Introduction

Landlocked Afghanistan lies in the heart of Asia, and links three major cultural and geographic regions: the Indian subcontinent to the southeast, central Asia to the north, and the Iranian plateau in the west. Geography may not be destiny but it has set the course of Afghan history for millennia as the gateway for invaders spilling out of Iran or central Asia and into India: Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, Mahmud of Ghazni, Chinggis Khan, Tamerlane, and Babur, to mention some of the most illustrious examples. During this period, Afghanistan was part of many different empires ruled by outsiders and the center of a couple of its own. Its emergence in its modern guise began in the nineteenth century when the territory of Afghanistan was caught up in the great power rivalry between British India and czarist Russia, including two wars with the British. It remained peacefully neutral in the first and second world wars, although it experienced a brief civil war in 1929. But then in the mid-twentieth century Afghanistan was transformed into a cockpit for the cold war struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union that reached its climax with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and its withdrawal ten years later. In the subsequent civil war that erupted in the 1990s, Afghanistan became a failed state, ignored by the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it burst back on to the world scene when radical Muslim jihadists planned the 9/11 attack against the United States from there and provoked a U.S. invasion in retaliation. Since that time, a new Afghan government has struggled to bring stability to the country in the face of an Islamist insurgency.

All this focus on war and visiting conquerors overshadows the country's own inhabitants, except as the rough warriors who served as speed bumps on the highway of conquest or more recently earned a reputation for making the place ungovernable. As a result, Afghanistan itself remains just the vague backdrop in a long-running international drama where others hold

the speaking parts. It often appears that the Afghans provide only an unchanging, turbaned chorus in this play—that is, except for their ever-newer weapons. This book takes a different tack. It views the Afghans themselves as the main players to understand the country and its political dynamics, examining the question of how rulers in Afghanistan obtained political legitimacy over the centuries and brought order to the land.

Discussing political order in the abstract often ignores culture and shies away from history, but the anthropological approach of this book gives prominence to both. This seems natural enough when discussing the differences, for example, between a multiethnic Switzerland and Yugoslavia, even though both are European and not so distant geographically. Yet for remote and culturally alien Afghanistan, such specificity seems a luxury that can be easily dispensed with. If the truth be told, the less the world knows about a place, the easier it is to generalize about it. Are not all ethnic and religious conflicts, Muslim societies, underdeveloped economies, terrorist movements, and failed states fundamentally alike in most ways, especially in poor countries? Unfortunately they are not, and assuming that they are imposes a uniformity that is dangerously deceptive. Afghanistan may well share similarities with other countries and societies, but these elements need to be documented rather than assumed.

Themes

This book addresses four major questions that have particular relevance for understanding the country and its problems today.

International

- How did Afghanistan, which was overrun and ruled by a series of foreign dynasties for more than a thousand years, became renowned as the "graveyard of empires" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after forcing the withdrawal of both the British and Russians in a series of wars?

- Why did the U.S. invasion of 2001 that toppled the Taliban not immediately set off a similar national insurgency (as it did in Iraq), and despite that, still fail to bring stability to the country?
- Why have foreign attempts to change Afghanistan's politics, social structures, and government proved so ineffective?

Internal

- How did a ruling dynasty established in 1747 manage to hold power over such a fractious people until 1978, and why has the Afghan state since then experienced such difficulties in reestablishing a legitimate political order?
- Why did a country for which the term "Balkanized" appeared ideally suited show so few signs of disintegration as a national state in spite of its many divisions?
- How and why have splits in Afghan society since the 1920s over the structure of government and its policies led to so many periods of state collapse?

This book will argue that the most fruitful way to approach these questions is by examining the changing notions of power and political legitimacy in Afghanistan over a long period to understand how participation in national politics came to encompass an ever-wider circle of people. When the political structure was least open to competition, rulers found it easiest to maintain their legitimacy and authority because threats came from only a limited number of contenders. It was much harder to gain exclusive authority when the political system was more open and included more participants competing for power. Indeed, in the absence of an alternative political structure, such struggles for power threatened to disrupt society as a whole. In the worst cases it produced an unstable situation where no one could achieve enough power and legitimacy to restore political order without resort to continual armed conflict.

Afghanistan avoided this type of state collapse and political disorder for most of its history because the only people who competed for power were "professional rulers," hereditary elites who saw government as their business.

