of the MKA involvement in 1946 when the funding was primarily Afghan (from hard currency accumulated during the war years from the karakul industry and supplying food items to the British army in India), to decades later there were disagreements between the Afghans and the foreigners on the best use of funding:

- Needed soil and water surveys were not accomplished.
- Needed drainage construction was minimized.
- Technical vs. political considerations of development.
- Cost vs. technical considerations of development.
- Farmers (settled nomads) inexperience, over-use of water and no water charges.
- Difficult soils issues: a clay desert with undeveloped salty and alkali soils and an impermeable layer of conglomerate caused problems. In at least one area of Nad-i-Ali, this conglomerate, similar to a layer of concrete, was some six feet below the surface and caused a major but repairable disaster in which some 300 farm families abandoned their land. This region has only four inches of rain a year and some one hundred and twenty inches of evaporation. The resulting movement of moisture and natural salts to the surface without the controlled percolation of irrigation water down and out through an effective drainage system was self-defeating. A proper drainage

system was missing. Also under these soil conditions, poor drainage and farmer mis-use of water in some areas resulted in water-logging.

**The Shamalan Land Development Project:** [18] Even after the joint development and approval of this project, each organization involved with this development project came with differing priorities and expectations. Differing priorities between the USAID, BuRec and HAVA resulted in some level of "failure" in the period 1965-1973. The important question again is who saw it as a "failure" and who saw it as a "success?"[19]

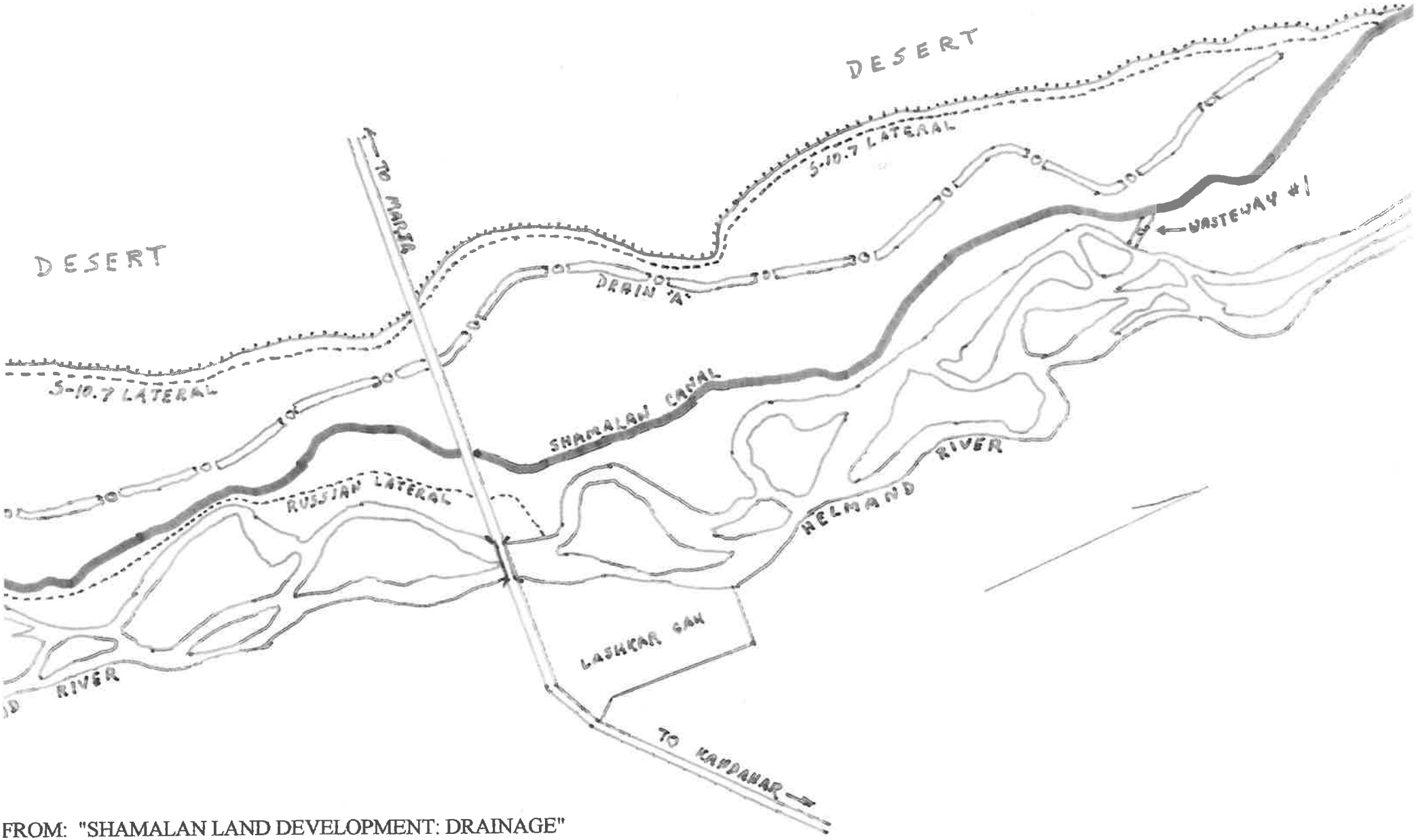
Both a feasibility study and soils survey of the flood plain were completed during the late 1960s by HAVA and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BuRec), the U.S. technical assistance team for HAVA ca.1964-73. This report served to justify the project and the BuRec anticipated later project expansion on this foundation.[20] The stated goals of the project were to:

