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Introduction by Robert McMahon, The Ohio State University

For students of contemporary history, Afghanistan has become virtually synonymous with upheaval, instability, bloodshed, warfare—and tragedy. Over the past nearly half-century, the embattled country and its long-suffering citizens have experienced invasions, occupations, armed resistance movements, impoverishment, severe economic dislocation, the displacement of millions of refugees, and repressive misrule by religious fanatics. Scholars, journalists, and policy analysts have spilled prodigious amounts of ink in their efforts both to make sense of Afghanistan’s plight and to explain the spectacular failure of first the Soviet Union and then the United States either to stabilize the country or to achieve their core objectives there.¹ Yet surprisingly few studies have examined in any depth the period before the watershed Soviet invasion of 1979.²

Robert B. Rakove does an exemplary job filling that vacuum. What role, he asks, did Afghanistan play in international politics in the preceding decades? More specifically, what forces and individuals shaped the kingdom’s ties with the wider world, especially those with the globe’s preeminent power? How important *was* Afghanistan to the United States, how did its importance change over time, and why? *Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion* addresses those key questions effectively in a narrative teeming with verve and insight and populated with colorful characters and telling vignettes. Rakove draws from a broad range of archival sources from American and European repositories to reconstruct the little-known history of relations between Afghanistan and the United States from the 1920s to the end of the 1970s. During the Cold War era, where Rakove concentrates most of his attention, Afghanistan *mattered* to the United States. Not, to be sure, as a front-line, vital interest, but as yet another meaningful piece on the Cold War chessboard, one whose alignment with the Soviet Union would deal a setback to US regional and global interests, and correspondingly redound to the benefit of Washington’s main adversary.

Did US officials of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s exaggerate Afghanistan’s value? Did they devote too much time, energy, and money in their endeavors to keep Afghanistan non-aligned? Or not enough? Were the instruments of influence they utilized to achieve their goals sufficient, or insufficient? Were they properly or ineffectually deployed? Those are among the chief questions that Rakove grapples with, and that several of the reviewers in this lively forum weigh in on in their own critiques of the book. Terry Anderson, for his part, suggests bluntly that *Days of Opportunity* actually “demonstrates that Afghanistan really was not that important to either Washington or Moscow.” That assessment is partly echoed by Carter Malkasian, who speculates that Cold War-driven “alarmist fears” led US policy makers to overestimate the strategic import

¹ For example, Vassily Klimentov, *A Slow Reckoning: The USSR, the Afghan Communists, and Islam* (Cornell University Press, 2024); Elisabeth Leake, *Afghan Crucible: The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Romain Malejacq, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan* (Cornell University Press, 2020); Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (Norton, 2010).

² Ludwig W. Adamec, *Afghanistan’s Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century: Relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain* (University of Arizona Press, 1974).

of a peripheral state. Yet it was perceptions that conditioned US initiatives, as Rakove notes, however off-base they might have been. Rarely does one find in the multitudinous voices catalogued here any clear-eyed assessments of the actual strategic or economic significance of Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest and most isolated lands.

The reviewers uniformly praise the reach of the book, its analytical rigor, and its deep and expansive evidentiary base. Most also approvingly note the quality of the prose and the brisk pace of Rakove's chronologically organized narrative. Inevitably, some offer caveats, pointing out areas that deserve fuller explication. Although Jayita Sarkar commends Rakove for granting Afghan leaders agency throughout the story, she and Umberto Tulli believe that their viewpoints, perspectives, and policy stances could be fleshed out. Tulli suggests that the conception of what "modernization" meant in an indigenous Afghan context remains somewhat muddled. He also calls for more sustained focus on the cultural dimension of Afghan American relations, a point Rakove embraces in his measured response. Highlighting some of the parallels between pre- and post-1979 Afghanistan, Malkasian laments that the author did not explore them more systematically.

This illuminating forum underscores many of the strengths of traditional diplomatic-international history in its focus on state-to-state relations, its empirical richness, its attentiveness to contingency, and its broad focus on great power rivalry. At the same time, it opens out to an exploration of a host of ancillary issues: from developmentalism and business schemes to the role of non-state actors, intra-regional conflicts, and the enduring dilemma of borderlands.

Contributors:

Robert Rakove is a lecturer in International Relations at Stanford University, where he has taught since 2012. He is the author of *Kennedy, Johnson and the Nonaligned World* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). He received his doctorate from the University of Virginia in 2008, and previously taught at Old Dominion University and Colgate University. His scholarship has been supported by fellowships and grants from the Miller Center for Public Affairs, the Mershon Center for International Security Studies, the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, and the Hoover Institution.

Robert J. McMahon is the Ralph D. Mershon Professor of History Emeritus at The Ohio State University. He has also taught at the University of Florida and held visiting professorships at the University of Virginia, Williams College, University College Dublin, the Free University (Berlin), and Gadjarda University (Indonesia). He is the author, among other works, of *The Cold War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2nd rev. ed., 2021).

Terry Anderson is Professor of History at Texas A&M University. He has received Fulbright awards to China and Indonesia, and was the Mary Ball Washington Professor of American History at University College, Dublin. Among numerous books and articles, he is the author of *Bush's Wars* (Oxford University Press, 2011) and *The Movement and The Sixties* (Oxford University Press, 1995) as well as the forthcoming *Why the 1990s Matter* (Oxford University Press) and the sixth edition of *The Sixties* (Routledge, Taylor & Francis).

Susan Colbourn is Associate Director of the Program in American Grand Strategy at Duke University. She is the author of *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell, 2022).

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Review by Terry Anderson, Texas A&M University

The most significant part of *Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan before the Soviet Invasion* by Robert B. Rakove is not in its excellent examination of over five decades of United States-Afghanistan relations from the 1920s until 1979, but in the fateful days of April 1978. Rebels in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) and their Soviet military advisers unexpectedly ousted nationalistic President Mohammed Daoud Khan. Immediately, observers in Washington, DC, and some in Moscow wondered what the nature of the new regime would be, and what role, if any, the Kremlin would play in the new leftist government. This episode was momentous. It would lead to the Soviet invasion of the nation in 1979; to President Jimmy Carter's uneven response, which boosted the election of Republican Ronald Reagan; and to the eventual arming of the Afghanistan *mujabideen* in their rebellion against the Soviet occupation. Leadership in Moscow had made an incredible blunder. "Do not worry," Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev said to a colleague, "we will end this war in three or four weeks."¹

Not so. The long war in Afghanistan was one of the reasons for the collapse of the USSR and the Soviet empire. Afghanistan once again became "the graveyard of empires."² That imperial collapse had other repercussions, such as the stoking of the aggressive impulses of Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2022 to attempt to regain the Soviet empire's greatness, or at least landmass, by attacking Ukraine. After all, Putin labeled the demise of the Soviet Union the "greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century."³

There are many commendable aspects about *Days of Opportunity*. The research is admirable. Rakove has read documents from no less than five nations. His findings from the Czechoslovak Communist Party archives are revealing about the views and motives of Eastern Bloc nations, and his research employs documents from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. He has mined all the necessary American documents and National Archive Record groups and visited the depositories of seven Presidential libraries.

At times Rakove's prose is compelling. He begins the book, and each chapter, with an interesting vignette or episode that captures themes that appear later. Chapter 6, "The Crisis Era, 1959–1963," for example, begins with President Dwight Eisenhower's 1959 visit to Afghanistan. Eisenhower landed and viewed the Afghan air force, which was composed of Soviet MiG jets, thus demonstrating that even the most far-off places were caught up in the international Cold War. The local crowd was friendly to the president, and the former WWII Supreme Allied Commander realized that it was the "the poorest country" he had ever seen (171). His administration boosted US development aid, and Rakove notes that one of the more interesting forms of aid was educational. It is surprising to learn that it was not large public or wealthy Ivy League institutions that stepped in to help this developing nation, like Michigan State's educational aid to South

¹ Odd Arne Westad, *Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 316-336.

² Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2001).

³ James Hershberg, "Putin Is Repeating the USSR's Mistakes: The Wrong Lessons of History," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 February 2022.

Vietnam, but the University of Wyoming. “During the 1950s,” the author notes, “Wyoming dispatched agricultural instructors and other specialists to Kabul University and welcomed Afghan students at its campus in Laramie” (174).

Chapter 8, “The Fall of the Monarchy, 1968–1973” also captures themes that apply to Afghanistan and other places of American interest. It begins in early 1970 when Vice President Spiro Agnew’s motorcade drove through Kabul and was met by youthful protesters waving anti-American signs and tossing projectiles, demanding that the United States get out of Vietnam. By the Nixon years US policy had shifted toward neutral nations. Washington no longer felt that neutralism, in the words of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, was “an immoral and shortsighted conception.”⁴ By the late 1960s, the new administration was eager to help those nations defend their independence. Vice President Spiro T. Agnew met with the Afghan king and prime minister and was pleased to report that “[t]he Afghans seem to think and react more like Americans than any Asians I have thus far encountered” (240). President Lyndon Johnson had made similar comments about South Vietnamese leaders Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. During the long Cold War, a foreign nation’s culture was not important to leaders in Washington. Foreign despots knew how to fool the Americans into thinking that an Afghan who grew up in a tribal village speaking Dari was just like Agnew, the son of a Greek immigrant who grew up in a middle-class Baltimore home.