The right to rule was established by conquest and had two characteristics. The first was a lack of involvement (militarily or politically) by the subject population, which was often compared to a flock of sheep. The second characteristic was that competition for supreme power came only from within the dynastic elite or from outside invaders. Established rulers never feared replacement by subordinate groups within the polity because while such groups might act as their allies or enemies in political struggles, they did not conceive of themselves as potential rulers. Both of these characteristics were particularly evident in empires established by the Turko-Mongolian rulers who founded almost all the dynasties in the region from modern Turkey to northern India from the mid-tenth century to the beginning of the Western colonial era.

The emergence of a class of professional rulers was the product of a hierarchical political culture in which only men from certain elite descent groups were believed to have the right to rule or even compete for power. They did not have to rely on popular support because they employed mercenary armies (financed by tribute, or taxes on trade and agriculture) and feudal levies (provided by those to whom the ruler had granted landed estates). The only significant internal challengers to this exclusive political system were the tribal warriors organized into segmentary descent groups who inhabited marginal zones that states could not administer directly. They were egalitarian and rejected the legitimacy of any outside authority, but played a minor role in politics except when state power grew weak. In such a situation, tribal groups on the edge of the polity could topple a dynasty and seize the state for themselves. The structure of the system did not change, however, because the leaders of these tribal groups quickly monopolized power themselves and pushed their old followers back into the margins. For example, while Afghanistan's Durrani rulers (1747–1978) may have originated in an egalitarian Pashtun tribal system, they employed a classic hierarchical model of governance to maintain power exclusively within their own dynastic lines. They abandoned the democratic and federal political institutions commonly used among the Pashtun tribes at the local level, and replaced them with autocracy. Because of this, the relationship between the Pashtun tribes and their putative dynastic leaders was always a troubled one, in which cooperation (or conflict) depended on the issues involved.

This well-established tradition of exclusive elite authority began to erode in the nineteenth century as the increasing sway of Western colonial powers changed the political ecology of the region. Thus, from the founding of the Durrani dynasty in 1747 until 1838, Afghan rulers had only close relatives as rivals. Tribal groups stood aloof from such dynastic struggles, and only demanded that any victor continue to respect their traditional rights or pay them off. When the British invaded in 1839 and again in 1878, the pattern changed. The Afghans expelled the British each time, but only by employing rural militias in rebellions over which the dynastic elite had no control. This set up a contradictory dynamic in which the Afghan rulers encouraged armed resistance to expel foreign invaders, but then refused to share power when the war was over. It also valorized the defense of Islam and the Afghan nation as principles, yet at the cost of undermining the exclusivity of dynastic privilege. With each succeeding crisis and popular military mobilization, the restoration of state authority became harder and disputes over who had the right to rule the state became fiercer. During the nineteenth century such challenges to elite power remained largely inchoate because the cultural tradition of dynastic exclusivity remained so strong. After the First Anglo-Afghan War ended in 1842, the existing Muhammadzai dynasty continued to maintain its grip on power with no significant challenges by non-Muhammadzai rivals.

The situation changed in the wake of the Second Anglo-Afghan War after 1880. The new amir, Abdur Rahman, abolished the decentralized governmental system in which tribes and regions maintained a high degree of autonomy in exchange for submitting to the legal authority of the Kabul government. When faced with numerous revolts by his own relatives and regional groups, he waged war against his own people until he and his government had no rivals of any type. While effective, resentment of Abdur Rahman's heavy hand created a political backlash that over the longer term undermined his successors and led to a civil war in 1929 that forced the abdication of his grandson, King Amanullah (r. 1919–29). In the aftermath a Tajik usurper took power in Kabul for nine months until the royal elite rallied the Pashtun tribes against him and put a distant cousin, Nadir Shah, on the throne. Political participation appeared to widen with the establishment of a parliamentary system in 1964, but King Zahir Shah refused to cede any of his executive authority to it. He was ousted in a republican

coup by his cousin, Daud in 1973. A Communist coup in 1978 ended Daud's life and his republic, terminating 230 years of dynastic rule. This change, however, ignited an uncontainable conflict in the wake of the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89) that replicated on a grand scale the pattern of the Anglo-Afghan wars: the mobilization of groups throughout the country in resistance to (or support of) the new regime.

More than any other set of events, the Communist coup and Soviet invasion opened the question of political legitimacy in Afghanistan. The old dynastic tradition was in ruins, but there was nothing to replace it. This issue of who had the right to rule and on what basis was not resolved even after the Soviet Union withdrew in 1989 and its client regime collapsed in 1992. Lacking any overarching political unity among themselves, the various mujahideen resistance factions led the country into civil war and lay the groundwork for the rise of the Taliban. These conflicts eviscerated the formal state structure they were fighting to control and engulfed an ever-larger part of the Afghan population into political struggles from which they had been previously isolated. All the ethnic and regional groups in Afghanistan became politically and militarily empowered, reversing the process of centralization that had been imposed by Abdur Rahman.

