

The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban

by Sarah Chayes, Penguin, 2006, 386 pp.

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I.

Go back, if you will, to what you were thinking and feeling about Afghanistan around October of 2001 – or in any case, what you were thinking and feeling if you had any sympathy for the US-led war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. You probably felt a measure of gratification at the sight of retribution for the 9/11 attacks, a sense of grief and loss over the destruction entailed by that retribution, a sense of anxiety about what the future might portend, but – admit it – a sense of hope that things might eventually work out.

Now return to the year 2008, and take a look at Afghanistan today. Admit it: your hopes have been smashed. October 2001 now seems like ancient history. We haven't quite lost the war, but we're slowly travelling the road to defeat, and have been for the last six years. The Taliban have regrouped, as have bits of al-Qaeda, and both have taken sanctuary across the Afghan border in Pakistan. Pakistan itself is reeling, listlessly, from its much-hyped flirtation with 'democracy,' and is currently losing and conceding its own war against the same enemy. Every week brings news of another bombing somewhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan (along with the occasional rampage in India), but no source brings news of any strategically stable victory in either place. Afghanistan around Kabul is perhaps as stable as it was during the Soviet occupation. The rest of the country is as unstable as it was at the same time – a kind of 'rentier anarchy' [1] based on plunder, corruption, and brutality.

Why did this happen? Could it have been otherwise? These questions (and other pertinent ones) are at the center of Sarah Chayes's powerful 2006 book, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban*, as well as a series of articles, speeches, and interviews since then. Chayes's work offers a wealth of information on 'Afghanistan after the Taliban,' and penetrating insights expressed with verve, intelligence, and passion. Having said that, however, I found myself, while reading her work, recalling something that Socrates tells his interlocutor Crito in Plato's dialogue of that name: 'My dear Crito,' Socrates tells his friend, 'your eagerness is worth much if it should have some right aim; if not, then the

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greater your keenness the more difficult it is to deal with' (Plato 1981). So it is with Chayes's work, as I'll explain, focusing on the book, but engaging her other work as well.

II.

The Punishment of Virtue, though neither quite autobiography nor memoir, nonetheless places Chayes's own life squarely at the center of the action. As readers, we see what she sees, and hear what she hears, and the Afghanistan we come to know through her narrative is ineluctably framed by her idiosyncratic perspective on things.

In so far as it is relevant to the book, Chayes's biography is a story of disillusionments, with Afghanistan playing a redemptive role. She begins her career as a graduate student in Near East Studies at Harvard, only to have a 'violent allergic reaction' (p. 8) to the academic enterprise which leads her, via odd jobs, into journalism. A stint with National Public Radio (NPR) sends her to Paris, which she uses as a home base to cover the war in the Balkans and the proceedings of the War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague. 'Shattered in ways that took [her] by surprise' by the events of 9/11 (p. 10), she abandons Paris, and plunges headlong into north-western Pakistan and eventually Afghanistan to cover the US-led war there.

A few months of reporting, mostly from Pakistan, convinces her that both she and her journalistic colleagues have gotten the story of the fall of the Taliban desperately wrong. Frustrated by her editors' (and the public's) refusal to deal candidly with the facts she has uncovered (or believes she has), she leaves journalism altogether, and joins Afghans for Civil Society (ACS), a US-based non-profit organisation founded by Qayum and Patricia Karzai (Qayum being the Afghan-American nephew of Hamid Karzai, Patricia being Qayum's wife). Resisting the easy blandishments of NGO life in Kabul, Chayes opts to live and work among ordinary Afghans in the southern city of Kandahar, erstwhile capital of the Taliban.

The book follows the trials and tribulations of her ACS work in Kandahar from 2001 to 2005. It begins at the end of that period with the 2005 murder of her colleague and friend, Akrem Khakrezwal, at the time the police chief of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. In a digressive but still informative way, Chayes recounts the events that led to Akrem's death, and then led to the anti-climactic and inconclusive investigation into it. En route, we get Chayes's lucid and often profound insights

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into post-Taliban Afghanistan, as well as into Afghanistan's relations with the US and Pakistan.

Late in the book, Chayes expresses disillusionment with 'the fantasy of direct democracy' (p. 324) – and indeed with the Karzai government as such – and resigns from ACS. After a 'conversion to economics' (p. 331), she decides to become an entrepreneur in Kandahar, putting together a co-op called Arghand, devoted somewhat improbably to the manufacture of fine natural skin-care products from indigenous local crops (see Chayes 2007b). She remains in Kandahar as I write (Nov. 2008), working for Arghand, churning out opinionated Op-Eds, and venturing back to the States on occasion to stake her claims in contemporary debates about Afghanistan (see Chayes 2008a).

