No Good Men Among the Living Study Guide

No Good Men Among the Living by Anand Gopal

BOOKRAGS

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Summary

No Good Men Among the Living by Anand Gopal describes the American war in Afghanistan from the perspective of three ordinary Afghans. The first is Akbar Gul, also referred to briefly as Mullah Cable, a former Taliban commander who rejoined the group during their resurgence several years after the U.S. invasion. Akbar Gul originally joined a local militia to protect himself and his family, but he became one of the most feared enforcers of Taliban law. It is clear, however, that Akbar Gul was not particularly interested in the Taliban's religious ideology. Instead, he was primarily driven by the material wealth and personal fulfillment the Taliban provides.

The second major individual is Jan Muhammad Khan (JMK), an anti-Taliban warlord and close friend of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. At the beginning of the book, JMK was set to be executed in a Taliban prison but was saved at the last moment by the Taliban's surrender to Karzai and the new Afghan government. Installed as the governor of Uruzgan province, JMK gained tremendous wealth and influence, but developed a reputation for corruption and self-serving violence. While he was nominally a U.S. ally, it is clear that this corruption sullied the United States in Afghans' eyes and encouraged them to support the resurgent Taliban.

Finally, Gopal follows Heela, an Afghan woman forced to move with her family from Kabul to rural Khas Uruzgan during the Afghan civil war. Heela has strong aspirations to become a nurse or teacher, but is severely limited by strict customs barring women from leaving their homes alone or without a burqa. In many ways, Heela's struggle to lead an independent life is symbolic of attempts by all Afghan women to play a greater role in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Heela is ultimately elected as a Senator from Uruzgan province.

In addition to these three individuals, Gopal describes the American obsession with defeating "terrorists," often leading U.S. troops to attack, imprison, and kill prospective allies. More broadly, Gopal argues that this and other failures of the American war in Afghanistan were a result of U.S. officials misunderstanding and oversimplifying Afghan society.

Prologue-Part 1 (Chapters 1-4)

Summary

The Prologue of this book introduces a major theme of the entire text; the author states that American officials viewed the war in Afghanistan, and the larger War on Terror, in terms of categories: terrorists and non-terrorists, or fundamentalists and democrats. Gopal argues that most Afghans do not fit neatly into these categories. As a result, the U.S. effort in Afghanistan, which had originally seemed successful, would become a failure. Further, Afghans saw both sides of the conflict as far from perfect, as reflected in an Afghan proverb, “there are no good men among the living, and no bad ones among the dead.”

Chapter One begins in the Afghan village of Gayawa on the morning of September 11, 2001. A young boy arriving in the village finds it nearly deserted, with the exception of a small group of people hiding inside the local schoolhouse. The village had been attacked by the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group. By this time, the Taliban had nearly defeated its primary adversary in the ongoing Afghan civil war, a coalition of tribal warlords called the Northern Alliance. In doing so, the Taliban had established control over the vast majority of Afghan territory and instituted a draconian version of Islamic law, outlawing music, film, and photography, and barring women from the public sphere. The Gayawa massacre was carried out by a Taliban commander known as Mullah Cable (referred to as Akbar Gul later in the text), named for the cable he used to whip Afghans not in compliance with strict Taliban law.

September 11th was a turning point for the Taliban. Following the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the U.S. government demanded that the Taliban surrender al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Though pressured by many of his advisers to comply, Taliban leader Mullah Omar refused, feeling such a concession would delegitimize the Islamic nature of his government. In response, the United States allied with the Northern Alliance to drive the Taliban from power.

At a small outpost near Gayawa, Mullah Cable was convinced that the Americans would quickly lose interest in this conflict and, even if they did not, his small unit was too insignificant to be targeted. His perception changed when his entire unit was killed by a single U.S. airstrike. Attacks like these, so technologically advanced that they seemed almost magical, devastated the Taliban throughout the region, while the Northern Alliance advanced on Kabul, the Afghan capital. Hopeless about the Taliban’s chances, Mullah Cable deserted the front lines and headed for his family’s home in Kabul. He was continually harassed by villagers along the way, who knew him as a former Talib, and twice pressed back into service by other Taliban units. Although he eventually reached his family and brought them successfully to neighboring Pakistan, Mullah Cable felt humiliated and depressed at his fall in stature.

Chapter Two shifts to Jan Muhammad, a prisoner of the Taliban in Uruzgan province in December 2001. Jan Muhammad was the former governor of Uruzgan and had once enjoyed considerable influence in the province. His opposition to the Taliban had eventually led to his arrest and on this day, unaware of the 9/11 attacks and American invasion, Muhammad was to be executed. As governor, Muhammad had worked extensively with Hamid Karzai, a member of an elite family and tribal community. While smuggling humanitarian assistance into Uruzgan from Pakistan, Karzai was also working to create a “Southern Alliance” of warlords from ethnic Pashtun tribes to overthrow the Taliban government.

As the American invasion began, Karzai sought U.S. support for his tiny network. He was met by skepticism on both sides; American officials doubted his ability to rally sufficient forces, while tribal elders, though impressed with Karzai’s vision for a Taliban-free country, saw it as worthless without tangible U.S. support. Karzai was vindicated, however, when he, with the assistance of U.S. special forces and airstrikes, successfully defended Tirin Kot, a rural village, from a Taliban attack. This battle, told from the perspective of an American commander and his Taliban adversary, was a dramatic victory for the outnumbered Americans, further destabilizing Taliban control and encouraging mass defection. Buoyed by this success, Karzai rose to prominence in the new Afghanistan leading to his appointment as Prime Minister and later election as President. As a result, he personally accepted the surrender of Mullah Omar who was allowed to return to life as a private citizen. The chapter ends with Jan Muhammad’s release from prison as a condition of the Taliban’s surrender, in keeping with Karzai’s promise to secure his release years earlier. Muhammad claimed that, at that time, he was motivated to seek revenge on the Taliban.

The main purpose of Chapter Three is to provide historical background on Afghanistan and the conflicts it has faced. Prior to the 1970s, Afghanistan was a modern, thriving country. In the late 1970s however, political unrest emerged, as Communist groups, Islamist groups, and the country’s government all competed for influence. The strife reached a climax in late 1979 when Soviet troops invaded the country to support their Communist allies and institute some stability. However, the invasion only increased the violence as U.S.-supported Islamist militants known as mujahedeen resisted Soviet control. The Soviet Union withdrew from the country in 1989 and collapsed two years later, leaving a weak Communist government in Kabul and a country in civil war. After toppling the government, mujahedeen groups began infighting, plunging the country into violence.

To illustrate the suffering of the Afghan people, Gopal introduces Heela, a Kabul native with four children, and her husband Musqinyar. During Communist rule, Heela had dreams of attending college and becoming a teacher. Like many urbanites at the time, she embraced modernity and the opportunities it afforded young women. However, she became increasingly fearful of venturing outside her house as competing militias battled in the streets. Simultaneously, Musqinyar stopped going to work at his government job. As the violence escalated, Musqinyar insisted that the family return to his rural hometown in Uruzgan province for their safety, forcing Heela to abandon her modern

lifestyle and begin wearing a burqa, a traditional Islamic garment loosely covering every part of a woman's body.

Gopal also describes how Mullah Cable, hereafter referred to as Akbar Gul, began his evolution from a young Kabul resident to a Taliban commander. The violence and looting plaguing his neighborhood forced Akbar Gul to join a local ethnic Pashtun militia to ensure both his physical safety and personal pride. Ethnic militias, as Gopal argues, were not formed out of a sense of ethnic nationalism, but because tribal communities were the one institution many young Afghans felt they could trust in this period of upheaval.

Chapter Four begins with an explanation of the Pashtun tribal practices that bar women from the public sphere. Gopal explains that the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan forced Pashtun families to closely protect anything that could be stolen from them, including female family members. This evolved into customs barring women from travelling outside their homes without a male escort, requiring them to wear burqas when they did, and preventing them from interacting with non-relative men. When the Taliban, who originated as religious scholars, seized control of the country and ended its civil war, they instituted these customs and strict Islamic law throughout Afghanistan.

Heela, now living in the rural town of Khas Uruzgan with her mother-in-law, was forced to adapt to this new reality. Initially, Heela struggled to accept her new role as a housewife while Musqinyar opened a pharmacy to serve the village. As one of the few literate women in the area however, Heela was chosen to participate in a government program to train women as nurses to treat other women in their village. In addition to vocational training, this provided Heela the opportunity to occasionally interact with women who came to her home for treatment. Despite this, Heela's life was relatively uneventful until the U.S. invasion.

The newly installed governor of Uruzgan, Qudus Khan, chose Heela to supervise a women's sewing center funded by international aid groups. This institution, however, conflicted sharply with traditional prohibitions against women working or even leaving their homes without a male escort. While Musqinyar was supportive of Heela's efforts, his mother believed they brought shame on the family, a view shared by most families in the village. As a result, Heela was forced to operate her center in secret to shield its courageous participants from scorn. When local families became suspicious, Heela closed the center for a time, then reopened it in her own house. Once again, however, Musqinyar's mother and a woman relative discovered the operation and threatened to expose the women and kill Heela's relatives, forcing her to permanently close the sewing center. The chapter ends with Heela in a state of depression due to the loss of this productive endeavor and her renewed isolation, while reports of violence became increasingly common, even as the U.S. military sought to ensure security.

Analysis

In Part One, Gopal focuses on presenting elements that will be expounded upon later in the text. This occurs in a technical sense, with the introduction of characters and basic historical facts, but more importantly in the presentation of major themes and concepts. Throughout the book, the author argues that U.S. leaders failed to fully stabilize and democratize Afghanistan because they oversimplified the country's divisions and history. To Americans, the war in Afghanistan began with the 9/11 attacks and represents a battle between democrats and religious extremists. For the Afghans portrayed here, American involvement is only one chapter in a longer search for peace and stability.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the unusual order in which Gopal presents historical events. He begins with the period of Taliban control immediately before and after the 9/11 attacks, then shifts back in time to the Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war, and finally forward to the years following 9/11 and the institution of a new Afghan government. This structure can be confusing to the reader - it is not always clear which time period Gopal is describing - but this is the desired effect. The author conveys the impression many Afghans have of their country's history. Where Americans see specific turning points on a timeline, Afghans have experienced a constantly revolving series of leaders with no real change. While provincial governors and national leaders come and go, the everyday lives of Afghans rarely change. In this atmosphere, even invasion by a world superpower is impactful, but not remarkable. Throughout this section, Gopal portrays the malaise felt by average Afghans and the larger complicated setting into which the United States has entered.