One of the main strengths of this book is that Rakove examines many topics that fly under the radar of other histories. Americans supplied funds and expertise to build roads from Kabul to Kandhar, from Herat to Islam Qala; to construct airports in Kandahar airport and other areas; and to assist in constructing and supplying hydroelectric generators for the Kajakai Dam. Americans in the public and private sectors were interested in Afghanistan’s possible petroleum reserves which were in the north of the country, close to the border with the Soviet Union, and where there was almost no infrastructure to extract the black gold. Rakove examines Afghan-Pakistan-Iran relations as well as the decades-long issue of the establishment of Pashtunistan. On that issue, the US dismissed the Wilsonian idea of self-determination of peoples due to the rising heat of the Cold War.

Moreover, Rakove considers numerous forgotten people and events who impacted American-Afghan relations. US Ambassador Henry Byroade (1959–1962) memorably hunted rare sheep, visited distant villages, and attempted to increase US aid to Afghanistan. US Ambassador Robert Neumann (1966–1973) attempted, along with others, to curb the export of opium from Afghanistan during President Richard M. Nixon’s War on Drugs. Rakove’s description of the 1979 killing of US Ambassador Adolph Dubs in the Kabul Hotel by unknown parties is particularly well done. Rakove impressively situates this tragedy with other events at the time, including: President Jimmy Carter’s granting of diplomatic relations to China in 1978, which prompted conservatives to claim that he had stabbed Taiwan in the back; China’s surprising invasion of northern Vietnam; the Shah of Iran’s flight from his nation; and the establishment of Islamic Republic of Iran and the subsequent storming of the US Embassy in Teheran. Together these made

⁴ “Foreign News: A New Look at Neutralism,” *Time*, 24 October 1960.

President Carter look indecisive, weak, and floundering, and opened the door for a forceful conservative response in the November 1980 election.

Rakove also examines the Soviet-American competition in Afghanistan, and one of his insights is that construction projects in Afghanistan caused rival diplomats to develop warm relations during the Cold War. “I’ve never been in a post where you had as friendly relations with Soviets as we had in Kabul,” remarked diplomat Archer Blood, and US Ambassador John Milton Steeves (1962–1966) described his Soviet counterpart as “one of the best friends I had in the country” (216).

Days of Opportunity also presents a version of the cultural diplomacy emphasized a generation ago by Penny Von Eschen’s *Satchmo Blows up the World*.⁵ By the late 1950s, the Soviet and Chinese Communists were courting the Afghanistan people with “Tajik and Turkmen singers and dancers” and Chinese acrobats, and the USSR made the “first ever jet-powered landing within Afghanistan, at the newly completed Bagram airfield,” which Moscow had constructed (166-167).

Naturally, in any book review there will be some quibbles. The book is too long, which results in repetition. Of course important topics must be reexamined in the narrative as administrations in Washington and Kabul changed, but reading about one wheat shortage after another gets rather tiresome. There also is too much minutiae. At one point the author notes that in retrospect, “the events of July 1975 [i.e., Kabul’s increasingly tense relations with Pakistan] assume an outsized significance” (295). In that case it is not clear why the topic is examined.

The book includes two questionable statements, one involving President John F. Kennedy which is discussed below, and one on President Lyndon Johnson. Rakove writes that it is “lamentable, even tragic, that—while he undertook a reform program of breathtaking ambition—Lyndon Johnson did not perceive a similar process to be under way in Afghanistan” (238). Given that the president’s plate was full with Vietnam abroad and race riots at home, with the protests led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, along with the growing anti-Vietnam War movement, it is not clear why would Johnson would have focused on Afghanistan⁶

Rakove argues that during the half century that his book examines, American administrations should have done more to form stronger relations with Afghanistan. Perhaps, but that was always a difficult proposition considering its location and the rapid turnover of governments in Kabul. The same could be said about US relations with many smaller nations such as Iraq before Saddam Hussein took power.

Overall, this book demonstrates that Afghanistan really was not that important to either Washington or Moscow. Until 1979, neither nation committed the necessary funds and attention to convince Kabul that it

⁵ Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁶ Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties*, 5th edition (Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2017), chapters 3 and 4; Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (Oxford University Press, 1998), chapters 7–9.

should join their side. With Kabul's political instability, with one new government after another, it was not a good investment for either East or West blocs.

At the end of this volume, Rakove quotes Kennedy as having said that it "makes a lot of difference whom we place in difficult spots like Afghanistan," and adds that "it still does" (355). After reading this book it seems that US administrations only cared about Afghanistan during World War II and sometimes during the Cold War, especially during the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s. That partly caused the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991, and American eyes turned elsewhere until 9/11 refocused Washington on Central Asia. Now that there is no Soviet Union, and now that the US is out of that 'forever war,' it seems most likely that the United States will revert to the policy it had toward Afghanistan in the 1920s and 1930s.

That is not to say that this is not an important book. On the contrary, Rakove has written a book that extends the Cold War historiography of the last generation, beginning with Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*.⁷ *Days of Opportunity* continues to extend the literature, this time to Central Asia. Rakove introduces important issues that relate to many global south nations during and after the Cold War. His judicious research and his exhaustive treatment of US-Afghan relations from the 1920s to the late 1970s result in a fine piece of scholarship that should be the definitive volume on the topic for years to come.

⁷ Westad, *Global Cold War*, and continuing on with Jason Parker's *Hearts, Minds, Voices: U.S. Cold War Public Diplomacy and the Formation of the Third World* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and Parker's *Brother's Keeper: The United States, Race, and Empire in the British Caribbean, 1937–1962* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

 Review by Susan Colbourn, Duke University

US relations with—and engagement in—Afghanistan long predated 2001 and the fateful decision to invade following the September 11th attacks. That fact might seem painfully obvious. Yet, for a relationship that proved so consequential in the first decades of the twenty-first century, curiously few scholars have paid sustained attention to the bilateral ties connecting Washington to Kabul across the twentieth century.¹

In a sweeping and rich narrative, Robert Rakove does just that. *Days of Opportunity* tells the story of US-Afghan relations over six decades, spanning from the two countries' early engagements and the obstacles to establishing relations in the 1920s through the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's invasion at the end of 1979. Rakove's core assertion is a simple one. "Afghanistan mattered to the United States," he writes, "well before the 1979 Soviet invasion, the ensuing war, or the conflicts of the twenty-first century" (2). To explain why Afghanistan mattered, Rakove marshals an exceptional range of archival sources to explore the many issues that shaped relations between Washington and Kabul over the years.

Rakove centers the people who shaped relations, weaving in telling anecdotes and interpersonal dynamics that bring these ties to life. One cannot help but wonder, for instance, what the Afghan students who found themselves in Laramie, on the campus of the University of Wyoming, in the 1950s made of their surroundings. He introduces a fascinating cast of characters, not least the ambassadors who represented the United States in Afghanistan over the years. (Ambassador Robert Neumann, who served in Kabul from 1967 to 1973, could easily be the subject of a dedicated biography.) This emphasis on individuals offers a reminder of something which is all too easy to forget: people are the essential ingredient of policy.

Drawing on the experiences of individuals, Rakove deftly highlights the diverse links connecting the United States and Afghanistan. He weaves together business ties, large-scale development projects, education programs, counternarcotics efforts, countless requests for wheat deliveries, and the ever-shifting calculations of politics—national, regional, and global. Some of the dynamics at play will be familiar to many, such as the scope and scale of the myriad development projects undertaken in Afghanistan² or the

¹ Much of what has been published in recent years focuses on US-Afghan relations in the late 1970s and through the 1980s, as the Soviet Union waged war in Afghanistan. See, for some examples, Conor Tobin, "The Myth of the 'Afghan Trap': Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978–1979," *Diplomatic History* 44:2 (2020): 237–264; Robert B. Rakove, "The Central Front of Reagan's Cold War: The United States and Afghanistan," in *The Reagan Moment: America and the World in the 1980s*, ed. Jonathan R. Hunt and Simon Miles (Cornell University Press, 2021), 324–344; Elisabeth Leake, "Reagan and the Crisis of Southwest Asia," in *The Reagan Moment*, 367–387; and, Elisabeth Leake, *Afghan Crucible: The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2022), especially chapter 6.

² On Cold War-era development projects in Afghanistan, see Nick Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *Journal of American History* 89:2 (2002): 512–537; Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Intervention: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Antonio Giustozzi and Artemy M.

Afghan front of Washington's "War on Drugs."³ Yet, even where Rakove touches on well-known episodes, *Days of Opportunity* generously builds on recent scholarship and offers a fresh perspective as Rakove connects individual episodes to the broader contours of US-Afghan relations.