Though she doesn't address them in precisely those terms, *The Punishment of Virtue* offers clear and forceful answers to the questions posed toward the beginning of this review. Things went wrong, according to Chayes, as a result of two sets of causes, one internal to the country, one external.

Internally, Afghanistan is a nation and culture that is dysfunctional to the point of collapse. Having been on the receiving end of three decades of war, Afghans are too traumatised and impoverished to resist the warlords and thugs that attach themselves like parasites to the country's government and economy. As a result, Afghanistan lacks the underlying conditions for a functioning economy or the rule of law.

Externally, Afghanistan finds itself caught between two problematic and related influences, one involving the US, the other involving Pakistan. The American influence consists of a confused attempt to combine warfare with nation-building, and to engage in the latter on the cheap. In other words, the Americans want – in a characteristically inchoate and incoherent way – to 'fight the bad guys' and 'help the good guys,' without a clear sense of the distinction between them, of principles to set priorities or resolve conflicts between their various aims, or indeed any determinate sense (beyond clichés) of how they intend to accomplish any given aim. Meanwhile, the Pakistanis want, and know that they want, 'strategic depth,' that is, an Afghanistan that they can control at will (p. 118). So the Pakistani role in Afghanistan is essentially duplicitous and subversive: a nostalgic longing for the good old days when the Taliban were in power, with tactics to bring them back to power in one form or another.

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Put the two factors together, and you get a cogent explanation of what went wrong in Afghanistan – indeed, you get a recipe for creating it. Take a land-locked, anarchic country with strategic significance for all of its powerful and ambitious neighbours. Subject it to constant warfare, so that its population longs for the imposition of stability at virtually any cost, including a regime imposed by the least literate, most violent, and most irrational people in the land. Add a clueless superpower that overthrows this regime to replace it by one that is (somewhat) more literate but visibly more corrupt, and then add a conniving southern neighbour that professes support for the superpower while abetting an insurgency against it. Let the whole thing simmer for six years. The result will be Afghanistan, circa 2008.

Could things have been otherwise? Chayes thinks so. On her account, as of 2001, the internal factors were a given, but the external factors might have been different, if only the Americans had gotten things right. What went wrong in Afghanistan, Chayes insists, was a function of specifically American ignorance, dogmatism, naïveté, timidity, simple-mindedness, moral laxity, and civic apathy. Post-9/11 Americans didn't want to hear the truth about the fall of Kandahar; they wanted to hear a story of the vanquishing of the Taliban by anti-Taliban forces. US officials didn't want to de-Talibanise (or de-warlordise) the new Afghan government; they were content to let re-Talibanisation (and re-warlordisation) happen under their very noses, and then deny that it was happening. The US military wasn't interested in nation-building; it wanted to fight the bad guys by conventional military methods. Having just forged an alliance of convenience with Pakistan, the American government was blinded to Pakistan's subversion of Afghanistan. And so it denied the existence of that subversion or else let it happen.

The result, as Chayes puts it (in a sardonic inversion of a Taliban motto), was 'The Punishment of Virtue and the reward of vice,' that is, the (often unwitting) sacrifice of America's friends to its enemies. Indeed, Chayes takes the murder of her friend Akrem Khakrezwal to be the paradigmatic example of such a sacrifice, and his death fairly haunts the pages of the book. For the US government, support for Afghanistan has typically meant support for its government, even at the price of complicity with the warlords, murderers, theocrats, and thieves who constitute that government. For the American people, Chayes notes with genuine grief, support for Afghanistan seems not to mean anything at all. From the flag-waving days of the autumn of 2001 we seem now to have muddled our way to the confusion and apathy of the autumn of 2008. The 'good war' is on the brink of being lost, and almost nobody cares. [2]

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To get things right, Chayes argues, we ought to follow the advice she indefatigably offers up in blueprint after blueprint both in the book, and in a series of articles and working papers collected on her website since the book's publication. We first have to admit that we got the Afghanistan story wrong in 2001. That means admitting that we never actually won the war. What we did instead was to let the enemy melt away to fight another day. Second, we have to understand Pakistani intentions for what they are. The Pakistani government, on Chayes's account, is not an ally but something closer to an enemy, and ought to be treated accordingly. Third, we have to take the nation-building enterprise more seriously. In particular, the military has to learn how to multi-task, and learn that the job of winning hearts and minds is less a matter of guns and bullets than of bricks, mortar, and the rule of law. We cannot shoot our way to victory; we have to win the population over by building them the nation they need. Had we done all this in the first place, Chayes implies, 'the good war' might well be on the road to victory.

