When we look at the Boer War at the end of the century, it’s tempting to root for the little guy.

The biggest empire in the world, picking on a buncha Dutch farmers who just want to be left alone.

The real story’s messier. The real story is ALWAYS messier.

1. It’s more like a big bully picking on a medium-sized bully.

The Transvaal Republic wasn’t all that small, or all that weak.

Thanks to its gold, it was the richest state in all southern Africa.

It threw its weight around, too.

Ask the Zulus or the Swazis or the Matabele or the Xhosa.

All of them had been turned into subjects.

Their people had been dragooned into low-priced labor pools.

Their lands had been stripped away and turned into farms and cattle-ranges.
Its policy-makers looked north and west and south, to the day when everything south of the Zambezi River was in the Transvaal orbit.

2. The Uitlanders, the white people who weren’t Boers, who worked in the Transvaal, were being kept in the sweaty jobs. They were being treated like second-class citizens.

Now, granted, that’s better than being treated like fourth-class noncitizens, the way Africans were.

But it’s not pleasant.

How many Uitlanders were there? England was pretty sure there were more English-speakers than Boers.

If that was so, it meant that in a free, fair election, the people of Transvaal would vote to become part of the empire.

The Boers were a minority culture in a minority race, and they insisted on holding everything in their own hands.¹

3. English policy makers were sure that there were lots of Boers who would be happier in the Empire.

After all, the Transvaal Republic was so conservative, so poky, so discriminatory.

Yes, it could dig up gold.

But where were the factories? Where was the booming industrial economy it could have had?

Set the Boers free from codgers like old Oom Paul, and you’d see an economic boom that would make the Transvaal a powerhouse.

Everywhere would benefit: ALL the colonies in South Africa.

4. African natives weren’t going to get equal treatment from English or Boer. But if you asked them, they’d rather have an imperial overlord than an Afrikaan one.

At least their chiefs could go to London, and ask for justice.

And sometimes they got it.

Sometimes sure beats never.

In the Cape Colony, where English-speakers ruled, the few blacks who could read and write and had property, could vote.

You’d find penguins swimming in the Limpopo River before you found Boers allowing that.
Now, the fact was, black Africans were wrong.

And so were English policy makers.

As a matter of fact, the Uitlanders in the Transvaal were a minority. If they’d been given the vote, and even if they’d voted together, they could never have beaten the Boers.

But that doesn’t mean that the planners in London and on the Cape didn’t believe what they were saying..

And the one reason why they were willing to go to war was that they KNEW ... JUST KNEW that the Uitlanders would rally behind them, and so would a lot of the Boers.

All their opportunities rested on two people:

Joe Chamberlain, Colonial Secretary

and the High Commissioner for South Africa, governor of the Cape Colony

Sir Alfred Milner.

Joe you know. What about Milner?

An iron-tough specimen of grit and cunning.

He wasn’t a general; but he might as well have been.
a “civilian soldier of the Empire,” he called himself.

and the more you watched him in action, the more you suspected that it was of the *German* empire.

That’s where he’d done his schooling – that and Oxford²

Lawyer ...
Newspaperman...
Director-general of the accounts in Egypt
KCB

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² At Baliol, where he won the first scholarship, at age 18. He got four after that in a row.
and now governor.  

Whatever he did, it was 100% Nothing would stand in the way of his career.

In college, he made a resolve that he wouldn’t get involved with women – no marriage, anyhow – till he retired.

And he didn’t. Not till he turned seventy.

As governor, he spent nine months learning Dutch and Afrikaans.

Before a year had gone by, he was all for a war to make the Dutch republics into British colonies.

And the tool for doing it was to uphold the uitlanders.

There was nothing romantic about their leaders.

Milner and Chamberlain knew them for what they were.

“A lot of cowardly, selfish, blatant speculators who would sell their souls to have the power of rigging the market,” Chamberlain called some of them.  

But you take what martyrs you can get.

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This was simply a war waiting to happen.

At least on the face of it, the British were acting like bullies.

What business was it, for Britain to tell the Transvaal who it could let vote, and who it couldn’t?

But here was the Empire, insisting that the Big Issue – the one that really counted – was letting the uitlanders vote after five years in Transvaal, not the legal fourteen.

And it was based on a fresh idea – one England had never claimed before –

that no matter where English people settle, English authorities have the right to rule them.5

What if they’d said that about Irish Americans, for instance?

No state has the right to set up voting requirements for them?

It’s a lot closer to the idea of a certain other person – NOT English – that in any country where German people happen to be living, Germany had the right to annex them.... the Sudetenland, say.

In fact, fair play for Uitlanders was more an excuse than a reason for fighting..

5 Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 28.
Chamberlain wasn’t trying to get the Boers to give ground.

He was hunting up an excuse to get up a war with them.

His worst nightmare was that they’d cooperate.

He and Milner burned the midnight oil, trying to find something the Boers would say NO to.

And the Boers really were such an impossible people!

