

WHAT HISTORY CAN TEACH US ABOUT CONTEMPORARY AFGHANISTAN

By Thomas E. Gouttierre



King Zahir Shah. Source: <http://tiny.cc/iudziv>.

AFGHANS OFTEN REFER TO THE PERIOD BETWEEN 1963 AND 1973 AS THEIR COUNTRY'S "GOLDEN AGE."



Women in a Kabul record shop (1950s–60s). Source: <http://tiny.cc/dc82gw>.

Almost every American today knows Afghanistan is located in the heart of Asia. We were not always that informed. When my wife and I learned in the summer of 1964 that we would be going as Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) to Afghanistan, our family members and friends thought we were off to Africa. But after the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980s, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the ensuing military and civil presence of the US in that country, Americans are familiar with even more than the location of Afghanistan.

Yet images today of Afghanistan are rarely positive. There is little reporting on that nation's rich culture and history, the renowned hospitality of the Afghan people, or its stunning physical beauty. Instead, reports of suicide bombings, loss of civilian and military lives, gender inequality, religious extremism, poppy cultivation, and allegations of corruption and election fraud dominate the news and suggest a troubled future.

Images I retain from an earlier time suggest reasons for hope for this beleaguered country, whose people have endured unrelieved war, deprivation, and instability for nearly forty years. I lived in Afghanistan for most of the years between 1965 and 1974. As mentioned above, my wife and I spent the first two of those years as PCVs. We returned to live there while I was a Fulbright scholar and then executive director of the Fulbright Foundation in Afghanistan. Our eldest child was born there during the last of these experiences.

Afghans often refer to the period between 1963 and 1973 as their country's "Golden Age." At the beginning of that decade, Afghanistan's monarch, Zahir Shah, worked with Afghan intellectuals and technocrats, many of whom had received graduate degrees from American institutions of higher education, to present a progressive constitution to his fellow citizens.

This document, approved by a national assembly, initiated the process of transforming Afghanistan's government to a democratic, constitutional, parliamentary monarchy. Afghans, though often inconsistent and troubled, embraced the ensuing transformation. They welcomed modernization and opportunity. They contrasted their country to their neighbors—Pakistan under military rule, Iran under the repressive police state of the Shah, and the totalitarian regimes of the Communist Soviet Union and China.

No fields of opium poppies were under cultivation anywhere. Food was plentiful in the bazaars. Afghans and foreigners could travel between cities and provinces for work, recreation, or vacation without restriction or security concerns. In population centers, growing numbers of elementary



Women students in a biology class at Kabul University (1950s–60s). Source: <http://tiny.cc/u142gw>.

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Miss Jane Williams teaches English at the Rabia Balkhi Girls School (Kabul 1960). A National Archives photo. Source: <http://tiny.cc/py82gw>.



President John F. Kennedy and King Zahir Shah during the monarch's visit to the US in 1963. Source: *In Small Things Remembered: The Early Year of US-Afghan Relations* at <http://tiny.cc/7472gw>.

and secondary school students were female. The colleges of education and humanities at Kabul University had more young women than men in their classrooms, with increasing numbers joining the colleges of medicine and engineering. More than 50 percent of the teachers and government employees in Kabul were educated women; few urban women wore the enveloping, full-body *chaadiri*, preferring scarves or no head covering at all. In Kabul, Afghan women young and old could move about to shop, visit, and go to work and school without obligatory male escorts; mothers and their children played together in the city's parks without concern for safety.

To be sure, such progress was mostly in population centers; rural Afghanistan, as in all developing societies, would lag behind. Yet, even in agrarian and tribal-based provinces and districts, the Afghan central government had offices and staff to provide security, public works, and social and judicial services, as well as education for young girls and boys.

Afghanistan counted itself as one of the neutral, nonaligned nations. The East and West competed to assist Afghanistan as part of the Cold War. Foreign Service professionals from both blocs often sat in meetings together to plan development strategies. It was an exciting chapter in Afghanistan's history, an ideal time and place to serve as an American Peace Corps volunteer or Foreign Service officer.

The US was a partner with the Afghan government in their development process. President John F. Kennedy hosted Zahir Shah and his wife in the White House in 1963, the year before the king ushered in the transformation of his country's civil society. Afghans took great pride and pleasure in inviting Americans into their homes, to their weddings and family parties, providing the hospitality for which they were so well-known.