I think Chayes makes a good case for the first of these claims: our victory in Afghanistan was indeed as superficial as she suggests. [3] She is generally correct about the second, as well: Pakistan is as much our enemy as our ally. But some of what she says about Pakistan is colossally wrongheaded, as is most of what she says about nation-building. In the next section, I'll discuss what she gets right; in section IV, I'll discuss what she gets wrong.

III.

There's certainly no shortage of writing on Afghanistan nowadays, ranging from best-selling novels and 'life inside Afghanistan' memoirs at one end, to hard-core policy analysis and academic historiography at the other. The Punishment of Virtue is hard to place in any one of these categories: it tells a story but isn't a novel; it's autobiographical but isn't an autobiography; it contains its share of policy analysis but isn't policy wonkery; and it talks about history but in a notably unacademic way (recall her allergy to academia). But if one had to pigeonhole it, all of Chayes's writing on Afghanistan since 2006 belongs in some way to the 'life inside Afghanistan' category: all of it stresses her credentials as a full-fledged, long-term inhabitant of Kandahar. She thus writes with the authority of someone who has lived the conditions she is describing, something not generally true of traditional policy analysis, journalism, or historiography. Whether one agrees or disagrees with her, one can't help admiring the courage and equanimity she displays under conditions that would have induced most of us to pack up and go home.

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This first-hand experience pays dividends that she describes very well:

Being a journalist, even one of good faith, is always an exercise in approximation. There is just not enough time, at least in radio, to be sure you got it right...You have to come up with something by the end of the day, almost anything. So you charge around talking to as many people as you can lay hands on in the closing window of time...And when in doubt, you stick by your colleagues. It is the safest course, and it is the course your editors feel comfortable with. ...

But Afghanistan is a place of too many layers to give itself up to the tactics of a rushed conformity. Afghanistan only uncovers itself with intimacy. And intimacy takes time (p. 26).

Chayes takes the time, and as a result, does a very good job of correcting what conventional journalism gets wrong, and exposing how and why it goes wrong. Even apart from the details, her stunningly candid accounts of mainstream reporting on Afghanistan during and just after the initial phase of the Afghan war (late 2001 to early 2002) should serve to undermine journalists' often obnoxious self-image as the world's guardians of truth and objectivity. It's said that journalism is 'the first draft of history,' but the journalism Chayes exposes in the early chapters of the book is often enough the first draft of mythology. The first eighty or so pages of the book are worth reading simply for the insight they offer, both implicitly and explicitly, into the insular (and typically unscrutinised) mentality of the foreign correspondent.

Chayes's own pet example is the fall of Kandahar, a story she tells with a mild air of score-settling, since she was prevented by her editors from telling it as a reporter for NPR. The conventional wisdom about the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 rests on three assumptions. The first is a general picture of the war: the fighting was done by Afghan anti-Taliban forces (e.g., the Northern Alliance), who, in a spontaneous uprising facilitated by American airpower, battled the Taliban for control of Afghanistan. The second is an application of this picture to the fall of Kandahar, the Taliban capital. On the conventional view, Kandahar was captured by a pincer movement involving the forces of Hamid Karzai, and the anti-Taliban leader Gul Agha Shirzai. Karzai negotiated and bribed his way from the north, as Shirzai fought his way from the south. As a result, '[t]he military pressure that Shirzai's group was exerting from the other side, to help accelerate Karzai's negotiations, seemed at

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least partially to warrant the friendship that developed between the warlord [i.e., Shirzai] and his American patrons' (p. 26). And so, Shirzai was, after the defeat of the Taliban and the fall of Kandahar, given the governorship of Kandahar, where he settled in to become one of America's most trusted Afghan allies.

According to Chayes, the conventional wisdom was all wrong. For one thing, it conflates the general picture of the war in the north of the country with that in the south. The Northern Alliance may well have done the bulk of the fighting in the north (e.g., Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul), but Afghans did not do the bulk of the fighting in the south (e.g., Kandahar). It was the American Special Forces that fought for Kandahar, not the Afghans. So Kandahar was not captured by any Afghan pincer movement involving cooperation between Karzai and Shirzai.

What happened was much more problematic, and a more ominous harbinger of things to come. Having effectively deposed the Taliban, one element of the US government put Hamid Karzai in charge of Kandahar. Meanwhile, another element of US forces ordered Gul Agha Shirzai's militia into Kandahar, in effect, to depose Karzai himself by force (p. 52). 'Why,' Chayes wonders, 'would one set of U.S. advisers tell its protégés to attack Kandahar when the enemy – the Taliban and al-Qaeda – was beaten and the city was already held by another group of U.S. protégés?...Foreboding rises in me: The Taliban have scarcely fallen, and already U.S. policy seems at cross-purposes with itself' (p. 52).

