

# افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد  
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY STEPHEN F. EISENMAN

09.09.2021

## Kabul on My Mind



Holkham Hall, Matthew Brettingham and William Kent, architects, completed 1764.

Photo: Wikipedia commons.

### 1. Drinks with Ashraf Ghani

The fall of Kabul reminded me of the time, in late November 2001, that I had drinks with Ashraf Ghani. My ex-wife, Mary Weismantel and I were invited by the anthropologist Sidney Mintz to meet Ghani in a VIP suite at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Washington, D.C. When we arrived at about 5 pm, Ghani was seated in a high-backed chair beside his wife, Rula Saade. The future Afghan president wore formal, black, Pashtun clothes, and drank tea. Rula was also impeccably dressed in black. In those days, I affected worn tweed, the uniform of the male professor in early middle-age.

Mary had first met the Ghani after a lecture a couple of years earlier at Johns Hopkins University, where both he and Mintz were professors. Ghani was famous for asking brilliant and annihilating questions after guest presentations, and Mary said he didn't disappoint. I was the only non-anthropologist among us, but Sid liked me – we talked Marxism and told each other Jewish jokes – and so I was included.

Anyway, here's what we discussed, as far as I can recall or reconstruct: 9/11, the War on Terror, and the recent liberation (or conquest) of Kabul. I said I was concerned that George W. Bush's war on terror was nothing more than a green light for arms merchants to rake in huge profits, and for government spooks and bureaucrats to curtail civil liberties. Ghani ignored my leftist commonplaces and summarized his theory of "failed states" and what to do about them: combat corruption, end the rule of compradors and other elites, and establish a citizen-based, or bottom-up approach to development and governance. He also said that once the Taliban were banished from Afghanistan, a new generation of Afghan leaders (women as well as men) could build a progressive, secular society. He told us he was considering moving back to his home country to help with the rebuilding to come. I'm ashamed to admit wondering: "Will he have to give up tenure?"

## **2. The U.S. Defeat**

Skip ahead 20 years. It's August 15, 2021, and the fall of Kabul has barely registered on my consciousness. That day, my wife Harriet and I were preparing to travel from our home in Micanopy, Florida, to the UK, and I was busy duplicating, mailing, and emailing the necessary documents: pre-departure Covid PCR test reservation applications, U.K. Passenger Locator Forms, 2<sup>nd</sup> day post-arrival Covid test requests, and Covid test declarations for our U.S. return. Washington itself could have fallen, and I wouldn't have noticed.

However, by the day of our flight on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, the dimensions of the debacle in Afghanistan were clear. An American empire built of blood and ashes was swept aside by a rag-tag army of 50,000 lightly armed but determined jihadis. This was a defeat as certain and complete as the one delivered by the combined forces of the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong in Saigon in April 1975. And the closing theatrics were similar: hasty evacuation of diplomats and their families from the national capital; frantic burning of classified documents by the CIA to prevent them falling into enemy hands; disabling of helicopters and other war materiel; and scenes of desperate local allies literally clutching at overloaded, departing aircraft as enemy forces approached.

There's no point arguing, as many American politicians and the mainstream press have, that a later departure would have yielded a less humiliating result, for two main reasons: 1) The Afghan population hated us more than they hated the Taliban, so defeat was preordained; and 2) Whatever moment Biden started to pull out diplomats and evacuate allies, the whole world – which includes Afghan troops — would know the jig was up. Why fight and die when the puppet government and the puppeteer have begun to surrender? Whenever that time came, Afghan troops would lay down their arms, strip off their uniforms, and either join the Taliban or flee. And that's just what happened. To delay the inevitable defeat would only mean more displacement and death for soldiers and ordinary Afghan people.

The final withdrawal was a spectacle that should have brought joy to anyone opposed to military aggression and empire. The U.S. has been continuously at war since 1941 and has gutted or destroyed nations on every continent except Antarctica. (In truth, not even the South Pole is safe.) The list of *invadees* includes Guatemala, El Salvador, Granada, Iran, Cuba, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia, and the Philippines, not to mention covert interventions in Italy, Nicaragua, the Congo, Venezuela, Bolivia and elsewhere. But because the victors in Afghanistan were the Taliban – archaic fascist bully boys – it was difficult to feel much satisfaction. The end of open hostilities promised neither socialism nor Ghani's "citizen-based" economic development. In fact, the US destroyed most of the progressive, secular forces in the country decades ago when we armed the mujahadin — the future Al Qaeda and Taliban — to fight the Soviets. (Thank you very much, Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Ronald Reagan.) All this has been well reported in *CounterPunch* and a handful of other U.S. organs of the left but obfuscated by the two liberal newspapers — *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* — that I compulsively scan while waiting to board airplanes.