Projects funded by international bilateral and multilateral foreign assistance organizations, including the US Agency for International Development (USAID), provided training and employment for tens of thousands of Afghans in the construction of roads and bridges, irrigation, power dams and grids, and airports in Kabul and Qandahar.

The Soviet Union constructed the Kabul Airport, and the US constructed the airport in Qandahar. The road between Kabul and Qandahar was constructed under a USAID project, the road onward from Qandahar to Herat by a Soviet-funded project. The Soviet Union was the lead donor in agricultural development schemes north of Kabul, the US in the southern provinces of Qandahar and Helmand. The combined international agricultural development projects succeeded in making Afghanistan nearly self-sufficient in grain production and animal husbandry and an exporter of pomegranates, melons, grapes, raisins, apples, pistachios, almonds, and walnuts.



The Kajaki Dam provides flood control, power, and irrigation water to the Helmand Valley. Source: <http://tiny.cc/ny92gw>.



USAID agronomist Emory Howard speaks with a local farmer (Helmand Valley, 1960s). Source: <http://tiny.cc/mea3gw>.



Peace Corps Volunteer Nancy Lamson of Augusta, Georgia, teaches English at the Auxiliary Nurses and Midwives School (Kabul, 1977). Source: National Archives Still Picture Unit, <http://tiny.cc/knb3gw>.



Duke Ellington arrives in Afghanistan. L to R: William Brewer, US Chargé d'affaires; Ellington; Mr. Pardes, Afghan Ministry of Information and Culture Protocol Department (Kabul, 1963). Source: Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville, <http://tiny.cc/do92gw>.

American PCVs served as teachers, vaccinators, auditors, and rural development workers throughout urban and rural Afghanistan. Female volunteers could ride alone on their bikes to bazaars or work with little concern for their security. Every school wanted Peace Corps English teachers; students demonstrated before the Ministry of Education, demanding these young men and women be assigned to their schools.

This collaborative atmosphere extended beyond development schemes and Cold War politics. In a production of *Kiss Me Kate* by the expatriate Kabul Amateur Dramatic Society, the male lead was played by the Soviet cultural attaché, the female lead by a US PCV. Members of the diplomatic missions serving in Kabul competed in tennis tournaments, golf matches, basketball leagues, and pickup games sponsored by embassies and the United Nations. I lost a tooth in a friendly, though competitive, basketball match to the elbow of the same multitasking Soviet cultural attaché. It was indeed a different time with different images.

It was not idyllic; Afghanistan was then as it is now: a poor, developing country. But it had not undergone decades of war and devastation. Afghans had a sense of moving forward, of hope, of being able to participate in setting their own future. Unfortunately, the years that followed the Afghan "Golden Age" have been the most destructive and tragic in the nation's history. Progress that had been achieved in developing a sense of national identity among Afghans was reversed. This setback to the aspirations and progressive efforts of Afghans was initiated by a single, selfish act. That act would presage a downward spiral into decades of uninterrupted instability, violence, war, and suffering.

When King Zahir Shah and other members of the Afghan royal family moved to transform Afghanistan's civil society in 1963, they forced out of power the strongman in what was essentially a military-dominated monarchy. That individual, the king's first cousin and brother-in-law, Sardar (prince) Muhammad Daoud (Daoud), served as prime minister between 1953 and 1963. He was the dominant figure in the royal family. The king was the face of the government but had little power other than as a member of the royal family council. Daoud, never reconciled to the collective decision taken by the royal family, would take his revenge in 1973.

Daoud, an ambitious, stubborn, nationalistic, gruff, and secretive man, was the de facto ruler of his country during the crucial, formative years of the Cold War, when regional and global balances of power were being created and shifting. Afghans had long been concerned about the inexorable advances to their northern borders by Czarist Russia and then the Soviet Union. The geopolitical circumstances to Afghanistan's south and east underwent dramatic changes two years after the end of World War II. Great Britain agreed to the partitioning of its South Asian "Jewel in the Crown" into the newly independent, contentious nations of Pakistan and India and then left the region. Afghanistan's immediate neighbor to the east was no longer a colonial power but an insecure, competitive Pakistan, seeking to create the national identity that still eludes it.