1. Construct the S-10.7 lateral off the north end of the functioning Shamalan Canal to improve the irrigation system of the western half of Shamalan. The lateral would be constructed on the western side of the irrigated flood plain along the base of the desert escarpment.

2. The above construction would also bring needed water into the un-farmed areas at the south end of the flood plain, allow expanded land development, irrigation and land settlement, a key HAVA political and economic priority.

3. Provide a sizable heavy construction equipment purchase for the construction work. The bulldozers and self-loading scrapers would replace much of the aging MKA equipment presently being used by HCU.

4. Build a 200 acre demonstration plot at the north end of the project area which involved land leveling, removing housing, vineyards and orchards as well as the many, centuries old traditional tree-lined farm ditches, not addressed when the Shamalan Canal was constructed by MKA in the early 1950s. This was not a HAVA priority as it would have been/was a very politically and economically complex issue in relations with the farmers. It would be/have been difficult and costly to implement.[21]




FROM: "SHAMALAN LAND DEVELOPMENT: DRAINAGE"
ROYAL GOVERNMENT OF AFGHANISTAN: HAVA
3 JANUARY 1972

When the 20+ miles of the S-10.7 lateral was completed, land development and settlement was initiated and completed in central and the south end of Shamalan, including some areas that had initially been classed as "Class 6" land (un-irrigatable) where today the settled farmers remain and farm successfully.[22]

While the first three goals were accomplished with some alteration, the demonstration plot was not undertaken by Afghan government choice. The farmers did not accept this element of the project.

It is difficult to implement projects involving land leveling, land consolidation, vineyard and orchard removal and temporary displacement of farmers from their land in areas of fragmented land ownership that have been farmed for generations. Combine this with farmer mistrust of government and you have the recipe for failure.

The demonstration plot to be developed by this project was designed to include:

- *Removing farm families that resided on their land to temporary shelters on the desert escarpment above the flood plain.* The NGO CARE Medico had agreed to implement this relocation effort and to determine what the people were to do during this period of dislocation, i.e., no income. Farmers would lose at least one crop season and the leveling process would likely reduce fertility in some areas. This was not an acceptable plan for the farmers. They remembered an action in the past in Darwishan: the government had moved people off the land to develop it but subsequently they were not allowed to return as the area was converted into an experimental farm. It is not clear what the Darwishan land ownership was at that time. In Shamalan, a cadastral survey had been completed with ownership identified but it was not up to date.