Similarly, as Gopal argues in the Prologue, the United States tended to divide Afghans into strict categories, those in favor of the new government and the "terrorists" who opposed it. To dispute this dichotomy, Gopal explains how Akbar Gul became the Taliban commander Mullah Cable. Mullah Cable, as a persona, is exactly the sort of person that the U.S. officials would label as an enemy bent on extremist ideology. For Gopal, however, Akbar Gul's evolution is much more tied to tribal communities than any grand ideology. As the author states, "the factions [in the Afghan civil war] were organized along ethnic lines...because in the face of perpetual instability, with a weak or absent state, you allied with those you knew and trusted" (64). This explains why Akbar Gul, growing up in a Kabul ravaged by violence, felt the need to turn to violence himself in the form of a Pashtun militia. The young man had no particular hatred for other ethnic groups or outsiders, but viewed his fellow Pashtuns as a support system in the absence of an effective government. It can also explain why, in Chapter One, he felt no strong loyalty to the Taliban cause once it was clear the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance had become far superior. Gopal does not argue that this justifies Akbar Gul's actions, but that the American view of a brightly divided society is different from the far more complex system of tribal and ethnic loyalties that Afghans experience.

A third element of this oversimplification is the American view of women's rights in Afghanistan. In the U.S. narrative, the sharp restrictions on women in the public sphere were a Taliban institution based on a distortion of Islam. Eliminating the Taliban,

therefore, should have allowed women to be equal participants in society. The Afghan reality, as expected, was much more complex. Gopal argues this fact by first describing the tribal origins of these practices. In a book largely centered on individuals and anecdotes, this is a clear decision by the author to provide broader context. Viewed through this lens, restrictions on women had a certain, if outdated, logic and were not intended to be discriminatory. Gopal furthers his argument through his portrayal of Heela. The author chooses Heela as a subject because she had many of the elements that should have allowed her to lead an independent and public life. She was well-educated, had a supportive husband, and was highly motivated by what she termed a "tug" (88). Coupled with outside support, she was the perfect candidate for international efforts to empower Afghan women. Her experience with the sewing center, however, demonstrates that Heela and women like her had to contend with far more than Taliban law in pursuing education and work. Heela's main antagonist in this pursuit was her own mother-in-law and the larger community that shares her views, regardless of who controled the central government. As in the case of Afghanistan's cycle of violence, Gopal's implication here is twofold. Afghan society is far more complex than U.S. officials acknowledge and, as a result, simply toppling a government is not enough to remake society.

Vocabulary

pervading, preconceived, metastasize, epicenter, warlord, draconian, puritanical, vindictive, obscurantist, node, prodigious, scion, urbane, impotent, guerrilla, warren, machinations, commandeer, sobriquet, samizdat, doyenne, lugubrious, jangled, cloistered, internecine, cataclysmic, apostate, jihad, insouciance, secularism, purdah, detente, egalitarian, suzerainty, hierarchical, gravitas, recalcitrant, infidel

Part 2 (Chapters 5-7)

Summary

Chapter Five focuses on a series of events in Band-i-Timor, a collection of settlements in a desert area of Kandahar province. In late 2001, the area was controlled by a collection of tribal elders, led by Hajji Burget Khan and Hajji Bashar. Following the U.S. invasion, these two men led their community in supporting the U.S.-backed government and agreed to participate in a national assembly of tribal elders Hamid Karzai had proposed to select a transitional government. At this time, U.S. forces settled into former Soviet bases and began contracting local Afghans to provide logistical support and supplies. This was an enriching practice for Afghans but many, including Gul Agha Sherzai in Kandahar province, began pushing these relationships beyond the provision of supplies. Knowing that the military had been ordered to find and eliminate terrorists, Sherzai began feeding intelligence to officials about potential targets.

As Gopal explains however, the Taliban had been resoundingly defeated and its leadership publicly stated that they would not resist a stable Afghan government, if one were established. Few, if any, “terrorists” remained. Instead, Sherzai led U.S. forces to target his own personal and political enemies, a cycle that gave him broader control in the region and thus more influence over American policy. Included in Sherzai’s list of targets was Hajji Burget Khan, who died in U.S. custody after his compound was violently raided. Many of his associates were tortured at an American base for purportedly conspiring with the Taliban. The outrage of Khan’s tribesmen was temporarily controlled by Hajji Bashar, until he too was arrested by U.S. authorities for drug smuggling. Ironically, Bashar was arrested while in New York City, sharing information to help target the Afghan opium market and is serving a life sentence in a New York prison. The chapter closes with a third example of a former mujahedeen fighter who had renounced politics following the Soviet withdrawal but was repeatedly arrested and tortured by U.S. forces.

Chapter Six returns to Jan Muhammad whom Karzai appointed governor of Uruzgan province. In turn, Muhammad chose Abdul Qudus, a fellow Popalzai tribesman, to be the district governor of Khas Uruzgan, the home of Musqinyar and Heela. The people of Khas Uruzgan, however, had already chosen their own governor, a man referred to as Groundskeeper Yunis. The resulting standoff grew increasingly tense, with no one in a higher position of authority willing to settle the dispute. At one point, several major Taliban commanders came to the town intending to surrender their weapons and pledge loyalty to the new Karzai-led national government, but were unsure which governor to approach. In a bizarre, but seemingly common, incident, U.S. forces raided the compounds of both men in a single night, having been fed contradictory intelligence that both were Taliban fighters. The United States eventually released the men captured during these raids with an apology stating that only pro-government civilians had been killed.

As Jan Muhammad expanded his role in government, allowing him to regain the honorific suffix “Khan,” he became a conduit for U.S. aid money flowing to local Afghans. As a result, JMK, as the Americans called him, could command the loyalties of local leaders who needed funds for various projects. He also commanded his own personal militia, which he ordered to kill a Ghilzai tribal leader named Pai Muhammad. The elder had briefly allied with the Taliban but shifted support to the Karzai government. Such an evolution, however, was meaningless to JMK in his drive for revenge against his former enemies. Pai Muhammad was replaced by another elder selected by the community, Muhammad Nabi, who had once openly defied the Taliban and spent time in the same prison as JMK. Despite his public support for the Karzai government, he too was arrested and tortured by U.S. forces for supposedly maintaining a cache of weapons. Rather than continue to endure this treatment, Nabi fled to Pakistan.

Gopal ends Chapter Six by describing a similar feud between two warlords in northern Afghanistan. In this case however, United Nations negotiators settled the dispute without violence. The difference here, as one U.N. official described, was that in the absence of U.S. troops, neither warlord could manipulate foreign soldiers into settling their conflict.

Chapter Seven focuses on events in Zurmat district where a major battle had taken place between U.S. forces and Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters during the 2001 invasion. As a result, U.S. official viewed the area as a hotbed of terrorist activity. Gopal relates of series of local officials who were arrested by the Americans and accused of supporting terrorism without real evidence. As in previous cases, these men had clearly just run afoul of rivals well-connected to the Americans. Dr. Hafizullah, a longtime opponent of the Taliban and competent district governor, was targeted because his corruption investigations began implicating members of the Kabul government. His replacement, Commander Naim approached the Americans to pledge his support and inquire about Dr. Hafizullah. He too, was accused of terrorism and arrested and both men were sent to the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. An anti-Taliban militia leader named Commander Parre was tortured extensively by U.S. troops in prison after he angered the local police chief, Abdullah Mujahed. Mujahed, who had also claimed that Dr. Hafizullah was a terrorist, was himself sent to Guantanamo after a falling out with U.S. commanders. Hundreds of other pro-American militants and political leaders were detained on vague accusations of supporting terrorism, largely originated by rivals seeking to secure their own survival. Lacking knowledge of local politics and sufficient coordination, military units often arrested individuals working toward the same mission with different units. The overall impact of these practices was the devastation of U.S. relations with local communities. Gopal purports that the Americans were simultaneously removing and imprisoning their connections to these communities and angering their members by humiliating their leaders.

Analysis

The overall purpose of Part Two is to demonstrate how Afghan powerbrokers manipulated the U.S. military into intervening in local disputes. This involvement is a major theme of the entire book. Gopal presents this in multiple ways throughout this section. Chapter Five examines two men, Hajji Bashar and Hajji Burget Khan, who were U.S. allies in their effort to install a new Afghan government. Although these individuals do not appear later in the text, they serve an important function in this chapter. As Gopal suggests, these were exactly the type of local allies that the United States sought to cultivate. They were both supporting American policy and had legitimacy among the local tribal community. Despite this, they were targeted by the Americans because of faulty intelligence from Sherzai. Through this, they became symbolic of purported American allies generally. Like all Afghans, these men were at the mercy of their local rivals and the U.S. military. Even as U.S. officials sought to find clear and consistent allies, local conditions, most notably tribal politicking prevented them from doing so. Instead of achieving their broader mission, American troops became a tool for influential Afghans to wield in their long-running conflicts. Gopal argues that U.S. misunderstanding of local conditions precluded any chance of success.

This theme is furthered through the example of Jan Muhammad (JMK) and his feud with the Ghilzai tribe. Here, Gopal focuses on the man directing U.S. troops, rather than the individuals he targeted. This allows the author to clearly demonstrate the motives and tactics of leaders like JMK. As introduced in Chapter Two, JMK was motivated to seek revenge on the Taliban, regardless of whether or not his perceived enemies were still active Taliban militants, and to build his influence in Uruzgan province. To accomplish this, he used his connections to government funding to command the loyalty of local leaders. This too, represents a disconnect between the American and Afghan view of this conflict. For Afghans like JMK, his local grievances were far more important than a larger national project to create a stable Afghanistan. As a result, American funding, in addition to military power, became a weapon for tribal leaders. This money, rather than achieving a more significant U.S. objective, became entangled in JMK’s schemes to weaken his opponents and consolidate his influence.

