Afghanistan On The Brink

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By Ahmed Rashid

In December 2005 I spent several hours a day in the lobby of the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul interviewing some of the people who passed by. The hotel, perched on a hill at the edge of the city and long ago written off by the Intercontinental chain as a loss, has been through some rough times in Afghanistan's twenty-three years of war. In 1992 I spent more than a month using the hotel as a bunker to avoid getting hit, first as the Communist regime crumbled and then as the civil war unfolded across the city below me. For much of the following decade the hotel was without regular electricity or running water and you never saw an Afghan woman there.

In 2005, sitting on a sofa in the hotel's lobby, I found on my left a former Taliban commander with a beard down to his waist, and on my right a young and beautiful Afghan woman from Herat, whose only concession to "covering up" was a very loose and flimsy head scarf. They were both members of the new Afghan parliament that had been elected on September 18; for the past week they had been receiving instruction from UN experts on what a parliament was and how to behave in one. The two-hour lunch breaks allowed the members of parliament (MPs) to meet each other informally. As he argued with the woman, I could see that the former Taliban officer was still in a state of shock that she was there at all.

An even bigger shock must have been the seating arrangements on December 19, 2005, when the parliament was inaugurated by President Hamid Karzai in the presence of US Vice President Dick Cheney, who arrived twenty minutes late. Men and women MPs were seated next to each other in alphabetical order—and there were no complaints. That does not happen in Iran or in the Arab world; the largely rigged parliaments in most Muslim countries enforce strict segregation.

The parliament has proved that it is not a tightly controlled vehicle for Karzai or the Americans. It set about its first task in March 2006 with the kind of earnestness and professionalism one might expect from much older bodies. In Afghanistan's presidential system of government, the country's new constitution gives parliament the power to approve the president's cabinet and the MPs did just that. They politely demanded that each of Karzai's twenty-five cabinet ministers present their credentials, say what they had achieved and hoped to achieve, and then answer tough, rapid-fire questions from the MPs.

Even more remarkable was that the proceedings were, for the first time, broadcast live on TV and on radio. A large part of the population watched them. For a month work came to a standstill while mesmerized Afghans heard tribal and warlord ministers fumble for words as they sought to explain themselves. Eventually on April 20 parliament approved only twenty ministers, forcing Karzai to fire five of his nominees.

It is hard to overstate the importance of such a freewheeling parliament and the first general elections experienced by Afghans since 1973. Some 6.6 million Afghans had cast their vote and 41 percent of them were women. Women hold sixty-eight seats or 27 percent of the 249 seats in the Wolesi Jirga, or lower "House of the People," and one sixth of the seats in the Meshrano Jirga—the upper house or Senate called the "House of the Elders." That is by far a greater number of women in parliament than in any other Muslim country, or, for that matter, in many Western countries. Yet an estimated one third of the male MPs consists of warlords, gross violators of human rights, or men involved in drug smuggling. It is what you get after more than two decades of war.

The voter turnout last September was only 53 percent, compared to 70 percent for the presidential elections in 2004. The reasons for the low turnout have everything to do with the perilous state of Afghanistan today, the lack of security, and the disillusionment of voters.

The elections brought to a conclusion the UN-sponsored process that began in late November 2001, when the UN officials Lakhdar Brahimi and Francesc Vendrell persuaded the Afghan factions to meet in Bonn to outline a "road map" for the future. Since then the Afghans have debated and voted on a new constitution, freely elected a president and a parliament, and set up councils in all thirty-four provinces to run their own affairs. By now over 60,000 militiamen have been disarmed, five million children have been sent back to school, and some health care is being provided beyond Kabul. The growth of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP)—excluding its booming production of opium—has averaged around 17 percent each year since 2002.