### **3. Holkham Hall**

Our flight to Heathrow was uneventful and when we landed, nobody at customs checked to see if we'd been vaccinated or had submitted the proper paperwork. The train to Norwich and taxi to Burnham Overy Staithe on the Norfolk coast was equally smooth. By mid-afternoon, my wife was embracing her elderly parents and two, grown daughters whom she hadn't seen since the start of the pandemic, plus her older brother and his two boys. The chaos at Kabul airport – the teen who died in the wheel well of a departing flight, the infant trampled and killed by the crowd and finally, the scores of victims from a suicide bombing – was for me only a somber baseline for the harmonies of a family

reunion. So was Biden's parting shot: the killing by drone of two, supposed ISIS-K suicide bombers in addition to an innocent family gathered near them; they were a household of ten. We were nine.

Little of the mayhem in Kabul, however, remained on my mind the following morning as my wife and I and two old friends visiting from Cambridge, walked together on footpaths and narrow roads from Overy Staithe to Holkham Hall, about five miles. Siobhan Mellon does climate and environmental planning for the South Cambridgeshire District Council. Her husband, Malcolm Ausden, is a Principal Ecologist for the RSPB. Malcom and I walked close together much of the way, and discussed birds, global warming, and the changing ecology of Norfolk. Well, mostly he talked, and I eagerly listened:

"The reason there are so many nettles and brambles beside these hedgerows is because of the run-off of nitrogen from the adjacent farms. High nitrogen plants are very nutritious; that's why they evolved protection in the form of poisons and thorns."

"It's true we are seeing very few birds right now. But it's not because their numbers have recently plummeted, but because it's molting season. They are especially vulnerable at this time, so they stay hidden from view."

We stopped at midday to eat a packed lunch of vegan sausage rolls and crisps at the Gothic ruins of Creak Abbey, and then continued along a barely discernable path through a field overgrown with ragwort, burdock, and thistle. By now we were nearing the end of our walk. Before us were the imposing, stone and iron gates of the Holkham estate. A straight, paved road led to the great house and gardens, and beyond that to the North Sea. The road was flanked on each side by vast fields of ripened wheat. Malcolm anticipated my question:

"The Norfolk Four Course System of crop rotation, developed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, is based upon large, rectilinear fields with straight roads between them, making planting, harvesting and transportation easy. With chemical fertilizers today, there is less crop rotation, but the emphasis on size and geometric regularity remains. Unfortunately, that reduces the number and length of hedgerows and the diversity of plants, insects, birds, and mammals."

Malcolm's comments set me thinking about the history of capitalism and the rise of the British Empire.

The Norfolk System is often identified with Thomas Coke, the First Earl of Leicester, who built Holkham Hall (completed 1764), which we now approached on the right. The house is a huge, austere, Palladian affair with a columned and pedimented central pavilion and

four, identical wings at each corner. The architects, Matthew Brettingham and William Kent — with a significant assist from Coke himself — focused their attention on the marble and alabaster interior, so the exterior had to take care of itself. If one large window was sufficient to illuminate a room, no others were added, resulting in an unrelieved expanse of yellow brick on the exterior. Adolf Loos, the great Viennese modernist who equated ornament with crime, would have found Holkham Hall admirably law abiding.

Coke demolished cottages and even whole villages on his estate to expand planting and enclose open lands. He also ended customary rights to gleaning and increased the number of sheep and cattle on the estate. All this improved agricultural yields and profits, though Coke's non-agricultural investments, profligacy as a collector, and notorious drinking and gambling nearly bankrupted the estate. (He especially promoted cock fighting.) Seventy-five years later, his more sober great-nephew, Coke of Norfolk, undertook further modernization through additional enclosure, and rationalized husbandry. It was partly due to him that grazing sheep became the defining image of rural Britain, and the reason so much of the United Kingdom is now an impoverished monoculture of closely grazed grass.

The agricultural revolution pioneered by the Cokes and others, combined with the slave trade and the rapid development of coal as prime mover, are why Britain became hegemonic and developed an empire. That's the context of "The Great Game," the 19<sup>th</sup> Century contest with Russia for Afghanistan and other lands in Central and South Asia, understood to be gateways India. The latter of course, was the "jewel in the crown" of imperial possessions. It was both the source of raw materials and a market for finished goods.