Unfortunately the successful resistance strategy of making the country ungovernable for the Soviet occupier also ended up making Afghanistan ungovernable for the Afghans themselves. While the Afghans had recovered from many earlier periods of state collapse, the body politic was now afflicted with an autoimmune disorder in which the antibodies of resistance threatened to destroy any state structure, regardless of who controlled it or its ideology. Compounding this problem was a centuries-old structural weakness: the dependency of all Afghan governments on outside aid for financial stability. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan found itself without world-power patrons for the first time in 150 years and hence had no significant sources of outside revenue with which to fund a central government. In the face of indifference and a lack of aid by the major foreign powers and the international community in general, the country could no longer right itself as it had done so many times in the past.

The stalemated mujahideen civil war opened the door to interference in Afghan affairs by neighboring states, strengthened regional ethnic power

brokers, and facilitated the exploitation of Afghanistan's weakness by foreign Islamist groups. At the forefront of these Islamist groups was the Afghan Taliban, which with the support of Pakistan and foreign jihadists, took power in Kabul in 1996. Although they justified their rule in Islamic terms, the Taliban were largely Pashtuns who saw all other ethnic groups as enemies. Even after they had conquered almost all the country, they never created a real government, and Afghanistan became a classic failed state. As an ally of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda, the Taliban were the immediate target of U.S. retribution following the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, DC. The Taliban fell even more quickly than they rose: once it became clear that they would lose, every region of the country (including the Pashtun south) turned against them. Foreign troops were welcomed, against all expectations, because the Afghans saw them as a bulwark of protection against the very Afghan forces that had driven the country into ruin. More pragmatically it was equally clear that the Afghan government and economy could not be revived without massive infusions of foreign aid. If other wars had driven Afghans out of the country, the end of this one brought back about four million people, the largest repatriation of refugees ever seen (and one done largely by the Afghans themselves).

The question of creating political legitimacy was at the heart of reconstituting the Afghan government after its installation in 2002. A particularly delicate task would be installing a new political system without giving it the stigma of foreign imposition. Nothing undermined the legitimacy of any Afghan government faster than the charge that it was beholden to foreign masters. Despite the best of intentions, though, Afghan state building in the twenty-first century was fatally flawed because it attempted to restore a system designed for autocrats in a land where autocracy was no longer politically sustainable. The international community assumed that such a system would be considered legitimate if validated by elections. But Afghanistan had its own political traditions, in which elections played no part, and the virtues of majoritarian rule were not immediately obvious to the country's regional and ethnic minorities. Moreover, talk of democracy was difficult to reconcile with just how little power was delegated to any institution not part of the central government. The constitution of 2004 created a government barely distinguishable from the centralized monarchies and dictatorships that had characterized earlier regimes. Similarly,

notwithstanding discussions about inclusivity and popular participation, neither were allowed at the local level. Provincial governors, police officials, and even schoolteachers would still be appointed exclusively by the central government in Kabul without consultation.

The rationale for this push toward centralization was the assertion that the country would break apart without firm control at the top. With the recent example of the former Yugoslavia firmly in mind, many international actors feared that the Afghans would inevitably seek to splinter the country along ethnic and regional lines if given the opportunity. Yet of all the country's many problems the push toward ethnic fragmentation had never been a powerful political force in Afghanistan because of a seeming paradox: ethnicity without nationalism and a pragmatic politics that was largely immune to ideology. While Afghanistan was divided into distinct regional and ethnic groups that could quite easily live without one another's company, there was no pressure to break the country into smaller parts. Afghans found the existence of a unitary state more advantageous than the alternatives, particularly because a larger state served as a barrier against undue meddling by its neighbors. Nor did Afghans have the political enthusiasm for such a project. Having suffered through both a radical socialist regime and a radical Islamist one, Afghans were not likely to be moved by anyone's new ethnic nationalist ideology.