This year GDP growth is expected to amount to 14 percent, and the government will finance 60 percent of its annual budget with its own revenue rather than from Western and other donors—even though the funds for the entire development and reconstruction budget still come from donor countries. Yet government revenue will total only 5.4 percent of non-drug GDP in 2006, "less than any country with data," according to the latest Council of Foreign Relations report on Afghanistan by Barnett Rubin. Ominously he also points out that the postwar economic boom is now coming to an end. Rubin, the best of a handful of American scholars on Afghanistan before September 11, still knows Afghanistan better than anyone else. His report for the Council on Foreign Relations makes depressing reading, whether in showing what was not done at the right time or what still needs to be done.

Attempts to resurrect the Afghan state during the last five years have been dependent on four sets of players. On the Afghan side there are Karzai and his ministers, the warlords, and struggling human rights workers. The international community has been led by the UN secretary general's special representative to Afghanistan. The first three special representatives —Brahimi, followed by the Frenchman Jean Arnault and the German Tom Koenigs—have helped administer the elections, the parliament, and the government, and they have coordinated their activities with the UN development agencies and some eight hundred Western and Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well.

The most influential international officials have been the Americans, led by the US ambassador and the successive American generals who have led the coalition forces, which now number 23,000 troops. (Most of them are Americans who are hunting down members of al-Qaeda.) The most decisive and intrusive foreign official in Afghanistan was Zalmay Khalilzad, who served as US ambassador from 2003 to 2005 and is now the US ambassador in Iraq. Initially, the US government refused help with peacekeeping in Afghanistan. A more recent participant in this activity in Afghanistan is NATO, which, since August 2003, has led the eight-thousand-strong International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, in Kabul. This year NATO will deploy 11,000 more troops as it sets up provincial reconstruction teams in twenty-three of the country's thirty-four provinces. Next year US forces will merge under NATO to create a single command.

It is now five years since George W. Bush declared victory in Afghanistan and said that the terrorists were smashed. Since the Bonn meeting, in late 2001, a smorgasbord of international military and development forces has been increasing in size. How is it, then, that Afghanistan is near collapse once again? To put it briefly, what has gone wrong has been the invasion of Iraq: Washington's refusal to take state-building in Afghanistan seriously and instead waging a fruitless war in Iraq. For Afghanistan the results have been too few Western troops, too little money, and a lack of coherent strategy and sustained policy initiatives on the part of Western and Afghan leaders. The Bonn conference created the scaffolding to build the new Afghan structure, but what was consistently missing were the bricks and running water. Inside the scaffolding there is still only the barest shell.

One consequence has been a revived Taliban movement that has made a third of the country ungovernable. Together with al-Qaeda, Taliban leaders are trying to carve out new bases on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. They are aided by Afghanistan's resurgent opium industry, which has contributed to widespread corruption and lawlessness, particularly in the south. The country's huge crop of poppies is processed into opium and refined into heroin for export, now accounting for close to 90 percent of the global market. This spring's crop is expected to be larger than ever, and reports suggest that drug smugglers are increasingly forming alliances with Taliban fighters. According to the Independent in London, Islamic fighters agreed to temporarily suspend their campaign of violence during the poppy harvest this year, to ensure maximum profits. The Afghan government has shown a fatal incapacity to deliver services to its people and the West has failed to deal with

interfering neighbors, such as Pakistan and Iran.

The situation was becoming so critical that many concerned donors, but especially the United Nations, debated how to formally continue extending support to Afghanistan after the process agreed on at Bonn was completed. In February 2006, Karzai, the UN, and a large group of nations signed the Afghanistan Compact in London, setting out, once again, the world's commitment to Afghanistan and in turn Kabul's commitment to state-building over the next five years. Praised as a major declaration of the world's solidarity with Afghanistan, the compact is in fact an admission of strategic failure. Many of its goals can be found in numerous promises, agreements, and pledges that were made, and never fulfilled, by the US, Britain, and other powerful nations as far back as 2001. The compact may well be a case of too little too late—even if it could be fully carried out. Rubin observes that the Afghan government will be held accountable for any failure to meet the compact's ambitious goals, but the Western nations that sponsored it cannot be held accountable. We have seen the same pattern in Iraq and Sudan. The international community makes promises that remain unfulfilled, only to remake them a few years later, freshly packaged.