– they were willing to talk

– they were willing to make a deal

How about a seven year residency to vote?
That’s not much more than five.

And then they agreed to England’s demand for a five-year period...

Whereupon England changed the demands.

In fact, the Government declared, they weren’t going to negotiate at all.

You only negotiate between nations.
There was no such thing as the nation of Transvaal. It was British territory.

The only thing the Boers could do, to satisfy Britain, was to agree to go out of existence and haul down their flag.\footnote{Farwell, \textit{The Great Anglo-Boer War}, 34-36.}

Oh, yes.... and everybody in Transvaal had to turn in their guns.

After they were completely disarmed, talks might begin again.

Is it any wonder that the Boers then, and every historian since, has seen the British government as treacherous, its every offer as insincere?

Chamberlain and Milner were like that lawyer in a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta:

\begin{verbatim}
    a great Arithmetician who can demonstrate with ease
    That two and two are three – or five – or anything you please!
    An eminent logician who can make it clear to you
    That black is white, when looked at from the proper point of view;
    A marvelous philologist, who’ll undertake to show
    That “Yes” is but another and a neater form of “No.”
\end{verbatim}

\textbf{II. BOER-HUNTING}
A. The Perfect War

Better to strike first, than be struck.

On October 11, 1899, the Boers invaded Natal and the Cape Province.

A week more, and British divisions were on shipboard, heading for what they thought would be a quick, glorious win.

Never was a war more popular.

Arthur Sullivan set one Kipling war-poem to music.

Actresses chanted it on stage to raise money.

War mottoes went on cigarette packets and ashtrays and pillowcases.⁷

Sergeants gave up their stripes, just for the chance of enlisting, even as a private.

Soldiers were swamped in gifts as they marched off ...

bars of chocolate
field glasses
Kodaks
sporting guns

⁷ Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 54. As you might imagine, the poem was Kipling’s, “The Absent Minded Beggar,” urging civilians to pay into the Soldiers’ Families’ Fund:

When you’ve shouted ‘rule Britannia,’ when you’ve sung “God Save the Queen,”
When you’ve finished killing Kruger with your mouth,
Will you kindly drop a shilling in my little tambourine
For a gentleman in khaki ordered south?
He’s an absent minded beggar, and his weaknesses are great –
But we and Paul must take him as we find him –
He is out on active service, wiping something off a slate –
And he’s left a lot of little things behind him!”
And because this was the first real war with khaki uniforms, khaki became THE fashion statement.

A song was called “Khaki”

The Government raised money by selling Khaki bonds.”

The Royal Marines, stuck with white belts, soaked them in tea to make them khaki colored.

The Scots Greys painted their horses khaki.

And the Boers would call the British soldiers “Kakies,” as a result.8

B. Ready to Fight? Absent-Minded Beggars

Never did a country want a war more – go out of its way to get into a war – and do it without getting ready to fight.

The British weren’t set for war, and the army certainly wasn’t ready for South Africa.

Parliament hungered for war – as long as it didn’t cost much.

So the Government never got around to collecting supplies.

It didn’t even have the uniforms to ship.

8 Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 55.
No saddles – no horses – no horseshoes

And a total of 80 cavalry swords.

The army started with war with just 200 rounds of cannon ammunition in stock for the field guns.

Plenty of bullets for rifles – 151 million rounds.

But more than a third of it was illegal under the laws of war –

the so-called “dum-dum bullets”

that expand when they hit, because they have a hollow center.⁹

They had learned everything fighting imperial wars, all of them on a small scale.

They had no general staff.

Coordinating strategy across a worldwide empire, they had two intelligence officers – no more, no less.

Plus 14 clerks.

⁹ Britain had just signed the agreement at the Hague on July 12, 1899, declaring dum-dums too barbarous for use. Of course, in the war that followed, both sides used them. Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, 41.
The French army had 230 people to make maps for the battlefield.

Britain had 30.

So they didn’t know what the land looked like – where the hills were – how deep the rivers were.\textsuperscript{10}

In the end, the Intelligence Department did a crackerjack job.

They found plenty of information.

... but nobody ever passed it on to the generals in South Africa – so it hadn’t the least use.

The generals were given their orders from home.

These were very detailed, very specific:

Take charge.

[that’s it? That’s all? And go where? Take what? Do what?

Nobody told them.]

\footnote{Farwell, \textit{The Great Anglo-Boer War}, 42.}
Officers headed out to South Africa without any strategy briefing. They had no idea of what government policy was. And Military Intelligence didn’t bother to clear things up.

They stuck to the weapons they were used to, and the tactics of Wellington’s time.

Machine guns – smokeless powder – repeating rifles...

All changed the way soldiers fought.

But the generals didn’t know it.

The whole way you fought a battle could change.

You could use the telegraph lines –

even field telephones.

And before the war was over, the wireless had sent messages across the Atlantic.