- *Completing a land survey with court action if necessary to up date the cadastral records to insure correct identification of land ownership and to insure accuracy of total land area owned but few farmers trusted/trust court action.* Through inheritance over time, the land in this area was highly fragmented and one man may have owned several small plots. With the land consolidation element of the project, each owner would receive back one plot of land equal to whatever total he owned in the past - but not necessarily in the same location. But the same families had farmed the plots for

generations, were emotionally attached, and knew that not all areas were homogeneous in fertility.[23]

- *Leveling the land in the demonstration area would include removing housing, trees along canals, canals/ditches, vineyards and orchards, mosques, etc.* This would come as a shock to many and there were questions about how the farmers would be compensated for property loss. There were many such important questions left unanswered right up to the time construction was to begin.[24]

- *Re-building the irrigation system with control structures on the squared off plots of land of each land owner and allow the farmers to return.*

There was discussion at the time to construct a new village up on the escarpment for the farmers so the valuable, newly developed crop land would not be filled with housing. At the time, this was not an acceptable alternative to the farmers. In later years and into the present, some farmers were/are re-locating housing compounds up on the escarpment (government land) to increase their farm size. In several locations, they are having wells drilled inside the compounds so the women/children would not have to go down to the canal to get water…the traditional source.

The stated assumption of this land development segment of the project, as with most demonstrations, was that the farmers in Shamalan would witness great change and improvement within the demonstration plot. They would subsequently agree to have their land leveled and consolidated where each farmer would have all his land in one squared off field with adequate, easily controlled water. This, by BuRec and US agricultural standards, was a technically correct plan. But this clashed with local values. Most cash-crop farmers are not gamblers: too many unknowns and too many negative elements associated with the process prevented mass approval. Because there was potential for a local political headache and considering this was a very costly element in the project, it was not a priority for HAVA.

With all the controversy and delay, it was no surprise when the first bulldozer arrived to begin work on the S-10.7 lateral turn-out and the first adjacent field, that they were met by farmers with guns. While no violence occurred, work did stop. The several years of project start-up delays upset elements of USAID/Kabul,

BuRec, USAID/Washington and the embassy because it had affected political relations with several ministries of the Afghan government. This was a long-approved project where funds had been obligated but nothing was happening.

Delays continued. And then, in what appeared to be a carefully coordinated and timed manner, after the safe arrival in Karachi of the much anticipated heavy equipment, the governor, and the head of HAVA (the same man) called a meeting of the top USAID officials, U.S. ambassador and other U.S. notables. It was only then, after years of delays and excuses that he announced he could not proceed with that element of the project because of "farmer opposition." The U.S. officials then saw through the smoke that the Afghans did not want to admit unwillingness to embark on the difficulties of this demonstration plot, this pilot, until all of the anticipated heavy equipment was delivered, assuming that the order might be cancelled. The new equipment was their priority in this development project.[25]

In spite of differing priorities in the Shamalan Land Development Project, what was accomplished?

- The S-10.7 lateral was completed. Irrigation water was introduced into the water-short areas in south Shamalan. Drainage was improved.

- New settlers were given land in the newly developed areas.

- The agricultural economy was given a boost.

- HAVA/HCU acquired a surge of new, replacement heavy equipment which they used also in the follow-on Drainage Project, up to 1979.

- The mechanics of HCU received training for the modern hydraulic systems of the new equipment. Special dust proof, air conditioned workshops were erected for that equipment.