NATO's supreme commander, the American general James Jones, is fond of saying that Afghanistan's main problem is drugs, not the Taliban. However, without taking on the Taliban, the drug problem cannot be addressed. In the four southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, and Uruzgan, the Taliban and their mafia friends from Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia command farmers to grow poppies so they can rake in money from taxes and peddle heroin abroad to fund their movement. These provinces are the main base and command center for the Taliban and are now entirely devoid of any signs of economic reconstruction or the presence of NGOs. I was told that British, Dutch, and Canadian troops under NATO command will be deployed in these provinces this summer; but they have adamantly refused to address the poppy problem, and each country has a different strategy for contending with the Taliban. The British say they will go on the offensive; the Dutch say they will act defensively. Thus the NATO forces seem more like a coalition of the unwilling than anything else, and the Taliban have started to challenge them with an accelerated summer campaign of bombings and ambushes.

At a conference in Madrid on May 17, General Jones made an impassioned plea to the twenty-six NATO countries who are sending troops to Afghanistan this summer to end the national restrictions that they impose on their own forces. There are now some seventy-one restrictions on how the forces can be used, he said, making it extremely difficult for the commander of ISAF to run an effective military campaign—whether it's winning people's sympathies or fighting the Taliban. Jones told me he was doing his best to get the caveats down to a manageable number.

The day after the conference, as Jones left Madrid, the Taliban attacked in four provinces in southern Afghanistan. Trying to seize a small town in Helmand province, they sponsored two suicide car bomb attacks, ambushed convoys, and planted mines. A total of 105 Afghan civilians, police, and Taliban died—the bloodiest single day since the war ended in December 2001. A Canadian woman soldier and an American contractor were also killed.

The American government has demanded that NATO become more active, because, I was told, the beleaguered Donald Rumsfeld is desperate to bring some American troops home by November's congressional elections. Around three thousand of the 23,000 US troops now deployed in Afghanistan are scheduled to return home this summer and Western intelligence officials say several thousand more may depart before November. The start of an American withdrawal in the midst of a vicious Taliban resurgence naturally infuriates Karzai and his government; it is particularly disillusioning for millions of Afghans who, unlike their Iraqi counterparts, still equate a sizable US military presence with security, continued international funding, and reconstruction. In Iraq practically the entire population wants the Americans to leave, however pleased they are about the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. But the survival of the new Afghan government has depended upon the leadership of the US and its ability to convince the rest of the world to rebuild the country. The US needs to contribute money to carry out its promises and show it is willing to stay the course. It is doing neither.

Since 2003 when the Taliban first began to regroup, they have gradually matured and developed with the help of al-Qaeda, which has reorganized and retrained them to use more sophisticated tactics in their military operations. As recently as a year ago, the main Taliban groups were composed of a few dozen fighters; now each group includes hundreds of heavily armed men equipped with motorbikes, cars, and horses. They burn down schools and administrative buildings and kill any Afghan who is even indirectly associated with the government. In the south, they operate with impunity just outside the provincial capitals, which have become

like Green Zones. Approximately 1,500 Afghan security guards and civilians were killed by the Taliban last year and some three hundred already this year. There have been forty suicide bombings during the past nine months, compared to five in the preceding five years. Some 295 US soldiers and four CIA officials have been killed in Afghanistan since September 11, 2001 —140 by hostile action.

The Taliban movement is partially directed from Quetta, in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, where it has been allowed to flourish largely undisturbed by the military regime of President Pervez Musharraf. The Pakistanis have never started a military operation against the Taliban in Ba-luchistan or arrested a single senior Taliban commander—although several minor officials have been handed over to Kabul. Taliban logistics, training, and recruitment were formerly dependent on allies in Pakistan such as the fundamentalist Islamic parties that rule Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province. But the Taliban is now well entrenched in southern Afghanistan too. Al-Qaeda has also put Taliban members in touch with insurgents in Iraq; the result is that the Taliban members are learning how to plan and carry out suicide bombings, make and plant mines, and detonate improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They thus have been able to prepare increasingly deadly ambushes for Afghan and Western troops.