The variety of issues and irritants is striking, though not surprising. But Rakove avoids the temptation to give seemingly mundane issues short shrift. Instead, he shows how even routine matters played into and reflected broader trends in the relationship. Take, for example, US-Afghan wrangling over the construction of a highway connecting Herat to Islam Qala on the border with Iran. Rakove highlights how Afghan officials lobbied for a wider road, appealing to their American counterparts with an undeniable logic: if the highway were too narrow, it would be interpreted as a (negative) commentary on US largesse. In the end, the Afghans managed to win another 0.7 meters. Such was the cost of doing business when it came to bilateral relations (230).

For a book whose subtitle promises a history of the United States and Afghanistan, the end product is precisely that—and, at the same time, so much more than advertised. The outside world, as Rakove reminds us, often intruded in bilateral relations. He offers surprising illustrations of this dynamic, such as how Afghan objections to the deployment of US soldiers to the Congo in 1964 marred the relationship and incensed Washington's ambassador in Kabul (219-221). And Rakove's narrative is filled with detail about the interactions between Afghanistan and its neighbors—not just the Soviet Union, but also Iran and Pakistan—in depth.

Rakove's wide-ranging international research underscores this breadth. Rather than rely on the reporting of US diplomats to characterize the aid arms race and the dynamics of Cold War competition in Afghanistan, for example, he turns to a wealth of records from Czechoslovakia to showcase how Communist officials perceived that same situation. Nor does Rakove stop with the Czech archives. He incorporates assessments and perspectives from France, Germany (from both East and West), the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. These appear alongside a wide range of US archival sources from across administrations—he cites material from every presidential library from Harry Truman to Jimmy Carter—and from a variety of agencies and departments. Rakove's research turned up surprising connections, rich stories, and even enabled him to discuss one of the seemingly few episodes that did not make it into Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's voluminous memoirs: a quick November 1974 stop in Kabul, where he took in a match of *buzkashi* (272-273).

To read Rakove's book today, a fundamental tension lingers: it is hard to forget or ignore what comes after. We know that the Afghanistan on Rakove's pages will be plunged into decades of conflict, with waves of

Kalinovsky, *Missionaries of Modernity: Advisory Missions and the Struggle for Hegemony in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Hurst, 2016).

³ US efforts to curb drug production in Afghanistan are covered in James Bradford, *Poppies, Politics, and Power: Afghanistan and the Global History of Drugs and Diplomacy* (Cornell University Press, 2019), and James Bradford, "The War on Drugs in Afghanistan," in *The War on Drugs: A History*, ed. David Farber (NYU Press, 2021), 242-270.

invasion and internal strife over the late twentieth century and well into the twenty-first. I found it impossible to read the reporting of US Ambassador Theodore Eliot during 1978's Battle for Kabul— "To seize Kabul is not to control Afghanistan" (307)—and not be reminded of more recent years. At times, I wondered whether and how Rakove might link the patterns of US-Afghan diplomacy he writes about to those on display in recent decades. Those are, however, unfair, and unreasonable asks of a book designed to tell the history that is often overlooked in favor of a later history that is defined by conflict.

Rakove is insistent—and rightly so—that the history of the United States' relations with Afghanistan is worth telling on its own terms, not as an antecedent to the tragic history that followed 1979. That is, in and of itself, a choice that reflects how significant US-Afghan relations have been post-1979. The narrative might not map the contours of the relationship through the late twentieth century and into the post-invasion years, but it is nevertheless a pre-history of sorts. Afghanistan mattered to the United States before 1979 and that vibrant, curious, and often-overlooked relationship informed what followed. And so, Rakove helps us appreciate a much more recent history, what changed (plenty), and what did not (also plenty). *Days of Opportunity* is essential reading for anyone wishing to know more about US-Afghan relations, past and present.

Review by Carter Malkasian, Naval Postgraduate School

Robert Rakove's *Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan before the Soviet Invasion* is a scholarly history of US foreign relations with Afghanistan up to 1979. The book fills a gap in the diplomatic history of Afghanistan and the United States and is a welcome prelude to the more heavily studied period of civil war between 1979 and 2021.¹

Rakove's main argument is that "Afghanistan mattered to the United States, well before the 1979 Soviet invasion, the ensuing war, or the conflicts of the twenty-first century" (2). He covers the interactions between ambassadors and Washington officials over the decades, as well those with Afghan prime ministers, presidents, and kings. Pakistani and Iranian leaders receive due attention as players in the wider region that framed US policy. The writings of these different senior leaders indeed show that Afghanistan mattered to the United States.

Rakove refrains from drawing too many parallels between America's pre-1979 Afghanistan experience and its post-1979 one, but for those familiar with modern Afghanistan the connection is inescapable. Descriptions of large expensive development projects, replete with comfortable camps for US workers, are all too familiar. Ambassador John Milton Steeves's 1963 description of the Kandahar airport as "a monstrosity in the desert" calls to mind the sight of the sprawling Kandahar air base, which from the air looks nearly as large as Kandahar city itself (211). The more recent arguments about the civilian surge echo the Cold War debates over whether development assistance should only be used to enable sustainable economic growth versus for political aims.² In both cases, the debates were never resolved, and aid was never tailored to best meet the objectives at hand. Even more so, the policy discourse over US interests in Afghanistan, and why any investment should be made in a far-off country, resembled debates within a series of administrations about the purpose of the 2001–2021 intervention. Above all, it is eerie how Americans in the pre-1979 period repeatedly misunderstood the country and its people, as they did from 1979–2021.³

¹ It is admittedly a little early to discern if the period of civil war is truly at an end or merely a pause. For a general history of Afghanistan, see Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton University Press, 2010). For US policy between 1979 and 1992, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

² See Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (Knopf, 2012); Karl Eikenberry, "The Limits in Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs* (September-October 2013); "What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction," Special Inspector General For Afghanistan Reconstruction, (August 2021), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>; and "Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan," Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (September 2017), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/sigar-17-62-ll.pdf>.

³ These parallels and a description of the Helmand Valley project can be found in Chandrasekaran, *Little America*.

Rakove's history is rich in characters. There's Cornelius Engert, "Afghanistan's oldest friend," who between 1920 and 1942 served in Iran (visiting Afghanistan for several weeks), El Salvador, China, Ethiopia, and again Iran before becoming America's first ambassador to Afghanistan (44). There's Henry Byroade, the former brigadier general, ambassador to six different countries, and big-game hunter who drove into the Wakhan corridor to trophy the fabled Marco Polo sheep. There's Adolph Dubs, the US ambassador who was murdered in 1979 in what some say was a kidnapping and others say was a Communist plot. President Dwight Eisenhower is of course present, the first US president to visit Afghanistan. So is John F. Kennedy, every bit as charismatic as expected. I greedily wish Rakove had treated the reader to even more anecdotes. I wanted to know the languages the ambassadors spoke (did Engert speak Farsi, Spanish, and Mandarin?) and more about interactions of the ambassadors and lower-level political officers with Afghans, especially outside Kabul.

The book's central theme is the familiar discourse between those who saw Afghanistan as a US interest and those who did not. The former were often ambassadors who had learned to care for Afghanistan, its scenery, and its people. "Interests" might be defined by feelings as much as cold analysis. Their argument was that the Soviet Union was actively investing in Afghanistan's development and its military. Therefore, the United States should invest enough in development to dissuade Afghanistan from siding entirely with the Communist bloc. The latter were often Washington officials. Foreign Service Officer Wallace Murray, the hard-bitten Near East Division chief in the 1930s, railed against recognizing Afghanistan: "I can't for the life of me see any useful purpose in encouraging Americans to become involved in such a useless part of the world as Afghanistan" (25). National Security Council staffer Robert Komer, of later Vietnam fame, also loudly opposed wasting US resources in far-off Afghanistan, which he called a "far lower priority than many other foreign policy matters" (219).⁴ Yet the distinction is not black and white. Some Washington insiders also lobbied for Afghanistan. Presidents could be won over. Rakove argues that Kennedy was enchanted by the rugged terrain, colorful history, and romance of Afghanistan (213).

Those who were in favor of US assistance for Afghanistan generally succeeded. In 1956, NSC5409 endorsed efforts to "discredit and make difficult increased Soviet activities in Afghanistan" through "a limited number of projects which will provide immediately visible evidence of continued U.S. friendship for and interest in Afghanistan" (132). Although debates on Afghanistan continued, the document effectively articulated US policy from 1956 to 1978. As Rakove writes, "Eisenhower and his five immediate successors each sought to maintain the independence of the Afghan state. They thereby committed themselves to an extensive, evolving array of political, economic, and cultural programs within Afghanistan, with profound local and regional implications" (133).

