

**From New Deal to New Frontier in Afghanistan:
Modernization in a Buffer State**

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Working Paper: #6
August 2002
The Cold War as Global Conflict
International Center for Advanced Studies
New York University

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In May 1960, the historian Arnold Toynbee left Kandahar and drove 90 miles on freshly paved roads to Lashkar Gah, a modern planned city known locally as the New York of Afghanistan. At the confluence of the Helmand and Arghandab rivers, close against the ancient ruins of Qala Bist, Lashkar Gah's 8,000 residents lived in suburban-style tract homes surrounded by broad lawns. The city boasted an alabaster mosque, one of the country's best hospitals, Afghanistan's only coeducational high school, and the headquarters of the Helmand Valley Authority, a multipurpose dam project funded by the United States.² This unexpected proliferation of modernity led Toynbee to reflect on the warning of Sophocles: "the craft of his engines surpasseth his dreams."³ In the area around Kandahar, traditional Afghanistan had vanished. "The domain of the Helmand Valley Authority," he reported, "has become a piece of America inserted into the Afghan landscape. ... The new world they are conjuring up out of the desert at the Helmand River's expense is to be an America-in-Asia."⁴

Toynbee's image sits uneasily with the visuals of the recent war. In the granite battlescapes captured by Al Jazeera's cameras in the days after September 11, Afghanistan appeared as perhaps the one spot on earth unmarked by the pervasive influence of American culture. When correspondents referred to Afghanistan's history it was to the Soviet invasion of the 1980s or the earlier Great Game that ended with the British Empire's departure from South

¹ This essay was researched and written between the beginning of the bombing campaign in late September and the mopping up of the last Taliban resistance around Tora Bora in early December 2001. Like many colleagues, I found myself called upon, without benefit of expertise, to place the war in a historical context. The lecture that became this essay was based on materials found in the Indiana University library, online, and in a few archival documents sent by friends. I am grateful to Melvyn Leffler and Andy Rotter for comments on an earlier draft; to David Ekbladh for his contribution of documents; and to Alison Lefkowitz for research assistance.

² Mildred Caudill, *Helmand-Arghandab Valley, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (Lashkar Gah: USAID, 1969), pp. 55-59; Hafizullah Emadi, *State Revolution and Superpowers in Afghanistan* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 41.

³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Between Oxus and Jumna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 12.

Kabul
high schools
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Asia in 1947. There was a silence about the three decades in between. During that time, Afghanistan was aptly called an “economic Korea,” divided between the Soviet Union in the north and the United States in the south.⁵ In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States made southern Afghanistan a showcase of nation-building with a dazzling project to “reclaim” and modernize a swath of territory comprising roughly half the country. The Helmand venture is worth remembering today as a precedent for renewed efforts to rebuild Afghanistan, but it was also part of a larger project—alternately called development, nation-building, or modernization—that deployed science and expertise to reconstruct the entire post-colonial world.

When President Harry S Truman announced a “bold new program ... for the improvement of underdeveloped areas”⁶ in January 1949, the global response was startling. Truman “hit the jackpot of the world’s political emotions,” *Fortune* noted.⁷ National delegations lined up to receive assistance that a few years earlier would have been seen as a colonial intrusion. Development inserted a new problematic into international relations, and a new concept of time, asserting that all nations followed a common historical path and that those in the lead had a moral duty to those who followed. “We must frankly recognize,” a State Department official observed in 1953, “that the hands of the clock of history are set at different hours in different parts of the world.”⁸ Leaders of newly independent states, such as Zahir Shah of Afghanistan and Jawaharlal Nehru of India, accepted these terms, merging their own governmental mandates into the stream of nations moving toward modernity. Development

⁴ Ibid., pp. 67-68.

⁵ Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan, the Canny Neutral,” *Nation*, September 21, 1964, p. 135.

⁶ Harry S. Truman, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1949, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1949*, pp. 114-115.

⁷ “Point IV,” *Fortune*, February 1950, p. 88.

⁸ Henry A. Byroade, “The World’s Colonies and Ex-colonies: A Challenge to America,” *Department of State Bulletin* 29 (November 16, 1953) 751: 655.

was not simply the best, but the only course. “There is only one-way traffic in Time,” Nehru observed.⁹

Aided by social science theory, development came into its own by the mid-1950s as both a policy ideology in the United States and as a global discourse for assigning obligations and entitlements among rich and poor nations.¹⁰ Nationalism and modernization held equal place in the postcolonial creed. As Edward Shils observed in 1960, nearly every state pressed for policies “that will bring them well within the circle of modernity.”¹¹ But nation-building schemes, even successful ones, rarely unfolded quietly. The struggles, often subtle and indirect, over dam projects, land reforms, and planned cities generally concerned the meaning of development, the persons, authorities, and ideals that would be associated with the spectacle of progress. To modernize was to lay claim to the future and the past, to define national identities and values that would survive and guide the nation on its journey forward.¹²

In late September 2001, while looking for lecture material related to the war that had just begun, I came across references to the Helmand project. It initially appeared to resemble rural development schemes I was studying in Southeast Asia, but closer examination revealed the project’s unusual scale and longevity. Vulnerable to shifts in policy, funding, or theoretical

⁹ Jawaharlal Nehru, The Discovery of India (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 393.

¹⁰ On the history of development ideas, see H. W. Arndt, Economic Development: The History of an Idea (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Gerald M. Meier and Dudley Seers, eds., Pioneers in Development (New York: Oxford, 1984); Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton, Doctrines of Development (London: Routledge, 1996). On development as discourse, see Arturo Escobar, Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Tim Mitchell, “America’s Egypt: Discourse of the Development Industry,” Middle East Report 21 (March-April 1991) 2: 18-34. On the social sciences and modernization theory, see Robert Packenham, Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas and Social Science (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Nils Gilman, “Paving the World With Good Intentions: The Genesis of Modernization Theory, 1945-1965,” PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2001; Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard, International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Christopher Simpson, ed. Universities and Empire (New York: New Press, 1998).