In the early 1950s, in its effort to contain the spread of Communism, the West, led by the US and Great Britain, sought to complement the NATO alliance with a similar pact along the Soviet Union's southern borders. The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), also called the Baghdad Pact in reference to the site of its headquarters, ultimately included the US, Great Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan. Initially, the Eisenhower administration approached Afghanistan to join but was rebuffed by Pakistan, which threatened to pull out if the Afghans were included. Daoud took this as a personal affront and would refuse to meet with senior American diplomats thereafter. He turned to the Soviet Union to supply and train Afghanistan's military. The rest of the royal family members and their allies in the intellectual communities, concerned about a drift toward the Soviet Union, sought out relations with and assistance from NATO countries in civil, educational, and development projects. The US in particular seized this opportunity to



Sardar Muhammad Daoud.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/o3ltgw>.

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forestall Afghanistan from coming under the Soviet sphere of influence through developing various economic aid projects described earlier.

It was against this backdrop that the royal family effected its palace coup, removing Daoud from power and setting the stage for reform and for the ensuing best ten years of Afghanistan's history. Daoud, irrevocably angry, sat at home, not associating with his relatives for most of those years; he was rarely seen in public.

Then, one hot July morning in 1973, while the king was in Italy with his family for annual health checkups, Radio Kabul went silent, and airplanes buzzed the city's rooftops. People rushed to the streets in apprehension; there was one name on their lips: Daoud! Indeed, the next day, he announced the end of the monarchy; he was now Afghanistan's president.

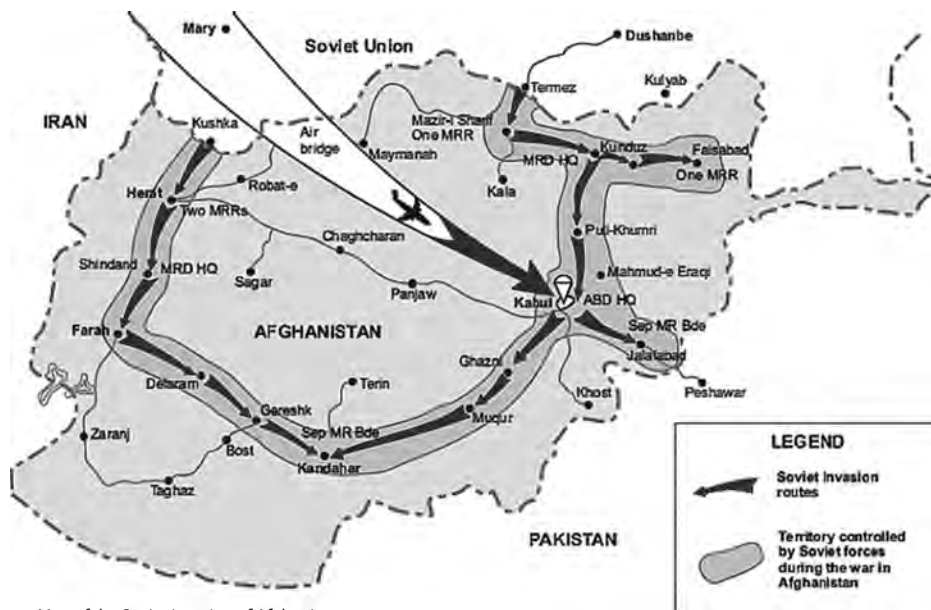
The next five years were uncertain ones for Afghans. Daoud's allies in the coup—mostly drawn from military and political circles trained in the USSR or influenced by Soviet thinking—were gradually replaced by Daoud's colleagues from the earlier period when he served as prime minister. The political process was seized with inertia. Most telling, Afghans who were able began to take their families and money out of the country, fearful of what might come next. In a desperate move, in response to increasing opposition within his own ranks, Daoud informed the Soviet Union that Afghanistan would terminate the Soviet-Afghan military association, replacing it with agreements with Turkey, Egypt, and other regional states.

Daoud's moves were too late. The fears of the Afghans were well-founded. What came next was a Soviet-assisted coup in the spring of 1978 by those very circles Daoud had earlier maneuvered out of his government. Unlike Daoud's coup, this was a bloody one. Daoud and more than thirty members of his extended family, including women and children, were executed in the dining room of the palace; tribal khans and influential Afghans, particularly with ties to the West, were killed, imprisoned, and intimidated. Millions began streaming out of the country, primarily to Pakistan and Iran.