And on Chayes's account, beholden to warlords like Shirzai, it was essentially to stay that way. Warlords like Shirzai eventually came to enjoy extraordinary privileges under the American dispensation, and in turn, came to manipulate major elements of American policy, including security arrangements, drug policy, resource management, and intelligence (ch. 17). As a result, our putative victory in Afghanistan put American resources at the beck and call of corrupt and illiterate warlords more interested in 'plunder and subsidy' (Chayes's phrase) than the defeat of the Taliban.

Chayes's first-hand perspective also serves her well in her account of the two-facedness of Pakistani policy in southern Afghanistan. Chayes is hardly the first to draw attention to this phenomenon, but where much mainstream coverage relies on anonymous, unsubstantiated, or opaque complaints by US military officers about Pakistani shenanigans, Chayes offers detailed and damning evidence of Pakistani complicity with the Taliban of a sort one rarely (if ever) encounters in mainstream

reporting. Consider an abbreviated excerpt from one of several such passages in the book:

That winter [2002], [Akrem Khakrezwal] managed to land a tribesman in one of the terrorists training camps that littered the Pakistani side of the border. The mole brought back the curriculum, a syllabus covering such subjects as demolitions and bomb making, especially with kitchen pressure cookers, or how to plan and execute the assassinations of public figures: how to track their routines, where to wait for them, how to aim. A Pakistani colonel and two majors were the professors; Akrem gave me their names. ... It was the first time Akrem told me this. He would say it again the night before he died. (p. 190)

She puts the point this way in a 2007 article in *Boston Review*:

The evidence...abounds. It can be seen in the faces of Taliban whom Pakistani soldiers usher into Afghanistan at main border crossings. It can be seen in the open distributions of weapons and motorcycles at madrasas in the border town of Chaman. It can be seen in the Pakistani army officers training militant recruits; and in the sophisticated weaponry found by NATO soldiers after battles near Kandahar last fall. (Chayes 2007a)

Nor has Musharraf's fall from power changed anything. A recent article in the *Guardian* quotes Bushra Gohar, senior vice-president of Pakistan's Awami National Party, on the subject: 'There are still training camps, still [terrorist] sanctuaries, still cross-border movement in the tribal area. ... There's duplicity, at some level, in our policies' (Shah 2008). Chayes's ferocity on this issue throughout the book and in her later writing is both refreshing and well-justified (see pp. 172-85, 232-3, 240-45, 268-9, and 295-6, and generally, Chayes 2007a).

In drawing attention to these issues, Chayes raises difficult questions about the proper relation of means and ends in warfare. In World War II, the United States fought the Nazis in alliance with the Soviet Union, a policy the American left approved in the name of necessity, and the isolationist right (the so-called American 'Old Right') opposed in the name of morality. During the Cold War, the US contained the Soviets in alliance with a series of right-wing dictatorships, a policy the American *right* approved in the name of necessity, and the *left* opposed in the name of morality. The Afghan war presents us with an analogous set of

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dilemmas. We fought the Taliban in alliance with the Afghan warlords. Having put those warlords in positions of power, should we now support them in the name of necessity or depose them in the name of morality? We relied on Pakistan to invade Afghanistan in the first place. Should we rely on them at the risk of their double-crossing us, or double-cross them at the risk of having to go to war with them? One can't read Chayes without having to confront such questions squarely, and without grasping the urgent need for clear answers.

It's worth adding that Chayes' work is also a pleasure to read. The book in particular is wonderfully clear and direct; she minces no words, but still manages to write movingly and unpretentiously of the people and places that affect her. She has a particular gift for applying abstract ideas to particular contexts, and a gift for assimilating and streamlining the complexities of academic work in a relevant and accessible way. Her discussions of the psychological ramifications of warfare and trauma are particularly important (pp. 148-9, 188-9, 246-64), and though some reviewers have found her digressions into Islamic, Afghan, and imperial history distracting, I found them interesting and informative (chs. 10, 19, 22). All in all, what she gets right is more than worth the price of the book.

IV.

I find myself reluctant to criticise Chayes's work. Who wouldn't be reluctant, from the comfort of an armchair, to criticise someone in the trenches? Having said that, however, the fact remains that Chayes's main claims have gone essentially uncontested by mainstream reviewers in the two years since the book's publication, as have the later (and often more strident) versions of those claims in her more recent articles and interviews. But some criticism is in order.