The best means of attaining legitimacy in post-2001 Afghanistan would have been to recognize that the government's function was more important than its form: what it could do for the people who lived there. After a quarter century of war and social disruption, ordinary Afghans sought security, economic stability, and a chance to live normal lives. Ironically, this was what the traditional systems of elite dynastic rule historically provided over the centuries: security of life and property in exchange for obedience. Political participation of a modern democratic type was of course a nobler goal, and given the de facto autonomy of Afghanistan's regional and ethnic groups, more rather than less of it might be required to bring stability to the country today. But as the current difficulties suggest, practitioners of older and less attractive traditions of power understood that the first role of government was to offer security for its people from enemies without and against disorder from within. Before rejecting the past wholesale, it would be best to understand how Afghans achieved the feat so often.

Structure

The themes outlined above take place within a cultural and historic context, and this book presents them in this fashion. Chapter 1 provides a basic outline of Afghanistan's land and peoples. Specialists may wish to skip the descriptive parts because they are already familiar with them, but those for whom Afghanistan is largely a blank need to acquire a basic grasp of the country to make the more detailed material presented later comprehensible. Readers who fear they cannot possibly keep track of so many different groups should remember that they do so with ease when following their favorite sports teams, so thinking of this section as the "Afghan League" roster will make the task easier. So will remembering that some teams are more significant than others (the Manchester Uniteds or New York Yankees of Afghan politics), and that they generate similar passions of loyalty and hatred that more neutral observers find difficult to comprehend.

As important as knowing who the people are is also understanding how they live. Afghanistan is invariably described by casual visitors as "biblical" or "medieval." Rather than chide such observers for their ethnocentricity or Orientalist biases, I might note that there is some validity to this common trope. Afghanistan is medieval in the sense that religion still plays a determinative role in culture and politics, much as it did in Europe before the Enlightenment set the West on the road to secularization. Afghanistan is also biblical in the sense that it retains a nonmechanized rural subsistence economy, mud-brick architecture, and caravans of nomads that would not have appeared out of place two millennia ago. But physical appearances can be deceiving: these same "timeless" people shot Soviet helicopters from the sky using U.S. Stinger missiles in the 1980s and are now as addicted to cell phones as anyone else on the planet.

People also live their lives in a physical world. Afghanistan's mountain ranges and river systems define a number of distinct regions that are much older than the nation-state called Afghanistan today. These regions are more than just some names on a map; they have determined settlement patterns and trade routes as well as created different local cultures through the millennia. Each is centered around one of the country's major cities (Herat, Qandahar, Mazar-i-sharif, and Kabul), which serve as regional hubs

within Afghanistan and link it with the outside world. Beyond the local identities that separate them, these regions share a common history and political-cultural tradition as part of Turko-Persia. Geographically, Turko-Persia encompasses the highlands stretching west to east from Anatolia and the Zagros Mountains through the Iranian plateau to the ragged edges of the Indian Plains, and north to south from central Asia to the Indian Ocean. It shares a common city-based Persianate culture interwoven with the legacy of the formerly nomadic Turkish ruling dynasties that came to dominate the region from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries.

The final section of chapter 1 applies ibn Khaldun's classic model of Middle Eastern political organization to Afghanistan. In that fourteenth-century work he posited two quite different types of societies: a "desert civilization" based on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism in marginal zones; and a "sedentary civilization" based on the surplus agricultural production of the irrigated river valleys or plains that supported the cities. The social organization of the former was based on kinship ties, was relatively egalitarian, and displayed strong bonds of social solidarity in the midst of a general poverty of material resources. The latter's population maintained hierarchical social classes, concentrations of great wealth, and residence-based identities with little social solidarity but strong economic interdependence. This distinction still typifies Afghanistan and continues to have a profound impact on the country's governance. Far from participating in a single political sphere, Afghanistan has always been two worlds, interacting but unintegrated. These contrasting patterns of subsistence, social organization, and regional political structures underlie long-standing ethnic and tribal divisions. They also constitute elements of material life and social organization that have persisted for centuries, even millennia, and set the framework for daily life as it is ordinarily lived.

Chapter 2 examines the premodern patterns of political authority and the groups that wielded it. During this period nation-states did not exist and regions found themselves as parts of various empires. This chapter focuses on how (and what kinds of) territory was conquered, how conquerors legitimated their rule, and the relationship of such states with peoples at their margins.