The long list of examples that Gopal provides in Chapter Seven demonstrates that the examples of Hajji Bashar, Hajji Burget Khan, and JMK were not unique. Gopal conveys this through the specific cases presented, but emphasizes it through his narrative structure. The author moves quickly from one example to the next, often mentioning an obscure connection between the individuals described. He provides the reader limited opportunity to process the implications of one case before presenting another. The reader is effectively overwhelmed by the sheer number of individuals affected by U.S. raids and the relevant details. This mirrors the confusion of Afghans and Americans involved in these events. U.S. actions were inexplicable to the Afghans who tried to comprehend larger motives and justifications. Simultaneously, U.S. officials were themselves often confused by contradictory intelligence, shifting alliances, and a lack of coordination. This chapter conveys a metaphorical “fog of war”; in each case, the United

States was focused on short-term objectives but unable or unwilling to place each action in a larger context.

Finally, the events in this section relate to the theme of categories, first introduced by Gopal in the Prologue. Part One demonstrates how Afghans did not fit neatly into the categories constructed by the American mindset. Part Two expounds on this by demonstrating how this mindset was manipulated by local leaders. Gopal clearly states that the Taliban had quickly ceased to play a major role in the conflict. As a result, there was no one that clearly fit into the “terrorist” category. Individuals like Sherzai and JMK, knowing the Americans were intent on these distinctions, labeled their rivals as terrorists and made them the target of U.S. raids. While the focus on strict categories had been a clear blindspot earlier in the text, Part Two presents its tragic implications. Almost all of the individuals targeted in the operations Gopal describes were tortured by U.S. intelligence officials. While this treatment would be reprehensible in any case, it is particularly horrific when applied to individuals who originally sought to support American efforts. It is, however, the darkly logical extension of the terrorist categorization. If one views Afghan society as brightly divided and considers all those on one side of the divide as responsible for the 9/11 attacks, the torture of prisoners could seem justified.

Vocabulary

culvert, notorious, pragmatism, supplicant, emasculation, patronage, imperatives, entreat, argot, spurious, sinecure, crucible, obdurate, preternatural, aquiline, duplicity, coiffed

Part 3 (Chapters 8-9)

Summary

Chapter Eight returns to Heela and Musqinyar in Khas Uruzgan in mid-2004. At this time, Afghanistan's first Presidential election was approaching and the couple received a letter stating that the United Nations (UN) was looking for workers to register local residents to vote. The letter specifically encouraged women to apply. Both Heela and Musqinyar volunteered and they began travelling from village to village registering residents. At first, many tribal leaders were resistant to the idea of women voting and refused to let Heela speak to them. The couple, however, devised a ruse in which Heela would pretend to hand out cheap medicine from the pharmacy and, when alone with groups of women, speak with them about voting and the upcoming election. She found a range of attitudes among the voters; some eagerly registered and agreed that a woman's vote was solely her discretion, others felt it was wrong to vote differently from their husbands, and some refused to register at all. Heela was extremely driven in her mission, learning as much as possible about each candidate so that she could educate the women she registered. She also began to consider a future in politics, continuing her work with the UN or for a candidate.

At the same time however, an NGO worker was mysteriously killed in a neighboring village. The UN warned its employees that the security situation was deteriorating and Musqinyar concluded that Heela would remain at home for her own safety and stop registering women to vote. A few months later, on election day, Musqinyar was hired to supervise all of the polling places in the district. He agreed to let Heela supervise the women's polling place, provided she was given security guards. Although no women arrived to vote, the district as a whole had extremely high turnout and Heela was excited that traditional attitudes in the district seemed to be shifting.

By this time, Qudus Khan, the district governor of Khas Uruzgan had been killed by his own police chief. This internecine fighting, largely orchestrated by JMK to eliminate his rivals, resulted in a flurry of revenge killings among tribal leaders. Finally, Commander Zahir, known for his combative temper and corrupt practices, was appointed by JMK as the district's police chief. At a meeting of tribal elders and local educated people focused on convincing the province government to remove Zahir, Musqinyar boldly spoke out against JMK, saying nothing would change in the area while he was still in charge. The other men, knowing how JMK and Zahir had targeted their enemies in the past, were unwilling to speak out themselves.

After the election, Musqinyar learned that the Zahir's police had been fining residents who could not prove that they had voted. Infuriated by this corruption and the effect it could have on villagers' perception of democracy, Musqinyar went to the local governor to complain. When it became clear that the governor was also involved in the plot, Musqinyar threatened to report him to the UN and the central government. As he exited the governor's office, he noticed that Commander Zahir had been watching him.

The next night, Musqinyar slept in his pharmacy, fearing he would be attacked by Zahir's men on his drive home. In the morning, his fears were confirmed when he drove past a car, similar to his own, riddled with bullets with three dead bodies inside. While he tried to reassure Heela when she began having nightmares about men chasing her with guns, it was clear that Musqinyar's safety was at risk. One night, while Musqinyar was out, Heela saw dark figures moving around in her front yard. She took her husband's gun and fired into the yard, scaring away the mysterious intruders. The next day, Zahir's wives came to Heela's home, ostensibly to seek medical care, but the women warned her that she and her family should leave until the security situation improved. When Musqinyar learned that his name was on Zahir's list of "troublemakers," he began to make plans for his family's escape back to Kabul. He sought help from the local UN office, but officials there did not have a phone that he could use and would not assign him bodyguards, stating that, as he was no longer their employee, he was not their responsibility.

Despite Heela's objections, Musqinyar continued to work during this period, believing the family needed to make as much money as possible before leaving. As he was driving home one evening with two of his sons, Musqinyar's car was approached by three men he did not recognize. At home, Heela heard a series of gunshots. Fearing the worst, she rushed out into the road, doing so without her face covered for the first time in ten years. She was quickly tackled to the ground by two old women who said she could not go any further because a group of men would see her. As she sat wailing on the ground, the women assured Heela that her family had not been hurt.

Chapter Nine begins with Heela in her house, attempting to piece together what had occurred. She had been dragged back to her home by the two older women who promised to look after her younger sons, Nawid and Walid. Her brother-in-law Shaysta informed her that Musqinyar and their sons Omaid and Jamshed had all been injured and were being treated. Shortly after, however, Shaysta brought Musqinyar's body to the house, revealing that he had been killed. While her sons were still alive and being treated in American field hospitals, Heela was overcome with grief. Adding to her pain, Heela remained concerned that Commander Zahir's men would attack her and her family, a fear confirmed when she heard people moving outside her house at night. Her neighbors were also unwilling to provide help watching her children or working in the family's fields, as they normally would following a death like Musqinyar's.

Local custom, resistant to the idea of a single woman living alone, dictated that a widow marry her husband's brother, in Heela's case, Shaysta. Heela, however, was extremely resistant to this idea. Resolved that she would survive this tragedy like she had the other difficult events in her life, Heela and her sons left her house in the middle of the night determined to escape the village. Still needing a male escort, she stopped at Shaysta's house and told him that there was money at Musqinyar's pharmacy that she needed to get before someone else stole it. Shaysta called Heela insane for going out at night like that, but agreed to escort her to retrieve the money. As they approached the pharmacy, however, Heela continued walking into the open desert toward an American military base. When Shaysta called her a whore and threatened to kill her, Heela pulled out the gun she had been carrying to demonstrate that she was serious about leaving

the area. Soldiers on the walls of the base told her to drop her gun and raise her arms, but an Afghan translator recognized Nawid and Walid and had the Americans open the base's gate to allow the family to enter. Heela wanted to tell the Americans everything that had happened to her, but she was afraid that they would refuse to help her is she criticized their supposed ally, Commander Zahir. Instead, Heela said that the Taliban killed her husband and a few days later, she was flown away from Khas Uruzgan in a helicopter with Nawid and Walid.

Analysis

Part Three addresses two of the book's major themes: the focus on survival and the conflict between traditional and Western values. A significant portion of the text focuses on Musqinyar's attempts to ensure the physical safety of his family. He stopped Heela's voter registration efforts, insisted that she have security guards with her while supervising the polling station, and attempted to leave Khas Uruzgan when it became clear that Commander Zahir was targeting him. When he was killed, Heela assumed these responsibilities. More importantly, however, Heela was forced to ignore the larger dynamics of her country's conflict to ensure survival. One of the most important passages in this book is Heela's thought process when deciding to tell the American soldiers that Musqinyar had been killed by the Taliban. As she believed, "her life now depended on the Americans, and there was no escaping the fact that she had to choose a side, like everyone else around her had done. The neutral ones ended up buried; the shrewd survived. She had to speak in a language they would understand" (180). It is clear that Heela felt she could not trust the Americans to help her if she criticized Zahir. While Heela was supportive of the American effort generally, she had to disregard these larger goals for her own survival. This was an understandable decision on her part, but it did, in a minor way, complicate the mission of U.S. troops. By refusing to implicate a corrupt official, Heela contributed to the flawed Taliban-centric narrative that had inhibited the American effort. Such considerations are, however, necessarily less important than physical safety.

This calculus mirrors Heela's general approach to the voter registration work she did on behalf of the UN. While Heela was clearly dedicated to supporting Afghan democracy, her primary motivation in this effort was her own personal fulfillment and empowerment. Since leaving Kabul and particularly following the closure of the sewing center, Heela had felt trapped by the physical walls of her home and the cultural norms of rural life. Working for the UN, however, allowed her to reenter the public sphere, connect with other women, and earn money for her family. While her specific goals shifted throughout her life, Heela had consistently been interested in supporting herself and having a life independent of her husband. In doing so, Heela was focused on survival in an emotional and psychological sense. For her, pursuing her goals had always been nearly as important as physical safety. Gopal's descriptions of Heela throughout the book focus on her state of mind and often refer to "the tug," how she terms her desire to be more than a housewife. This mindset is further demonstrated in Heela's resistance to marrying Shaysta. Though she would have been physically safe, she did want to be

beholden to someone who did not support her goals like Musqinyar did. In this way, survival for Heela, and for women like her, is portrayed as far more than basic security.

This idea, however, conflicts with many traditional Afghan values. While Heela faced specific physical threats throughout this section, it is clear that the traditional tribal values that restrict women's activity outside their homes were far more impactful. Heela clearly wanted to lead an independent life and support broader initiatives to empower women. However, she repeatedly encountered barriers, such as tribal leaders not wanting women to vote, that prevented her from doing so. These barriers are clearest in the events following Musqinyar's death. Heela was immediately beholden to Shaysta, a man she did not like and had no interest in marrying. Without Musqinyar's support, she had no way to continue her work with the UN or an NGO. Thus, Heela's resistance to Shaysta is symbolic of a larger struggle between women's traditional roles and their aspirations. By refusing to marry Shaysta or stay with him in the village, Heela both asserted her own independence and recast how her community viewed women. The intense backlash she encountered from Shaysta, however, demonstrates how deeply ingrained this mindset was and how remarkable it was for Heela to act as she did.