Daoud's killers and successors were members of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a collection of self-styled Afghan Marxists that had difficulty staying together. The Pashtoon (Pashtun) rural and military wing, Khalq, and the members of the urban-based, Persian-speaking branch, Parcham, were pushed to unite by the USSR to bring about the overthrow of Daoud. Shortly after its accession to power, the two branches were again riven by old animosities; the Khalq branch took sole control of the PDPA, sending its former Parcham partners to diplomatic posts within Warsaw Pact nations. Khalq's attempts to force radical agrarian and marriage reforms were highly unpopular. Opposition grew in the form of small, regional guerilla groups.

Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the Afghans it was mentoring, the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Afghanistan in December of 1979, deposing the Khalq president and installing as the new leaders of Afghanistan those Parchamis who had been sent earlier into diplomatic exile. The USSR did not anticipate how fatal this decision would be, not only for its ambitions in Afghanistan but also for its own long-term survival.

The rest of the world, in uncommon unanimity, condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and moved to aid the nearly seven million Afghan refugees who fled to Pakistan and Iran. The US, China, Persian Gulf States, and some European nations began to arm the Afghan *mujahideen* (insurgents or holy warriors). Staging and training was conducted in Pakistan along the border with Afghanistan.



Map of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Source: <http://tiny.cc/q58qhw>.

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August 1988, an Afghan mujahid demonstrates positioning of a Soviet-built SA-7, handheld, surface-to-air missile. Source: <http://tiny.cc/apntgw>.



Soviet troops (in right row) withdrawing from Afghanistan in 1988, Afghan military on the left. Source: <http://tiny.cc/k7ntgw>.

PAKISTAN ENCOURAGED TENS OF THOUSANDS OF YOUNG PAKISTANI AND AFGHAN RELIGIOUS STUDENTS (TALIBAN) TO LEAVE THEIR STUDIES AND ARRANGED FOR THEM TO JOIN MULLAH MUHAMMAD OMAR.

The bravery and determination of the Afghan mujahideen, combined with the unwavering commitment and support of those nations determined not to permit the USSR to upend the post-WWII political-military balance of power, proved more than the Soviet Union could overcome.

With growing unrest at home over the loss of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan and the inability of the society to wage a foreign war and provide the essentials of life to its own citizens, the USSR was forced to retreat in ignominious defeat in February 1989—fewer than ten years after its invasion. This proved to be the final straw on the Soviet camel's back. By the end of the same year, the Berlin Wall was down, and the Warsaw Pact was dead. Within two years, the Soviet Union was history.

The decade that followed the Soviets' defeat was just as debilitating for Afghans as the one before it. Essentially abandoned by those nations that

were its allies in the war against the Soviets, there would be no Marshall Plan of reconstruction for the Afghans. Afghanistan was beset by a civil war contested by regional warlords who had acquired military experience and resources while fighting Soviets. None of them were effective or powerful enough to rule anything more than their own regional territory. As part of this war, Kabul, which had survived the Soviet-Afghan War intact, was virtually destroyed.

Next door, Pakistan was alarmed. It had hoped to emerge from the Soviet's departure as the dominant political and military force in Afghanistan. Paranoid of India, to which it had lost three wars since partition, Pakistan was determined that its western front be secure. It was concerned lest a stable, independent, nationalistic Afghanistan emerge as a potential ally of its mortal enemy to the east. To en-

sure what it described as strategic Islamic depth to its west, Pakistan put together an unholy alliance of warlords, drug lords, and al-Qaeda, loosely coordinated by its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), a branch of the Pakistani military. Realizing that it favored none of these, Pakistan settled upon a minor local lord from the Qandahar region, Mullah Muhammad Omar, as its primary ally and client within Afghanistan.

Mullah Muhammad Omar had gained popularity among Pashtoons—the predominate ethnic group in Afghanistan's southern regions—because of his draconian enforcement of law and order in an otherwise lawless environment. Pakistan provided Mullah Muhammad Omar and his small band of followers with military training, sophisticated weapons, ammunition, military transport, and money to pay salaries. Most important, Pakistan encouraged tens of thousands of young Pakistani and Afghan religious students (Taliban) to leave their studies and arranged for them to join Mullah Muhammad Omar. Thus the Taliban movement was born.