¹¹ Edward Shils, “Political Development in the New States,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 2 (April 1960) 3: 265.

¹² Clifford Geertz observed that this double sense of time was what gave “new-state nationalism its peculiar air of being at once hell-bent toward modernity and morally outraged by its manifestations.” Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 243.

fashion, cold-war era development schemes suffered shortcomings reasonably attributed to their piecemeal approach and shortages of commitment, resources, or time. Such failures, James Ferguson has observed, only reinforced the paradigm, as modernization theory supplied the necessary explanations while new policy furnished solutions.¹³ The Helmand scheme had no such excuse. It came under American supervision in 1946 and continued until the departure of the last reclamation expert in 1979, outlasting the theories and rationales on which it was based. It was lavishly funded by U.S. foreign aid, multilateral loans, and the Afghan government, and it was the opposite of piecemeal. It was an “integrated” development scheme, with education, industry, agriculture, medicine, and marketing under a single controlling authority. Nation-building did not fail in Afghanistan for want of money, time, or imagination. In the Helmand Valley, the engines and dreams of modernization had run their full course, spooling out across the desert until they hit limits of physics, culture, and history.

The planners of the Helmand project presented it as applied science, as a rationalization of nature and social order, but they also trafficked in dreams. Planting a modern city next to the colossal ruins of Qala Bist was a calculated gesture asserting an imagined line of succession from the Ghaznavid dynasty to the royal family presiding in Kabul. Every development scheme involves representations of this kind, and a complex project, such as the Helmand venture, can accommodate overlapping sets of symbolic meanings that justify and sustain it, even in failure. Modernization demanded, Michael Latham notes, a “projection of American identity.”¹⁴ Exporting an American model of progress required continual redefinition of the sources of American greatness and renewed efforts to plant its unique characteristics in foreign

¹³ James Ferguson, The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in the Third World (New York: 1990), pp. 254-56; Michael E. Latham has also made this point. See Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 181.

¹⁴ Latham, “Introduction: Modernization Theory, International History, and the Global Cold War” in Staging Growth, ed. by David Engerman, et al (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, forthcoming 2002).

landscapes. The New Deal, the New Look, and the New Frontier each revised the stakes and symbolism of the Helmand venture. Within Afghanistan's government, the impulse to modernize went back into the early twentieth century when tribal and ethnic loyalties were reformed as a national identity. The Helmand project symbolized the transformation of the nation, representing the legitimacy of the monarchy, the expansion of state power, and the fulfillment of the Pashtun destiny.

The Accidental Nation. Afghanistan, at its origin, was an empty space on the map that was not Persian, not Russian, not British, "a purely accidental geographic unit," according to Curzon, who put the finishing touches on its silhouette.¹⁵ Both the monarchy and the nation emerged from strategies Britain used to pacify the Pashtun peoples along India's Northwest frontier in the last half of the nineteenth century. Consisting of nomadic, seminomadic, and settled communities with no common language or ancestry, Pashtuns (Pathans in Hindustani) comprised for colonial officials a single racial grouping.¹⁶ They occupied a strategically vital region stretching from the southern slopes of the Hindu Kush range through the northern Indus Valley into Kashmir.

To prevent tribal feuds from inviting Russian influence, colonial officials devised a double-pronged strategy to bring the Pashtun belt under British control. First, they split it in half by surveying the Durand Line, the 1,200 mile boundary that today separates Afghanistan

¹⁵ Curzon, quoted in Cuthbert Collin Davies, The Problem of the North-West Frontier, 1890-1908 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), p. 153.

¹⁶ Defining the Pashtun threat in the absence of reliable linguistic or pigmentary markers was a vital strategic and scientific undertaking. A summary of the early ethnographic work is contained in John Cowles Prichard, Researches into the Physical History of Mankind, 3rd ed., (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1844), 4: 81-91; see also Maj. H. G. Raverty, "The Independent Afghan or Patan Tribes," Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Oriental and Colonial Review 7 (1894): 312-326; Lt. R. C. Temple, "Remarks on the Afghans Found Along the Route of the Tal Chotali Field Force in the Spring of 1879," Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 49 (1880) 1: 91-106; H. W. Bellew, The Races of Afghanistan (Calcutta: Thatcher, Spink, and Co., 1880). See also Conrad Schetter, "The Chimera of Ethnicity in Afghanistan," Neue Zürcher Zeitung October 31, 2001, www.nzz.ch/english/background/2001/10/31_afghanistan.html, accessed November 9, 2001; on the importance of ethnology to the colonial mission, see Gyan Prakash, Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 26-30.

and Pakistan. Plotted in 1893, the “scientific frontier” followed a topographic ridgeline that could be held at strongpoints blocking key mountain passes.¹⁷ By bisecting tribal homelands and the seasonal migration of three million pastoralists following herds of Persian fat-tailed sheep between lowland and upland grazing areas, the Durand Agreement restricted Pashtun autonomy and facilitated new forms of indirect influence over peoples on both sides of the line.¹⁸

Rather than demarcating the spatial limit of British sovereignty, the Durand Line marked a division between types of imperial control. On the India side, a smaller Pashtun population, the “assured clans,” could be co-opted and deployed as a proxy army against Pashtuns on the Afghan side, precluding the emergence of a regime in Kabul hostile to British interests. The Mohammadzai—the clan of Zahir Shah, ruler of Afghanistan from 1933 to 1973—was such a subaltern force, benefiting from British power without being fully constrained by it.¹⁹ Straddling the Khyber Pass, they used subsidies and arms to overwhelm their rivals on the Afghan side.²⁰ This variety of indirect rule, known as the “Forward Policy,” kept Afghanistan firmly under British influence for the first half of the twentieth century.²¹

The Line complemented a cultural strategy of pacification known as the Pathan Renaissance, through which colonial agents aligned their own interests with those of their tribal

¹⁷ Lt. Gen. Sir George McMunn, *Afghanistan from Darius to Amanullah* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1929), pp. 225-228; Sultana Afroz, “Afghanistan in U.S. Pakistan Relations, 1947-1960,” *Central Asian Survey* 8 (1989) 2: 133.