Vocabulary

indiscretion, venality, diffidence, convalescing, ineluctable, caroming

Part 4 (Chapters 10-12)

Summary

Chapter Ten returns to Akbar Gul, previously known as Mullah Cable, who had fled from his Taliban unit to Pakistan, then to Iran in an attempt to find work. With the Taliban's fall, President Hamid Karzai encouraged Afghan refugees to return and help rebuild their country. Akbar Gul heeded this call, but was unable to find a job in Kabul, thus he returned to his ancestral home in Wardak province. Akbar Gul was optimistic about the future of Afghanistan and believed that the American presence might ultimately be beneficial in providing stability. He began working at a small electronics shop and quickly became known for his ability to fix cell phones. His reputation, though somewhat based on the fact the he would secretly buy his customers entirely new phones if he broke theirs, spread through neighboring districts, enriching Akbar Gul and allowing him to expand his business. Before long, however, members of the Afghan National Police arrived at his shop and demanded that he fix their phones for free. It was clear that incidents like this were not unique. All of Akbar Gul's neighbors had stories to tell about their mistreatment at the hands of corrupt officials, leading to widespread discontent.

Shortly after, Akbar Gul was contacted by a friend from his time in the Taliban who asked if he wanted to return to "work," a euphemism for the revived Taliban. Akbar Gul, believing conditions would eventually improve, declined. Other former Taliban fighters, however, had reached the opposite conclusion. Immediately following the American invasion, many Taliban fighters had attempted to surrender to the new government. Most were refused however, and repeatedly arrested, imprisoned, and tortured long after they had renounced their membership and surrendered any weapons. Gopal points out that former Talibs became extremely frustrated, not because they believed they were blameless, but because other groups that had committed similar atrocities were not targeted and were often given government support. As a result, Mullah Omar reorganized top Taliban leaders in Pakistan and began directing attacks against the government in Afghanistan. In his words, "war [was] forced upon" the Taliban (195). Over time, Akbar Gul became increasingly convinced that the United States was intent on colonizing Afghanistan, believing that a powerful country could not knowingly support such corrupt institutions without ulterior motives. As a result, he rejoined the Taliban in early 2005.

Chapter Eleven begins with Akbar Gul travelling to a nearby region called the Tangi to meet with a Taliban leader. He was given a rifle and $330 to begin anti-American operations and quickly recruited several friends, all of whom were eager for revenge on the U.S.-backed government, to join his unit. Another man, Mullah Manan, joined a similar unit after JMK destroyed his poppy field, depriving his family of income. In order to buy weapons for the group, Akbar Gul convinced the driver of a fuel truck to turn over his load, claim his truck was hijacked by an armed group, and share the profits from a black market sale. With his share, Akbar Gul bought a variety of weapons from U.S.-backed warlords, who were otherwise being forced to sell their weapons to a UN

disarmament program at a lower price. With these weapons, Akbar Gul created a check point on the local highway, the first Taliban one in the area. Before long, Akbar Gul's unit became more brazen, striking U.S. forces and Afghan police with roadside bombs and ambushes. The group's success increased their recruitment and fundraising ability, leading to further success.

As Taliban units like Akbar Gul's began controlling more and more of the country's rural areas, the U.S. military was compelled to respond. Fearing that American troops were looking for him when he saw them enter his village, Akbar Gul decided to stay at a friend's house for a few nights. When the Americans attacked that same night, Akbar Gul fled from the house. The next day, Akbar Gul saw four U.S. soldiers guarding an exposed hillside and called other Taliban fighters to help him ambush the group. An American airstrike eventually forced Akbar Gul's group to retreat, but he became famous for supposedly killing four U.S. soldiers. In reality, the soldiers had all survived the attack, but Akbar Gul's reputation grew throughout the district, encouraging him to attempt even more daring operations.

Chapter Twelve begins in autumn 2008 with an account of a Taliban attack on a bus in southern Afghanistan. Fighters kidnapped and executed all but two of the bus's passengers, believing they were Afghan army recruits who had come to fight the Taliban. In reality, all of the passengers were headed to the Iranian border, hoping to be smuggled across to find work. News of the massacre spread throughout Afghanistan and led to widespread anti-Taliban protests.

Next, Gopal describes events in the village of Garloch where a Taliban commander had temporarily lived. Even after the village residents pressured the commander to leave, calling him a coward for living among civilians, American forces continued to attack the area, reportedly looking for militants. A series of raids killed several civilians and destroyed homes and livestock. Enraged with the Americans but not wanting to join the Taliban, the entire village relocated to new settlement made of small canvas tents, referred to as "New Garloch."

Gopal also describes an interview he completed with Mullah Manan. After joining the Taliban, Manan worked to diminish the government's role in his area. Knowing that money led to influence, Manan warned that anyone working for the government or using government money would be killed. While he claimed the Taliban would provide services in their place, this rarely occurred. In one instance, Manan's unit beheaded a young man who had been running a government checkpoint. Manan stated that beheadings like this happened two or three times each month.

The remainder of Chapter Twelve focuses on an internal power struggle between Akbar Gul and another Taliban commander in his area, Ghulam Ali. Because Ghulam Ali owned the district's only gas station, his unit was much better funded and could attract more recruits. Impressed with his success, the Taliban's leadership appointed him the governor of Chak district, a position Akbar Gul previously held. Akbar Gul originally tolerated this, but became angry when Ali ordered the villagers to stop paying taxes to the government to run the nearby power plant. Though Akbar Gul had no interest in

supporting the government, he did not want to lose the public's support when the power plant was turned off. He also objected to Ali acting like "the king of Chak" (228). The disagreement between the two men escalated and they were both called to Peshawar, Pakistan to meet with Taliban leaders. In Peshawar, both men were brought to a large compound full of Taliban commanders and clerics. However, an agent from the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence service, was clearly the center of the meeting. He listened to both men, eventually instructing Ghulam Ali to stop his power plant scheme on the expectation that Akbar Gul would be more cooperative. While Ali's influence in the district continued to grow, Akbar Gul again appealed to Taliban leadership in Quetta, Pakistan to rein him in.

While in Quetta, he toured Taliban mosques and schools, seeing hundreds of young boys, future Taliban fighters, memorizing the Koran. The Quetta council was generally pleased with Akbar Gul and promised to watch Ghulam Ali more closely. Despite this, Akbar Gul was becoming disillusioned with the Taliban. He resented his loss of stature and blamed his fellow commanders for Ghulam Ali's rise. Throughout the country, the Taliban were responsible for more civilian deaths than the Americans. Simultaneously, American attacks were wiping out most of Akbar Gul's experienced fighters. At this time, an old associate contacted Akbar Gul, offering him a guaranteed government job if he agreed to switch sides. A few years earlier, he would have gladly accepted this position, but now Akbar Gul felt he could not possibly join the government he had been fighting. Though he felt little remaining connection to the Taliban, Akbar Gul rejected the offer and returned to "work."

Analysis

Akbar Gul was a clear example of someone who did not fit neatly into one of the categories conceptualized by American officials. By the end of this section, he would be labeled a "terrorist," having killed multiple American and Afghan soldiers as a member of the Taliban. This label is far more justified than many of the others applied in earlier sections, but it still does not represent the entirety of Akbar Gul's situation. It is telling that Gopal chooses to use the euphemism "work" when referring to Afghans rejoining the Taliban. This is a term used by the Afghans themselves, but is also characterizes how they view the Taliban. Terrorism, and more specifically the Afghan Taliban, are typically viewed in ideological terms - as enemies of democracy. Gopal suggests that this view is inaccurate. For men like Akbar Gul, the Taliban was work. It was something one had to do and may have enjoyed at some level, but ultimately is a transactional process. Akbar Gul rejoined the Taliban because he needed a source of income, a pursuit to fill his time, and a sense of purpose. This is particularly true after Afghan police harass him at his cell phone shop. Throughout the text, Akbar Gul never seemed particularly interested in the Taliban's strict Islamism. At the beginning of Chapter Ten, he refers to them as a "diversion, merely a job that had to be done, a job he hadn't put much thought into" (183). Undoubtedly, this is a self-serving characterization, but it is still indicative of his motivations. Though Akbar Gul fights the Afghan government and its American backers, he is not a terrorist in the strictest sense. Terrorism relies on an

ideology, but Akbar Gul does not care about ideology, he simply cares about protecting and advancing himself.

This characterization is strengthened by Gopal's description of Akbar Gul's conflict with Ghulam Ali. During this episode, it is clear that Akbar Gul was deeply troubled by Ghulam Ali's prominence in the area. On two separate occasions, he traveled all the way to Pakistan to address the situation. This is both time consuming and potentially dangerous; Akbar Gul recalled other Taliban commanders who disappeared after questioning the decisions of the group's leadership. By the end of Chapter 12, he considered leaving the Taliban completely. At first glance, this is an odd course of action. Ghulam Ali was a fellow Taliban member and Akbar Gul should have been celebrating his success. His reaction, however, shows that the Taliban's goals were not Akbar Gul's highest priorities. He was more focused on his own goals and status, rather than those of the organization as a whole. When those aligned, he was happy to use the Taliban as an avenue to improve his own situation. Once Ghulam Ali became dominant however, Akbar Gul was disenchanted with the group. This is similar to Heela's experience working with pro-government NGOs. In both cases, these individuals worked for groups with grand, if opposing, ideological goals. For Heela and Akbar Gul themselves however, these goals were secondary to their own survival. Heela worked for the UN because it allowed her to leave her home and lead a fulfilling life. Akbar Gul's mindset was similar. The Taliban provided resources and, more importantly, a greater purpose. In both cases, these individuals were primarily focused on their psychological survival.

The theme of survival also appears briefly in the two small anecdotes Gopal provides in Chapter 12. Anti-Taliban protests erupted after members of the group execute men who were travelling to Iran for work. These men were not involved in Taliban's fight with the government, they were focused on survival. The Taliban, in turn, faced public disdain for ignoring this distinction. A similar situation existed among the villagers of Garloch, who were forced to relocate after near-constant American attacks. Gopal shows that these villagers, like the men travelling to Iran, were primarily driven by a will to survive. Gopal wants to readers to see that given the option of joining the Taliban and fighting the Americans, they refused. To them, the ideological distinction between these two groups was meaningless.