I remarked in the previous section that the bulk of Chayes's comments about Pakistan are on-target: Pakistan is a two-faced pseudo-ally, interested for its own reasons in the subversion of Afghanistan and the promotion of the Taliban. Fair enough. She is very perceptive on the factual issue, but much less so on what to do about it. She says very little in the book of a prescriptive nature, except to offer a few unserious quotations from American soldiers in Afghanistan, one of whom would 'sign up for another rotation' to 'invade Pakistan,' and another who says that the Afghan-Pakistani 'border is just an imaginary line keeping us from doing our job' (p. 245). It may be tempting to quote soldiers on the ground as though they had the inside track on military wisdom, but these soldiers' 'advice' has strategic

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implications that Chayes doesn't pause to consider. She quotes them (twice) [4] with evident approval, but it's unclear whether she herself thinks we should invade – go to full-fledged war with – Pakistan. If so, I'd be curious how far she'd be willing to push that 'invasion.' All the way to Peshawar? All the way to Islamabad? All the way to Lahore? If so, she must be very confident that we can successfully play 'chicken' with a nuclear power, and confident that they will be the first to blink. [5]

Chayes offers her own prescriptions for dealing with Pakistan in a February 2008 working paper on her website called 'Comprehensive Action Plan for Afghanistan' (Chayes 2008b). After a bit of boilerplate about Musharraf's Pakistan as a 'force for instability' in South Asia, and criticism of the '\$1 billion/year' we're sending there, she writes:

Pakistan *must* arrest or kill the leadership of a major part of the Taliban movement, commonly known as the *Quetta Shura*. If this is not done in a timely fashion, the US should take military action, as it has in the past against al-Qaeda figures.

The United States should unequivocally support the legitimate aspirations of the Pakistani people to be governed in a lawful and democratic fashion. We should not enjoin them to maintain Gen. Musharraf in a position of executive power if their elected parliament chooses to reduce his importance. We should support their desire to immediately release illegally arrested or confined legal and media professionals, and we should demand a relaxing of the police-state control of the border provinces, and an effective democratization there, in return for a massive injection of development aid into those regions.

This is a singularly uninformative set of prescriptions. The first paragraph purports to offer military advice, but doesn't tell us whether the 'military action' envisioned entails going to war with Pakistan, or just sniping across the border. In the first case, her claims are rather less than 'comprehensive'; in the second, they have all the poignancy of a demand to import coals to Newcastle. The second paragraph purports to offer political advice about the legitimate democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people, but says nothing at all about the legitimacy of either the Bhutto dynasty or Nawaz Sharif, and so, in the end, says nothing of substance about just what it is that we are being enjoined 'unequivocally' to support.

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In so far as they have content, Chayes's prescriptions are flatly incoherent. On the one hand, she seems to want a hawkish policy that practically courts war with Pakistan over the Taliban. On the other hand, she wants a populist policy that respects the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people to rule themselves, and demands a 'relaxation' of control over the very territories in which the Taliban operates. But it should be obvious that her hawkishness contradicts her populism. A hawkish policy demands aggressive confrontation of the Taliban. A populist policy demands deference to Pakistani popular opinion. Since popular opinion in Pakistan is incredibly soft on the Taliban – most Pakistanis hate the very idea of fighting them – being more respectful of popular opinion would require being less tough on the Taliban than we already are. [6] Furthermore, Chayes's recommendation to relax control over the frontier provinces ultimately means loss of control over them, which in turn means handing control over to the Taliban and its allies. But that subverts the whole point of the hawkish policies Chayes professes to favour.

That brings me to what seems to me the most problematic feature of Chayes's writing, namely, her defense of the nation-building enterprise in Afghanistan. If she has a single basic prescription to offer, it is that the United States has an overriding moral and political responsibility to re-build Afghanistan as a viable nation from the ground up. We have to build its roads; feed its people; jump-start its economy; get rid of its warlords; ensure the accountability of its government officials; certify its doctors; maintain internal security (while securing its borders); find, prosecute, and punish criminals; create an alternative to the drug trade; and generally, facilitate the Afghan people's aspiration for democratic self-government. Meanwhile, we also have to win the war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, maybe invading Pakistan while we're at it – but be sure not to do any of this with too heavy a hand, lest we come across as colonialists or imperialists. It's a pretty tall order.

This aspect of Chayes's writing, unfortunately, is the epitome of wishful thinking. [7] I said that Chayes has a genuine gift for streamlining complex writing and making it relevant to the present, but the historiography she recounts screams some very obvious lessons that she unaccountably ignores. Afghanistan has always been a country prone to anarchy; no government in the past several hundred years has succeeded in installing a regime there with genuine legitimacy or sovereignty over the whole country. Since the Mughal and Safavid Empires, and on through the British, Soviet, and Pakistani interventions, attempts have been made by foreign meddlers to negotiate or impose some kind of political order on the place, and

every attempt has been a miserable failure. Chayes quixotically seems to suggest that if we change course, we can succeed where others have failed.