¹⁸ Davies, *Problem*, pp. 162-3; Sulzberger, “Nomads Swarming Over Khyber Pass,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1950, p. 6; On the British construction of “Afghanistan,” see Nigel J. R. Allan, “Defining Place and People in Afghanistan,” *Post-Soviet Geography and Economics* 41 (2001) 8: 545-560.

¹⁹ W. K. Fraser-Tytler, *Afghanistan: A Study of Political Developments in Central and Southern Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 332. British officials located the Muhammadzai’s homeland in Hastnagar, which is now in Pakistan. India Army, General Staff, *A Dictionary of the Pathan Tribes* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1910), p. 34.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71; Maj. Gen. J. G. Elliott, *The Frontier, 1839-1947* (London: Cassell, 1968), p. 53. Afghan nationalists believed Britain had secretly annexed Afghanistan by supporting the Mohammadzai, leading the constitutionalist “Young Afghan” movement to assassinate both the king, Nadir Shah, and his brother, Mohammad Aziz, who was ambassador to Germany. An attempt was also made on the British embassy. Hasan Kakar, “Trends in Modern Afghan History, in *Afghanistan in the 1970s*, edited by Louis Dupree and Linette Albert (New York: Praeger, 1974), p. 31.

allies. Cultivating a Pathan identity as a unitary “pure” race in contrast to the “mixed” Tajiks, Baluchis, Hazaras, and others with whom they were mingled, colonial officials invented the reputation of the Pathans as a warrior caste.²² They were “our chaps” natural rulers, the equals of the British. “You’re white people, sons of Alexander, and not like common, black Mohammedans,” the title character of Rudyard Kipling’s The Man Who Would be King explained to the Afghans.²³ Pashtuns were entitled to subsidies, to rank in the Indian Army, and to a direct relationship to the crown. Schooling internalized the racial taxonomy, supplanting allegiances to village, family, and clan, while linking Pashtun identity with modernization. Edwardes and Islamia colleges, founded in Peshawar in the early twentieth century, inculcated a consciousness of Pathan nationhood and suggested “the place which the Pathan might fill in the development of a subcontinent.”²⁴ An awareness of race distinguished the literate few from the vast majority of uneducated Afghans unable to discriminate between ethnographic types.²⁵

1747 (As it was meant to, the sublimation of the Pashtuns reconfigured politics on both sides of the frontier.²⁶ When Nadir Shah crossed the Durand Line and seized Kabul from the Tajiks in 1929, he established a monarchy based on Pashtun nationalism with overtones of scientific racism. Comprising less than half the Afghan population, Pashtuns claimed an entitlement based on their status as an advanced race, the bearers of modernity and progress.²⁷ Punitive expeditions against Tajiks in the north and Hazaras in the south and west, in which German-

²¹ McMunn, Afghanistan from Darius, p. 228.

²² Akbar S. Ahmend, “An Aspect of the Colonial Encounter in the North-West Frontier Province,” Asian Affairs 9 (October 1978) 3: 319-327.

²³ Rudyard Kipling, The One Volume Kipling (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1932), p. 735.

²⁴ Olaf Caroe, The Pathans-550 B.C.-A.D. 1957 (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 430.

²⁵ In 1962, Louis Dupree tried a free association experiment on students at Kabul University using the terms “Afghanistan,” “United States,” etc. Students identified Afghanistan and the U.S. as “white” countries, Pakistan and India as “black-skinned.” Dupree, “Landlocked Images: Snap Responses to an Informal Questionnaire,” AUFS Reports, South Asia Series, 4 (June 1962) 5: 51-73.

²⁶ Arnold Fletcher, Afghanistan: Highway of Conquest (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), p. 245. Fletcher attests that “Pushtoonism” was the base of the new Afghan nationalism.

²⁷ Alfred Janata, “Afghanistan: The Ethnic Dimension,” in The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism ed. by Ewan W. Anderson and Nancy Hatch Dupree (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), p. 62.

made aircraft supported mounted troops, broke the autonomous power of these regions, opening them to Pashtun settlement.²⁸ Nadir Shah built a professional army—new in Afghan tradition—of 40,000 troops, linked by kinship and personal loyalty to the monarchy and trained by French and German advisers.²⁹ A system of secularized schools and a change of the national language from Dari, a Persian dialect, to Pashto, demonstrated the new regime's determination to bring Afghanistan's ungovernable tribes under the control of a rationalized, central state.

For Nadir Shah and his son Zahir, who assumed the throne after his father's assassination in 1933, political survival depended on enlarging and deepening the authority of the state. To its new rulers, Afghanistan was an unknown and dangerous country. It had few roads, only six miles of rail (all of it in Kabul), and few internal telegraph or phone lines. For most of the 10 or 12 million Afghans (Afghanistan has never completed a census), encounters of any kind with the central government were rare and unpleasant.³⁰ Laws were made and enforced in accordance with local custom and without reference to the state; internal taxes existed only on paper. Evidence of royal authority—easily visible on Kabul streets patrolled by Prussian-helmeted palace guards—disappeared as rapidly as the pavement underneath a traveler leaving the city in any direction. There were no cadastral maps, city plans, or housing registries, an absence that made Afghanistan less legible, and therefore less governable than countries that had been formally colonized.³¹ Modern states are able to govern through manipulation of abstractions—unemployment, public opinion, literacy rates, etc.—but in Afghanistan

²⁸ The campaign against the Khehestani Tajiks north of Kabul was particularly severe. Prisoners were executed by being blown from the mouths of cannon. "Eleven Afghans Blown from Guns at Kabul," *New York Times*, April 6, 1930, p. 8; "Afghan Revolt Reported," *New York Times*, November 21, 1932, p. 7; Vladimir Cervin, "Problems in the Integration of the Afghan Nation," *Middle East Journal* 6 (Autumn 1952) 4: 407.