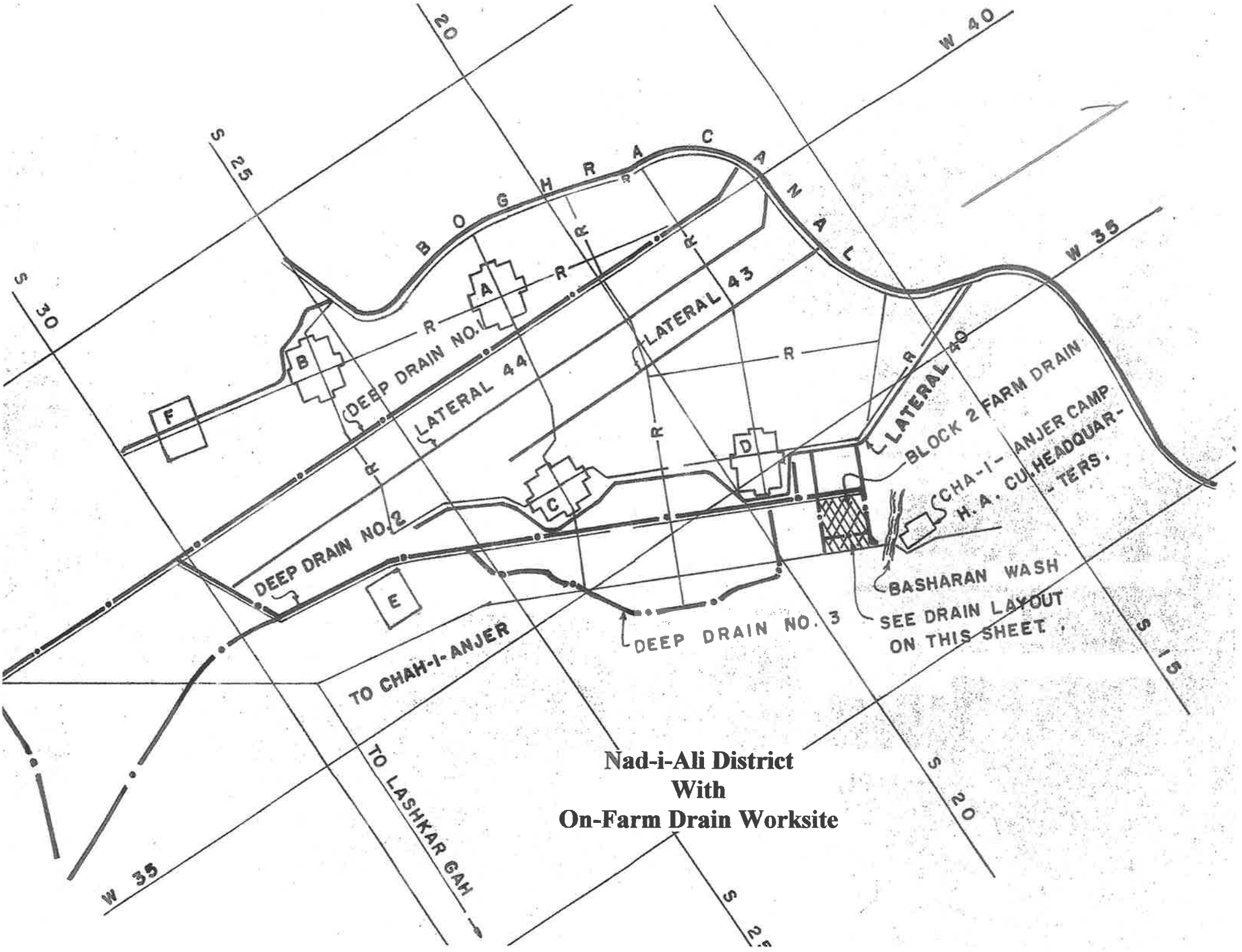
Was this success or failure? It depends on who you ask. Except for the demonstration plot, never an Afghan priority, the Shamalan Project accomplished its goals under difficult circumstances.

In the months before the 1973 coup, the contract of the BuRec came up for renewal. U.S. officials, closely watching a perceived "failure" in this project allowed the contract to expire. The BuRec team left Afghanistan and their