In Turko-Persia, rulers did not seek to impose their authority uniformly across the landscape. Instead they imposed direct rule only in urban areas

and on productive agricultural lands that paid more than it cost to administer them. They employed strategies of indirect rule when dealing with the peoples who had poor subsistence economies. These did not repay the cost of administration, and their location in remote mountains, deserts, and steppes provided natural bulwarks against attack. But the relationship between the center and these hinterlands was of great significance because when state authority weakened, it was tribal groups from the hinterlands that most often toppled existing regimes. The tribal groups that most commonly succeeded at this task were the Turks of central Asian steppe origin. Their hierarchical tribal structure gave them an advantage over more egalitarian tribal groups, which had more difficulty unifying and supporting a single leader. The Turks were also heirs to a horse cavalry tradition that remained militarily decisive against people who fought on foot until gunpowder weapons entered the picture.

The long-term dominance of Turkish dynasties in the region has been underplayed in a modern Afghan history that gives primacy to the Pashtuns as the country's rulers. But in reality the Pashtuns were never rulers in Afghanistan before the mid-eighteenth century. Only at that time, after serving as military auxiliaries to the Safavid and Afsharid empires in Iran, did the Durrani Pashtuns come to power by adopting the governmental structure and military organization of their former overlords. Indeed Ahmad Shah Durrani, the founder of the Afghan Empire, inherited the lands he ruled only after his Iranian patron, Nadir Shah Afshar, was assassinated. He and his heirs imposed the Turkish tradition of royal succession that demanded the ruler be chosen from only within the royal lineage. During this period the Afghan Empire slowly lost its most valuable provinces and retreated into the boundaries similar to those of today's Afghanistan.

Chapter 3 examines the erosion of traditional elite authority and new models of modern state building in the nineteenth century. The Anglo-Afghan wars were the crucibles that transformed the Afghan state and society. The focus is less on the wars themselves than the consequences they had for Afghanistan. In terms of foreign relations, the rulers of Afghanistan found themselves in the paradoxical state of becoming ever more dependent on the subsidies from the British raj even as they pushed the Afghan people to become more antiforeign. Domestically successive rulers sought to make the central government more powerful, but did not succeed

until Amir Abdur Rahman took the throne in 1880. Understanding what he did and at what cost remains significant for Afghanistan today. Every ruler in his wake has attempted to maintain his model of government even when it brought ruin on the country. They all subscribed to Abdur Rahman's belief that rulers should resist sharing power and that the Afghan population had no role in government. Although the "Iron Amir" has been dead for well over a century, his zombielike shadow still looms large over the country and its politics.

Chapter 4 analyzes the fate of Afghan rulers and their regimes in the twentieth century. Some were more successful than others, but one thing they had in common was unexpected ends to their reigns. Every Afghan leader during this period was either assassinated while in power or driven into exile. While these events may seem unduly complex on first encounter, they can be broken down into three distinctive periods: 1901–29, 1929–78, and 1978–2001.

- 1901–29: This period was characterized by demands for constitutional reform in Afghanistan and independence from British control. Both were achieved in the reign of Amanullah (1919–29), but the king's attempts to modernize Afghanistan led to a backlash and civil war that forced his abdication. A new Musahiban dynasty then took the throne under Nadir Shah after he rallied the eastern Pashtun tribes in opposition to the country's first Tajik amir.
- 1929–78: The Musahiban period was characterized by cautious economic and social reforms. Only after being on the throne for three decades did Zahir Shah agree to establish a limited parliamentary system in the constitution of 1964. But such political tinkering could not contain the pressures created by the military and economic modernization of the country, which was funded by the cold war competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. Zahir Shah was ousted in 1973 by his cousin Daud who reigned until his murder in 1978.
- 1978–2001: The last two decades of the twentieth century were bookmarked by the imposition of two extreme ideologies on Afghanistan. The first was a failed attempt to implement revolutionary

social and economic policies by a Communist regime. It led to the Soviet invasion and occupation of the country in the 1980s. Russia's withdrawal in 1989 began a period of civil war that destroyed the formal state structure, and gave rise to the Taliban and their reactionary Islamist regime. Taliban policies for changing Afghan society were equally as radical as those of the Communists, but in the opposite direction.