Vocabulary

ignominious, rancor, nadir, abscond, metier, nascent, germinate, escarpment, allay, abhorrent, circuitous

Part 5 (Chapters 13-14)- Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 13 returns to Heela, who moved frequently in the months immediately following her arrival at the U.S. military camp in Tirin Kot. At the camp, she was reunited with her son Jamshed and lived in a tent for a few weeks. The family was later brought to Kandahar Airfield, a larger U.S. base. There, Omaid, who had survived four bullet wounds due to the work of American doctors, was recovering in the city's hospital. A doctor at the hospital gave Heela fifty dollars worth of Afghan currency, allowing her to find an apartment in the city. Before long, however, Heela realized it would be extremely difficult to find work. When her money ran out, a friend of Musqinyar's built Heela a sign to put outside her house advertising midwife services. The work allowed her to afford an additional month's rent, but it ended when Musqinyar's friend left the city. Heela realized that she had no choice but to return to Uruzgan to seek the assistance of Musqinyar's larger circle of friends. At that time, Uruzgan was still controlled by JMK, but international officials viewed him as a destabilizing influence. Though he still enjoyed American support, JMK was later removed from his post by President Karzai at the request of the Dutch government, who refused to send troops to the area until he was removed. JMK was promoted to a position as special adviser to the President and claimed the Dutch were secretly aiding the Taliban.

In Uruzgan, Heela and her sons lived with one of Musqinyar's friends, Hajji Akhund, who allowed her to stay on his property and agreed to cover for her if the locals discovered that a single woman was living there. Heela managed to keep her secret for a year while also working with an NGO that gave medical aid to women and children. When she was discovered, however, her house was ransacked and the villagers began to spread rumors about her. At the same time, she received a letter and two phone calls from the Taliban, who threatened her with violence if she did not stop working with the international NGO. Wanting to continue her work, Heela agreed to provide medicine to the Taliban, as well. As before, Heela was primarily focused on survival and was willing to help the Taliban provided they left her and her family alone. She settled into a routine of working for the NGO each morning, returning home before her sons each day to prepare dinner, and falling asleep to the familiar sounds of distant gunfire and rockets. One day however, her son Nawid, the most outgoing of the four boys, was picked up outside her house by Uncle Ruhollah a cousin of JMK's known for molesting young boys. Horrified and unable to contact Hajji Akhund or her American associates, Heela convinced the NGO's driver to bring her to JMK's home village of Touri.

As described in the beginning of Chapter 14, Heela's search for Nawid was unsuccessful. She stopped at JMK's compound, but he was in Kabul and his assistants claimed they were unable to contact him. At her home, Heela sat silently with her three other sons when two armed men returned Nawid. They promised her that he was unharmed; he had been saved by the "meshr," Matiullah Khan. Matiullah was a nephew of JMK who had risen to power by ruthless enforcing security on the roads and in the

area around Tirin Kot. In doing so, he had earned a contract with the Americans and the awe of local Afghans. A few days after Nawid's return, one of Matiullah's militiamen visited Heela to give her the meshr's phone number, telling her to call if anyone ever bothered her. When Heela called a few weeks later to report that a neighbor had been leering at her through her windows, the man was locked up, threatened, then released with the warning that next time, he would hang.

Heela began working at the local hajj office, which coordinated travel for Muslims to make their pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Far more educated than her male colleagues, she quickly became the most popular and skilled bureaucrat in the office. One day, she was visited by Musqinyar's uncle, who offered to take her with him on the hajj. The idea of travelling all the way to Saudi Arabia seemed outlandish, given that she normally could not go to the local bazaar without an escort, but she eagerly agreed. Upon returning, Heela was referred to as "hajjanay" and highly respected individual among the men in the village. The local women, however, gossiped about Heela's familiarity with men and occasionally threw stones at her windows, driving her to look for a new job. While working for an election-related NGO, Heela travelled to Kabul. On her way home, she met Matiullah Khan in the Kabul airport. Knowing her by reputation, Matiullah asked her to work for him in his local campaign on behalf of President Karzai. Heela enjoyed the work, but was limited to speaking to housewives in the few villages in Uruzgan that remained under government control.

Hanifi, one of Musqinyar's friends also worked on the campaign. Hanifi was a member of Uruzgan provincial council, an elected body of 12 elders charged with advising the governor. Two of the council members, including Hanifi, represented Uruzgan in the Afghan senate. Sensing that she wanted to return to Kabul, Hanifi encouraged Heela to run in the local elections. Though she was hesitant at first, Heela registered to run. Matiullah, eager to stack local government with his allies, heavily supported Heela's campaign by providing her a car, staff, and campaign posters. Though Heela met only a small number of voters, the implication of Matiullah support was clear and she was elected to the local council. When Matiullah sent a car to retrieve Heela following the elections, the driver informed her that as a "wakil," lawmaker, she no longer needed a male escort and could travel as she pleased.

The council's first business was choosing the two senators who would represent Uruzgan in Kabul. After a lengthy discussion, Heela volunteered herself, but the men on the council quickly reminded her that Uruzgan did not have woman senators. She called Matiullah directly, but he sounded annoyed that Heela would openly ask for his intervention. Heela felt ridiculous, having overstepped her role during her first day in office, but she was notified later that she was, in fact, chosen as one of the province's senators. When she arrived in Kabul to begin her term, an official asked for her surname to process her identification card. Though custom dictated that Heela take Musqinyar's name as her own, she wanted to emphasize her independence. Thus she chose "Achekzai," the name of her tribe as a symbol that she had come to represent the people of Uruzgan.

In the Epilogue, Gopal describes how events in Afghanistan were shifting in late 2010, given the United States's impending departure. By this time, Akbar Gul was extremely discouraged by events in Afghanistan, feeling there was no group, including the Taliban, that he could trust. He had been secretly passing intelligence to the U.S. military, but was later arrested by the Americans and imprisoned at Bagram Air Force Base. Jan Muhammad, who claimed the Taliban had taken over Uruzgan in his absence, was killed when armed men attacked his compound. Matiullah Khan maintained control over most of Uruzgan, but was also competing with Daud Khan, a local tribal leader and militia commander. Overall, Gopal states that while the United States claimed to be building the Afghan state, they had built a much more significant power network outside the state. In practice, Afghanistan was primarily controlled by warlords who had been contracted by the Americans to provide security. Infighting between these warlords, rather than the Taliban, was now the most significant cause of violence in the country. The book closes with Senator Heela who dreaded the coming departure of U.S. troops and the resulting power vacuum. Gopal states that this war could not be won through capturing territory and building institutions, but by merely surviving amidst incredible violence and chaos.

Analysis

The focus of Chapters 13 and 14 is Heela's return to Uruzgan, involvement in local politics, and eventual election as a Senator. This is meant to serve as somewhat hopeful, if not entirely optimistic, end to Gopal's work. Heela's election is the fulfillment of her lifelong ambition to have a career and life independent of her husband's. Beginning with her introduction, Heela had ambitions to become a teacher and was greatly dismayed when she was forced to move to a rural area and remain in her home at all times. Her time in Uruzgan was punctuated by repeated attempts to work outside her home, particularly in ways that would help other women. Her election as Senator, therefore, is the culmination of Heela's entire narrative. She achieved the ultimate status within her society. This is particularly clear in the statement by Matiullah's driver to Heela stating that she no longer needed a male escort. Before this point, Heela had been entirely dependent on the men in her life for permission to play an active role in public life. While Musqinyar was clearly supportive, his attitude did not change the overall practice in society. In contrast, her election resulted in true liberation for Heela. Not only could she act as she chose, but she could do so without relying on direct support from men. This signifies a form of transcendence, as Heela had shed her traditional constraints, marked by the fact that she is now referred to as "lawmaker" as opposed to "sister" or another feminine term.

Despite Heela's obvious success, Gopal details Matiullah's involvement to demonstrate the influence that extralegal warlords wield in Afghan society. It is clear that Heela would never have been elected without Matiullah's backing. He offered her protection from the Taliban, hired her to work on President Karzai's campaign, and eventually encouraged and supported her own candidacy. In this way, Heela is symbolic of Afghan democracy and the role of women in society. Her election directly aligned with American goals in Afghanistan. It simultaneously signified a functioning electoral system and the ability of

women to participate in that system. Much like Heela however, the system depended on the support of warlords like Matiullah. It is clear that Matiullah provided some benefit to both the Americans and Afghan society, but he was ultimately governed by his own interests. He brutally enforced security in order to receive American contracts. He supported candidates for office that would represent his interests. If those interests had shifted, Matiullah likely would have abandoned his support for democracy and women like Heela. This is clearly problematic in the long-run, as it suggests an inherent weakness in Afghan democracy. Gopal stresses this point more directly in the Epilogue. Matiullah was an integral part of the network of power that the United States created outside the Afghan government. This network ultimately controlled Afghanistan and determined whether or not democracy could function.

Vocabulary

prodigious, delineation, divination, arrhythmic, hajj, repartee, extricate

Important People

Mullah Cable/Akbar Gul

Akbar Gul is one of three major individuals described in this book. He is first introduced as Mullah Cable, but is referred to by the pseudonym Akbar Gul for the majority of the book.

Akbar Gul came of age in Kabul during the Afghan civil war. After his home and neighborhood were continually harassed by members of a militia fighting in the war, most of his family left the country to live in Pakistan. Wanting to protect himself and his family's home, Akbar Gul remained in Kabul and joined an ethnic Pashtun militia. Eventually, he became a commander in the Taliban and enforced their strict laws in northern Afghanistan. It was here that he acquired the name "Mullah Cable," a reference to his predilection for whipping those who violated Taliban law.

When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, Akbar Gul originally believed they would abandon the effort quickly and that he would be unaffected. Shortly after however, Akbar Gul's entire unit was killed by an American airstrike. Awed by U.S. technology and military power, he abandoned the Taliban and fled to Pakistan.

Akbar Gul travelled to Iran looking for work before returning to Afghanistan and his ancestral home in Wardak province. He worked as a cell phone repairer for a few months and was frequently harassed by Afghan national police. Angered by this humiliation, Akbar Gul rejoined the Taliban and became a prominent leader in his region. He and his unit were known for several successful attacks on U.S. and Afghan troops.