²⁹ Bhalwant Bhaneja, *Afghanistan: Political Modernization of a Mountain Kingdom* (New Delhi: Spectra, 1973), p. 20.

³⁰ Louis Dupree, "A Note on Afghanistan," *American Universities Field Staff Reports* (hereafter *AUFS Reports*), South Asia Series, 4 (August 1960) 8: 13.

³¹ Afghanistan was the type of "illegible" state described by James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale, 1998), pp. 77-78.

interventions of any kind, and the reactions to them, were brutally concrete. The prime minister, the king's uncle, on his infrequent inspection tours of the countryside, traveled under heavy guard.³²

Zahir Shah sought help from Japanese, Italian, and especially German advisers, who laid plans for a modern network of communications and roads. A German-built radio tower in Kabul allowed instant links to remote villages and the outside world for the first time. Through a national bank and state cartels, the government supervised a cautious and tightly controlled economic modernization. German engineers built textile mills, power plants, carpet and furniture factories to be run by monopolies under royal license.³³ Tax codes and state trading firms began to bring lawless sectors, such as stock raising and trading, within reach of accountants and assessors in Kabul. These efforts met with sporadic—and occasionally bloody—resistance, but the regime persisted in slowly, firmly, laying the barren politics of abstraction and principle over the warm, cruel politics of the heart.³⁴

During the second world war the United States replaced Germany as the external partner in the young king's plans. The Holocaust and submarine warfare caused Afghanistan's external trade to undergo a sudden and advantageous reorientation. One of the country's chief exports was karakul, the pelt of the Persian fat-tailed sheep converted in the hands of skilled furriers into the glossy black fur known as astrakhan, karacul, or Persian lamb. The former centers of fur making, Leipzig, London, and Paris, closed down during the war years and the industry moved in its entirety to New York. From 1942 through the 1970s, New York furriers consumed nearly the entire Afghan export, two and a half million skins a year, which resold as

³² Rosita Forbes, "Afghan Dictator," *Literary Digest*, October 16, 1937, p. 29.

³³ Wilber, *Afghanistan*, pp. 238-243.

³⁴ "Not the barren politics of abstractions and principles, but the warm, cruel politics of the heart." Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell* (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1996), p. 72.

lustrous black coats and hats ranging in price from \$400 to \$3500.³⁵ A tiny fraction of the retail revenue went back to Afghanistan, but the fractions added up. The government employed exchange rate manipulations to exact an effective tax rate of over 50 percent on karakul, making it the country's most lucrative source of exchange as well as revenue.³⁶ Afghanistan ended World War II with \$100 million in reserves, and in the midst of the post-war "dollar gap" crisis in international liquidity, Afghanistan was favored with a small but steady source of dollar earnings.

The collapse of the British empire created a chance for Pashtun reunification that lent new significance to the modernization project. From the vantage of Kabul, the partition of India in 1947 ended whatever justification the Durand Line had once had. A Pashtun separatist movement emerged in Peshawar and Kashmir, and with the encouragement of India, Zahir Shah proposed the creation of an ethnic state—Pushtunistan—consisting of most of northern Pakistan, which would give the assured clans an option to merge with Kabul at some future date. It was a hopeless proposal—the frontier was internationally recognized—but the king stuck to it rather than allow Pakistan to inherit the decisive instruments and influence of the Forward Policy. The assured clans represented a continuing threat to the Afghan state. After 1947, members of the royal family spoke of building in Afghanistan a secure, prosperous base for the recovery of Pashtun lands.³⁷

The Pushtunistan controversy would later draw Afghanistan into the cold war. U.S. diplomats dismissed it as fantasy, but to the monarchy Pashtunistan was as solid as France. A visitor in 1954 found government offices in Kabul hung with maps on which the "narrow,

³⁵ "Karakul Sheep," *Life*, July 16, 1945, pp. 65-68; Peter G. Franck, "Problems of Economic Development in Afghanistan," *Middle East Journal* 3 (July 1949) 3: 302.

³⁶ Abdul Haj Kayoumy, "Monopoly Pricing of Afghan Karakul in International Markets," *Journal of Political Economy* 77 (March/April 1969) 2: 219-237; Ali Mohammed, "Karakul as the Most Important Article of Afghan Trade," *Afghanistan* 4 (December 1949) 4: 48-53.

³⁷ Najibullah Khan, "Speech Delivered on Radio Afghanistan," *Afghanistan* 2 (April-June 1948): 13.

wiggly object” plainly appeared, “wedged in between Afghanistan on one flank, and the remains of West Pakistan on the other.”³⁸ The dispute periodically turned hot, with reciprocal sacking of embassies and border incidents that gradually converted the Durand Line into the kind of politico-geographic feature that typified the cold war, an impassable boundary. The movement of goods across the frontier was tightly restricted, and in 1962, Pakistan closed the passes to migration, terminating the seasonal movement of the herds.³⁹ From the mid-1950s until the end of the Soviet occupation, Afghan exports and imports moved almost exclusively through the Soviet Union, which discounted freight rates to encourage the dependency.⁴⁰

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, however, the Soviet Union was preoccupied with internal reconstruction, and Afghanistan looked to the United States for help in consolidating a centralized state that could assume responsibility for the public welfare.⁴¹ Through its development programs, the monarchy assumed a relationship of trusteeship over the nation, presenting the king as retaining custody of the state during a dangerous transitional period but ready to relinquish power once modernity was achieved. “Afghanistan is a backward country,” Mohammed Daoud, the king’s brother-in-law, cousin, and prime minister, observed in 1959. “We must do something about it or die as a nation.”⁴² Large-scale development projects, visible signs of national energy, would stake a claim to the future for the Pashtuns and to the present for the royal family. One such scheme particularly appealed to the king; he wanted to build a dam.