As we approached Holkham Hall, Malcolm and I joined up with Siobhan and Harriet, all of us striding side-by-side on the smooth, black asphalt. As we gazed at the garden façade of the great house, the conversation took an unexpected turn. "Isn't it a shame," Siobhan asked, "what's happening in Afghanistan?" She continued:

Have you heard Rory Stewart [former British MP, aligned with the Tories] discuss the disastrous decision by the U.S. to withdraw in such haste? Stewart's a real expert; he once walked across the whole country, so he knows his stuff!"

I replied: "I'm afraid I don't know what Stewart has to say". Malcolm interjected:

"I heard him interviewed on the BBC. He has two arguments. First, that the U.S. has kept the peace there for the last five years with a minimal force of 2,500 – 4,000, plus close air

support. Why couldn't it just keep doing that? The cost is small beer for such a big military force."

"And what's his second argument against withdrawal" I asked?

"That if the Americans were determined to go, they should at least have waited until the end of the fighting season in November. That way, they could have evacuated everybody at much greater leisure and safety."

"Both arguments are specious," I replied:

"To begin with, the peace the U.S. has kept for the past four years has been, to say the least, uneasy. During that time, about a thousand Afghan non-combatants have been killed by U.S. and allied drone and missile strikes, more than at any other time in the war. Afghan military casualties have numbered in the tens of thousands."

"And as for Stewart's second point, does he really think the Taliban are afraid of the cold? Would they refuse to take the presidential place in Kabul if they had to wear sweaters? Unless we wanted to remain in the country indefinitely, increase our forces on the ground, and subject the native population to further displacement and death, we had to leave."

We continued to discuss the situation in Afghanistan until we reached a small lake on the estate, populated by geese, swans, ducks and a little egret. Malcolm expressed his dislike for the Egyptian geese with their dull grey feathers but admitted the migrants have settled in well and seem to cooperate with native birds. The egret was familiar to Harriet and me from northern Florida; one regularly visits our little pond to hunt insects and small frogs. Malcolm told us the first recorded modern sightings of this bird in England were in the 1970s. "The consequence of climate change shifting their habitats north," Harriet asked?" The art historian show-off among us said he doubted that explanation since egrets and herons are found in Dutch and Flemish Baroque game paintings by Frans Snyders and Melchior de Hondecoeter. (One of Melchior's best bird paintings, in fact, is in the collection at Holkham Hall.) "It was the feathered hats," Siobhan offered, "that killed off all the egrets and herons in Northern Europe by about 1900." We agreed it was nice to have them back.

#### **4. The Intellectual vs the Politician**

We're back in London now for a few days, before our return to Florida. I'm catching up on grim news and commentaries about hurricanes, floods, fires, and the vicious Texas abortion law. The reporting on Afghanistan in the *NYTimes*, *Guardian*, *BBC*, *CNN*, *Time* and the rest continues to emphasize the precipitateness of the American withdrawal. Most conservative and liberal politicians in

the U.S. and U.K. repeat the same canards. Nostalgia for the lost empire is one explanation for the British perspective, as if warfare and occupation were a humanitarian necessity. In fact, the British intervention has been marked by military failures and atrocities.

Ashraf Ghani remains out of sight, in exile in the UAE. There were initial claims that he absconded with tens of millions in cash, but there's been no confirmation of that, and I'd be very surprised if it was true. We know what kleptocrats look like, and he doesn't fit the bill. When we spoke in 2001, he seemed completely sure that a new, progressive, and secular Afghanistan would be born out of the ruins of a "failed state" — a nation broken by the Cold War, Islamic fanaticism, tribal hatreds, and government corruption. If anyone had the knowledge and skills to establish a rules-based and progressive political order, I thought, it was Ghani.

What the former Afghan president failed to reckon with however, despite his brilliance, was that the United States had so little interest — media clichés to the contrary — in "nation building." There was no plan to establish a state bureaucracy that could operate independently of the U.S. State Department and C.I.A. There was no desire to build up an Afghan army and air force that could fight on its own without U.S. controlled military equipment and maintenance. And there was certainly no American willingness to permit the Afghan president to chart a foreign policy that might bring it into alignment with Russia or China, our chief political and economic rivals. Ghani was an intellectual but not a pragmatic politician or a charismatic revolutionary. It will require a combination of both to wrest Afghanistan back from the Taliban and the U.S., now once again lurking in the background.

*Stephen F. Eisenman is Professor of Art History at Northwestern University and the author of The Abu Ghraib Effect (Reaktion, 2007), and The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights (Reaktion, 2015) among other books. His American Fascism Now, with Sue Coe, has just been published by Rotland Press. Eisenman is also co-founder of the non-profit, Anthropocene Alliance.*

CounterPunch 08.09.2021