Another Taliban commander, Ghulam Ali, eventually rose to prominence in the same region. Backed by his lucrative gas station, Ghulam Ali supplanted Akbar Gul as the area's Taliban governor. Disenchanted by this, Akbar Gul became discouraged by the Taliban generally, but still considered himself a member. He eventually informed on the Taliban to U.S. officials. At the end of the book, Akbar Gul was in a U.S. prison for his terrorist activities.

Jan Muhammad

Jan Muhammad is the second major focus of this book. He is also referred to in the text as Jan Muhammad Khan and by his initials, JMK. He was a prominent political leader in Uruzgan province and a close friend of Hamid Karzai.

Jan Muhammad was part of a powerful family in Uruzgan and became a prominent mujahedeen commander during the Soviet invasion and Afghan civil war. During the period of Taliban rule, JMK was imprisoned, tortured, and set to be executed in a Taliban prison. He remained there until after the U.S. invasion in 2001. When the

Taliban surrendered to the new Afghan government, Hamid Karzai demanded that JMK be released. Though grateful to his friend, JMK was determined to seek revenge on his Taliban enemies. Karzai appointed JMK the governor of Uruzgan province, restoring his previous power and status.

As governor, Jan Muhammad orchestrated a brutal campaign against his political rivals. He is cited by Gopal as an exemplar of Afghan leaders manipulating the United States into attacking his personal enemies by tagging them as terrorists. Though JMK became unpopular with the people of Uruzgan and international groups working in the area, he enjoyed the support of the United States and President Karzai. He was finally forced from his position by the Dutch government, who refused to send additional troops to Uruzgan until JMK was removed. He was appointed as a special adviser to President Karzai and continued to resent the Dutch government, whom he claimed secretly supported the Taliban.

Heela Achekzai

Heela is the third major individual described by Gopal. She is the mother of four children who became an Afghan Senator in 2009.

Heela grew up in Kabul prior to the 1979 Soviet invasion. Like many women at the time, she had aspirations of attending college and becoming a nurse or teacher. Heela's husband Musqinyar was very supportive of her career goals. During the early period of the Soviet invasion and subsequent Afghan civil war, Heela and her neighbors in Kabul were relatively unaffected. As the conflict progressed, however, the area became increasingly violent, making it impossible for Heela to continue her education. Heela and Musqinyar left Kabul for his ancestral home in Uruzgan province when Heela was pregnant with their first child. In the more traditional Uruzgan, Heela was forbidden from leaving her home without a male escort and was forced to wear a burqa when she did. Though Heela dedicated herself to being an exemplary housewife, she longed for opportunities outside her home. A Taliban initiative to train women as nurses to treat other women gave Heela some opportunity to interact with visitors to her home, but this was fairly limited.

Following the U.S invasion, an international NGO chose Heela to oversee a women's sewing center in Uruzgan. The women involved, however, were defying cultural taboos against women working, forcing the center to be kept secret. Eventually, Musqinyar's mother and cousin discovered Heela's initiative and forced her to close the center. She was later chosen to assist Musqinyar in registering women to vote and supervising a polling place during national elections, but this too was a limited opportunity. Throughout this period, Heela encountered a cycle of fleeting chances to work outside her home before being forced to remain home again.

Following a dispute with Commander Zahir, the local police chief, Musqinyar was killed in an attack that also injured the family's two eldest sons. Stricken with grief and fearing for her own safety, Heela seemed destined for a life trapped in Khas Uruzgan. Local

custom dictated that Heela would marry her brother-in-law, Shaysta, but she refused to do so. Resolving to survive this tragedy, Heela forced Shasyta to escort her to the local American military base, where she asked for help evading the Taliban and reuniting with her injured sons. The Americans eventually took her to Kabul, where she struggled to find work.

Before long, Heela returned to Tirin Kot to stay with a friend of Musqinyar. For a time, Heela worked for a medical NGO, handing out medicines to local women. While doing so, she agreed to provide medicine to the Taliban after a fighter from the group threatened her for working with outsiders. Heela and her family also became acquainted with Matiullah Khan, a pro-American warlord who strictly enforced a level of stability and security in Uruzgan and promised to personally protect Heela. After meeting Matiullah in person, Heela began working for his local campaign to re-elect President Karzai. As her familiarity with the electoral process grew, a friend convinced her to run for provincial council with Matiullah's support. After winning this local election, she was chosen by her peers on the council to represent the province as a Senator in Kabul. This is a monumental moment for Heela, who adopted the name of her tribe as her last name, rather than follow the tradition of adopting her husband's name, signifying her independence and individuality as a woman.

Musqinyar

Musqinyar was Heela's husband and the father of her four sons. The two met and married in Kabul before the Soviet invasion and ensuing Afghan civil war. Throughout his life, Musqinyar was supportive of Heela's desire to educate herself and have a career. As the civil war made it increasingly difficult for Musqinyar to reach his office at the national health department, he decided to move the family to his ancestral home in Khas Uruzgan and open his own pharmacy. Although he often feared for her safety, Musqinyar helped Heela evade the tribal customs that forced her to remain in their home, often lying to his mother about their actions.

Like Heela, Musqinyar frequently worked for UN campaigns to register and educate voters about upcoming elections. He was committed to instilling democratic values in his community and sought to ensure that his fellow Afghans understood the importance of voting. As a result, he was extremely angry when he learned the Commander Zahir, the local police chief, was fining individuals that did not vote. His public denouncements of Zahir made him a target of local militias and Musqinyar began arranging for his family to leave the village. He was attacked and killed by Zahir's men before he could do so.

Shaysta

Shaysta was Musqinyar's brother. Living nearby in Uruzgan, Shaysta occasionally joined Musqinyar and Heela for holidays or other significant events. Following his brother's death, Shaysta took charge of the family's affairs and, as tradition prescribed,

planned to marry Heela. Heela, however, refused to comply and tricked Shaysta into escorting her to the local American base so she could leave the village.

Hamid Karzai

Hamid Karzai was a major political leader and the first elected President of Afghanistan following the American invasion. Even before the U.S. invasion, Karzai was a significant opponent of the Taliban government and sought to create a “Southern Alliance” of Pashtun fighters to overthrow the government. With the support of the U.S. military, he rose to prominence and remained ostensibly committed to the process of rebuilding Afghanistan. Despite this, he supported a number of corrupt officials, such as Jan Muhammad Khan and drew the ire of some Western officials.

Matiullah Khan

Matiullah Khan was a pro-government warlord in Uruzgan who rose to power in the later years of American presence in the country. He had a reputation for violence and harsh retribution, but did manage to provide security in a significant portion of the region. In order to cement his influence, he openly backed candidates in local elections with the implicit agreement that they would support his interests in the government.

Commander Zahir

Commander Zahir was the police chief in Uruzgan province. Like his close associate JMK, he was openly corrupt and used his influence over U.S. forces to have them target his political enemies. Zahir had Musqinyar killed after the latter publicly criticized him and his corrupt practices.

Ghulam Ali

Ghulam Ali was a Taliban commander in Chak District. As the owner of the local gas station, he had considerable resources to direct toward his unit’s violent activities. As he became increasingly successful, Ghulam Ali eclipsed Akbar Gul as the Taliban governor of Chak. This angered and alienated Akbar Gul and the two feuded repeatedly.

Gul Agha Sherzai

Gul Agha Sherzai was an anti-Taliban warlord in Kandahar who was contracted to supply the local American base and eventually shifted to providing U.S. forces with intelligence on supposed Taliban militants to target. These “Taliban” were in fact Sherzai’s personal enemies who had no direct conflict with the United States or the Afghan government. The author argues that Sherzai was one of many local warlords

who manipulated the U.S. obsession with finding and killing “terrorists” as a way to enrich themselves and eliminate potential rivals.

Objects/Places

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country in central Asia. Its Taliban-led government provided a safe haven for al Qaeda leadership and was thus invaded by the United States and its allies following the September 11th attacks.

Kabul

Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan.

The Soviet Invasion of 1979

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to provide support for the communist government that was under attack by anti-communist militant groups. When the Soviets withdrew, they left the country without a strong central government, leading to the Afghan civil war.

The Mujahedeen

The mujahedeen or “freedom fighters” was a general term for the rebel militant groups that fought the communist Afghan government and their Soviet backers during the 1980s. The U.S. government supported the mujahedeen with weapons and money.

The Afghan Civil War

Following the fall of Afghanistan’s communist government in the early 1990s, various mujahedeen groups fought each other for control of the country in the Afghan civil war. The civil war ended when the Taliban came to power.

The Taliban

The Taliban were a militant group that practiced and enforced a strict version of Islam when they controlled Afghanistan in the late 1990s. They were removed from power by the U.S. military in 2001.

The Northern Alliance

The Northern Alliance was a group of tribal militias that continued to resist the Taliban when they controlled Afghanistan's government. They sided with the United States during the 2001 invasion.

The American Invasion of 2001

Following the September 11th attacks, the U.S. government demanded that the Taliban government turn over al Qaeda leadership for trial in the United States. When they refused, the U.S. military invaded Afghanistan, removed the Taliban from power, and worked to establish a democratic system in Afghanistan.

Uruzgan

Uruzgan is a province in Afghanistan that was controlled by Jan Muhammad Khan after Hamid Karzai became President.

Khas Uruzgan

Khas Uruzgan is a town in Uruzgan province. It was the home of Heela and Musqinyar.

Tirin Kot

Tirin Kot was the capital of Uruzgan province and thus the home of Jan Muhammad Khan and the site of various violent attacks following the 2001 invasion. It was also the site of a major U.S. victory over the Taliban in 2001, for which Hamid Karzai received credit, building his reputation throughout Afghanistan.

Themes

Limited and over-generalized categories negatively affected the U.S.' success in Afghanistan.

Gopal wastes no time in his book claiming that American military and political leaders made a mistake by viewing the war in Afghanistan through only two sharply divided categories. On one side were pro-American democrats, who were vehemently opposed to al-Qaeda and the Taliban and wanted to install American-style democracy. The enemies were fundamentalist terrorists who despised Western values and modernity and wanted to return Afghanistan to system of strict Islamic and tribal law. This view was extended to the worldwide war on terrorism and became commonplace among most Americans. In contrast, Gopal argues that few Afghans fit neatly into these categories. Some were ostensibly American allies but often undercut U.S. efforts to advance their own interests. Others who sided with the Taliban did so out of necessity or frustration, but had no ideological conflicts with the new Afghan government. This oversimplification and misunderstanding of Afghan society is, in Gopal's view, the ultimate cause of America's failure to defeat the Taliban and fully stabilize Afghanistan.