North of Baluchistan, in the Pakistani Pashtun tribal areas of North and South Waziristan and adjacent provinces in Afghanistan, a more international kind of insurgent movement has taken root. It is led by al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban, and includes members of the Afghan Taliban, Central Asians loyal to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Chechens, Uighur and Chinese Muslims, and other Afghan groups led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. They are fighting largely in the east and northeast of Afghanistan, but have also demonstrated an improved capacity to set off car bombs and mount suicide attacks in Kabul and other major cities. They have been able to hold off Pakistani troops who were sent to Pakistan's border areas by Musharraf under considerable US pressure in the spring of 2004. However, Pakistan is not the only problem. Barnett Rubin writes that all of Afghanistan's neighbors—Iran, India, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics—oppose a long-term US presence and have funds for their own Afghan proxies just as they did during the civil war in the 1990s. They are waiting for the Americans to leave.

The lack of security is a direct consequence of the small numbers of Western forces on the ground. Quite apart from the countryside, they have failed to secure even the major cities and highways so that aid agencies can work. For five years the US Pentagon has single-mindedly pursued al-Qaeda while failing (just as it has done in Iraq) to acknowledge the need for a coherent plan to restore civil society in Afghanistan, as well as the importance of hunting down the Taliban, which it has treated as a local, Afghan problem that US troops should not be concerned with. The result has been the absence of a clear US strategy for dealing with Pakistan. This has deeply frustrated the Afghan leadership, while creating periodic shout-ing matches between Karzai and Musharraf on CNN. The effectiveness of the American campaign against al-Qaeda, meanwhile, is itself questionable, since the group's two top leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, remain at large. The Americans claim to have caught numer-ous leaders they describe as Number Three in the al-Qaeda hierarchy, although every time a Number Three is caught another seems to take his place.

Second on Rubin's list of Afghanistan's most serious problems is "corrupt and ineffective administration without resources." Once the war in Iraq began, the government received too little money and support to make its ministries capable of delivering services to the people. In this vacuum, warlords and cabinet ministers were quickly won over by bribes from members of the drug trade; they sought out business and property deals for themselves. But the major nations were squabbling over Iraq and paying little attention. Rubin observes that poverty, hunger, ill health, and gender inequality are so bad in Afghanistan that the country remains at the bottom of every global ranking.

In Afghanistan, the drug trade has undermined everything from security to development, while increasing public frustration with the government. Afghanistan produces 87 percent of the world's heroin according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), based in Vienna. UNODC estimates that the value of all opiates produced in Afghanistan last year was $2.8 billion—out of which only $600 million reached the farmers. That is much less than the average estimated $2.5 billion per year that Western donors have provided Afghanistan since 2001. The aid programs supposed to provide alternative livelihoods to farmers producing poppies or help them grow other lucrative cash crops are derisory when compared to what the drug smugglers offer. The best-functioning programs to help farmers are run by opium traffickers who provide improved varieties of poppy seeds, fertilizer, and better methods of cultivation to increase opium yields and even large-scale employment during the poppy harvest. When we compare Afghanistan's situation today with that of 2001, we see the

country now needs to develop an entire alternative economy to replace the drug economy.

That international donors refuse to invest in the agricultural regions where 70 percent of the population live has been a critical failure. Another has been the failure to fund infrastructure projects. In the five years since the US-led invasion not a single new dam, power station, or major water system has been built. Only one major intercity highway has been completed. Only one in three Kabul residents has electricity, which works only one out of every three nights. Rubin points out that until 2003 funding for Afghanistan's reconstruction was below that of East Timor and Haiti. Meanwhile, the US and NATO are spending between $15 billion and $18 billion a year on their military operations. Most tragic of all, Western populations are hardly aware of the crisis because there has been chronic failure to report on Afghanistan, especially in the US.