³⁸ Ian Stephens, Horned Moon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 263.

³⁹ See the series of reports by Louis Dupree, “‘Pushtunistan’: The Problem and its Larger Implications,” AUFS Reports, South Asia Series, 2-4 (November-December 1961): 19-51.

⁴⁰ S. M. M. Quereshi, “Pakhtunistan: The Frontier Dispute Between Afghanistan and Pakistan,” Pacific Affairs 39 (Spring/Summer 1966) 1/2: 99-144; on the U.S. position, see Dennis Kux, The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2000), pp. 42-3, 78; Afroz, “Afghanistan in U.S.-Pakistan Relations,” pp. 138-140.

⁴¹ Paul Overby, Holy Blood: An Inside View of the Afghan War (Westport: Praeger, 1993), p. 30.

⁴² Louis Dupree, “An Informal Talk with Prime Minister Daoud,” September 13, 1959, AUFS Reports, South Asia Series, 3 (1959): 18.

A TVA for the Hindu Kush. Nothing becomes antiquated faster than symbols of the future, and it is difficult, at only fifty years remove, to envision the hold concrete dams once had on the global imagination. In the mid-20th century, the austere lines of the Hoover Dam and its radiating spans of high-tension wire inscribed federal power on the American landscape. Vladimir Lenin famously remarked that Communism was Soviet power plus electrification, an equation captured by the David Lean film *Dr. Zhivago* in the image of water surging, as a kind of redemption, from the spillway of an immense Soviet dam. In 1954, standing at the Bhakra-Nangal canal, Nehru described dams as the temples of modern India. "Which place can be greater than this," he declared, "this Bhakra-Nangal, where thousands of men have worked, have shed their blood, and sweat and laid down their lives as well? ... When we see big works, our stature grows with them, and our minds open out a little."⁴³ For Nehru, for Zahir Shah, for China today, the great blank wall of a dam was a screen on which they would project the future.

Dams also symbolized the sacrifice of the individual to the greater good of the state. A dam project allows, even requires, a state to appropriate and redistribute land, plan factories and economies, tell people what to make and grow, design and build new housing, roads, schools, and centers of commerce. Tour guides are fond of telling about the worker (or workers) accidentally entombed in dams, and construction of these vast works customarily requires huge, unnamed sacrifices for the good of the community. To displace thousands from ancestral homes and farms, bulldoze graveyards and mosques, and erase all trace of memory and history from the land is a process familiar to us today as ethnic cleansing. But when done in conjunction with dam construction, it is called land reclamation.⁴⁴ It can be justified even in democratic systems by the calculus of development. India's interior minister, Morarji Desai,

⁴³ Nehru, "Speech at the Opening of the Nangal Canal," July 8, 1954, Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, vol 3, Delhi: Govt. of India Publications Division, 1958, p. 353.

told a public gathering beneath the Pong Dam in 1961 that “we will request you to move from your houses after the dam comes up. If you move, it will be good. Otherwise we shall release the waters and drown you all.”⁴⁵

A dam-building project would vastly expand and intensify the authority that could be exercised by the central government at Kabul. Remaking and regulating the physical environment of an entire region would, for the first time, render Afghanistan into the legible inventories of material and human resources in the manner of modern states. Using its karakul revenue, the Afghan government hired the largest American heavy engineering firm, Morrison Knudsen, Inc. of Boise, Idaho, to build a dam. Morrison Knudsen, builder of the Hoover Dam, the San Francisco Bay Bridge, and soon the launch complex at Cape Canaveral, specialized in symbols of the future. The firm operated all over the world, boring tunnels through the Andes in Peru, laying airfields in Turkey. Its engineers, who called themselves Emkayans, would be drawing up specs for a complex of dams in the in the gorges of the Yangtze River in 1949 when Mao’s People’s Liberation Army drove them out.⁴⁶ Afghanistan hired Morrison Knudsen in 1946. The firm set up shop in an old Moghul Palace outside Kandahar and began surveying the Helmand Valley.

The Helmand and Arghandab rivers constitute Afghanistan’s largest river system, draining a watershed the size of California. Originating in the Hindu Kush a few miles from Kabul, the Helmand travels through upland dells thick with orchards and vineyards before merging with the Arghandab twenty five miles from Kandahar, turning west across the arid plain of Registan, and emptying into the Sistan marshes of Iran. The valley was reputedly the site of a vast irrigation works destroyed by Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century. The entire

⁴⁴ On the political uses to which dams have been put, see Ann Danaiya Usher, Dams as Aid: A Political Anatomy of Nordic Development Thinking (London: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁵ Quoted in Arundhati Roy, The Cost of Living (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 13.

area is dry, catching two to three inches of rain a year. Consequently, river flows fluctuate unpredictably within a wide range, varying between 2,000 and 60,000 cubic feet per second.⁴⁷ Before beginning, Morrison Knudsen had to create an infrastructure of roads and bridges to allow the movement of equipment. Typically, they would also conduct extensive studies on soils and drainage, but the company and the Afghan government convinced themselves that in this case it was not necessary, that “even a 20% margin of error... could not detract from the project’s intrinsic value.”⁴⁸

The promise of dams is that they are a renewable resource, furnishing power and water indefinitely and with little effort once the project is complete, but dam projects are subject to ecological constraints which are often more severe outside of the temperate zone. Siltation, which now threatens many New Deal-era dams, advances more quickly in arid and tropical climates. Canal irrigation involves a special set of hazards.⁴⁹ Arundhati Roy, the voice of India’s anti-dam movement, explains that “perennial irrigation does to soil roughly what anabolic steroids do to the human body,” stimulating ordinary earth to produce multiple crops in the first years while slowly rendering the soil infertile.⁵⁰ Large reservoirs raise the water table in the surrounding area, a problem worsened by extensive irrigation. Waterlogging itself can destroy harvests, but it produces more permanent damage, too. In waterlogged soils, capillary action pulls soluble salts and alkali to the surface, leading to desertification.⁵¹ Early reports warned that

⁴⁶ Robert De Roos, “He Changes the Face of the Earth,” *Collier’s*, August 2, 1952, pp. 28-30.