Ever since the Civil War, smart officers had known that you could get a much better sense of the land – and enough copies of maps to go around – by carrying along a photographic unit in the field.

All terrific ... and the British wouldn’t touch any of them.  

[Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 45.]
The only improvement on war that the Boers feared was the British secret weapon... the airship

... the bomber – a blimp, a zeppelin.

Boers kept their eyes on the skies and spotted them everywhere.

– which was strange, because the British didn’t make any.

It was such a secret weapon that even the British didn’t know they had one.

So the Boers wasted lots of ammunition shooting out the lights on invading airships –

which, since the lights were only stars in the sky, didn’t really do much good one way or the other.\(^{12}\)


\(\text{“White Man’s War”: Manpower}\)

Most of all what Britain needed was men, and it didn’t have ‘em. Not at first.

There were only 14,750 regulars on hand.

A field force of 47,000 was on the way – about one-fifth of the whole British army.

Most of its soldiers were off-limits.

Sudanese...

Hausas from Lagos

Malays

Indians... Sepoys –

This would be strictly a white man’s war.

Only the Australians, Canadians, and other people who could meet the color line could rally to the colors.¹³

They even recruited Americans...

One of Teddy Roosevelt’s rough Riders

A whole squadron of Texas cowboys and mule-skinners

Eventually, the British would enlist half a million men for service in South Africa.

They had no choice; because even with a force twice as big as the whole imperial army had been up to now,

even facing against only thirty thousand Boer farmers,

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the Empire found itself stymied, slowed, slaughtered, and smashed.

Twenty-one thousand men would die in service, of disease or wounds.

The reason had everything to do with an immense miscalculation.

Britain thought it was coming into the Transvaal as a liberating army.

Every English-speaker would rise up – and there were many more of them than the Boers.

Most of the Boers would shrug, and go on farming.

But the Boers didn’t shrug. One and all, they joined to throw out the invaders.

They weren’t a minority of whites. They were a majority.

As for the Uitlanders... not only did they fail to give their liberators a helping hand.

Many of them packed up and left, went to the Cape or Natal, and spent the war grousing because the British government wasn’t paying their keep.¹⁴

Boerdom: A People’s Army

The Boers had no trained army. Indeed, it’s hard to call it an army at all...

...more like a South African version of our own Minutemen.

Every Boer man old enough served. Their army was made of local units, saddled and ready to move fast – the so-called commandos.

They owned their own horses...

...elected their own officers ...

...and uniformed themselves as they pleased.15

The only thing the government handed out was the Mauser rifle

5-cartridge magazine

...and, unlike the British guns, you could load them in a clip, five at a time, just by a quick push of the thumb.

It had better sights than the British guns.

It could kill at 2,200 yards.

... a darned sight better than the Lee-Metford
that British soldiers used

... and better still than the guns that replaced them,
which had sights that let you miss the
target by a foot and a half, from 500 yards
off, if you did everything absolutely right.  

Every supply was higgledypiggledy.
Tea merchants’ carts were pressed into service to carry war supplies,
with the owner’s advertising on the side.

Laundry wagons

Butcher’s carts ... all did service.\textsuperscript{17}

None of the rigid discipline of the British Tommy for them.

They did no marching – no drilling – no saluting.

No uniforms – no medals – no brass bands.

Generals dressed like privates ..

and got the very same pay.

Soldiers elected their own officers.

This was a People’s Army.

Anybody could walk into General Piet Joubert’s tent.

One soldier did, to borrow a shoelace.\textsuperscript{18}

Soldiers drifted home after a battle, or from one army to
another, as suited them.

If you were losing and hoisted the white flag, the Boers would keep on
shooting.

\textsuperscript{17} Farwell, \textit{The Great Anglo-Boer War}, 59.

\textsuperscript{18} Farwell, \textit{The Great Anglo-Boer War}, 59.
For one thing, they didn’t know what the white flag *meant*.

(Bantus and Zulus didn’t wave white flags)

For another, you couldn’t give a Boer orders.

And if you did, he sure wouldn’t obey it.

And for another, even if somebody in *your* group put up the white flag, you jolly well didn’t have to obey it.

You were going to keep on fighting till you dropped.\(^{19}\)

But they had several vital strengths.

They knew the land – and the British didn’t.

They had the best, most modern arms and knew how to use them.

They didn’t know enough about military manuals to freeze their thinking. They moved fast and they knew how to improvise.

You couldn’t find better guerrila fighters in the white men’s world.

\(^{19}\) Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, 75.
What’s more, they had a very simple, very practical tactics.

You don’t attack the other side.

You let them come to YOU, and you dig in and wallop them.

This makes good sense.

C. General Decay: Buller-ing it Through, 1899

Sir Redvers Buller commanded.

He was stern-tempered, ruthless, and, as one reporter said, had a “gift of grim silence.”

That was just as well. He had a terrible lisp, because in one war he had been severely wounded: a horse kicked in his front teeth, and there were never much good after that.²⁰

If being one of the Wolseley gang made one a crackerjack general, Britain couldn’t have picked better.