This theme and the resulting American failures is demonstrated clearly in each of the three individuals Gopal follows closely. In many ways, Heela is a shining example of what the United States hoped to achieve in the new Afghanistan. However, while her accomplishments certainly aligned with American goals, she was not particularly tied to the United States. Instead, she sought employment and later political office as a personal endeavor. Conversely, Akbar Gul, as a member of the Taliban, is a stereotypical example of a terrorist and enemy to democracy. It is clear however, that he does not share the Taliban's basic ideology and only joined the group as a way to earn money and self fulfillment.

The theme of categories and its relation to American failure are clearest in the case of Jan Muhammad Khan. JMK was, as a provincial governor, nominally a U.S. ally. He enjoyed a close relationship with U.S. forces and was a personal friend of President Hamid Karzai. From an American perspective, he was clearly categorized favorably. Despite this, JMK was clearly corrupt and used his influence over the U.S. military to advance his personal goals. This is immoral in any case, but is particularly destructive given the circumstances. JMK's deplorable and violent actions became associated with the United States and its values as a whole. This alienated Afghans who would otherwise be willing to support the American effort and encouraged them to side with anti-U.S. elements like the Taliban. A similar situation emerged among lesser warlords like Gul Agha Sherzai. On a smaller scale, Sherzai and others like him used the American focus on categories to their advantage. By tagging their personal enemies as "terrorists," they ensured they would be targeted by U.S. military action. A more nuanced view would reveal that the vast majority of these individuals were actually supportive of the U.S. effort or at least stopped opposing it outright. As in the case of

JMK, the cemented perspectives of American officials turned initially receptive Afghan communities against them.

Survival was the primary motivation for most Afghans

While the United States and high-level Afghan leaders were focused on a grand ideological struggle, most Afghans were struggling to survive, both physically and psychologically, and resorting to extreme measures in order to do so.

This theme is most clear in the case of Akbar Gul, who leaves and then rejoins the Taliban over the course of the U.S. invasion. For him, involvement with the Taliban is purely a question of survival. Akbar Gul originally joins a local militia, which morphs into a Taliban unit, as a way to protect himself and his family's neighborhood. When the U.S. invades, Akbar Gul quickly abandons the Taliban when he witnesses the destructive power of a U.S. airstrike. Unlike the Taliban leaders that initially press him back into service, Akbar Gul is not interested in preserving the Taliban's ideological domination over the country and he quickly flees to neighboring Pakistan. After several years, he rejoins the Taliban only after he is repeatedly humiliated and extorted by Afghan policeman. Akbar Gul goes on to repeatedly target American equipment and lives and certainly bears responsibility for his actions, but it is clear he is not the anti-Western, religious fanatic he would be portrayed as. At each point in his life, Akbar Gul is most concerned with his own survival, both physical and psychological. As a young man he joins a militia for self-defense, but also for the opportunity to protect his family's home. He leaves the Taliban to save his own life, but also to avoid the humiliation and trauma of watching his comrades be killed. Finally, he rejoins the Taliban, driven by economic need and frustration at being repeatedly harassed by the Afghan government.

Heela's decisions, though less dramatic, also represent a primary focus on survival. Throughout the book, it is clear that Heela struggles with her reality of being restricted to her home. As an ambitious woman, she becomes deeply depressed as prospects for employment and outside interaction are repeatedly taken from her. Thus, she continues to seek these opportunities, particularly after Musqinyar's death, for her personal fulfillment. Further, she makes two very specific decisions to ensure her survival at the cost of hampering American efforts to defeat the Taliban. First, when she arrives at the U.S. base following Musqinyar's death, she claims he was killed by the Taliban, rather than truthfully implicate the supposed U.S. ally, Commander Zahir. Second, upon her return to Uruzgan, Heela secretly provides medicine to the Taliban to ensure the safety of her and her family. From a strictly ideological perspective, these actions contradict with Heela's general support for democracy and the new Afghan government. As with Akbar Gul however, her primary goal is survival, thus she disregards higher-level goals in certain circumstances.

The importance of tribal loyalties

Gopal argues throughout this book that Afghans do not resort to tribes because they are incapable of imagining a nationalist identity, rather tribes provide the most reliable, if flawed, source of stability.

The importance of tribal loyalties is an extension of the centrality of survival in Gopal's depiction of Afghan society. The author states clearly, when describing Akbar Gul's initial decision to join a militia group, the tribal connections are an important institution in Afghanistan. Akbar Gul joins an ethnic Pashtun militia, not because he is interested in some form of ethnic nationalism, but because this is the most reliable support system he can access. Similarly, when threatened by the violence of the Afghan civil war, Musqinyar and Heela leave Kabul for Uruzgan province, where their extended families and fellow Pashtuns can provide safe haven. As Gopal explains, tribes provide some level of stability in the otherwise chaotic and often violent Afghanistan. With a minimally functioning government and security force, tribes protect their members from outside violence.

On a broader scale, this explains the Taliban's ability to regain a foothold in southern Afghanistan. Like most of the residents in this area, the Taliban is a majority ethnic Pashtun group. As a result of the government's incompetence and corruption, the Taliban was viewed as one of two imperfect options. Given this choice, many Afghans sided with those with whom they shared a tribal background. In introducing this theme, Gopal attempts to challenge traditional American perspectives on Afghan tribalism. Tribal loyalty is often viewed as backward and counterproductive to the goal of Afghan state building. This is true in some sense, but the author clearly demonstrates the logic of such loyalty.

American involvement in local conflicts

American involvement in local conflicts is inextricably linked to the focus on categories, but is presented as the major proximate cause of U.S. failures in Afghanistan. This trend is presented thoroughly in Part Two (Chapters 5-7) of this book. Gopal describes a seemingly endless string of incidents in which the United States imprisoned, tortured, or killed potential allies. These events seem absurd to the reader. Tribal elders who were meeting and working with U.S. forces one day had their homes raided and were imprisoned the next. However, a closer examination reveals that political and tribal leaders used their influence and connections with the U.S. military to denounce their rivals as terrorists and target them for attack.

In this way, as Gopal describes, the U.S. activities were motivated not by carefully considered determinations of who threatened American interests, but rather the wishes of the most powerful, wealthy, and connected warlords. The author argues that this trend did not begin with the American invasion, but is part of a long history of foreign powers, most notably the Soviet Union, amplifying local conflicts by intervening with considerable military resources.

The conflict between traditional Afghan and modern western values regarding women

In contrast to most of the themes presented, Gopal's depiction of the conflict between traditional Afghan and modern Western values does largely conforms with typical understandings of the war in Afghanistan. Along with the obvious disruptions caused by violence, Gopal presents an Afghanistan that is experiencing cultural strife. While its urban centers were relatively modern before the Afghan civil war, Afghanistan was returned to an intensely paternalistic society, heavily influenced by traditional rural values, with the rise of the Taliban. Gopal presents these practices, most notably those that restrict the movement of women outside their homes, as a logical extension of the need for farmers in rugged areas to protect their property and families. Simultaneously however, they were incompatible with modern Afghan society and, most importantly, the aspirations of many of the women affected.

This conflict is explored thoroughly through Heela's experience in Uruzgan. Throughout her stay in the rural province, Heela was depressed by her inability to find consistent ways to advance a career or even interact with non-family members. She was continually barred from various activities by the objections of her mother-in-law, potential damage to her reputation in the village, or threats to her physical safety. These barriers remained even though her own husband was supportive of her aspirations. Only through extreme effort and risk does she succeed in becoming a senator.

It is noteworthy, however, that Heela relied on the support of a man, Matiullah Khan, in her election campaign. While Heela's personal achievement was laudable, the necessity of Matiullah's support suggests that it was exceedingly rare. The ability of women to act in the public sphere was still ultimately determined by men, suggesting that traditional values still maintain dominance. This is also clear when Matiullah's driver retrieved Heela after her electoral victory. The driver stated that, as a lawmaker, Heela no longer needed a male escort. This suggests that she had reached a level between man and woman. While this was promising for Heela personally, it suggests that women were still given a lower status. Afghan culture did not improve the position of women generally, but rather rewarded those who disregarded their womanhood.

Styles

Structure

This book is primarily structured around three primary individuals, Akbar Gul, Heela, and Jan Muhammad Khan. Though these three lived in generally the same region of Afghanistan, their experiences are only indirectly linked and they never encounter each other in person. Gopal's goal is to present the experiences of these individuals in connection to the war in Afghanistan, rather than a complete account of the war itself. As a result, while the narrative is structured roughly chronologically, it is driven by events in each individual's personal life, rather than major milestones in the war. Gopal only occasionally provides the dates of various events for context, suggesting that they are less important than the effects those events have on the communities depicted. As a result, this book is often more biographical, relying on the impressions and feelings of its subjects, rather than being strictly factual.

Gopal departs from this structure significantly in two places; first, when describing the Afghan civil war and later, in Part Two, when presenting the plethora of cases in which U.S. forces targeted potential allies. These two sections share a unique pattern. Gopal utilizes more specific factual information, including names and dates, but does so in a chaotic way. A long list of names are presented while events are not always presented in chronological order. In doing so, the author mirrors the effect these events had on Afghanistan as a whole. He successfully portrays the chaotic and seemingly endless cycle of violence and instability experienced by Afghans. Further, by using this technique early in the book, Gopal deconstructs the well-ordered style and depictions of the war that American readers are likely more familiar with.

Perspective

As is immediately clear, Gopal's goal in this book is to present the Afghanistan war from the perspective of Afghans themselves. In doing so, Gopal mirrors the perspective of the three individuals on which he focuses. In describing Jan Muhammad, he focuses on large ideological conflicts between the U.S. and the Taliban, as JMK imagined himself as a major player in these battles. Heela's experience is very focused on her household and local village. Even when outside groups, such as the Taliban or pro-government militias are mentioned, they are not accompanied by any description or larger context. Thus these sections mirror Heela's limited access to outside information and primary focus on herself and her family. Finally, Akbar Gul experienced a different view of the war than Heela, but his experiences, such as rejoining the Taliban, are still largely subjective and self-focused. This conveys Akbar Gul's basic understanding of the various sides to the conflict, but disregard for larger implications beyond his personal concerns. Overall, these descriptions are meant to convey the character's experiences, rather than Gopal's own thoughts. While he is clearly critical of U.S. actions in

Afghanistan, he rarely makes this criticism directly and instead allows the reader to draw their own conclusion based on the events presented.