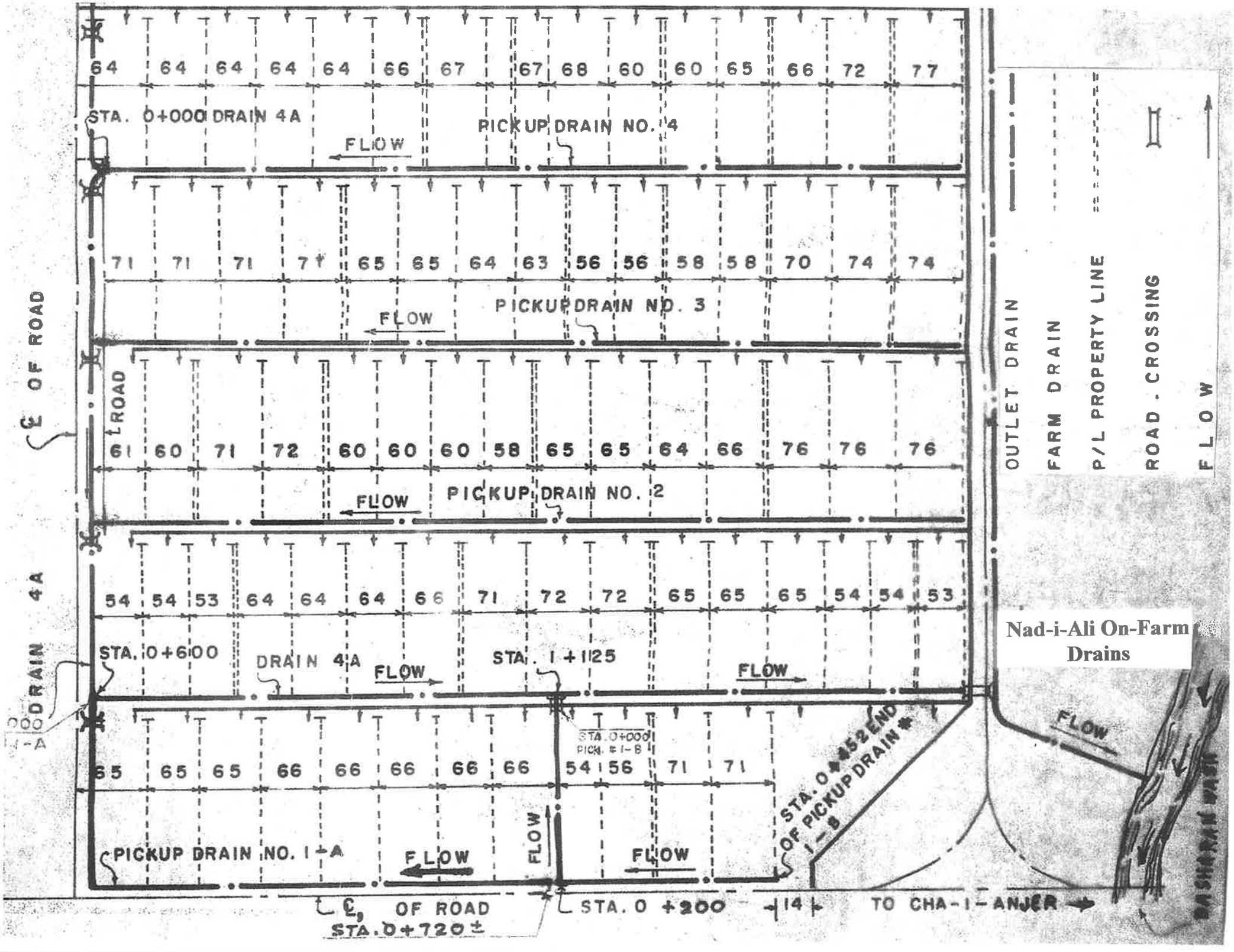
expectations for a longer term involvement went with them. As other aspects of the project wound down, the Afghan Government dramatically changed with the summer of 1973 Coup d'Etat. A nationalist political figure and previous Prime Minister named Mohammed Daoud succeeded in a peaceful overthrow of King Zahir Shah, his cousin, while the king was in Italy for medical treatment.

In the months following the 1973 coup it was difficult to re-establish functional government working relationships between USAID and the HAVA. The new Minister of Agriculture was a communist in the new nationalist/communist government of Daoud, to whom HAVA reported. This Minister had indicated that he had no interest in working with the U.S. Uncertainty within the Afghan government resulted in no new project development for Helmand. USAID shut down its facilities and pulled U.S. personnel out of Helmand for the first time since 1946. The 1974 visit of the then U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to Kabul resulted in Daoud's direct request for the U.S. to continue work on the "unfinished symphony" of Helmand.[26] As Daoud tried balancing the factions of his young government to achieve many goals, HAVA was transferred from the Afghan Ministry of Agriculture to the Ministry of Planning. The results were quick.