For his career was like a summing-up of half a century of imperial war....

China, 1860
the Red River expedition, 1870
the Ashanti campaign

²⁰This was the China War, in 1860. See Farwell, 85.
But bigger wars need bigger talents, and Buller ran short almost at once.
He had never held an independent field command.

Give him an order, he’d take it all the way to the moon.

Make him give an order ... that was different.

He’d never been in charge of planning before.

He hadn’t the brains for it – and knew it.

For 15 years, he’d been strictly a desk soldier.

Good food and good beer had made him tubby.

And all the changes in weapons in those 15 years had passed him by.\(^\text{21}\)

By the time he reached South Africa, British forces were shut up and under siege.

The Boers had brought the war home to the Cape Colony, investing

three railway towns:

Kimberley
Ladysmith
and Mafeking

The first thing for Buller to do was raise the siege, and his forces came at
it two ways:

1. out of Natal, to relieve Ladysmith

2. through the Orange Free State to relieve Kimberley and Mafeking

Then, it all went well, the armies would meet up and march to Pretoria,
take it, and the war would be over.

It failed completely.

Apparently, the flower of British generalship, in packing their bags, had
forgotten and left their imaginations at home.

Again and again, they underestimated the Boers.

What – ignorant Dutch farmers, stand up to Her Majesty’s Regiments?
It was unthinkable.

So the British failed to defend a single pass into the Cape Colony.

They could have blown up bridges and tunnels, to keep the
Boers out.
They didn’t destroy a one of them.

Bridges and tunnels are expensive.

They knew all about infantry.

What had won for them in Napoleon’s day?

The lance!

The bayonet!

And it could win for them now!

What had won for them before?

The infantry charging across an open field.

None of that sissy stuff – like telescopic sights on the rifles.

None of that new-fangled stuff like breech-loading guns.  

Wars weren’t won by “jack in boxes” – people who bobbed up, fired, and then hid.

It was by marching over an open field and all firing at once.  

So in battle after battle, the British soldiers attacked straight-on,

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against entrenched positions.

Ask Grant; ask Lee; ask Napoleon.

The best way to beat an enemy is hit him on one side –

roll up his flank, so he can’t stand.

You don’t barrel right through his front.

You get around behind him –

or you pretend to hit him one place, while you’re working out a knockout punch someplace else.

Chancellorsville...

Gettysburg ...

Antietam ...

Heck, even General George McClellan knew that much!

But not the British generals! And the butcher’s bill was enormous.

Frontal assaults are always costly, but especially against accurate Mauser rifles.
They made all the worse havoc because of the new smokeless powder. The British couldn’t see where the shots were coming from, to focus their artillery on.

Smokeless powder had been around for ten years.

The British military had simply ignored it, all that time.

Rooilaagte

Picture it, the way it was at Rooilaagte.

You don’t even send in soldiers.

You send in a naval brigade.

“By Jove, what sport!” one midshipman cried.

It was – blood sport.

They marched over open ground – and when they were 650 yards from the Boers, the guns went off, cutting them down.

British officers insisted on marching ahead of the men in front, carrying their swords, and wearing polished belts.

Man, you could hit one of those with an unloaded gun!

Not one of them came out of the battle alive and well.

Here’s a major of Marines, in front of his men.
And he brings along ... his fox terrier!

The fox-terrier lived to tell the tale. The major didn’t.

Casualty rate: fifty percent.

And among noncom and comm. officers – close to 100%.

A lieutenant watching said: “By Heaven, I never saw anything so magnificent in my life!”

Obviously, he’d never visited a Chicago meat-packing slaughterhouse.

Oh.... and 21 Boers were killed, too.24

Magersfontein

Typical of everything wrong in the British generals’ style was the two-day battle at Magersfontein.

24 Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 94-95.
It was a low spatter of hills, right along the road to Kimberley, and to relieve Kimberley, the way had to be opened.

The commander could see that, to take out the Boers, they would have to take out the hill.

So he ordered a terrific artillery barrage.

... two hours of shelling, with 31 guns!

It knocked the summit to flinders.

Too bad the Boers weren’t there!

They had entrenched at the bottom – and nobody on the British side had bothered to check.

The Highland Brigade attacked at dawn. One more frontal assault.

No tricks – no surprises – except from the Boers.

A sheet of flame, as their line of rifles opened up.

The Scots general commanding, and eighteen of his officers were killed almost instantly.

Some of the Brigade broke and ran, and were shot in the back as they ran.

Others fell to the ground and hugged the dirt for all they were worth,
and all their leaders could tell them to do was “hold on till nightfall.”

Hour by hour the shooting went on, as other troops went forward and were thrown back.

At last the Scots couldn’t stand it any more, and ran for all they were worth.

Officers chased them, revolvers in hand, threatening to shoot them, kicking at those they managed to slow, but nothing worked.²⁵

The ridge was not taken, and the British suddenly realized that the never needed to, after all.