Rakove's evidence shows that US administrations consistently saw value in assisting Afghanistan but still leaves questions as to whether that value was exaggerated. When President Kennedy personally weighed in

⁴ Komer served as the Director of the [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support](#) (CORDS) program from 1967–1968, leading all pacification efforts in South Vietnam. Frank Leith Jones, *Blowtorch: Robert Komer, Vietnam, and American Cold War Strategy* (Naval Institute Press, 2013).

on Afghan-Pakistan border confrontations, and hosted King Zahir Shah at the White House, did his interest indicate Afghanistan's strategic importance, or did this reflect poor time management? With Cold War brinkmanship, the civil rights movement, and the early days of Vietnam at play, why should the US president have been spending any time on Afghanistan at all?⁵ And why did the policymaking process allow these diversions to occur? Was it a bureaucratic process issue? Or were Cold War alarmist fears exaggerating the importance of places like Afghanistan? Or was it really a larger issue of the fascinations of elites who filled the senior ranks of government versus what most Americans might have considered to be their own interests?

The ignorance of those on both sides of the debate about Afghanistan's wider history and its peoples is saddening. That ignorance is apparent on multiple fronts. Diplomats and engineers made overconfident assessments of the potential of development projects. In the Helmand Valley irrigation project which dammed two rivers and dug hundreds of miles of canals to bring water and crops to the desert, they ignored major problems regarding salinity and the scale of work required. British diplomat J. H. Watson wrote in 1947, "Ignorance of the country's history and the temper of her peoples (and the Americans are very new to Afghanistan) might lead to impractical advice about modernization" (69).

US leaders also never understood the depth of antipathy between Afghanistan and Pakistan over the border and the idea of a Pashtun homeland (Pashtunistan) that extended Afghanistan over the Pashtun areas of Pakistan. Rakove reports that Henry Cabot Lodge, US representative to the United Nations, even supported a random idea that Afghanistan and Pakistan might unite into some kind of federation (121).

The same ignorance was present in terms of Afghan politics. In some of the most compelling passages of the book, Rakove details how both the 1973 coup of King Zahir Shah and the April 1978 Communist overthrow of President Daoud Khan completely surprised the United States. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who visited Afghanistan twice, was gloriously unaware of the Communist opposition to Daoud Khan, which would result in the 1978 Saur Revolution and in turn Soviet intervention and Afghanistan's 40-year civil war.⁶ The US ambassador, Theodore Eliot, assessed Daoud to be "a wise and valuable leader whose rule is legitimate" and confidently predicted in April 1977 that Daoud would be safely in power for the next two to five years (296). Daoud was overthrown a year later and a year after that the civil war was unfolding, in what Rakove calls a cataclysm.

The failure to consider untoward possibilities foreshadows the failures in the recent war in Afghanistan. The issue is not that the US officials failed to predict the future: that is an unfair standard. The issue is a

⁵ For more information about the policy demands of the early 1960s, see: Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1999); John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2005); *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Critical Reappraisal*, eds. Len Scott and R. Gerald Hughes (Routledge, 2015); and Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁶ See David Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (University of California Press, 2002).

shortage of foresight, and the failure to see different possibilities and adopt policies to help insure against the worst. Rakove's narrative hints at answers to why this failure happened. The easiest is that very few Americans had any experience in Afghanistan. Many ambassadors were learning on the job. Another was the romanticism about Afghanistan and a desire to help its people, which encouraged optimism. There was also a US reliance on relationships with Afghan kings and prime ministers. Rakove shows well how in the 1970s "Washington banked its regional diplomacy" on Daoud, Reza Shah of Iran, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto of Pakistan. US foreign policy hinged on personal relationships that offered "immediate strength" but "long-term fragility" (304). The ambassadors themselves cultivated wider contacts (Ambassador Henry Byroade [1959–1962] knew the Communist leader Mohammed Taraki) but still seem to have received most of their information from the ruler and his regime. There is little reference to information from religious leaders, tribal leaders, or poorer peoples or to what was happening outside Kabul. The United States was therefore vulnerable to hearing only what the ruling party wanted it to hear, rather than a diverse perspective of the country and its political stability. As Nobel laureate Roger Myerson writes, "an international state-building mission needs to engage with local leaders throughout the country, not just with national political leaders. The mission's strategic direction should be informed by a detailed understanding of local political concerns as well as the views of the new national government's prospective leaders."⁷

The lesson is not just a problem of poor information, as more information does not necessarily improve effectiveness. The United States' recent twenty-year experience in Afghanistan, which involved an unprecedented number of American diplomats, soldiers, and aid experts yielded far more and better information but a more disappointing outcome (with a few achievements along the way). Just like their Cold War predecessors, Americans from 2001 to 2021 made significant errors in their assessments of the Afghan government, the Taliban, and political and cultural dynamics. Just like their Cold War predecessors, Americans lacked the forethought to see different possibilities and create options to deal with them.⁸ Rakove's work perhaps best serves as a warning on how little outsiders can understand about a foreign country.

Days of Opportunity delivers valuable insights into the United States' experience in Afghanistan, not only from the Cold War but into more recent wars. The contexts of the Cold War and 2001–2021 differ greatly, and parallels should be treated cautiously. Rakove's careful account helps reveal the possible continuity in American perceptions and beliefs, compelling one to ask why those continuities exist. Perhaps they are

⁷ Roger Myerson, "Local Politics and Democratic State-building," *Journal of Democracy* 3:4 (October 2022): 62–73, 67. Jennifer Murtazashvili argues that "one of the reasons why state building has not lived up to its promise is because these efforts are mainly top-down endeavors that leave little role for self-governance in the reconstruction process." Murtazashvili, "A Tired Cliché: Why We Should Stop Worrying About Ungoverned Spaces and Embrace Self-Governance," *International Affairs* 71:2 (Spring/Summer 2018):11–29, 11.

⁸ See Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Penguin, 2018); Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban* (Penguin, 2006); and Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

simply incidental; or perhaps they demonstrate bureaucratic, cultural, and social consistencies that could inform why the US involvement from 2001 to 2021 was so disappointing.

Rob Rakove's *Day of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion* is an embodiment of his persistent interest in actors who thrive in the liminal spaces of international politics. Nearly a decade earlier, Rakove's first monograph, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World*, was a much-needed corrective to our understanding of the so-called neutral countries in the global Cold War.¹ With his current tome, he writes the history of twentieth-century Afghanistan, a country that emerged in the global order as neither a colony nor a fully independent nation. He does so by presenting a new diplomatic history of the first half-century of relations between Kabul and Washington, DC that challenges the pejorative trope of Afghanistan as the "graveyard of empires."² As is expected from a historian of Rakove's caliber, *Day of Opportunity* is insightful, well-researched, and well-written.

Days of Opportunity is not another book on twentieth-century Afghanistan. The publishing space remains rife with accounts from journalists, policymakers, policy analysts, social scientists, and historians on what had "gone wrong" with Afghanistan, and how it can be "fixed."³ Most of these studies adopt a functionalist approach of problem-solving in earnest. For the vast majority of these books, Afghanistan is the *enfant terrible* of the past century. It was and continues to be in need of saving, taming, civilizing, developing, and educating. It is as if the country burst on to the international scene too soon (1921), when non-white peoples were expected to remain dependent on white-led governance structures, as the Covenant of the League of Nations unequivocally stated.⁴ As a consequence, the liberal international order, like a white schoolteacher punishing a precocious non-white kid in the colonies, have responded with willful neglect and/or active hostility towards Afghanistan.

Rakove seeks to correct this tendency in scholarship and policymaking by presenting Afghanistan and Afghans in a new light, in which they themselves are protagonists in stories about them, in which they have hopes, dreams, and ambitions that they seek to attain through diplomatic strategies and political tactics. *Days of Opportunity* is about "the pre-cataclysm era [1921–1979] of US-Afghan relations" (12). Rakove pursues the narrative arc of the Afghan quest for diplomatic relations with the United States in the 1920s and the

¹ Robert B. Rakove, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

² Though the phrase has been used to describe other countries, in reference to Afghanistan the first cited use was by Milton Bearden. Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2001).

³ See for example, Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W. W. Norton, 2010); Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Vassily Klimentov, *A Slow Reckoning: The USSR, the Afghan Communists, and Islam* (Cornell University Press, 2024); Romain Malejacq, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan* (Cornell University Press, 2020); Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (Bodley Head, 2017).

⁴ Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 22, 1919, United Nations Library, Geneva, https://libraryresources.unog.ch/ld.php?content_id=32971179 (last accessed 9 May 2024).

beginning of military actions at the end of the 1970s. It is a thoughtful engagement with what is a mostly misunderstood past of a nation-state made up largely of multiple borderlands.⁵

Rakove's *Days of Opportunity* stands out for at least three reasons. First, though *Days of Opportunity* is essentially a history of statecraft— Afghan and American—the book pays particular attention to borderlands, especially Pashtunistan but also Waziristan, Badakhshan, and others. These interstitial spaces between nation-states—which had tense relations with the political, economic, and military institutions of the state—have been important for Afghanistan, making Afghan society what it is today. As more historians of foreign relations are gravitating towards studying groups, communities, networks, and sub-state actors, there is a greater reckoning in our field for the significance of borderlands in state-making and unmaking, and their implications for diplomacy, as evidenced in recent works on South and Southern Asia.⁶ Rakove's work represents this important shift in meaningful ways, which will encourage more political and diplomatic historians to consider spaces where the state exists only in fragments, if it exists at all, not as exceptions but as the norm.