The primary objective of the Taliban was to conquer the Afghan warlords who had banded together in the Persian-language Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Masood (Masoud). Al-Qaeda sought to persuade Mullah Muhammad Omar to remake Afghanistan into an extremist Islamist or Salafi state. Al-Qaeda also would use Afghan territory to train terrorists to attack Western targets. Drug lords were eager to preserve the permissive environment for growing opium poppies in Afghanistan. ISI sought to keep all of



Bala Baluk, Afghanistan. Opium fields ready for harvesting were the target of poppy eradication by Afghan National Security Forces in Bala Baluk District on April 15, 2009. Tractors plow up poppy fields to prevent farmers from harvesting their opium crops. Source: ISAF Photo by US Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Monica R. Nelson, <http://tiny.cc/k7ntgw>.



Ahmad Shah Masood, known as the "Lion of Panjshir" (Sept. 2, 1953–Sept. 9, 2001). Source: <http://tiny.cc/0rmtgw>.



Afghans wait in line to vote as Afghan police provide security, shortly after a polling site opens in the Khas Kunar District in Kunar Province, Afghanistan (Aug. 20, 2009). Afghans in the area participated in the nation's second national election as they came to vote for their country's president. Photo courtesy of Afghan National Army. Source: <http://tiny.cc/v3s4gw>.

these members of the unholy alliance travelling on parallel paths that would enable Pakistani strategic policy regarding India. The rest of the world was introduced to these forces by the violent events of 9/11.

History does not necessarily foretell a better future. But Afghans remember when they effectively managed themselves and their government. They believe that it is their legacy and that they can do it again. They prefer to recall their successes during the period some analysts refer to as Afghanistan's "democratic experiment" to the turbulent years that followed Daoud's coup. They understand that *they* themselves must rebuild their nation; they also understand, after decades of turmoil and instability, they cannot reconstruct those institutions essential to the rebuilding process without the assistance of international partners, particularly Americans.

Not all images from Afghanistan today are negative. Though Afghan government officials, including President Hamid Karzai, are regularly portrayed in the Western press as ineffective or corrupt, the new constitution and governmental infrastructure, both modeled upon that which Zahir Shah ushered in fifty years ago, are functioning at various degrees in provinces and districts around the country.

Lost in the news of ballot stuffing in the 2009 presidential elections is the fact that forty-three Afghans, men and women, felt committed enough to the constitution and to participating in their own government to stand for election as president. Twenty-nine percent of the members of the Afghan Lower House of Parliament, as guaranteed by the Afghan constitution, are women. In contrast, eighteen of the members of the US House of Representatives are female. There are exponentially more children in school, both as a total number and percentage, than at any time in Afghan history. Women again are teaching and working

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Chief Justice Shinwani from the Supreme Court of Afghanistan (right) administers the oath of office for the presidential inauguration to Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai at the Presidential Palace in Kabul, Afghanistan (Dec. 7, 2004). Photo by US Air Force MSG James M. Bowman. Source: US Defense Department, <http://tiny.cc/yzstgw>.



Afghan and US government officials attended the judicial stage graduation ceremony held at the Afghanistan Supreme Court. The judicial stage two-year training program prepares law, Shari'a, and madrasa graduates for appointment as the country's next generation of judges. USAID provided technical assistance in the development of the curriculum and training on teaching methodologies. Kabul, Afghanistan, June 20, 2012. Source: US Embassy, Kabul, Afghanistan (US Embassy photo caption), <http://tiny.cc/i5qtgw>.



A classroom full of third graders at the Women and Children's Educational Center in Kabul, Afghanistan. Photo by Capt. Genieve David, US Air Force. Source: Afghanistan International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), <http://tiny.cc/zyxtgw>.



Students at a middle school in Qandahar received laptops through the One Laptop Per Child Afghanistan initiative. The computers provide students and their families with access to word processing, the Internet, job information, and resources for small business and farm development. Source: USAID/Afghanistan at <http://tiny.cc/hawtgw>.