It is unclear why anyone should believe this, and her vague appeals to what she correctly describes as ‘the *legend* of the Marshall Plan’ do not help her case (p. 140, my emphasis). Afghanistan’s erstwhile nation-builders didn’t fail for lack of trying. They failed because they lacked the knowledge and power to get the job done, and eventually came to realise that they lacked a justifiable reason for having accepted the job in the first place. The dynamics that led them to failure are precisely the dynamics that the United States and NATO currently face as well.

Consider first the issue of knowledge: do we know what we need to know to rebuild Afghanistan? At the purely political level, nation-building requires choosing sides in obscure and internecine quarrels between indigenous factions, picking winners and losers, giving power to some, and taking it from others. It also requires a sharp eye to the difference between friend and foe, and the corresponding knowledge of how to win friends and punish enemies. Chayes writes as though a few years in Kandahar had given her this knowledge (p. 313), and seems to suggest that with a little pluck and ingenuity, the US government can acquire it as well.

But this simply isn’t credible. For one thing, there is little reason to think that Chayes’s more controversial claims on this subject really qualify as knowledge in the first place. Much of what she has to say about Afghan politics is, by her own admission, sheer guesswork:

In Afghanistan, there are ways you know things. Outsiders call it rumour mongering or conspiracy theorizing, and when they ask you for some evidence, for something concrete to substantiate this gut feeling of yours, you shrug a little sheepishly because you have to admit they’re right – you’re only speculating. But still, you know. There is a tuning fork vibrating inside you to the true pitch. (pp. 2-3)

Chayes relies heavily on that internal tuning fork throughout the book (e.g., pp. 51, 52, 81-3, 296, 302, 351). Claims of this sort would be laughed off of any stage if made in defence of the Bush Administration’s policies in Iraq; should they command deeper respect because made in criticism of the Administration’s policies in Afghanistan? Chayes condemns the US government for being duped by various factions within the Afghan political arena, but rarely (and only cursorily) credits

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the possibility that as a person whose very life is guaranteed by a specific Kandahari faction, she is in precisely the same bind as they are (pp. 108-15). [8] Her Afghan protectors would naturally tell her what they wanted her to hear, and show her what they wanted her to see. And it is clear that they do. Less clear is whether she reliably knows when they do.

The liabilities don't end there. It is Chayes herself who repeatedly characterises Afghan political discourse (and indeed Afghan discourse generally) as prone to mendacity and inaccuracy: the 'worst cultural clash' she encountered in Afghanistan derived from Afghans' 'utterly incomprehensible relationship with the truth. Words were not all that important, it seemed, since people lied so systematically.... I could not make it compute' (p. 301, also pp. 44, 161). How then can one be certain of any given conclusion, derived of necessity from testimony from Afghans? Beyond this, Chayes gives us more than ample evidence of her own fallibility, years into her stay in Kandahar (p. 313), and though she reports that she taught herself Pashto while living in Kandahar (laudable enough), it is also clear that for a good part of her story, her Pashto was not good enough to be helpful. None of this gives Chayes a very reliable basis for the claims she makes about internal Afghan quarrels. Why then think the US government could do any better?

But suppose that we solved the knowledge problem. Would we have the power to do what needs to be done even if we knew what it was? And could we exert this power at a reasonable moral price? In fact, Chayes herself gives us all the evidence we'd need for an emphatic 'no' to both questions. At the political level, what Chayes wants is a sort of second regime change: fire the warlords installed in the first regime change, and then police and supervise the Afghan government to root out corruption. At the economic level, what she wants is an open-ended commitment to development aid to the private sector with strict 'accountability' on how this aid is to be spent and invested. The first task would require an indefinitely long military occupation and the installation of a Raj-style civil service. The 'accountability' provision of the second task would require the equivalent of a planned economy operated by remote control from the State Department. Naturally, all of this would produce tension, resentment, and resistance from aggrieved Afghan factions that would have to be dealt with, ultimately, by force. The operative principle is unstated but obvious: the more recalcitrant the Afghans are, the more force we'll have to impose on them to live up to our standards.

How much force would it take to subdue a place like Afghanistan? Quite a lot, it seems. Afghanistan, Chayes tells us, has for centuries been an impoverished ‘yaghestan’: an effectively stateless region that lives as much by trade as by plunder and extortion (see chs. 14-15 and 23-27 for vivid descriptions). How does one rule such a place? Chayes gives us a hint of the answer in her description of the nineteenth-century Afghan amir, Abd ar-Rahman Khan, whom she describes as ‘perhaps the most brilliant statesman ever to rule Afghanistan’ (p. 123). What made him so brilliant was his success at unifying Afghanistan and preserving its independence, a task that ‘took him about a decade of intense and sometimes savage fighting, as well as several forced relocations of population – ethnic cleansings, in effect – to complete the job, to force his unruly countrymen to submit to him’ (p. 130). Do we have the sheer *capacity*, whether military, political or psychological, to embark on a ‘job’ like that? And would completion of the job even count as ‘success’ at that cost?