Throughout this period there were a number of recurring conflicts. The most volatile was the issue of social change and its direction. Often described as a rural/urban or religious/secular divide, in reality the division was more complex since positions differed depending on the issue involved. What could not be denied, however, was that over the course of the twentieth century, a pattern developed in which factions with opposing ideologies replaced one another in an ever more violent manner—and displayed less willingness to compromise each time. As a result, the process of re-creating the state in the aftermath of conflict got progressively more difficult. The seemingly easy restoration of a central government after the civil war in 1929 can be contrasted with the absolute inability to restore internal stability during the 1990s. External factors that had changed included a lack of interest in Afghanistan by any major foreign power. This reduced the flow of aid to the county to a trickle and allowed neighboring states to interfere in Afghan affairs. There were also internal factors that made the restoration of political order more difficult. Regional and ethnic power brokers had emerged that stood in opposition to Kabul-based elite. Foreign Islamist groups had a greater role in Afghan politics and exploited Afghanistan's weakness for their own purposes. The state structure itself was also so weak that those who held the formal reins of power were not markedly stronger than their rivals who did not. But the most important wound was self-inflicted: having made Afghanistan ungovernable to induce a foreign occupier to withdraw, the Afghans found that they had inadvertently made it ungovernable by anyone else.

Chapter 5 looks at the first decade of the twenty-first century in Afghanistan. As the twentieth century ended, ever-larger numbers of Afghans had become caught up in political and military struggles from which they

had been previously isolated. Whether as fighters, refugees, or just victims of war and disorder, few escaped the turmoil that roiled the country. Ethnic and regional groups in Afghanistan had become politically and militarily empowered, reversing the process of centralization that had been imposed by Amir Abdur Rahman. Yet when the international community set about creating the new Afghan constitution, it did not start afresh but attempted to restore the institutions of old. This brought to the surface long-simmering disputes about the relationship of the national government to local communities, the legitimacy of governments and rulers, and the relationship that Afghanistan should have with the outside world. Little attention was given to the consequences of promoting social policies concerning women, individual rights, and secular education in a country where these had long been contested. The initial success of the process stalled and started to break down by 2005. The Taliban, who had been driven from the country in 2001, returned to begin an insurgency in the south and east.

As I also explain in the conclusion, Afghanistan's problems during this new decade can best be understood by examining where they fit past patterns and where they break from them. The prospects for bringing stability to Afghanistan hinge on whether these problems can be rectified in a way that Afghans find acceptable.

Approach

Although this book is firmly grounded in the history of Afghanistan and its ruling elite, as an anthropologist, my original research experience was framed by ethnographic encounters with ordinary people. These people had little interest in anyone's ideology, in part because their own cultural and religious identities were so strongly fixed. If the book could be expanded beyond its already-considerable scope, it would be through the addition of a thicker description of how such peoples on the receiving end evaluated their leaders and their policies. But their role in national politics has always been restricted because they were more concerned with local issues. Should a government meet basic expectations and leave them alone, there was little concern with what rulers in Kabul chose to do. Should a

government fail to meet basic expectations, then woe to the ruler who mistook people's traditional acquiescence of that leader's right to rule for political passivity in the face of policies that disrupted their lives. Emphasis on the tip of the iceberg should never blind one to the fact that it floats on a much larger mass, which although out of direct sight, sets the rhythm of its movement.

Combining an analysis of the contemporary Afghanistan and its longer-term history presents its own difficulties. The more distant past is always easier to condense than recent events, but comparing Afghanistan's last fifty years with earlier patterns provides an excellent opportunity to explore some of the underlying forces and structures that have shaped contemporary Afghan politics and distinguish it from previous centuries. Still, writing authoritatively of the twentieth century (let alone the twenty-first) as history does not come easily to one who has spent his life within it, and for good reason. As William Faulkner said of the American South, in Afghanistan (where centuries merge as fluidly as decades do in other countries) the past isn't even past there yet. The obstacles are also great: people are still alive who will object that they were there and saw it differently. On the other hand, such contemporary observers almost always failed to recognize the significance of events as they happened, and were prone to partisanship and wishful thinking. (Read any yellowing old newspaper if you want proof.) While the history of contemporary Afghanistan is complex, it is not opaque; rather, it is best understood by giving historical context its due because it still plays a crucial role in politics today. Future readers will have the luxury of more accurately determining whether I was insightful or woefully misleading.

The underlying structure of analysis seeks to test theoretical models against events and events against theoretical models to throw light on both. At the same time, the material is presented with a story line, so those readers who have little interest in the models may still find the book engaging. This approach violates a postmodern axiom that authors should avoid imposing a "master narrative" on events, particularly recent ones, since no one view or interpretation should be privileged over any other. Alas, this author is as addicted to narrative (master or otherwise) as any opium smoker is to their pipe. It is useless to chide him for privileging his own

interpretations in his own book. It will not stop or even embarrass him. Other writers fired up to prove him wrong can be counted on to do that, and the more wrong he is, the better their books will be. While no interpretation can ever truly stand the last word, each book should present its own. This is mine.