⁴⁷ A. H. H. Abidi, “Irano-Afghan Dispute Over the Helmand Waters,” *International Studies (India)* 16 (July 1977) 3: 358-9; Fraser Tytler, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Aloys Arthur Michel, *The Kabul, Kanduz, and Helmand Valleys and the National Economy of Afghanistan* (Washington, National Academy of Sciences, 1959), p. 153.

⁴⁹ Scientists believe the ecological effects of large dams may include global climate change, seismic disturbances, and a quickening of the earth’s rotation. For an inventory of environmental effects, see Egil Skofteland, *Freshwater Resources: Environmental Education Module* (Paris: UNESCO/UNEP, 1995); France Bequette, “Large Dams,” *UNESCO Courier* 50 (March 1997) 3: 44-46; Robert S. Divine, “The Trouble With Dams,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1995, pp. 64-74; Peter Coles, “Large Dams—The End of an Era,” *UNESCO Courier* 53 (April 2000) 4: 10-11.

⁵⁰ Arundhati Roy, *Cost of Living*, p. 68.

⁵¹ Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution* (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 121-139.

No

the Helmand Valley was vulnerable, that it had gravelly subsoils and salt deposits. The Emkayans knew Middle Eastern rivers were often unsuited to extensive irrigation schemes. But these apprehensions' "impact was minimized by one or both parties."⁵² From the start, the Helmand project was primarily about national prestige, and only secondarily about the social benefits of increasing agricultural productivity .

7

Signs of trouble appeared almost immediately. Even when half-completed, the first dam, a small diversion dam at the mouth of the Boghra canal, raised the water table to within a few inches of the surface. A snowy crust of salt could be seen on the ground in areas around the reservoir. In 1949, the engineers and the government faced a decision. Tearing down the dam would have resulted in a loss of face for the monarchy and Morrison Knudsen, but from an engineering standpoint the project could no longer be justified.⁵³ The necessary reconsideration never took place, however, because it was at this moment that the unlucky Boghra works was enfolded into the global project of development.

Truman's Point IV address reconfigured the relationship between the United States and newly-independent nations. The confrontation between colonizer and colonized, rich and poor, was with a rhetorical gesture, replaced by a world order in which all nations were either developed or developing.⁵⁴ The president explicitly linked development to American strategic and economic objectives. Poverty was a threat not just to the poor but to their richer neighbors, he argued, and alleviating misery would assure a general prosperity, lessening the chances of war.⁵⁵ But the "triumphant action" of development superseded the merely ideological conflict of the cold war: communism and capitalism were competing carriers bound

⁵² Michel, Kabuk, Kunduz, and Helmand, pp. 152-3.

⁵³ Michel, Kabuk, Kunduz, and Helmand, p. 154.

⁵⁴ Gilbert Rist, The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith (London: Zed Books, 1997), pp. 70-75.

⁵⁵ Harry S Truman, "Remarks to the American Society of Civil Engineers," November 2, 1949, Public Papers of the Presidents, 1949, p. 547.

for the same destination. Development justified interventions on a grand scale and made obedience to foreign technicians the duty of every responsible government was presented not as the best, but as the only possible course of action. Afghanistan—solvent, untouched by the recent war, and able to hire technicians when it needed them—suddenly became “underdeveloped” and owing to its position neighboring the Soviet Union, the likely recipient of substantial assistance. Point IV’s technical aid could take many forms—clinics, schools, new livestock breeds, assays for minerals and petroleum—but the uncompleted Boghra works was an invitation to something grander, a reproduction of an American developmental triumph.

When Truman thought of aid, he thought of dams, or specifically of the Tennessee Valley Authority, the complex of dams on the Tennessee River that transformed the economy of the upper South. “A TVA in the Yangtze Valley and the Danube,” he proposed to the TVA’s director, David Lilienthal. “These things can be done, and don’t let anybody tell you different. When they happen, when millions and millions of people are no longer hungry and pushed and harassed, then the causes of war will be less by that much.”⁵⁶ Truman’s internationalization of the TVA repositioned the New Deal for a McCarthyite age. Dams were the American alternative to Communist land reform, Arthur Schlesinger argued in The Vital Center. Instead of a “crude redistribution,” American engineers could create “wonderlands of vegetation and power” from the desert. The TVA was “a weapon which, if properly employed, might outbid all the social ruthlessness of the Communists for the support of the peoples of Asia.”⁵⁷

The TVA had totemic significance for American liberals, but in the diplomatic setting it had the additional function of redefining political conflict as a technical problem. Britain’s

⁵⁶ Quoted in Alonzo Hanby, Liberalism and its Challengers, FDR to Reagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 72-3.

