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## Death of an Afghan Godfather

By Dexter Filkins

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Ahmed Wali Karzai, who was killed today at his home in Kandahar, embodied all the flaws of the American project in Afghanistan. Karzai was affable, spoke perfect English, and had been so helpful to the Americans in the early days following the 2001 invasion that the Central Intelligence Agency put him on its payroll. And, of course, he was the half-brother of Hamid, the Afghan President. In the decade since 2001, Karzai leveraged all those things to become the most powerful man in southern Afghanistan. He was a kind of godfather: Karzai cavorted with drug dealers, oversaw gangs of gunmen, and made deals with the very Taliban insurgents the Americans were trying to kill.

Ahmed Wali had grown very rich and very powerful. On paper, he was the chairman of a lowly government panel called the Kandahar Provincial Council. But he was much bigger than that. Nothing important happened in Kandahar Province without Karzai's say so. A series of provincial governors—the men who were supposed to be in charge—came and went. None of them could stand up to Karzai. If they tried, they were soon out of a job.

And now Karzai is dead, killed, apparently, by Sardar Mohammed, one of his close associates (the first reports had said it was a bodyguard), who was killed himself shortly after he did the deed. We can only wonder about the motive. Was Karzai killed for money? For honor? Or for revenge? In a statement, the Taliban claimed responsibility, but there is no proof as yet that it's true. In a way, it hardly matters. A man like Karzai, in a country like Afghanistan, acquires a lot

of enemies. There were any number of people who wanted him dead. It's what comes next that really matters.

Ahmed Wali Karzai had a fascinating relationship with the Americans, one that tells the story of Afghanistan's American era. In 2001, the Americans arrived in Afghanistan knowing very little about the place and badly in need of friends. Karzai offered his hand, and, coming from a prominent local family, he helped guide them through the labyrinth of tribal politics that binds southern Afghanistan. Karzai was said to be particularly useful in fingering Taliban insurgents and their supporters. (Many Afghans were convinced that he often just fingered his rivals.) With the Americans' support, Ahmed Wali Karzai's power grew. He built a vast housing development using government land, and was one of the shareholders of Kabul Bank, which I wrote about for *The New Yorker*. Afghanistan became the world's largest supplier of opium; American officials were convinced, even if they could not necessarily prove it in court, that he was enriching himself from the narcotics trade. He helped form militias and private-security companies, and sometimes used them for his own ends. In the process of enriching himself, Karzai alienated ordinary Afghans, some of whom had to pay bribes to Afghan officials and others who were forced from their land. American officers were convinced that Karzai drove many Afghans into the arms of the Taliban. And yet, for all of that, the Americans, and particularly the C.I.A., could not force themselves to break with him.

In the 2009, General Stanley McChrystal arrived in Afghanistan armed with the conviction that good governance—good Afghan governance—could defeat the Taliban. McChrystal and other senior American officials tried to push Karzai out of Kandahar, mainly by appealing to his brother, the President, to send Karzai abroad—to the United Kingdom, for instance, to become the ambassador. In those days, the Americans were clear-eyed about the threat that Karzai represented to a stable Afghanistan. As one senior American officer said to me at the time: “The only way to clean up Chicago is to get rid of Capone.”

But President Karzai refused, again and again. And after a few months of this, the Americans decided that getting rid of Ahmed Wali Karzai wasn't worth the damage that doing so would cause to their relationship with his half-brother. They also worried that his departure would leave a vacuum in the middle of Taliban country. So the Americans backed off, and Ahmed Wali Karzai got to stay. Instead, the Americans vowed to work around him—which was never really possible.

Which brings us to now. What happens next? Over the past year, American Marines and soldiers have cleared the Taliban from large tracts of southern Afghanistan. Hundreds of Americans have been killed in these operations, but they have provided a temporary opportunity to get governance right in southern Afghanistan. As long as Ahmed Wali Karzai remained in control, serious change was probably impossible. And now?

It may not be good form to say that a man's death offers a second chance, but that is exactly what we have in Afghanistan. Will the Americans take it?