All around the hills were blank, monotonous plain.

They could go round.
They could have gone around to begin with.

Tell you the tale of the battle, well, there’s not much to tell:
Nine hundred men went to the slaughter, and nigh four hundred fell.
Wire and Mauser rifle, thirst and a burning sun

Knocked down by hundreds ere the day was done.

The regiment, one Highlander said bitterly, had been “led into a butcher’s shop and bloody well left there.”

There was nothing for Britain to do but retreat after that.

### Black Week

One defeat followed the next.

And in the three towns where British troops were under siege –

- Kimberley
- Ladysmith
- Mafeking

... that was just how they stayed.

British forces couldn’t break through the Boer lines to rescue them.

The siege wasn’t all that strenuous.

Shells kept falling all the time – but out of 5000 that hit Ladysmith, the total casualty was one woman, and she was only wounded.

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There was plenty of food.

... including an extract of horseflesh that you could stir into a soup, and called “chevril.”

... and endless amounts of tasty wild spinach.

which kept the people of Ladysmith strong to da finitch.

And the Boers were very good about not fighting on Sundays.

So you could go to church.

Or play polo and tennis and football.

Or have band concerts.

Or amateur theatricals and nobody would interrupt you.

In fact, on Christmas, the Boers around Ladysmith honored the day specially.

They lobbed in five shells — all of them full of pudding.

(And a Merry Christmas to you!)
D. Bobs’s War

If the war was to be won, it needed fresh leadership.

The Government turned to Lord Frederick Roberts ...

“Little Bobs,” as the Tommies called him.

And little he was.

You had to be five foot three and a half inches, to get into the infantry.

Bobs couldn’t have passed the physical.

(He was just barely five foot three)

But he was an officer, so that was different.

In the Victorian Age, they used to talk of Sir Garnet Wolseley as “our only general,” and of Bobs as “our other general.”

The two men detested each other, and probably if they’d met would have each glared at the other out of the one eye either one had left

– Wolseley had lost his in Crimea
– Bobs lost his to “brain fever.”
But the soldiers never liked Sir Garnet, and they loved “Bobs,”

He was kind, and gallant, and classy.

and besides, he was about the only senior officer left
who wasn’t bedridden or gaga.

And he wasn’t afraid of anything ... except cats.\textsuperscript{30}

What a chance! To run the largest British army since Waterloo!

And as his second, the hero of the Sudan, Lord Kitchener, tall, haughty,
the English Bismarck, the hero of Khartoum.

Bobs was all fire –

“I. of K.” was all iron.\textsuperscript{31}

“Bobs” saw what the problem was: against a quick-moving enemy, British troops had
to move and maneuver.

He would put his infantry in the saddle –

A mounted company for every infantry battalion in the field

\textsuperscript{30} Farwell, \textit{The Great Anglo-Boer War}, 153.

\textsuperscript{31} The two men liked each other very much, though they only met once. Kitchener almost worshipped
“Bobs.” and he never gave him a bit of trouble in the South Africa campaign. When some of Roberts’s plans went
wrong, Kitchener took the blame for it, and when Roberts handed over his command, he started pressing to have
Kitchener made Commander in Chief in India ... the one job that Kitchener most wanted. John Pollock, \textit{Kitchener:
Plus new cavalry regiments, and a full-scale cavalry division.

He also sacked five generals, six brigadiers and some two dozen colonels almost at once.

**Cronje**

On February 27\textsuperscript{th}, Roberts captured General Piet Cronje, “the Lion of Potchefstroom” and 4000 Boers at Paardeberg.

(It was the anniversary of the battle of Majuba – that made it even worse for the Boers).\textsuperscript{32}

By March 13\textsuperscript{th}, he was marching triumphantly into the capital of the Orange Free State.

**Ladysmith**

Even Buller started being lucky. On the next to last day of February, he broke the siege of Ladysmith.

\textsuperscript{32} Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, 205-16. Paarderberg was Kitchener’s business. He was able to trap Cronje’s army along the Modder River, a thick, brown colored river shaded in trees. It took ten days of bombardment to bring the boers to surrender. Far more British soldiers died from drinking the river than from the battle – and the battle itself was pretty bloody. But enteric and typhoid fever were the real killers.
Better late than never, perhaps, but most of the rescued men grumbled that considering how long it took, “late” and “never” had come pretty close to being synonymous terms!

And not only did it cost him a thousand-plus dead;

with a Boer army at his mercy, he let it leave in peace, to fight another day.

One American watched, baffled.

Why didn’t the British send out their cavalry and lancers to grab the supply wagons at least?

The British officer gaped: “They might kill us.”

Mafeking

Just at the northern end of the Cape colony was Mafeking. A Bantu name. It means “place of stones.”

It wasn’t much of a place, this railroad town –

maybe 1,700 whites
and 7000 black Africans

No more than a cluster of tin-roofed little houses

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33 Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 230-33.