But suppose, at last, that we had both the knowledge and the capacity to do the job. The most fundamental question remains: why do it? Here we confront a fundamental ambiguity in Chayes’s writing, and quite generally, in American thinking about Afghanistan. Americans have come to think of Afghanistan – as distinct from Iraq – as ‘the good war.’ What is less often noticed is that the goodness of ‘the good war’ derives from its original rationale in self-defence and generally, national self-interest. The rationale is as follows: Having been attacked on 9/11 (and before then), we had to destroy al-Qaeda’s capacity to attack us again. Since al-Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, we struck there and overthrew the Taliban regime that was harbouring it. If we’re still in Afghanistan, that must be because al-Qaeda is still there, and the Taliban are not quite defeated. In that case, it might make sense to stay to finish the war we began. But this defensive rationale sits very uneasily with the nation-building enterprise that Chayes has in mind.

There are two distinct but often conflated lines of argument on this topic. One school of thought makes an argument from *national self-interest and self-defence*. On this view, we ought to rebuild Afghanistan because if we don’t, we risk a repetition of the 9/11 attacks. Failed states lead to terrorism; hence, to undermine terrorism, we’d better turn the failed states into successful democracies. Alongside this self-interested argument, there sits another superficially similar, but fundamentally different one based on *altruistic humanitarianism*. On this view, the obligation to rebuild Afghanistan floats free of concerns about our security, and of our interests

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as such; we just have a plain old duty to rebuild Afghanistan because the Afghans need us, whether rebuilding it benefits us or not.

It is tempting to run the self-interested and altruistic rationales for war together. Both, after all, lead by different routes to nation-building, so why not combine them to make a complementary case for it? The problem is that the self-interested rationale yields a far more defeasible case for nation-building than the altruistic one. If we accept the self-interested view, as I think we should, it is *possible* that nation-building is something we have to embark on for our own security. But it is equally possible that nation-building is a crazy, self-sacrificial enterprise entirely lacking a rational justification. At a minimum, we have to be clear about the normative standard that stands behind any argument for any particular policy on this issue. And if nation-building is not specifically in our security interest, we should have no part in it, period. Indeed, the presumption should be against it.

Chayes's claims on these topics are equivocal as between the self-interested and altruistic arguments, but her rhetoric favours the altruistic one. What upsets her most about the ethos of contemporary America is its tendency to describe the world 'in binary terms': us against them, with 'them' defined as an enemy to be vanquished by military force. Her America, by contrast, is the unselfish one of town meetings, the Marshall Plan, and the Peace Corps. And nation-building is the natural consummation of that unselfish vision. But there are at least two problems here, one constitutional, one moral.

First, though it seems a pedestrian point, it's worth noting that the idea of occupying and running a foreign country has no warrant whatsoever in the American constitution. With respect to military matters, the Constitution legitimises 'the common defence' of Americans, as well as punishment of and reprisal against 'offenses against the law of nations'; it speaks of the need to 'repel invasions' of the United States and its territories, and to guarantee 'a republican form of government' within each state, protecting each state against external threats. The emphasis is decidedly narrow and nationally self-interested: American might exists for the benefit of Americans, period. There is, to be sure, a constitutional power to make treaties with other nations, and so, implicit reference to allies and trading partners. But a nation interacts with allies and trading partners as part of a venture for mutual advantage, not as an exercise in altruism. And it's far from clear that our relationship with Afghanistan fits any description of 'mutual advantage.' [9]

Though one hears a great deal nowadays about ‘the wholesale violation of constitutional rights by the Bush Administration in the war on terrorism,’ one seldom hears about the utter lack of constitutional warrant for the nation-building enterprise, presumably because the constituencies attracted to that enterprise tend substantially to the left of the Bush Administration. Chayes quotes an Afghan official who stresses the need for clear limits on the powers and responsibilities of the Afghan government (p. 219). Shouldn’t that be true of the US government as well?

Constitutionality aside, we confront a basic moral question as well. It’s a difficult enough question why someone should put his life on the line in the defence of his own country when the risks he incurs benefit his friends, family, fellow citizens, and (if he survives) himself. But if that is a difficult question, consider the demand that soldiers put their lives on the line in defence of someone else’s country, with no expectation of benefit to friends, family, fellow citizens, or self. What justifies that?