Workers processing *anaar* (pomegranates), which Afghanistan is famous for in Asia. Source: <http://tiny.cc/e9stgw>.

in government offices, dressing modestly, but without the *chaadiri* required by the Taliban. There are more than fifty independent, private television stations and hundreds of private radio stations, newspapers, and magazines. Roads are being built in remote areas. Agricultural development projects are being renewed. There are institutions of higher education in all major population centers; although not fully evolved, they are, nonetheless, a base for future educational development. Individual Afghans are demonstrating their hope and trust in the future by investing their own money in rebuilding of homes and shops, constructing new buildings, and sending their children to school.

The change in military strategy ushered in by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and his military team in the waning months of the Bush administration, and sustained and refined into policy by President Barack Obama, is improving security in population centers. Violence by insurgents is taking place primarily in only a couple of dozen of Afghanistan's nearly 400 districts. The troop strength and capacity of the Afghan National Army, trained by American and other foreign military, has increased demonstrably. The military capacity of the Taliban forces in Afghanistan is being degraded, causing them to target Afghan civilians to avoid confronting the enhanced combined international and Afghan armed forces. This, in turn, reduces the already-low regard most Afghans have for the insurgent groups.

Images coming out of Afghanistan in the near future will likely be a mixed bag. Nation-rebuilding, especially following years of war and destruction, is even more challenging than nation-building. Complicating Afghanistan's case, its neighbor, Pakistan, the putative US ally in combating terrorists, continues to harbor, train, support, and arm Taliban and other insurgent groups that cross over into Afghanistan to attack Afghans and Americans. Nonetheless, Afghans, who four times defeated the British and Soviet armies in wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and who recall better times decades ago, are eager to work for a better future.

It would be interesting to speculate how Afghanistan's earlier attempts to form its civil society might have proceeded without Daood's coup. Would there have been a subsequent pro-Soviet coup, Soviet invasion, and

occupation? One could justifiably wonder if the warlords, drug lords, civil wars, the Taliban, and even al-Qaeda would have become chapters of Afghanistan's recent history. Although the government under the past ten years of the monarchy was not perfect, it was inclusive and indigenous, and it was making the effort to build upon the rule of law and civil society. It remains Afghanistan's greatest tragedy that four decades of war, destruction, and the need to begin building anew would follow Daood's revenge-driven act. In the final analysis, Americans and their international allies must remember that the conflict in Afghanistan is not a war against Afghans. No Afghans participated in the 9/11 attacks. The campaign in Afghanistan is part of a greater, global conflict: the war against militant Islamist terrorism, which like the protracted Cold War, requires sustained determination. ■

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Nonfiction

Dupree, Louis. *Afghanistan*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Gutman, Roy. *How We Missed the Story: Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2008.

Poullada, Leon B., and Leila D. Poullada. *The Kingdom of Afghanistan and the United States, 1828–1973*. Crete, NE: Dageforde Publishing, 1995.

Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into Chaos: The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.

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Fiction

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Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2004.

Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. Simon and Brown, 2011.

Movies

The Kite Runner with Khalid Abdalla. Directed by Marc Forster. Dreamworks Video, 2008. 128 minutes. English.

The Man Who Would Be King with Sean Connery, Michael Caine. Directed by John Huston. Warner Home Video. 1975. 129 minutes. English.



Village girls wait as the Afghan National Police unload a shipment of humanitarian aid at their village. Food, winter clothing, and supplies were delivered to 300 villagers of Gozarah District in Herat Province of western Afghanistan (Gozarah, Afghanistan, 2009). Source: ISAF photo by US Air Force TSgt Laura K. Smith, <http://tiny.cc/net4gw>.

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From *The Gulistan* of Sa`di by Shaykh Muslih-udeen Sa`di Shirazi (1258)

گل و گل
رسید از دست مجنون بدستم
که از بوی دلاویز تو مستم
ولیکن مدتی با گل نشستم
و گرنه من همان خاکم که هستم
گل خوشبوی در حمام روزی
بد و گفتم که: مشکلی یا عیبری؟
بگفتا: من گل ناچیز بودم
که آل جنشین در من اثر کرد

Rose and Clay

*One day at bath a piece of perfumed clay was passed to me
from the hand of a friend.*

*I asked the clay—Are you musk or ambergris?
because your delightful scent intoxicates me.*

*It answered—I am but a worthless piece of clay that has
sat for a period with a rose.*

*The perfection of that companion left its traces on me
who remains that same piece of earth that I was.*

Translated by
Thomas E. Gouttierre