34 A Bantu name. It means “place of stones.”
plunk in the middle of the veldt.

Its strategic importance was zip.

You could burn it, blow it to smithereens.

The war would have turned out just the same.

But to English hungry for good news just about anywhere, it became the Alamo and Thermopylae and Rorke’s Drift all rolled into one.

The Boers put it under siege. And there it stayed for 217 days. But it didn’t fall.

For that, the credit went to Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, a distant descendant of Captain John Smith who later went on to found the Boy Scouts.

B-P was a rather vain little man, with many talents, just about none of them military.

He wrote a book about reconnaissance and scouting ..

acted in amateur theatricals...
drew caricatures ...
and instructed readers on the best way to go about pig-sticking.

Everyone agreed that he looked really good in a dress, with a fake falsetto voice to match.

Not for nothing he was called “Barnum Powell” by one magazine.  

By pure luck, he happened to be in command in a town where a smart staff officer had stocked up on meat, bread and vegetables, out of his own credit line.

Luck, because it wasn’t his jaunty courage that saved the day.

It was the Boers’ incompetence.

Having invested the town, they never moved in for the kill. Sooner or later, it would fall of its own accord ... they thought.

Rather, it was the siege that fell. On May 17th, 1900, the British army rescued Baden-Powell’s troops.

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Nobody inside had suffered much in the meantime.

There were hardly any casualties, either.

But England so desperately needed a win that it went wild.

And it liked the pluck and cheery spirit of Baden-Powell besieged...

the ideal of how English people could laugh at danger
sneer at doom
& chuckle at catastrophe.

All through the dark days of reverses, he had sent message
on message, bright, chipper, full of the never-say-die
je-ne-sais-quoi back to England.

There’s a time when doing small things, but doing them with
style, matters more than a big strategic win.

And Mafeking, with Baden-Powell peering through his
telescope at the enemy and whistling, was such a
place and time.

“Mafeking night” went on five nights.

Policemen couldn’t control the crowds – most of whom were hugging
each other, almost as if they’d been French, and – even more so
– doing a lot of indiscriminate smooching.

They even kissed the cops.
“I wouldn’t go through that kissing again for something,” one constable said disgustedly. “Right in the public street it was.”

Songs and marches and dances were written in honor of B-P.

There were rockets in Newcastle, sirens went off from factories in Bedford, church bells pealed in Glasgow.

And one orphan’s school gave each of its kiddies twopence, in honor of the day. One bright lad bought firecrackers with half of it, threw one through a shop door downtown, and set the place on fire.

For years, “to maffick” was a verb, meaning, “to let all the stops out.”

From then on, “Mafeking night” would be the measurement for every other public celebration.

Baden-Powell was raised to major-general

In time, he was given a seat in the House of Lords.

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E. The “Almighty Fist”

No matter how you look at it, “Little Bobs” had come through beautifully.

In seven months, he had beaten the Boers in every battle he got into.

He had taken two capitals.

He’d driven one Boer president out of the country and another into the bush.

He’d captured their top general and his army.

He’d lifted the sieges at Kimberly and Mafeking.

He’d scattered the armies of the enemy.

Every railroad, every supply source, was in his hands.

By the end of May, Oom Paul had fled the country.

He would never see his wife, his friends, or his beloved Transvaal again.

Pretoria was in the hands of the British army.

By rights, that should have ended things.

From now on, there was no possible way the Boers could win.
And yet taking Pretoria didn’t end the war. It just changed it.

The Boers couldn’t fight in the field any more, but they could battle in the brush.

Two years of vicious guerrila war stripped both sides of the genteel veneer of Victorian combat.

British armies could go wherever they wanted...

if they were willing to leave a trail of dead behind.

Boer commandos swooped in, living off the land and taking shots at the invaders.

Farmers that tried to stay out of the conflict had the roofs burned over their heads.

Everywhere, chickens, horses and pigs were set free from Boer rule – often by the Boer guerrillas themselves.

Raiding columns drove well out of the Transvaal into the Cape Colony.

250,000 British soldiers were not enough to pin down twenty thousand Boer horsemen who – by the time you caught up with them – looked like farmers, plowing their fields.

Their clothing melted into rags – and they stripped the bodies of dead British soldiers for something to wear.
They did the same to prisoners, and then let them go, stark naked, wherever they pleased.

Other soldiers wore old grain bags.

With no more bullets, they would follow British regiments.

Soldiers wore very loose cartridge belts, and they left a trail of bullets behind them, like Hansel and Gretel strewing bread-crumbs.

By the end of the war, the Boers were almost entirely armed with British rifles, shooting British bullets.

They needed nails to hold on their horseshoes.

So they fashioned them out of British telegraph wire.39

They couldn’t find tobacco to smoke; so they smoked Wayside Mixture, as they called it – made of horse dung.

This wasn’t Roberts’s kind of war, and he was too much the gentleman to win by blood and iron.