And though it seems crass to bring money up in the same breath as lives, in fact similar questions arise about money. I can see why, as an American citizen, I’m obliged to pay for ‘the common defence’ of other Americans, or even (in my magnanimous moments), the common defence of other members of the NATO alliance. But how did I incur the obligation to pay for the infrastructure of Afghanistan, or (much worse), for ‘a massive injection of aid’ into the tribal regions of Pakistan? Having had it forced on me, why should I encourage its continuation? I don’t see that Chayes has adequate answers to these questions, or even an interest in dealing with them. [10]

V.

Chayes ends her book on an oddly self-questioning note, wondering out loud about the legitimacy of the moral imperative that keeps her in Afghanistan after the death of her friend Akrem.

When Akrem was killed, I had wondered searchingly if it was not finally time to go. Without him, who was left to fight for? Who was left to support, to contribute my capacities to, such as they were? With him gone, the last rational hope for the future of Afghanistan had been quenched. Of what value could my presence be?

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She continues:

And yet this feeling, acute at first, did not stop to dwell in me. Instead, illogically, what I found myself experiencing was an inarticulate, renewed sense of commitment. I couldn't leave the place, there was too much to do.

Finally, she says:

I think Akrem understood that it doesn't really matter if there is a chance you will succeed. You have to keep trying. That's what matters. You have to try. You have to give your all. (p. 362)

Almost anyone would acknowledge the gravity and moral earnestness of Chayes's personal credo. But it's equally obvious that such a credo can't furnish the basis of a rational or justifiable foreign policy.

In fact, Chayes sells herself short in describing her personal motivation for staying in Afghanistan as 'illogical.' Given her highly idiosyncratic commitment to specific people, places, and projects, it might well have made rational sense for her to stay. But it doesn't follow from that, and isn't true, that if it was rational for Sarah Chayes to stay in Kandahar, it is justifiable for the US government to rebuild Afghanistan or occupy it for the indefinite future. A government policy cannot rest on an illogical, inarticulate sense of commitment, and cannot be premised on the quixotic thought that good intentions trump feasibility. But that is effectively what our Afghan policy rests on today. To 'keep trying' to occupy and rebuild Afghanistan is to sacrifice lives and money on an ill-defined, increasingly pointless, and probably Sisyphean venture. A thousand lives and billions of dollars into that quest, we're no closer to its completion than when we were when we first started. That is as much a 'punishment of virtue' as anything Chayes describes. We're entitled to ask when it will end. [11]

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Notes

- [1] A 'rentier' regime is one that derives unearned income from property, investment, or foreign aid. I borrow this notion from Rasanayagam 2005, p. 59, who credits Rubin 1995.
- [2] An incident in one of my classes confirms this in a somewhat pathetic way: I recently mentioned the Afghan war in passing to students in a class of mine. 'So they're still fighting that war?' asked one student, in all seriousness – a puzzlement shared by many of his fellow students. A good portion of the class was sceptical of the idea that the US was fighting a *bona fide* enemy in Afghanistan; the consensus of this group was that the Bush Administration had fabricated the enemy's existence.
- [3] For an early prediction that this would happen, see Bearden 2001.
- [4] She cites it once in the book, and again in Chayes 2007a.
- [5] I'd also be interested to know some details about logistics. How would the US military in Afghanistan be supplied in an invasion of Pakistan if its supply routes through Pakistan were closed, and its supply routes via Central Asia happened to follow suit (as, at Moscow's or Islamabad's behest, they might)? Would we run supply lines through India or would we have to open a second front in southern Pakistan to open up a supply line via Karachi and the Arabian Sea? Either answer leads to strategic conundrums.
- [6] See Shah 2008 for one example from dozens that might be cited. Pakistani popular opinion can also be inferred from the rhetoric of Pakistan's most popular politicians as expressed on television news shows, e.g., 'Capital Talk' and 'Live with Talat,' both accessible on You Tube (in Urdu).

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- [7] For a wilder example of wishful thinking on the same subject, see Mishra 2008's advice in the wake of the Bombay terrorist attacks of November 2008: 'Mr. Obama could act quickly to stem growing extremism in Pakistan and strengthen civilian authority by ending American missile attacks within its borders and shifting the allied strategy in Afghanistan away from military force and toward political nation-building and economic reconstruction.' What would prevent the Taliban and its allies from regrouping and expropriating the largesse?
- [8] Her references to the criminal careers of her hosts, the Achekzais, tend to amused or apologetic understatement (*e.g.*, p. 73).
- [9] Casuistic questions: If the Afghan constitution is inconsistent with the US Constitution (as it clearly is, several times over), don't US forces violate the U.S. Constitution every time they defend the Afghan regime? Can it be constitutional to enforce a foreign constitution incompatible with our own? Where in the US Constitution is this last power enumerated?
- [10] Neither, I might add, does President-Elect Obama. See Obama 2007.
- [11] Thanks to Carrie-Ann Biondi and Alan Johnson for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this review.

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