⁵⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom (London: Andre Deutsch, 1970), p. 233.

solution to Afghanistan's tribal wars had been to script feuds of blood, honor, and faith within the linear logic of boundary commissions, containing conflict within two dimensional space. The United States set aside the maps and replotted tribal enmities on hydrologic charts. Resolution became a matter of apportioning cubic yards of water and kilowatt hours of energy. Assurances of inevitable progress further displaced conflict into the future; if all sides could be convinced that resource flows would increase, problems would vanish, in bureaucratic parlance, downstream. Over the next two decades the United States would propose river authority schemes as solutions to the most intractable international conflicts: Palestine ("Water for Peace") and the Kashmir dispute.⁵⁸ In 1965, Lyndon Johnson famously suggested a Mekong River Authority as an alternative to the Vietnam War.⁵⁹

Afghanistan applied for and received a \$12 million Ex-Im bank loan for the Helmand Valley, the first of over \$80 million over the next 15 years.⁶⁰ Afghanistan's loan request contained a line for soil surveys, but the bank refused it as an unnecessary expense.⁶¹ Point IV supplied technical support.⁶² In 1952, the national government created the Helmand Valley Authority—later the Helmand and Arghandab Valley Authority (HAVA)—removing 1800 square miles of river valley from local control and placing it under the jurisdiction of expert commissions in Kabul. The monarchy poured money into the project; a fifth of the central

⁵⁸ On Jordan Valley Project, see "Press Conference: Statement by the Secretary," Department of State Bulletin, November 30, 1953, p. 750; "Eric Johnston Leaves on Mission to Near East," Department of State Bulletin, October 26, 1953, 553.

⁵⁹ David Ekbladh, "A Workshop for the World: Modernization as a Tool in U.S. Foreign Relations in Asia, 1914-1974," PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2002; Lloyd C. Gardner, Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1995), p. 191.

⁶⁰ Sulzberger, "Afghan Shah Asks World Bank Loan," New York Times, April 20, 1950, p. 15; Cynthia Clapp-Wincek and Emily Baldwin, The Helmand Valley Project in Afghanistan. AID Evaluation Special Study #18. (Washington: AID, December 1983).

⁶¹ Lloyd Baron, Sector Analysis—Helmand Arghandab Valley Region: An Analysis (Kabul: USAID [typescript], February 1973), p. 15.

⁶² Department of State, Fact Sheet: Mutual Security in Action, Afghanistan (Washington: International Cooperation Administration, 1959).

government's total expenditures went into HAVA in the 1950s and early 1960s.⁶³ From 1946 on, the salaries of Morrison Knudsen's advisers and technicians absorbed an amount equivalent to Afghanistan's total exports.⁶⁴ Without adequate mechanisms for tax collection, the royal treasury passed costs on to agricultural producers through inflation and the diversion of export revenue, offsetting any gains irrigation produced.⁶⁵ Although it pulled in millions in international funding, HAVA soaked up the small reserves of individual farmers and may well have reduced the total national investment in agriculture.

HAVA supplemented the initial dam with a vast complex of dams. Two large dams—the 200 foot high Arghandab dam and the 320 foot high Kajakai dam—for storage and hydropower were supplemented by diversion dams, drainage works, and irrigation canals. Reaching out from the reservoirs were 300 hundred miles of concrete-lined canals.⁶⁶ Three of the longest canals, the Tarnak, Darweshan, and Shamalan, fed riparian lands already intensively cultivated and irrigated by an elaborate system of tunnels, flumes, and canals known as juis. The new, wider canals furnished an ampler and purportedly more reliable water source. The Zahir Shah canal supplied Kandahar with water from the Arghandab reservoir, and two long-distance canals stretched out into the desert to polders of reclaimed desert: Marja and Nad-i-Ali. Each extension of the project required more land acquisitions, more displaced people. To remain flexible, the royal government and Morrison Knudsen kept the question of who actually owned the land in abeyance. No system of titles was instituted, and the bulk of the reclaimed

⁶³ Donald N. Wilber, ed., Afghanistan (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1956), p. 169.

⁶⁴ Hafizullah Emadi, State, Revolution and Superpowers, p. 53.

⁶⁵ Nake M. Kamreny, Peaceful Competition in Afghanistan: American and Soviet Models for Economic Aid (Washington: Communication Service Corporation, 1969), p. 29.

⁶⁶ Senate Special Committee to Study the Foreign Aid Program, South Asia: Report on U.S. Foreign Assistance Programs, 85th Congress, 1st session, 1957, p. 23.

? (land was farmed by tenants of Morrison Knudsen, the government, or contractors hired by the government.⁶⁷

? , The new systems magnified the problems encountered at the Boghra works and added new ones. Waterlogging created a persistent weed problem. The storage dams removed silt that once rejuvenated fields downstream. Deposits of salt or gypsum would erupt into long-distance canals and be carried off to deaden the soil of distant fields. The Emkayans had to contend with unpredictable flows triggered by snowmelt in the distant Hindu Kush. In 1957, floods nearly breached dams in two places and water tables rose, salinating soils throughout the region. The reservoirs and large canals also lowered the water temperature, making plots that once held vineyards and orchards suitable only for growing grain.⁶⁸ After a decade of work, HAVA could not set a schedule or a plan for completion. As its engineering failures mounted, HAVA's symbolic weight in the cold war and Afghanistan's ethnic politics steadily grew.

Utharot: Like the TVA, HAVA was a multipurpose river authority. U.S. officials described it as "a major social engineering project," responsible for river development but also for education, housing, health care, roads, communications, agricultural research and extension, and industrial development in the valley.⁶⁹ The US ambassador in 1962 noted that if successful, HAVA would boost Kabul's "earnings of foreign exchange and, if properly devised, could foster the growth of a strata of small holders which would give the country more stability."⁷⁰ This billiard-ball alignment of capital accumulation, class formation, and political evolution was a core proposition of the social science approach to modernization that was just making the leap from university think tanks to centers of policymaking. An uneasiness about the massive,

⁶⁷ Baron, Sector Analysis, pp. 17, 31.

⁶⁸ Ira Moore Stevens and K. Tarzi, Economics of Agricultural Production in Helmand Valley, Afghanistan (Denver: U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, 1965), pp. 30, 38.