Tone

As with his perspective, Gopal's tone primarily mirrors that of his subjects. Gopal repeatedly quotes and paraphrases JMK's bold denouncements of the Taliban and the Western officials who object to his leadership as well as his ringing praise of U.S. forces. This aligns with JMK's grandiose and theatrical personality. In contrast, Gopal traces Heela's cycle of fulfillment and depression, as her life shifts from positive to negative experiences. Throughout these events however, Heela is consistently portrayed as hopeful and resolved. Finally, Akbar Gul is also show as alternating between periods of optimism and depression. When his endeavours, such as his cell phone store, are successful, Gopal focuses on Akbar Gul's hopes and goals for the future, reflecting his optimism. During the periods that he is frustrated or disenchanted, Akbar Gul's narrative is inwardly focused on his own hopelessness. This shift in tone between individuals serves to amplify Gopal's attempt at presenting the war from their perspectives.

Quotes

The categories of the American war on terror-terrorists and non-terrorists, fundamentalists and democrats - mattered little, not when his abiding goal, like that of so many caught in the conflict, was simply to finish each day alive.
-- Anand Gopal (Prologue paragraph 3)

Importance: Gopal argues that the categories created by the Americans to view Afghanistan were incompatible with the true character of the country and its people's efforts to survive.

The elders understood what Karzai did not yet seem to grasp: political victories in southern Afghanistan came not to those with the most inspiring ideas or far-reaching programs, but to those with the deepest pockets and biggest guns.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote foreshadows a recurring theme in the remainder of the book, that most Afghans were concerned with tangible benefits and physical protection, rather than ideological victories.

Thousands of young men, many of them now orphans and widowers flocked to the various factions feuding for power in the civil war. There were no heroes; each group proved as responsible for the bloodshed as the next. Broadly, the factions were organized along ethnic lines- not so much due to ethnic nationalism, but because in the face of perpetual instability, with a weak or absent state, you allied with those you knew and trusted. In fact, it was often unclear what ideological differences, if any, divided the men fighting each other on Kabul's streets.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote demonstrates how, given a violent and unstable society, people tended to align with tribal communities as a form of protection.

Clannishness, in other words, was not a symptom of Afghans' preternaturally backward ways, but rather a sensible response to harsh and precarious conditions.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 4 paragraph 3)

Importance: Gopal dispels the idea that Afghans were inherently backward and beholden to their tribal loyalties. Rather, these networks provided the only stable system of protection.

For the ancient Pashtun mountain families, anything marauding rivals could plunder was worth protecting and controlling - and this included women.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: As with tribalism, Gopal argues that traditional constraints on women were a result of instability and the threat of violence, rather than a cultural backwardness.

What had once been a social practice confined to areas deep in the hinterlands now became a political practice, which, according to ideologues, applied to the entire country.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: Gopal explains how the Taliban combined traditional views on women with their strict religious doctrine and applied both ideas to all of Afghanistan, rather than just in the rural areas where they originated.

How do you fight a war without an adversary? Enter Gul Agha Sherzai - and men like him around the country. Eager to survive and prosper, he and his commanders followed the logic of the American presence to its obvious conclusion. They would create enemies where there were none, exploiting the perverse incentive mechanism that the Americans - without even realizing it - had put in place.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: Gopal argues that the American obsession with finding and killing terrorists allowed local warlords to manipulate U.S. forces into attacking their political rivals.

Noor Agha's path signaled the moral morass that the American mission was sinking into. At every step the United States may have been the hapless victim of Afghan strongmen, but it was also setting the rules of the game, and then following those rules through to their logical, bloody conclusions. The war on terror had become an end in itself, the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 7 paragraph 4)

Importance: Gopal suggests that while the Americans were manipulated by local leaders, they created - and were ultimately responsible for - the environment that encouraged this manipulation.

In the vagaries of the system, you survived one way and one way only: through the ruthless exploitation of everyone around you. There was no getting around it. The broken alliances, the faltering hopes, the rude exposure of foreign agendas all dictated a certain logic of duplicity if you planned to remain alive and free.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 7 paragraph 8)

Importance: This quote stresses that pursuing survival was the highest priority for Afghans and often forced them to ignore higher ideological concerns.

In a way, the mood of retribution should have been expected. After all, the Taliban's human rights record and their sorry attempt at governance inspired no sympathy. The problem was not so much that the Taliban were targeted but that they were uniquely targeted: the men now allied with the United States harbored similarly deplorable records from the civil war era, yet their crimes went unpunished. A true reconciliation process would have required either bringing to justice people from across the entire political spectrum, or else pardoning them all. To the Taliban, justice unequally applied felt like no justice at all."

-- Anand Gopal (chapter 10 paragraph 3)

Importance: Gopal argues that, while the Taliban had a deplorable human rights record, most other militant groups from the civil period were similarly horrific. As a result, the sole focus on punishing the Taliban was perceived as unjust.

It was autumn 2008, and for the first time anti-Taliban protests erupted countrywide. In villages that had rebelled against American and government abuses, the dark realization was setting that the Taliban were, in fact, no different from all the rest.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 12 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote demonstrates that the Taliban eventually faced backlash, even though Afghans remained angry with the Americans. This aligns with a long history of power shifting between groups with little change in actual quality of life.

After four deadly raids in the space of five months, Garloch residents faced a choice. They could take up arms in resistance, join the Taliban, and fight as their fathers had against a foreign occupation. But in this section of Laghman, haunted by the ghosts of Taliban brutality, resistance did not seem a viable option. Neither was neutrality, not in a war that had rendered the notion obsolete. So they took the only course remaining: they left.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 12 paragraph 15)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the bleak situation that many innocent Afghans faced as a result of the American invasion and their haphazard targeting of suspected terrorists.

For Heela, the war was not a matter of policy, not a neat delineation of allies and adversaries - it was life itself. Living a war was different from fighting one; it meant keeping yourself somewhere in the gray area of survival. So long as the Taliban left her and her family alone, so long as they dealt with her respectfully, she had nothing against them.
-- Anand Gopal (chapter 13 paragraph 1)

Importance: Given that Heela is symbolic of the values and society encouraged by the United States, this demonstrates that all Afghans, even those committed to a democratic future, were forced to make difficult decisions in order to survive violent conditions.

You’re a wakil now, you don’t need anyone.’ Not quite a man, but no longer just a woman, in victory she had become a category unto herself.
-- Anand Gopal, quoting Matiullah's driver (chapter 14 paragraph 1)

Importance: This symbolizes how Heela has transcended the traditional idea of an Afghan woman by becoming an elected official.

In other words, while the United States paid nominal amounts to build the Afghan state, it fostered a stronger and more influential network of power outside the state.
-- Anand Gopal (Epilogue paragraph 2)

Importance: Gopal argues that the primary failure of the United States is that it created a network of warlords outside the Afghan government that ultimately controlled the country and its resources.

Topics for Discussion

Gopal states that the United States chose to invade Afghanistan after the Taliban refused to surrender Osama bin Laden following the 9/11 attacks. Do you believe this was the right decision for U.S. leaders to make? Consider both the perspective of Americans directly following 9/11 and our current perspective given how the war has progressed.

This question encourages students to understand the motivations behind the U.S. decision to invade Afghanistan and put that decision in historical context. It also challenges them to critically evaluate that decision.

The author's overarching argument is that America's misunderstanding of Afghan society led to its failure to fully stabilize the country. What could have been done to ensure the U.S. officials had a better understanding of Afghanistan? What other conditions led to U.S. failure? How could those have been resolved?

This challenges students to evaluate U.S. policy in Afghanistan and consider ways it could have been improved.

As the Afghan civil war made his neighborhood increasing violent, Akbar Gul chose to join a Pashtun militia, rather than leave the country with the rest of his family. Why did he do this? How would you react in this situation?

This encourages the student to understand Akbar Gul's perspective and Gopal's argument about the importance of tribal communities.

When the Taliban seize control of Afghanistan, Heela was somewhat relieved to at least have some level of peace of stability. Many around her seem to share that view, despite the fact that the Taliban enforced extremely strict religious laws. Why did Afghans, particularly women, seem to value stability over personal freedom? Do you believe one is more important than the other?

This encourages the student to understand the perspective of Afghans living under Taliban control. It also challenges them to consider what the goals of a government should be.

Why did the United States rely so heavily on local warlords after its invasion? What were the benefits and drawbacks of this arrangement?

This challenges the student to consider why U.S. officials sought assistance from people like JMK and Gul Agha Sherzai, even when these individuals were clearly corrupt.

Musqinyar was killed by Commander Zahir after criticizing him publicly. Why did Musqinyar choose to do this, despite knowing he was risking the lives of himself and his family?

This encourages the student to consider Musqinyar's perspective and explore the difficulties in defending one's values in a violent and unstable society.

After returning from Pakistan, Akbar Gul rejected an offer to rejoin the Taliban before eventually agreeing. Why did he change his mind? What events occurred in the interim that affected his decision?

This challenges the student to understand Akbar Gul's perspective and consider what external pressures pushed him toward the Taliban.

After returning to Uruzgan, Heela provided medicine to the Taliban while working for a medical NGO. Why did she do this? What other options did she have? What would you have done in the same situation?

This encourages the student to consider Heela's perspective and explore why it is difficult to balance competing values in a situation like Heela's.

Matiullah Khan had a reputation for brutal violence and manipulation of the political system. Simultaneously, he brought a new level of security to Uruzgan and supported Heela in her aspirations. Was Matiullah a positive or negative influence on his society?

This challenges the student to weigh competing impressions of an individual and determine their overall influence. It encourages them to consider the difficulty U.S. officials faced in finding reliable and effective allies in Afghanistan.

Unlike many accounts of the war in Afghanistan, this book focuses very specifically on three individuals involved in the conflict. Why is this perspective important? What can we learn from these accounts that is not received from broader histories of the war as a whole?

This encourages the student to explore the contrasting benefits of different types of literature and consider the importance of understanding how large world events affect individual people.