**The Central Helmand Drainage Project 1975-79:** The needed Central Helmand Drainage Project was designed and approved by late 1974. The U.S. Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was brought in as the technical assistance team. The project was to focus on developing a complete drainage plan, needed since 1946, the construction of additional main drains and planning and construction of on-farm drains. On-farm drains had mostly been excluded in past development work except for an initial 24 MKA buried tile drains in Nad-i-Ali of which 20 were still functioning without maintenance in the early 2000's. In the planning stages, the SCS determined that on-farm drains spaced every fifty meters were required in the tight clay soil of central Helmand. HAVA indicated they could not afford such an expensive system for the region. Instead, they agreed to a demonstration area showing farmers what good drainage could produce. Additional political complications erupted between these Pashtun farmers and HAVA as to location of the proposed demonstration area. In this case the farmers apparently vied to have their lands used in the demonstration to take advantage of a free drainage system. The area ultimately selected for the demonstration was in a recently settled area of field crops with squared off fields located in Nad-i-Ali where the farmers lived in villages. There were few delays. The deep and narrow on-farm drains were hand-




**Nad-i-Ali District**
**With**
**On-Farm Drain Worksite**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Nad-i-Ali On-Farm Drains
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dug. Elsewhere and later some farmers dug their own on-farm drains but not at the fifty meter interval.

In short, the conflict of priorities in this case was between the SCS who pressed for a technically correct and effective irrigation system with good drainage, and HAVA, which was paralyzed by costs of on-farm drains and political relationships with the farmers.

## "LITTLE AMERICA" – A FAILURE?

Not really.

In April 1978, the Afghan communists staged a military coup in which Daoud and his family were murdered. Long standing U.S. involvement died with him. For the first time since 1946, the American development presence in Afghanistan was in the process of leaving. By late 1979 a full Soviet invasion was underway. This invasion brought most of the public and agricultural services in Helmand to an end and destroyed some of the related infrastructure. The irrigation system managed to escape this fate.

The irrigation system had been well designed and constructed by MKA and to great extent it is self-cleaning. There were many damaged control structures and ten years of silting by 1989 with the Soviet withdrawal. But the local watermasters and farmers had worked to keep the system functioning to irrigate their crops. By this time, the new cash-crop of opium poppy had been introduced into central Helmand.[27]

The British-built cotton gin, while needing spare parts and continuous maintenance, likewise has continued to function, but at greatly reduced rates. This has been accomplished without reliable support from either its home ministry or the foreign donors. Farmers continue to cultivate some cotton, which they would prefer as a cash-crop over opium, for the government gin and the numerous small hand-fed cotton gins privately owned in the region. There is still a cotton market, and the international cotton market has hit all time highs during the past 5 years. The cotton planting season for maximum production overlaps with the opium poppy growing season. With help with international marketing, cotton could

compete. In only 3-4 generations from a nomadic lifestyle, these cash-crop farmers now produce 40-50% of the world's opium. There has been little effective help or pressure from the Afghan government, the international community of donors or the military occupation forces to get out of the trade.

In the 1940s-1970s, the farmers developed their infertile desert clay soils into organic fertile soils. MKA created a large modern irrigation system. HAVA completed a land settlement program. To this day, these innovative farmers are expanding their land holdings into inaccessible "out-of-project" clay desert areas said to be in response to government poppy eradication. They are improving the soils, increasing poppy cultivation and mostly irrigating with seepage from the irrigation system or with deeper ground-water wells. But this development began during the Soviet period.

Central Helmand remains one of the most productive, innovative, double-cropping, cash-cropping agricultural regions in Afghanistan even if the primary cash-crop is illegal opium poppy. In the 1970s there were only a few families of settled Turkmen in Shamalan that produced commercial vegetables for the local market. Farmers began experimenting with commercial early-vegetable production in the 1990s using homemade "green houses" of sticks and plastic sheeting to compete on local Afghan markets with early-vegetables from Pakistan and Farah. Also, with help of an Afghan NGO, farmers were experimenting with okra as a vegetable and seed crop to market in Pakistan. In the 1990s the farmers were also experimenting with new varieties of wheat seed brought in from Iran without the help of an extension service. Despite competition with opium poppy, one area in Nad-i-Ali became a major producer of peanuts for markets in both Pakistan and Iran. This was an unknown cash-crop in this region in the 1970s.