Recently I asked a friend who is a senior reporter with CNN why CNN has not had a staff reporter in Kabul or Islamabad for over a year. These are, after all, two capitals that are cen-tral to the Bush administration's "war on terror," and the lack of reporters meant that the 18,000 US troops in Afghanistan are getting almost no mention in CNN's international news coverage. In view of recent decisions by Time magazine, The New York Times, and other major press organizations to fire hundreds of journalists, I thought my friend would talk of cost-cutting measures and reduced budgets for reporting in dangerous areas. Instead he answered, "You can add other major capitals, such as Bangkok, Jakarta, and Tehran, that are also going uncovered."

He told me that the problem in these Muslim capitals is not one of cost, but that very few senior staff members are volunteering to be stationed there. Nor are young American men and women, who a few years ago would be volunteering to report from Asia and the Middle East, coming forward. In contrast, in Britain, dozens of young journalists have been applying to report from both regions, whenever jobs come open. "Americans, especially young Americans, do not want to travel to Asia or the Islamic world, anywhere there may be danger," my CNN friend said. "It's a sad time for American journalism."

The two books under review, however, have been written by adventurous Americans who have lived in Afghanistan and Pakistan and have come to know both countries well. Ann Jones, the author of several feminist books, arrived in Kabul in December 2002, about a year after the US stopped bombing the country. She began to work for a small but effective NGO called Madar, or Mother, an organization set up some years earlier to help women in Kabul who had been widowed during the country's many conflicts. In Kabul in Winter, Jones describes her visits to down-and-out Afghan women in prisons and her experience teaching English to female teachers—jobs nobody else wanted to do.

Her book finely evokes the places Jones came to know. "Kabul in winter," she writes,

is the color of the dust, though the dust is no color at all. It's a fine particulate lifted by winds from old stone mountains and sifted over the city like flour. It lies in the streets and drifts over the sidewalks where it compacts in hillocks and holes. Rain and snowmelt make it mud. Mountain suns bake it....

When Jones visits young Afghan women in prison, she finds they were almost invariably put there after being abused, raped, or burned by their own men. She describes a typical case:

Dustana said she was about twenty, though her sallow skin and sunken cheeks made her look older. She had been in prison for six months. She too had been married off, but only a few months after the wedding, her husband's brother came to her house and ordered her to leave it because her husband had divorced her. The brother showed her an official-looking paper, but being illiterate, she couldn't read it. She asked to talk with her husband, but the brother said she could not. Instead he delivered her to the house of her aunt.

There, after some time, the aunt introduced her to a man from Bamiyan and said that she must marry him. She did as she was told, but the marriage was a fake, and the next day the new "husband" disappeared. The brother of the original husband, having come into a little money, also disappeared. (Zulal [Jones's translator] turned to me: "Is this not also in English 'prostitution'?") Then, to Dustana's surprise, her husband showed up. He brought the police and insisted they arrest Dustana on charges of adultery and bigamy. After investigators reported their findings to the prosecutor, she was brought to court, convicted of "illegal marriage," and sentenced to five years in prison.

There are, Jones writes, numerous codes of law—penal, legal, customary, and religious—that women have to conform to in each tribe or ethnic group. The question of women's rights is never raised. If they don't obey orders, or resist being abused, the men in their lives can have them arrested. As in many Muslim countries there is no specific law against rape—an Afghan woman who reports being raped is usually charged with adultery. Despite a new constitution that guarantees women's rights, many judges are barely literate and know only Sharia or Islamic law.