Second, Rakove shows the price of neutrality, unalignment, nonalignment, and even multi-alignment that the leaders and people of Afghanistan had to pay during the first fifty years of the twentieth century. *Days of Opportunity* sheds light on this essential but often ignored dimension of Afghan diplomacy. This begs the question for future scholars: how are some countries able to successfully maneuver being unaligned on the world stage, while others cannot? Is neutrality and unalignment even a viable option for some countries? For instance, how did India get away with being mostly nonaligned since the latter half of the twentieth century, but Afghanistan could not? Both countries had attracted external (read, “imperial”) actors for most of their histories, including the two superpowers during the Cold War.

Third, Rakove's attention to infrastructure projects, state-making, and diplomacy is impressive and important. He skillfully weaves in the role of US businesses such as M-K, Sinclair Oil Company, and Seaboard Oil Company to show how the lines between US government and businesses were ignored by both Afghans (thanks to *shirkat* system of semi-official companies enjoying state-supported monopolies) and Soviet leaders (owing to mistrust of their Cold War opponents). The political economy story that he presents is a significant one, which addresses gaps in the understanding of Afghanistan as a major player through developmentalist civilian infrastructures— a country otherwise represented in reductionist stereotypes through martial cultures, warlords, and civil war.⁷

⁵ See for example, Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁶ Benjamin D. Hopkins, *Ruling the Savage Periphery: Frontier Governance and the Making of the Modern State* (Harvard University Press, 2020); Elisabeth Leake, “Where National and International Meet: Borders and Border Regions in Postcolonial India,” *International History Review* 44:4 (2021): 856–873; Jayita Sarkar, *Ploughshares and Swords: India's Nuclear Program in the Global Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁷ For another excellent book on developmentalist infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, see Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Intervention: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Overall, *Days of Opportunity* is an excellent book on Afghanistan's diplomatic efforts, particularly towards the United States, as both countries navigated an uncertain world characterized by the weakening of European empires and the eventual decolonization of South Asia. Nevertheless, Rakove's focus is on the latter half of the twentieth century; the 1920s and 1930s are only touched upon hurriedly. His emphasis is on the Cold War, which gets eight out of ten chapters, while the earlier period gets two. Rakove is interested in questions of decolonization and the Cold War, but there could have been greater engagement with the historiography. Minor complaints aside, this is a terrific book on an important country that still remains largely misunderstood today. *Days of Opportunity* helps demystify Afghanistan by shedding light on Afghan leaders' challenges, opportunities, and strategic thinking before the formal Soviet invasion and decade-long occupation of the country.

In the 2007 movie *Charlie Wilson's War*, Congressman Charlie Wilson (played by the actor Tom Hanks) lectures his aide Bonnie on Middle Eastern/South Asian geography after receiving a cable from Kabul. Making an imaginary map in the air, he begins: "Russia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel."¹ This scene reflects the substantial ignorance about an obscure and unrecognizable country like Afghanistan, although the movie was set in the months following the December 1979 Soviet invasion of the country, when Afghanistan was under the global spotlight.

The American public—as well policymakers—may not have been familiar with Afghanistan in the late seventies and early eighties, but Robert Rakove in *Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan before the Soviet Invasion* explains how the history of US-Afghan relations began long before the Soviet invasion in 1979. To be clear, this is not the first piece of scholarship that focuses on Afghanistan during the Cold War. There are important works on Afghanistan's modernization—from specific case studies to Timothy Nunan's broader research—as well as works that focus on the 1979 Soviet invasion and its aftermath.² Yet, compared to the vast production of works on Vietnam, India, Pakistan, China, and many other countries, Afghanistan prior to 1979 remains little studied. One notable absence in the literature has been a long-term and broad study of Afghanistan-US relations, which is exactly what Rakove's *Days of Opportunity* offers. Rakove follows a traditional and comprehensive diplomatic-history approach, focusing primarily on governments and their actions.

As Rakove points out, Afghan governments have long sought to engage the United States. The book opens with early contacts between Afghan diplomats and the US in the 1920s, when an Afghan diplomatic mission went to New York and Washington. Trapped between the Soviet Union and British India, the Afghan leaders were looking for partners. By virtue of its distance and its economic growth, the US was an ideal ally. Yet, the Afghan diplomats failed to convince President Warren Harding to open a permanent mission in Kabul (19-27). This left a vacuum in Afghanistan that Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany filled. At the end of World War II, the defeat of the Axis powers created a new vacuum. This time, the void was almost immediately filled by the United States and the Soviet Union.³ To the United States, Afghanistan was both a supply line to the Soviet Union and a window on the Soviet Union's southern flank. In 1947-48, Afghanistan became a Cold War battlefield. Nevertheless, since it had no domestic subversion and there was no direct Soviet threat, Afghanistan was not a priority for American policymakers. Other countries

¹ *Charlie Wilson's War*, directed by Mike Nichols (2007, Universal Pictures).

² Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Nick Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *The Journal of American History* 89:2 (2002): 512-537; Jenifer Van Vleck, "An Airline at the Crossroads of the World: Ariana Afghan Airlines, Modernization, and the Global Cold War," *History and Technology. An International Journal* 25:1 (2009): 3-24.

³ Ludwig W. Adamec, *Afghanistan's Foreign Affairs to the Mid-Twentieth Century: Relations with the USSR, Germany, and Britain* (University of Arizona Press, 1974); Milan Hunter, "Afghanistan between the Great Powers, 1938-1945," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14:4 (November, 1982): 481-499.

took priority over it, including Greece, Turkey, Iran, and Korea. Yet, the country assumed a certain importance for the various US administrations which aimed to curtail the country's alignment with the USSR.

Over the following decades, maintaining Afghanistan as a non-aligned country was the priority and a constant theme in both Washington and Kabul. To accomplish this, various US administrations contributed to the modernization and development of the country, drafting and refining projects that embraced agricultural modernization and hydropower, oil production, the establishment of an airline, various infrastructure projects, constitutional reform, cultural diplomacy initiatives, as well as humanitarian assistance after dramatic crises. Here, despite the diversity among the various administrations, a certain continuity also emerged; Afghanistan was to receive moderate assistance so that it would remain a non-aligned country and not fall under Moscow's influence.

Against this general background, tensions occasionally arose between the United States and Afghanistan, including President Lyndon Johnson's partial disengagement from Afghanistan following Kabul's mild criticism of the Vietnam War (228-238). Similarly, Rakove's well-informed narrative describes events and episodes that did not fit neatly into traditional accounts of the Cold War. For instance, overthrowing Afghan President Mohammad Daoud Khan was never an option for the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower, despite similar American actions in Iran or Guatemala (see especially 149).

The book also offers another level of analysis, that of Afghan Cold War diplomacy vis-à-vis the United States. As in Washington, the limits and opportunities posed by the Cold War were also clear in Kabul. Taking advantage of the superpowers' rivalry, Afghan politicians and diplomats succeeded in channelling development aid and support for their projects, whether for personal or factional power consolidation, economic development and modernization, territorial and nationalist claims, or maintaining Afghanistan's status as a non-aligned country. In his balanced analysis, Rakove argues that Afghan diplomacy was quite successful in channelling aid until the 1979 Soviet invasion. Conversely, the pursuit of American largesse, while providing tangible benefits, weakened the Afghan state by causing a crisis of legitimacy for Afghan leaders. Rakove masterfully explains the contradiction in the analysis of President Mohammed Daoud Khan's actions: the paradox between his nationalist agenda and his development goals.