## CONCLUSION

Beginning with the work of MKA in 1946, central Helmand regained some of its major productivity and political importance excised in the 14$^{th}$ century. The major development programs outlined here were costly and fraught with various bureaucratic delays, errors and mis-direction. Transitioning a very under-developed, traditional region with a limited bureaucracy into the "western model" world does not happen with ease. The U.S. provided advisors and massive funding via grants and loans. It focused on technical correctness under US standards and

US concepts of development management in this very traditional area surrounded by a harsh desert environment. Much was planned, organized, constructed and developed under HAVA. This enormous undertaking and subsequent results noted above cannot be considered a failure.

Now, after 30+ years of war, much of that development has been destroyed. What does remain, however, are the intelligent, informed, cash-cropping, double-cropping farmers and/or their descendants, and their basic irrigation system. As some of the most productive farmers in the country, this area could again become Afghanistan's breadbasket. As well, it could become the primary producer of cash-crops like cotton, melons, vegetables, peanuts, etc. instead of 40-50% of the world's opium. Such a development would require effective leadership, less corrupt government, enlightened assistance, direction and support. Sadly these elements have mostly been absent over the past 10+ years.[28]

**Footnotes and references**:

Most of the hard-to-find references noted here from USAID sources, reports and dissertations can be found in my website: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org.

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[1] For a partial list of projects see: Cynthia Clapp-Wincek, THE HELMAND VALLEY PROJECT IN AFGHANISTAN, A.I.D. Evaluation Special Study No. 18, 1983, p. ix.

[2] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2012. David Rohde, "Visit Afghanistan's "Little America", and See the Folly of For-Profit War", The Atlantic, 06/2012. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "In Afghanistan, the rise and fall of "Little America", The Washington Post, 5 Aug. 2011. Nick Cullather, "From New Deal to New Frontier in Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State", Working Paper #6, The Cold War as Global Conflict, International Center for Advanced Studies, New York University, August 2002. Arnold J. Toynbee, Between Oxus and Jamna, NY, Oxford. Univ. Press, 1961. Louis Dupree, Afghanistan, Princeton Univ. Press, 1973, p. 499 ff.

[3] Most of this section on history comes from: Lloyd Baron, Sector Analysis: Helmand-Arghandab Valley Region, February, 1973, USAID/Afghanistan. Lloyd I.Z. Baron, The Water Supply Constraint: An Evaluation of Irrigation Projects and Their Role in

the Development of Afghanistan, PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 1975. Ghulam Farouq, The Effects of Local, Regional and Global Politics on the Development of the Helmand-Arghandab Valley of Afghanistan, PhD Dissertation, Univ. of London, SOAS, 1999.

[4] George P. Tate, Siestan: A Memoir on the History, topography, Ruins and People of the Country, 1910.

[5] "Helmand River iv. In the Late 19th and 20th Centuries", 2013 Encyclopaedia Iranica (on line), Vol.XII, Fasc. 2, pp.173-176.

[6] Farouq Azam/Ghulam Farouq, "VI. Helmand Project is Successful", p.2, draft document to be found in: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org. Ghulam Farouq, The Effects of Local, Regional and Global Politics on the Development of the Helmand-Arghandab Valley of Afghanistan, PhD. Dissertation.

[7] Farouq Azam, "VII. Conclusions and Suggestions", draft document, p.1, to be found in: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org. As noted in these documents, Farouq Azam's/Ghulam Farouq's father and grandfather were both very much involved in these early Saraj developments as chief engineer and consultant.

[8] Personal communication, Farouq Azam, Feb. 2013.

[9] Lloyd Baron, Sector Analysis, p.7ff.

[10] Farouq Azam, "VII. Conclusions and Suggestions", p.1.

[11] Frank E. Patterson, "Report on the Site Selection for the Permanent Administrative Center for the Helmand Valley Authority",USTCA, 1953, 23 pp. w/maps.

[12] See R.B.Scott's website: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org, the first 38 email/memos on the subject.