Unfortunately Jones uses part of her book to rehearse the recent history of Afghanistan. She has not talked to the politicians and revolutionary leaders who made much of this history and has to rely on printed sources which make her account reminiscent of other Western histories of the region. Jones also indulges in a long diatribe against what she sees as the warlike, misogynist character of Afghan society, and the Western journalists who failed to criticize it. "Afghans are famous fighters," she writes. "Fierce, implacable, ruthless, bold, savage, brutal—these are the adjectives attached to them in history books." She is particularly critical of Western journalists such as the foreign correspondent Robert Kaplan, who in the 1980s and early 1990s celebrated the heroism of Mujahideen fighters. Their reportage, she writes,

sometimes read like fan mail, tinged with a kind of homoerotic glorification of manliness, yet safely homoerotic because these tough, fierce, idealized bearded warriors seemed the very pinnacle of macho masculinity.

This kind of feminist anger is present throughout her book. At the same time, Jones sometimes relies on broad generalizations of the kind she criticizes in other journalists, as when she suggests that Western women working in Kabul dream of having an affair with their handsome Afghan drivers.

Jones is much more informative in her account of teaching English to female schoolteachers, a sobering experience in a country ravaged by years of Islamist rule and civil strife:

Our class meets in a school in the midst of a neighborhood of grim Russian-built apartment blocks. Once exclusively a high school, it is now used for primary and secondary (middle) school students as well. The different age groups are supposed to use the building in separate shifts, but at any hour the hallways seem filled with small noisy boys who run up and down screaming and fighting while little girls wrapped in big white chadors sit silently in the classrooms. Women teachers stand hopelessly in the corridors amid the swirl of shouting boys, as if there is nothing they can do. It is like a prep school for mujahidin—training up another generation of the kind of guys who wrecked the place during the civil wars.

Jones harshly criticizes Hamid Karzai for not taking a stronger stand about women's rights, although it could be argued that he has not been able to establish sufficient control of the country's legal system for any such pronouncements on his part to make a serious difference. But she writes perceptively about Washington's cronyism in its funding of development projects. The complaints of Afghans and Iraqis that hundreds of millions of dollars of development assistance are being squandered are quite understandable when, as Jones writes, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) hired consultants for $1,000 a day to report on the way that projects were being carried out. Afghan experts could do such tasks just as well for a small fraction of the cost.

In Afghanistan the biggest USAID contractor for education is Creative Associates International, a Washington, D.C.–based consulting company that has close connections to both the Pentagon and the State Department. In 2003 it received a $60 million contract from USAID to develop primary education in Afghanistan. The Washington Post, in recent reports, has described the failure of this project. Primary schools built at a cost of $174,000 each could have been built by Afghan contractors for $20,000 or less.

In Three Cups of Tea, Greg Mortenson, whose story is recounted by the journalist David Relin, is even more intrepid than Jones. A brilliant and well-known mountain climber, who today could be earning millions endorsing rucksacks in outdoor magazines, Mortenson decided instead to build a school in the most remote corner of northern Pakistan, a place that is unknown to all but very few Pakistanis.

Relin describes how Mortenson grew up in Africa, joined the US Army, trained as a nurse, and became a climber. In Pakistan in 1993 he was separated from a mountaineering party while trying to climb K2, the second-highest peak in the world, and was rescued by the extremely poor residents of a village called Korphe,

which is situated on the edge of giant glaciers in Baltistan, a corner of Pakistan close to China:

Korphe was far from the prelapsarian paradise of Western fantasy. In every home, at least one family member suffered from goiters or cataracts. The children, whose ginger hair he had admired, owed their coloring to a form of malnutrition called kwashiorkor.... The nearest doctor was a week's walk away in Skardu, and one out of every three Korphe children died before reaching their first birthday.

After Mortenson recovered he promised to build the villagers a school. His mother started a Pennies for Pakistan at the school where she teaches in Wisconsin. At home in Montana he sold everything he owned and lived in his car so he could save money for the project. In the meantime he lost his girlfriend and his job, and seemed to be going nowhere. He finally met Tara, the love of his life, and married her a few days after their first meeting.