Rakove offers a balanced analysis of this US-Afghan relations, which were marked by realism. Afghan leaders and diplomats were realistic in their efforts to build a relationship with the United States to counterbalance the Soviet appetite in the region and, later, were able to navigate the stormy waters of the Cold War. The American approach to Kabul was equally realistic, if sometimes flawed. While pre-1979 Afghanistan was not a top priority for the United States, Washington never gave up its commitment to keep Afghanistan isolated from the direct confrontation of the US and USSR. Nevertheless, the United States was too often willing to sacrifice Afghanistan on the altar of regional objectives. American realism also emerges in another central theme of the book: the fact that the United States avoided consistently prioritizing Afghanistan, fearing that excessive attention would trigger a massive Soviet action toward the country. Afghanistan presented US policymakers with a dilemma: if an initiative were too weak, it might be

seen by the Soviets as a green light for military incursion; if it were too strong, the US would be accused of imperialism and be saddled with a dependent state. Rakove's account of the relationship draws a well-balanced picture to explain how the cautious interest of US governments, the attention and emotions of US diplomats, the capabilities of the Afghan government, and political and geographical constraints made Afghanistan a battlefield of the global Cold War and helped lay the groundwork for the 1979 Soviet invasion.⁴ On this point, Rakove shows how the administration of President Jimmy Carter struggled to assess Afghan events of 1978–1979. Despite the acknowledgement by the administration that events were “deteriorating rapidly” and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who described the situation as an “arc of crisis,” the White House was still constantly caught by surprise (325). This is a further demonstration of the groundlessness of Brzezinski's “Afghan trap” (the alleged American plot to push the Soviets to invade Afghanistan and give them a “Soviet Vietnam”) and, more importantly, a further demonstration of how Washington linked Afghan problems to regional priorities and, in the end, misunderstood the situation.⁵

The book's strengths do not end here. From a methodological perspective, *Days of Opportunity* stands out for two reasons. First, Rakove conducted rich multinational and multi-archival research. Beyond public and private archival repositories in the US, Rakove's book benefits from primary sources that he used from the archives of four European countries (France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Czechoslovakia), as well as selected available Soviet documents. Rakove balances this international approach to American foreign relations by his attention to domestic factors, bureaucratic infighting, and Congressional pressures that contributed to shaping America's action toward Afghanistan. Second, the analysis is not limited to government action but embraces several different actors, including diplomats, politicians, businesspeople, experts and technicians, humanitarian actors (such as those who dealt with drought and famine). This plurality of players repeatedly entered Afghanistan, developed their projects, and contributed to that public-private nexus that was so important in the projection of American power abroad.

Moreover, attention to geography—and not to the all-encompassing determinism of geopolitics—helps one understand the difficulties and ambitions of Afghan leaders during the Cold War, as well as America's limited and balanced engagement. The dilemmas of the Americans and Afghans depended on the

⁴ Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press, 2011); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 288–387; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (Penguin, 2004).

⁵ Conor Tobin, “The Myth of the Afghan Trap: Zbigniew Brzezinski and Afghanistan, 1978–1979”, *Diplomatic History* 44:2 (2020): 237–264.

geographic proximity of the USSR, tensions with neighbouring Pakistan, and the Afghan irritation with an American aid policy that rewarded allies such as Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan more than Afghanistan.⁶

In addition to this positive appraisal of Rakove's book, there are three aspects of it that are less convincing.

The first one deals with the cultural and ideological dimension of the US-Afghanistan relationship. Rakove's narrative says little about the ideological baggage and the biases that Americans had about Afghanistan and the legacy of the culture of the colonial period and its mystifications. The description of *buzkashi*—a traditional game that troubled both Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev (101) and US Ambassador Angus Ward (128) for its brutality and backwardness—could have provided an opportunity to reflect on how Afghan cultural traditions have come to consolidate or undermine ideological and racial assumptions, and how local traditions were experienced by American diplomats and businesspeople there.⁷ Readers may wonder what the reactions of diplomats or businessmen were in their first encounters with Afghan society, traditions, markets, and even food. Andrew J. Rotter has insightfully suggested that encounters between cultures as different as Afghan and American are mediated by the senses, which eventually could shape political imagination and action.⁸

Second, though this point is perhaps linked to the availability of primary sources, Rakove's narrative presents an unbalanced description of diplomats and their role in keeping the United States and Afghanistan aligned. While the expertise and the emotional commitment of American diplomats in Kabul is clear, Afghan diplomats and their actions remain obscure and little explored.

Finally, much of the book deals with different development aid programs and modernization projects. However, there is a lack of explanation of what modernization meant to Afghan leaders. Considering the voluminous body of scholarship focusing on the history of development during the Cold War, which demonstrated how development was a polyphony of voices, projects, patterns, notions, and ideologies, little is said on what Afghan leaders really wanted.⁹ What model of development was of most interest to the Afghan leadership? Was development just a tool to pursue individual or factional aims, or did it represent a

⁶ On the impact and limits of geography, geopolitics and cartography on US foreign policy, see Timothy Barney, *Mapping the Cold War: Cartography and the Framing of America's International Power* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

⁷ Andrew J. Rotter, "Saidism without Said: Orientalism and US Diplomatic History," *The American Historical Review* 105:4 (2000): 1205-1217.

⁸ Rotter, "Empires of the Senses: How Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching Shaped Imperial Encounters" *Diplomatic History* 35:1 (2011): 2-19.

⁹ Among many others, see Corinna R. Unger, *International Development: A Postwar History* (Bloomsbury, 2018); Erez Manela and Stephen J. Macekura, eds., *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

key to transform the country? Did the Afghan government look with greater interest at programs of the US, USSR, China, international organizations, or others?

These minor reservations aside, Robert Rakove's *Days of Opportunity* is a first-rate work that contributes to our understanding of American foreign policy, the non-alignment movement, and the origins of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Response by Robert Rakove, Stanford University

I am profoundly grateful to Terry Anderson, Susan Colbourn, Carter Malkasian, Jayita Sarkar, and Umberto Tulli for their careful reading, thoughtful observations, and kind words about my book. Each is a highly accomplished scholar, and this panel interweaves expertise on the Vietnam War era, the crises of the late 1970s, human rights, the Atlantic alliance, nuclear technology and governance, South Asian development, and, of course, the modern US war in Afghanistan.¹ Sometime over the past year, each of these five colleagues assented to spend some of their scarce time on a rather hefty book. I do not know how this debt can be repaid, but will try here to address their questions and observations.

I thought I might begin by discussing the various structural and topical choices that shaped this book over the past decade. One was my belated realization that I could not begin the account after the Second World War, as I had originally intended. The pivotal choices of the immediate postwar period, especially Afghanistan's disastrous contract with the Morrison-Knudsen company, sprung from promises made in wartime. Perhaps 1939 or 1942 (the year the United States finally opened a legation in Kabul) might have functioned as a starting year, but that choice risked sidelining Afghan actors who had worked tirelessly across the preceding two decades to engage Washington's interest. Available sources and my own specialization only allowed limited analysis of Afghan policy and choices, but Kabul's diplomacy during and between the world wars anticipated much of what would follow.

Lamentably, some of the interwar stories will have to await publication at a later point. Sarkar notes that the coverage of this period is comparatively thin. The absence of sustained diplomatic contact between 1921 and 1934, aside from the occasional third-country conversation between US and Afghan diplomats, yielded a smaller documentary base—but not a total dearth. Aside from occasional instances when Washington deigned to notice the kingdom, the documentary record still reveals intriguing instances of Afghan contacts with US travelers, journalists, and entrepreneurs.

One especially merits further discussion. Material cut from the manuscript at a late stage detailed an escalating series of Afghan attempts to extend an oil concession to an array of (generally dubious) US actors, in the hopes that this would prompt both a renewal of relations and the opening of a diplomatic mission.² Charles Calmer Hart, an enterprising but erratic political appointee who served as the US minister in Tehran, was successfully enticed across the border in 1930. Afterward, he nursed an avid interest in Afghanistan's substantial but remote oil deposits. Within years, he succeeded in enlisting geologist

¹ Including but not limited to: Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties* (Oxford University Press, 1996); Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Jayita Sarkar, *Ploughshares and Swords: India's Nuclear Program in the Global Cold War* (Cornell University Press, 2022); Umberto Tulli, *A Precarious Equilibrium: Human Rights and Detente in Jimmy Carter's Soviet Policy* (Manchester University Press, 2021).

² Relations had been opened when the Harding administration received Afghan envoys in July 1921 but lapsed after the overthrow of King Amanullah in 1928 and the coronation of Nadir Shah the following year.

Frederick Clapp. The two men spearheaded an ambitious oil prospecting mission, backed by the Seaboard Oil Company. They obtained extensive concessions in both Afghanistan and Iran in 1936, only to forfeit them abruptly two years later when Seaboard abandoned the enterprise. A deeper examination of this episode would further illuminate Afghan oil diplomacy, the roles of corporate actors, and the wider geopolitics of the era. I hope to publish a journal article on this topic in the near future.

The heart of the book discusses US policy and Afghanistan's changing place within the global Cold War. The latter topic, of course, can only be described through the subjective, often conflicting assessments of historical actors. How *does* one assess national pavilions at an Afghan trade fair? The construction of a university? The visit of a senior official? Making sense of the ebbs and flows of local developments and their policy consequences required a largely chronological approach: one that advanced on a year-to-year basis, taking stock of the interplay between events within Afghanistan, the United States, neighboring countries, and other Cold War battlegrounds. In turn, as the reviewers note, I sought to describe the myriad ways by which external, usually unrelated events shaped Afghanistan's difficult, yet contingent, course through the Cold War. The reviewers are right: I wanted no part of the "graveyard of empires" cliché. It is as obscuring as it is insulting.³ It makes Afghanistan's misfortune a product of ascribed innate traits, rather than the actions of others and, as Elisabeth Leake writes, wider currents in international history.⁴

Working chronologically led to a different book: one which illustrates both change and persistence. Intrigued as I am by the various forms of Cold War competition in the nonaligned world, looking at one specific site of it across several decades appealed tremendously. Afghanistan represented both an early and relatively stable locus for dueling aid, cultural, and diplomatic programs. Yes, stable. Until the Marxist coup of 1978, its governments carefully maintained a middle position between the blocs, burning bridges to neither.⁵ After the commencement of the Soviet aid offensive in the mid-1950s, Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan and his brother, Foreign Minister Mohammed Naim Khan, worked assiduously to convince the United States of their desire to remain independent and nonaligned. After hesitant beginnings, Washington authorized an extensive, eclectic, and dynamic aid program.