[13] Murad A. Asiel, "Lashkar Gah Household Survey: A Demographic and Econometric Analysis", Kabul University, 1968-69, 78pp.

[14] "Lashkar Gah" in Wikipedia.

[15] Farouq Azam, "VI. Helmand Valley Project is Successful", p.3-4.

[16] Lloyd I.Z. Baron, "The Water Supply Constraint: An Evaluation of Irrigation Projects and Their Role in the Development of Afghanistan", PhD dissertation, McGill University, 1975, 277pp.

[17] Private communication.

[18] It was my understanding that I was hired by USAID ("direct hire") to mainly help with the developing long-term problems with implementing the Shamalan Land Development Project in the Nawa-i-Barakzai district of Helmand, now referred to as Nawa. I was the Mission social scientist (Research and Evaluation Officer, 1971-1978) at the time when the social soundness analysis was becoming standard procedure for project papers. The Shamalan Land Development Project pre-dated this project paper requirement.

[19] See the series of memo exchanges during this project in my website:www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org, under "Shamalan Land Development Project". All the official memos and documents have not yet been added.

[20] "Shamalan Unit: Helmand Arghandab Valley Development Project, Feasibility Report", BuRec, USAID, HAVA, 1968, 152 pp. w/maps. "Shamalan Unit: Appendix B", 1968, 133pp. w/maps.

[21] Richard B. Scott, "The North Shamalan: A survey of Land and People", USAID/Afghanistan, 1971, 55pp.

[22] Richard B. Scott, "Tribal and Ethnic Groups in Helmand Valley", Asia Society, 1980, pp. 21-23.

[23] We faced a similar problem with farmers in a small irrigated valley that had been farmed for generations in Antalya Provence, south Turkey, in the FAO Antalya Regional Project, mid-1960s, which included land consolidation and was never implemented. The designers of the Shamalan pilot element of this project could have understood the difficulties with a limited time in the field with the farmers.

[24] "Relocation of Farms", BuRec Official Memo, O.D.Mort, Field Eng. and R.F.Thompson, Design Eng. to J.K.Shankland, BuRec Project Manager, Helmand, May 1971.

[25] "USAID Responsibilities for the Shamalan Situation", Official Memo, R.B. Scott, DP to A. Boehme, A-DD, Jan. 8, 1973. There were numerous official memos exchanged within the USAID mission during this periods relating to the problems of the Shamalan Project and the development of a new (drainage) project some of which can be found in my website noted.

[26] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan, 2012, p. 32.

[27] Richard B. Scott, "Helmand Irrigation Rehabilitation Project", Final Report, 1 Dec 98 - 31 March 99, MCI/INL, 98 pp. (w/photos)

[28] Richard B. Scott, "Opium Poppy Cultivation in Central Helmand, Afghanistan: A Case Study in Bad Program Management", The Society for Applied Anthropology, 67th Annual Meeting, March 2007, 18 pp. "Reconstruction and Opium Poppy Cultivation in Central Helmand: The Need for an Integrated Program", Conference on Afghanistan Reconstruction: The Future, University of Nebraska at Omaha, October 2008, 18 pp. And the 38 email/memos, "Helmand Follow Up", in my website: www.scottshelmandvalleyarchives.org.

**Scott's Helmand and USAID Experience:**

USAID/Afghanistan, Research and Evaluation officer, 1971-78.
USAID/Mali, Project Manager, Mali Rural Works Project, 1979-81.
USAID/Pakistan, Project Manager, Tribal Areas Development Project 1982-84.
Pashto Service Chief, VOA, 1984-90.
USAID/DAI/Pakistan, Chief-of-Party, Kala Dhaka Area Development Project, 1990-93.
INL/MCI, Project Manager, Helmand Irrigation Rehabilitation Project, 1998-99.
USAID/CADG/Afghanistan, Consultant, Cotton and Alternative Crops Project, 2002.
USAID/DAI, Officer-in-Charge, Helmand Drainage Rehabilitation Project, 2002-03.
USAID/Chemonics, Rural Development Specialist, (Helmand) Alternative Income Project, 2004-05.