Instead, he set the policy – and let Kitchener carry it out.40

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39 Farwell, The Great Anglo-Boer War, 381.
His was a war of attrition. Take away their power to maneuver –
their power to make war – and they would be
ready to talk.

The Boers met the fate of Pathans in the Hindu Kush –
or Ashante on the Gold Coast, or Afghans

Their farms were burned, their crops trampled down.

30,000 farms went up in smoke.
3.6 million sheep were slaughtered.

The army’s track was like that of the Israelites –
pillars of smoke by day and fire by night.

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40 And get the blame. But let two things be remembered: first, it was Roberts who first ordered that homesteads would be burned down, wherever Boers were giving trouble, and burned down De Wet’s farm that same morning; it was Roberts who started the concentration camps. Second, Kitchener opposed both steps at first, and only later and not at all happily took them both up. John Pollock, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace*, 184.
Six to twelve farms a day were burned.

Sheep and cattle carcasses were dumped in the lakes, to make the water unfit to drink. 41

**Torch of Civilization**

Across the country, eight thousand blockhouses of stone and corrugated iron were built. Starting along the railway lines, they moved into the countryside.

Networks of these forts were tied together by barbed wire fences.

Each was within a rifle shot of another.42

Now it’s possible to sweep a part of the country clear.

You’ve broken the whole veldt into compartments.

Any crop that can feed a soldier ... destroy it.

Any farm that can give a commando shelter ... burn it.

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F. Concentration Camps

Any native you come on ... pick them up, put them in wagons and put them into one of two dozen concentration camps.

These begin as tent villages.

In summer, they get all the sun.
In winter, they’re open to the rain and gales.

They’re short on latrines –
shorter still on fresh water.43

Women and children, mostly.

But they’re prisoners of war.

Their husbands are in arms against you.

So they get army rations – reduced army rations.

43 British authorities would insist that it was mostly the Boers’ own fault. Farm families out on the veldt used all of it as an outhouse – you just did what you did and moved on. And with endless fields of grass, that makes some sense. But not in an enclosed camp.

Arguments like that don’t get the camp-commanders off the hook. If you want hygiene and discipline, you enforce it from Day One – the way you would rules about trying to escape.
No meat
No vegetables
No milk for the children
No soap

You couldn’t build a better breeding-ground for typhoid.

Of the 24,000 Boers who died in the war, twenty thousand would be women and children.

And nearly all of them died in the camps.44

Ironically, the real prisoners of war – the Boer men who surrendered – mostly lived to tell the tale.

They were packed off to prison camps in Ceylon (not bad)
India (not really bad)

and Bermuda.

They got army chow and army discipline.

And only a few dozen of them died.45

44 Kitchener wasn’t planning on death camp for Boer families. He wasn’t a butcher. But he was a thick-headed, stubborn general, and simply refused to pay any attention to what anybody told him about conditions in the camp until statistics made it impossible to ignore.

He treated prisoners as combatants, not as rebels (a.k.a. traitors), as he might have. He spent a lot of his time poring over death sentences, looking for excuses to commute them – and found a lot. And one of his most controversial acts was, in its own way, on the Boers’ behalf: the refusal to reprieve two Australian lieutenants who allegedly had ordered their men to kill twelve Boer prisoners. One of the two lieutenants was “Breaker” Morant, after whom the movie was made. John Pollock, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace*, 196-97.

45 Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, 420-29. There would be thirteen camps in India, five in Bermuda, six in Ceylon – and a few leaders were put onto St. Helena, “the Rock,” as it was called. One Bermuda camp was strictly
for teenage boys, and the worst hardship they had to endure was being forced to play cricket matches.

Other camps let the prisoners open coffee houses, breweries, tailor’s shops and drama societies. Some camps published their own newspapers, composed by the prisoners.

Everywhere, the British let the prisoners have all the envelopes and paper for writing that they wanted; but they had to buy their own stamps. All the same, if you just go to St. Helena, you could find 14,000 letters going out a month.
Vereeniging

The Boers couldn’t win, the British couldn’t lose. Especially after Kitchener did 3 dramatic things

– he started letting the women and children out of the concentration camps.

Now the Boers would have to feed and care for them and fight a war.

– he put regiments of Boers in the field to hunt down other Boers.

If Oom Paul’s people were going to stay one volk, they’d better settle now, before Boers became each other’s enemy

– he started arming blacks to fight Britain’s war.

... and that, to the Boers, was the most terrible thing of all.

Because there were many more blacks than whites in South Africa.

Every African with a gun in his hand is a model for all the others –

and a man who, when the war is over, may not say “Master,” when
So the war could only end one way.

But the end was very different from the end in Sudan or among the Ashanti.

Britain had insisted that there WERE no Boer republics – no leaders fit to open talks with.

In the end, though, they opened talks.

... and here, again, however much we hate doing it, we have to give the credit to Kitchener.