The evolution of that program reveals much about the changing politics and instrumentalities of US aid and the distribution of leverage between Washington and Kabul. Let's briefly consider a central pillar of the program: food aid. In recognition of Kabul's increasingly friendly neutrality during the war, the administration of President Harry S. Truman assented—despite British objections—to an ad hoc grain shipment in late 1946. Notably, the Afghans succeeded in advancing their case, despite terrible conditions in postwar Europe. President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Public Law 480 (PL-480) program created a durable

³ Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 27–40.

⁴ Elisabeth Leake, *Afghan Crucible: The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁵ Sarkar's scholarship explicates India's pragmatic use of Cold War nonalignment to advance its nuclear industry. See especially, Sarkar, *Ploughshares and Swords*.

instrument for the disposal of surplus wheat: one which benefited Afghan modernizers and Great Plains farmers alike.⁶ Remarkably, Afghanistan managed to become the world's only consistent recipient of wheat under Title II, which provided for grants on an emergency, humanitarian basis. US officials privately doubted the applicability of a provision that was intended for cases of famine, but as anxious Cold War competitors erred on the side of generosity. Afghanistan enjoyed this distinction for nearly a decade, but lost it in 1966, as its benefactor tightened its belt.

Henceforth, Washington drove a harder bargain: it conditioned aid on the enactment of agricultural reforms, especially the adoption of fertilizer-intensive methods. President Lyndon Baines Johnson's punitively dilatory approval of one PL-480 sale helped to destabilize one Afghan government.⁷ His successors' insistence on 'self-help' programs distorted the Kabul government's response to the disastrous drought and famine which beset the country in 1971–1972. Responding to the prompting of the US country team and American consultants, an Afghan minister, Abdul Wakil, first attempted to yoke famine relief to rural construction projects. The results proved disastrous: hunger scarcely corresponded to the labor supply. Analyses of Daoud's July 1973 coup invariably cite the famine as a key precipitating cause.⁸ I would even suggest that no single issue better depicts the evolution of this relationship than the ever-urgent question of food aid.

Tulli wonders what sustained attention to the sensory experiences of Americans in Afghanistan, along the lines proposed by Andrew Rotter, would reveal. This is a great suggestion and I regret not pursuing it further. Rotter's counsel notwithstanding, I have unfortunately privileged sight over its four counterparts.⁹ Thorough mining of diaries, letters, and memoirs would convey more of the unease experienced by Americans in the early decades. "Health is precious and precarious in this area," wrote diplomat Agnes La

⁶ Kristin L. Ahlberg, *Transplanting the Great Society: Lyndon Johnson and Food for Peace* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008).

⁷ Here, I should perhaps discuss my argument at the end of my seventh chapter. I criticize Johnson *not* for declining to undertake a major program in Afghanistan, but for needlessly punishing the kingdom. On 31 March 1967, the visiting Prime Minister Mohammed Hashim Maiwandwal, goaded by reporters, suggested a bombing halt in Vietnam. Afterward, Johnson retaliated, insisting that all Afghan aid requests be subject to his personal approval. It does not surprise me that aid allotments fell through his presidency, as part of a general trend toward austerity; it amazes me that he insisted on making time to review (and reject) Kabul's small dollar appeals while he was contending with the Tet Offensive and the presidential election (228–238).

⁸ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (I.B. Tauris, 2012), 171–172; Jonathan L. Lee, *Afghanistan: A History from 1260 to the Present* (Reaktion, 2022), 569–580; M. Hassan Kakar, "The Fall of the Afghan Monarchy in 1973," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9:2 (1978): 195–214; Thomas Ruttig, "How It All Began: A Short Look at the Pre-1979 Origins of Afghanistan's Conflicts," AAN Occasional Paper (Afghan Analysts Network, 19 January 2013), https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/02/20130111Ruttig-How_It_All_Began_FINAL.pdf.

⁹ Andrew J. Rotter, "Empires of the Senses: How Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching Shaped Imperial Encounters," *Diplomatic History* 35:1 (2011): 2–19.

Barr in 1948.¹⁰ Accounts of the early postwar era feature complaints about scarce, expensive, and unfamiliar food (as well as innumerable cases of foodborne illness). Kabul's houses often lacked insulation and while crisp mountain air might appeal in spring or summer, early post correspondence lamented bitter winter conditions. "The first six months to a year one can rely on his reserves of vital energy, good nature and finances together with the interest in and novelty of a new country, to carry him through," wrote clerk Martha Vandiver. "After that our tempers become brittle and we are apt to snap at people and take exception to the slightest thing."¹¹

Such difficulties could not have been incidental to the choices made in the postwar years. In this period, although US influence within Afghanistan was at its relative zenith, arduous conditions and heavy personnel turnover undermined the effectiveness of US diplomacy and aid. The efforts of the Morrison-Knudsen company to create comfortable work camps for its American workforce left its Afghan employer burdened with lasting debt. Fateful choices were made in these challenging circumstances, foremost among them the disastrous decision to back a notionally international oil development project in northern Afghanistan.

Cultural analysis of the prior images Americans brought to Afghanistan could also have been helpful. Here I would propose some caveats. To their American guests, the Afghan elite presented a friendly, cosmopolitan, fundamentally sympathetic façade: they sidestepped rather than collided with Orientalist presuppositions.¹² The myopia that Malkasian describes, the willingness of Americans to support ambitious, Kabul-devised modernization schemes, stemmed from this success. American officials spent much time in the capital and the Helmand, only visiting the rest of the country sporadically. Their hosts did nothing to discourage this tendency. The legendary sport of *buzkashi* is a recurring motif within the book, but I think it presented something of a Rorschach test to the foreign spectator. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev perceived it as reflective of Afghan backwardness. Ambassador Angus Ward beheld cruelty to animals. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, on the other hand, mused appreciatively that it explained how Afghanistan had retained its independence between empires.¹³

¹⁰ Memorandum, Agnes La Barr to Ely Palmer, May 6, 1948, Record Group 59, Records of the Office of South Asian Affairs, 1939-1953, Subject File Relating to South Asian Regional Affairs, Box 9, "860.3 Post Report and Living Conditions," US National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹¹ Memorandum, Martha Vandiver to Palmer, 5 May 1948, Record Group 59, Records of the Office of South Asian Affairs, 1939-1953, Subject File Relating to South Asian Regional Affairs, Box 9, "860.3 Post Report and Living Conditions," US National Archives, College Park, MD.

¹² See, for example an American diplomat's eulogy for Afghan prime minister and longtime foreign ministry official, Nur Ahmad Etemadi. Norman B. Hannah, "Afghanistan: History as Obituary," *Asian Affairs* 7:5 (1980): 299-304. Afghan and US leaders also likely benefited from the same shared theological tenets described by Rotter in his discussion of Pakistani American relations. See

¹³ *Buzkashi* is played by teams of riders who roughly vie to deposit a goat carcass into a goal area. On this, see G. Whitney Azoy, *Buzkashi: Game & Power in Afghanistan* (Waveland Press, 2012).

Last, I agree with Tulli that Afghan diplomacy and modernization deserve a thorough study in their own right—ideally harnessing the extensive online library of Afghan publications and perhaps surviving records within Afghanistan.¹⁴ Generally defined, Daoud, Naim, King Mohammad Zahir Shah, and their peers pursued similar geopolitical objectives: Afghanistan’s independence and economic modernization. With varying emphases, Afghan modernizers sought improved access to the wider world, complemented by domestic self-sufficiency in terms of agriculture, industry, and energy. As noted by several authors, Afghanistan’s educational modernization proved especially transformative.¹⁵ “The needs of our country are manifold, and the march of time compels us to meet them in the shortest possible duration,” Daoud declared in 1962.¹⁶ He especially wanted a strong military which would be able to project state power into hitherto remote or restive regions.¹⁷ Zahir aimed, concurrently, to preserve his family’s authority. To foreign analysts, the modernization programs of the Daoud years often resembled a wish list more than a cohesive strategy.¹⁸ They hinged upon optimistic estimates of foreign aid, export earnings, and domestic revenue.¹⁹ The programs may have, in turn, represented bargains among the Afghan elite, whose inner politics were only intermittently visible to foreigners. My evaluation of Naim’s federation proposal, noted by Malkasian in his review, cautioned me against assuming that policy emerged from close coordination between elite actors.²⁰

Were Washington’s efforts worthwhile? Were they feasible? Malkasian and Anderson pose this vital question. Among the reviewers, Anderson questions whether Afghanistan mattered to the United States. By itself, it would not have. It had elicited some sympathy and occasional parcels of assistance before 1953, alongside pessimistic estimates of its defensibility before a Soviet offensive. Eisenhower’s enlistment of Iran and Pakistan within his alliance system, however, transformed how Washington regarded the Afghan kingdom. Kabul’s eastern and western neighbors credibly deemed its alignment a matter of vital importance to them. The (unquestioned) strategic value accorded to these states obligated successive

¹⁴ Especially the voluminous Afghanistan Center at Kabul University Digital Repository, ACKU, 2017, <https://afghandata.org/>. Timothy Nunan’s majestic study of Afghan modernization vividly captures the experiences of Soviet, West German, and US technicians within the country. See Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 46-118.