Finally Mortenson received a $10,000 gift from a rich benefactor, which he used to establish the Central Asia Institute—an NGO dedicated to building schools—and returned to Pakistan. In the meantime he encountered mullahs who issued fatwas against him. It took him three difficult years to build his first primary school in Korphe, but in the next three months he built three more. He immediately understood why many experts have concluded that improving the lives of the people in such regions depends on educating girls. By now, he has built fifty-five schools in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, where 24,000 students are being educated.[*]

In telling Mortenson's story, the book also traces the history of the severely orthodox madrasas in Pakistan and describes how rich Arab Wahabbis arrive with suitcases of money to fund them. Well before September 11, Mortenson became a foresighted advocate of strengthening the Pakistani education system as a means of countering Islamic extremism. But the strongest part of his book is its account of how his single-minded pursuit of his plan to build a school inspired a wide and unlikely cast of characters to join him in his ventures. Among these, for example, are the tribal elders who befriended him, a taxi driver who became his guardian angel, and the Wazirs from Waziri-stan who kidnapped him while they were high on hashish. At one point, Mortenson was called before Pakistan's Shia clerics, who had been deliberating about whether his school-building work could be permitted under Islamic law:

Inside stood the eight imposing black-turbaned members of the Council of Mullahs. From the severity with which Syed Mohammed Abbas Risvi greeted him, Mortenson presumed the worst. With Parvi, he sank heavily down on an exquisite Isfahan carpet woven with a pattern of flowing vines. Syed Abbas motioned for the rest of the council to join them in a circle on the carpet, then sat himself, placing a small red velvet box on the plush wool before his knees.

With due ceremony, Syed Abbas tilted back the lid of the box, withdrew a scroll of parchment wrapped in red ribbon, unfurled it, and revealed Mortenson's future. "Dear Compassionate of the Poor," he translated from the elegant Farsi calligraphy, "our Holy Koran tells us all children should receive education, including our daughters and sisters. Your noble work follows the highest principles of Islam, to tend for the poor and sick. In the Holy Koran there is no law to prohibit an infidel from providing assistance to our Muslim brothers and sisters. Therefore," the decree continued, "we direct all clerics in Pakistan to not interfere with your noble intentions. You have our permission, blessings, and prayers."

The drawback of Mortenson's story, as told by Relin, is that it says little about the wider background of world events. While Jones's book goes on at too great a length about regional history, Three Cups of Tea does too little. The tumultuous political climate in which Mortenson found himself is rarely explained sufficiently, and when events are described, there are numerous mistakes in names and dates, as, for example, in the account of the Afghan factions fighting the civil war in the 1990s. Too much is said about Mortenson's attempts to raise money and too little about the far more interesting period following September 11, when Mortenson took on the task of helping Afghans build schools. Inevitably, Mortenson's book has much to say about the American failures in Afghanistan. "Everywhere we went, we saw US planes and helicopters," says Julia Bergman, one of Mortenson's supporters who visits Afghanistan with him after September 11. "And I can only imagine the money we were spending on our military. But where was the aid? I'd heard so much about what America promised Afghanistan's people—how rebuilding the country was one of our top priorities...."

Both Mortenson and Jones make a plea for Americans to learn from history, something the Bush administration has consistently refused to do. Bush visited Kabul for the first time on March 1, 2006, for a few hours, where he remarked on how brilliantly everything was going. In his more lucid moments, Zahir Shah, the former king of Afghanistan, now ninety-two years old, recalls the first US president to visit Kabul. That was President Dwight Eisenhower, who also came for a one-day visit, on December 9, 1959, when, at forty-five, the King ruled the country and was considered young. Shah remembers that he asked Eisenhower for more economic aid for his impoverished country, as well as diplomatic help to improve Afghanistan's deteriorating relationship with Pakistan, and a sustained US presence to protect the country. The help he received was meager and ineptly supplied. Some things never change.