He had never bought into the notion of unconditional surrender.

The way to end the war, he thought, was to treat ‘em rough on the ground and treat ‘em generous at the negotiating table...

agree to pay their debts

offer them lots of money to rebuild their farms and fix the damage.

give pardons and amnesties all around.

If he had been given a free hand, the war would have ended two
years sooner.47

As it turned out, Britain would do no hangings, no jailings.

The Boers could keep their arms, take an oath to the King, and go home
again.

Dutch would be taught in the schools as well as English.

England would pay 3 million pounds to rebuild the country.

And sooner or later, the country would have a parliament all its own
and be able to choose its own leaders.

Promises are like pie-crusts, made to be broken.

47 “We are now carrying the war on to put 2 - 300 Dutchmen in prison at the end of it,” he wrote furiously.
“It seems to me absurd and wrong, and I wonder the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not have a fit.” See John
But these weren’t. And if Milner was the villain of the start of the war, he was the hero of its finish.

As High Commissioner for South Africa, he put the Boers back on their feet.

He had help – Oxford men, mostly, cocksure and clever – very much like him – and like him, all bachelors.

“Milner’s Kindergarten,” people called them.

He reorganized the police and the prison systems.

He set up a government hospital in Pretoria.

He built hospitals for the insane.

He founded leper colonies.

He fixed the labor laws.
He repaired and expanded the railway system
the telephone service
the telegraph service.

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48 And, until peace terms were signed, one of the most adamant on insisting on unconditional surrender; it was Kitchener who offered better terms always, and assurances. John Pollock, *Kitchener: Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace*, 208-12.
Wherever he could, he set up a system of free public education.

There were 200,000 whites driven off the land, to be put back on to farm.

Milner’s Repatriation Department did it in barely a year.

To replace the farm animals slaughtered in war, he imported thousands of longhorns and heifers from America.

He bought 80,000 mules and donkeys from the army.

He handed out building materials, plows, harnesses, wagons, and seeds to the Boers at cost to start up with.

As for the uitlanders, who’d cried so much about the way the Transvaal made them pay a 5% tax on their profits from gold mining...

Milner made them pay twice that.

And for the British, Milner looked like the worst of softies, giving a handout to boors and bandits.

No more I’ll ‘ear ‘is rifle crack
   Along the block’ouse fence –
The beggar’s on the peaceful tack,
   Regardless of expense;
For countin’ what ‘e eats and draws,
   An’ gifts an’ loans as well,
‘E’s gettin’ ‘alf the Earth because
   ‘E didn’t give us ‘Ell!

   Ah, there, Piet! with your brand-new English plow!
Your gratis tents an’ cattle, an’ your most ungrateful frow,
You’ve made the British taxpayer rebuild your country-seat –
I’ve known some pet battalions charge a dam’ sight less than Piet.

– Rudyard Kipling, “Piet”

What Milner had in mind was a soft peace – one that would make the Boers into good subjects –

and a South Africa that would be ideal for settling lots of English-speakers to farm and use the land.

It was a nice try, almost unheard of in its generosity.

But the Boers didn’t want food on the table and a home on the range.

They wanted to rule themselves.

Milner could have plated them in gold, for all the good his good will would do.

And the heart of Milner’s plan wasn’t to get the Boers ready to run South Africa.

It was to jolly them, while he made the Transvaal prosperous.

Because the same assumptions that Milner went into the war with, he came out with:

– the Transvaal is the key to all South Africa

– if England runs it, it’s going to get a whole lot richer
Industry will come in.

So will English immigrants, like never before.

Four years – and they’ll overwhelm the Boers.

They could outvote them.

They’ll own everything of value.

It was fantasy.

The industrial revolution didn’t happen.

The flood of English-speaking immigrants didn’t come. 49

And they didn’t vote English. They voted WHITE.

Instead of siding against the Boers, a lot of them sided WITH them.

CODA: “SO LITTLE DONE, SO MUCH TO DO.”

And what of Cecil Rhodes, who had played such a role in pushing on the whole business?

He had never recovered from the Jameson Raid.

His heart wasn’t broken – just abused.

49 All of which is the larger point of Donald Denoon, A Grand Illusion: The Failure of Imperial Policy in the Transvaal Colony during the Period of Reconstruction, 1900-1905 (London: Longman, 1973).
Eating vast slabs of meat
drinking all day
and smoking all the time

... gave him cardiovascular disease.

By the turn of the century, the once-lithe form was bloated, cheeks blotched
and flabby, eyes watery, voice shrill, handshake weak.

His letters left out words, so that it was often hard to see what he
was trying to say.

Most of his time he spent in a mansion called Groote Schuur, outside
Cape Town, paneled in dark teak, hung with African
shields, and with a portrait of Bismarck on the wall.

In 1902, he died, Dr. Jameson at his side. “So little done,” he muttered at
the end, “so much to do.”

He was only 48.\footnote{Massie, \\textit{Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War.} 230.}