¹⁵ Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 173-228; Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (Yale University Press, 2002), 62-73; Leake, *Afghan Crucible*, 7-28.

¹⁶ “Priority for More Farm Output: Daoud Explains Second Plan Aims,” *Kabul Times*, 15 April 1962, 4.

¹⁷ Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan*, 125-30.

¹⁸ Maxwell J. Fry, *The Afghan Economy: Money, Finance, and the Critical Constraints to Economic Development* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 69-81. Barnett Rubin writes: “Government expenditures did not conform to any development plan.” Rubin, *Fragmentation*, 69.

¹⁹ In fairness, however, dramatic institutional changes to the US foreign assistance program, bureaucratic politics within Washington, and faltering legislative and public support for aid rendered Washington an unpredictable benefactor at best.

²⁰ David Engerman’s examination of the domestic and bureaucratic politics of aid within India influenced my analysis considerably. David C. Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

White Houses to ponder where Afghanistan fit in the regional picture. The logic of containment proved highly elastic. If US policymakers did not apprehend the links between Iranian and Pakistani security and Afghan conditions, their allies lost no time in illuminating them.²¹

The point is *not* that Afghanistan ever reached the first rank of geopolitical concerns before 1979 (even in that final year, the administration of President Jimmy Carter only dealt with it sporadically). Rather, like other major Cold War battlegrounds it held an ill-defined, yet volatile, intermediate value. In the decade of Presidents Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy (1953–1963), the prospect of its ‘loss’ to the Soviet bloc could and did spur an energetic, creative response. As Tulli notes, the United States could not play to win in Kabul. It was, however, unwilling to lose—especially when policymakers entertained notions of Moscow employing the country as a steppingstone to the subcontinent or the Persian Gulf.²²

How should we assess US policy? Here, I reach a split verdict. My fourth chapter criticizes the rapid consolidation of Afghanistan’s neighbors within the US alliance system. Eisenhower’s intervention in Iran was immoral and unwise. His hurried embrace of Pakistan constituted, in the words of Robert McMahon, “a monumental strategic blunder.”²³ Early criticisms of “pactomania” proved prescient. Yet, given the prevailing theses about the Soviet threat, those choices made some type of aid program in Afghanistan logical and likely. Money was all too often spent unwisely, especially in the south, but I hesitate to suggest that all was for naught. A modest program, developed in close concert with Afghan officials in Kabul and at the local level, could have benefited both parties.²⁴ Presidential diplomacy, as practiced by Eisenhower and Kennedy, was a reasonable expense toward this end.

The latter marveled, when introducing King Zahir, that there was nothing “more remarkable” than the fact that the United States had become, over the past quarter century, deeply concerned with events in countries like Afghanistan.²⁵ For Kennedy and others, Washington’s sudden concern with a distant, hitherto obscure kingdom exemplified the sudden transformation of US foreign relations wrought by the Second World War and the Cold War. Afghanistan’s experience aptly reflects the latter conflict in

²¹ Strategic concurrence did not yield persistent consensus with the two allies. Irked by territorial and riparian disputes, Pakistan and Iran sometime favored confronting Afghanistan. By spring 1956, the United States had adopted its policy of engagement and tended, thereafter, to mediate between its allies and Kabul.

²² Colbourn’s masterful history of the Euromissile problem describes an array of crises structurally intrinsic to the Atlantic Alliance. Similarly, Washington’s concurrent engagement of Afghanistan and alliance with its neighbors created enduring problems that resisted resolution. Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Cornell University Press, 2022), 4–5.

²³ Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War on the Periphery: The United States, India, and Pakistan* (Columbia University Press, 1994), 338.

²⁴ Had it been administered wisely, the United Nations Technical Assistance Mission (UNTAM), discussed in my third chapter, could have played this role. Many of its programs, focused on health, agriculture, and education, anticipated the ground-level efforts of the 1970s (93–97).

²⁵ Toasts of the President and the King of Afghanistan at a Dinner at the White House, 5 September 1963, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1963* (Government Printing Office, 1964), 655.

microcosm. Miscommunication, idealism, paranoia, and misperception drew the superpowers into a country that neither understood well. Yet they were not doomed to contest Afghanistan militarily. Remarkable to me are their halting steps toward cooperation within the country.²⁶ Détente arrived early in Afghanistan, albeit at the expense of the kingdom's diplomatic leverage.

More than a decade later, events within Afghanistan brought the final collapse of the teetering détente system. The removal of a familiar, if frustrating, regime in Kabul accentuated fears in regional capitals, and reinforced alarmist counsel in Washington. Amid a general crisis of confidence, noted by Anderson, the Carter administration incrementally adopted a more aggressive policy against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan after the bizarre February 1979 killing of Ambassador Adolph Dubs.²⁷

Moving toward the present, Colbourn rightly asks me to consider the implications of the pre-cataclysm relationship for the US war in Afghanistan. Aside from a couple of oblique references in chapter conclusions and a brief epilogue in the final pages, the body of the book is devoid of such discussion. Happily, Malkasian's review offers compelling, evocative linkages between the diplomatic encounters I chronicle and the 2001–2021 period, and readers are well advised to consult his comprehensive, insightful 2021 book.²⁸

A few others come to mind. During the recent war, domestic priorities precluded otherwise promising policy options. Rajiv Chandrasekaran describes USAID's repeated refusal to underwrite Afghan cotton cultivation, lest Afghan farmers compete with their US counterparts.²⁹ Washington followed a similar policy at the height of the aid contest. Counternarcotics policy presents even more compelling parallels. In both cases, US governments pushed their Afghan partners to eradicate opium poppies. In the 1970s, eradication policy was at best a distraction; in the current century, it proved a costly failure.³⁰ Both eras witnessed, above all, an emphasis on grandiose projects and a comparative neglect of the human factors that were required for sustainable progress. In either period, it proved far easier to pave a road than to develop

²⁶ On this shift, see Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 526–530.

²⁷ Dubs regarded extravagant theories of Soviet designs skeptically. His murder removed the most authoritative voice for caution within the US government. See Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 33–35.

²⁸ Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*.

²⁹ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 101–103, 200–204.

³⁰ James Tharin Bradford, *Poppies, Politics, and Power: Afghanistan and the Global History of Drugs and Diplomacy* (Cornell University Press, 2019), 214–221; Parwez Besmel and Nana Kwame Baah, “Critical Analysis of United States Counternarcotics Strategies in Afghanistan,” *Journal of Drug Issues*, 28 May 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220426241252752>.

durable institutions for its regular upkeep.³¹ As Malkasian reflects, the United States still struggles to gather and assess information abroad. In this, the case of Afghanistan is quintessential.

Anderson, Colbourn, Malkasian, Sarkar, and Tulli argue, in sum, that we have continued cause to study the Cold War at the local level. Our field can occasionally invest too much importance in lofty strategists and too little in the unsung ensemble cast of diplomats, experts, and volunteers who implemented policy and interpreted local events. Colbourn terms them “the essential ingredient of policy;” I could not agree more.

Nonaligned Afghanistan continually tested the grand designs crafted in superpower capitals. It mattered, not because it elicited conscious strategic forethought, but it forced awkward adjustments upon established doctrines and relationships. Reckoning with Afghanistan entailed contending with the unsettled legacies of colonialism, the challenges of development, the vagaries of governance in borderlands, independent nomadic peoples, and enterprising, often wildly unscrupulous, corporate actors. The effort could, as Tulli notes, lead policymakers toward a more realistic assessment of the world—but only if they heeded the observations of their agents on the ground. These lessons are difficult to learn, but the effort remains vital in this century.

In closing, I would like to thank my reviewers, Bob McMahon, and the H-Diplo team: Dan Hart and Diane Labrosse.³² This book involved a decade of research and years of writing and rewriting. It is a great pleasure to see it considered so carefully and thoughtfully by fellow historians and I am very happy that they regard it as a helpful contribution to our shared field.

³¹ Jamie Lynn De Coster, “Building and Undermining Legitimacy: Reconstruction and Development in Afghanistan,” in Aaron B. O’Connell, ed., *Our Latest Longest War, Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 157-188.

³² Tom Maddux initially wrote me to inquire about a roundtable. Sadly, he passed away last December, after decades of service to this forum and the field of international history. Alongside countless others, this roundtable attests to his dedication.