⁶⁹ Department of State, "Elements of U.S. Policy in Afghanistan," March 27, 1962, Declassified Documents Reference System [hereafter DDRS] (Woodbridge, Ct.: Primary Source Media, online), 1978-65B; Clapp-Wincek, Helmand Valley, p. 5.

barely-understood forces impelling two thirds of the world in simultaneous and irreversible social movement—surging population growth, urbanization, the collapse of traditional authority—overshadowed policy toward “underdeveloped” areas. Modernization theory offered reassurance that the techniques of Point IV could discipline these processes and turn them to the advantage of the United States. Development, economists Walt W. Rostow and Max Millikan of MIT assured the CIA in 1954, could create “an environment in which societies which directly or indirectly menace ours will not evolve.”⁷¹

A Strange Kind of Cold War Following behavioral explanations of development, U.S. aid officials sought to ally themselves with tutelary elites possessing the transitional personalities that could generate nonviolent, nonrevolutionary change.⁷² At first glance, the king and his retinue appeared almost ideally suited. Educated in Europe and the United States, royal government officials spoke in familiar terms of ways to engineer progress. Daoud presided as supreme technocrat. Educated (like the king) in France and at English schools in Kabul, he became prime minister in 1953. “We members of the royal family,” he told anthropologist Louis Dupree, “were all trained in the West and have adopted Western ideas as our own.”⁷³ Since coming to power in 1953, Daoud had accelerated the tempo of economic development, believing that without rapid growth, Afghanistan would dissolve into factionalism and be divided among its neighbors. He was sure U.S. and Soviet generosity sprang from temporary conditions and that his government had only a short time

⁷⁰ Department of State, “Elements of U.S. Policy in Afghanistan,” March 27, 1962, DDRS, 1978-65B.

⁷¹ Max Millikan and Walt W. Rostow, “Notes on Foreign Economic Policy,” May 21, 1954, in Universities and Empire, p. 41.

⁷² On the importance of psychology in modernization thinking, see Ellen Herman, The Romance of American Psychology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 136-148.

⁷³ Louis Dupree, “An Informal Talk with Prime Minister Daoud,” September 13, 1959, AUFS Reports, South Asia Series, 3 (1959) 3: 19.

in which to take all it could.⁷⁴ To American officials, Afghan modernizers appeared too eager, too ready to jump ahead without the necessary planning and information-gathering steps, and too ready to take aid from any source.⁷⁵ Daoud's receptiveness to Soviet and Chinese aid was particularly troubling. As Dupree put it: "A nation does not accept technology without ideology. A machine or a dam is a product of a culture."⁷⁶

Daoud's regime made no effort to disguise its chauvinism.⁷⁷ Controlling positions in government, the army, the police, and the educational system were held by Pashtuns to such a degree that the appellation Afghan commonly referred only to Pashtuns and not to the minorities who collectively comprised the majority.⁷⁸ A U.S. diplomat described the kingdom as a Soviet-style "police state, where there is no free press, no political parties, and where ruthless suppression of minorities is the established pattern."⁷⁹ But despite their favored status, Pashtuns revolted against the Mohammedzai eight times between 1930 and 1960.⁸⁰ Open violence between minorities was less common than conflict that pitted clan autonomy against central authority. In 1956, Daoud welcomed Soviet military aid and advisers. His security forces kept order with a heavy hand, and in 1959, when mullahs in Kandahar again led a movement against the government, the army used tanks and MiGs to crush the rebellion.⁸¹ Daoud had brought the cold war to Afghanistan.

Asked
US
First

To the Eisenhower administration, Morrison Knudsen's outpost in Kandahar was the scientific frontier of American power in Central Asia, guarding the high passes between risk and

⁷⁴ Dupree, *Ibid.*, p. 4; State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Biographic Report: Visit of Afghanistan's Prime Minister Sardar Mohammad Daoud," June 13, 1958, DDRS, 1996-11.

⁷⁵ National Security Council, "Progress Report on South Asia," July 24, 1957, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-57 [hereafter FRUS] (Washington: USGPO, 1987), 8: 49.

⁷⁶ Dupree, "Afghanistan, the Canny Neutral," The Nation, September 21, 1964, pp. 134-137.

⁷⁷ Leon Poullada described it as "a government of, by, and for Pashtun." Poullada, "The Search for National Unity," in Dupree, ed., Afghanistan in the 1970s, p. 40.

⁷⁸ Leon B. Poullada, The Pushtun Role in the Afghan Political System (Afghanistan Council of the Asia Society, 1970), p. 22.

⁷⁹ Ward to Department of State, December 14, 1955, FRUS, 1955-57, 8: 204.

credibility. The company was “one of the chief influences which maintain Afghan connections with the West,” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles believed. “Its departure would create a vacuum which the Soviets would be anxious to fill.”⁸² He wanted to preserve Afghanistan’s buffer role, but the perennial provocations along the Durand Line conjured scenarios in Dulles’s mind in which a Soviet-backed Afghan army attacked U.S.-allied Pakistan—another Korea, this time beyond the reach of U.S. air and naval power. Daoud’s Pashtun extremism led his government to welcome Soviet arms while instigating mob attacks on Pakistani consulates and border posts. In 1955, Dulles dissuaded Pakistan from a plan to overthrow the royal family, while his brother Allen, head of the Central Intelligence Agency, suggested using against Daoud the same methods that had recently worked to depose Mossadeq in Iran.⁸³ The United States wanted to separate the dual ambitions of Pashtun nationalism, preserving Daoud’s modernization drive while disposing of the Pashtunistan issue.

The Helmand project offered a way to counter Soviet influence by giving Daoud what he wanted, a Pashtun homeland. As originally envisioned, HAVA would irrigate enough new fertile land to settle 18-20,000 families on 15 acre farms.⁸⁴ Together with Afghan officials, U.S. advisers launched a program to sedentarize the nomadic Pashtuns whose migrations were a source of friction with Pakistan.⁸⁵ To American and royal government officials, this floating population and its disregard for laws, taxes, and borders, symbolized the country’s backwardness. Settling Pashtun nomads in a belt from Kabul to Kandahar would create a secure political base for the government and bring them within reach of modernization

⁸⁰ Wilber, ed., Afghanistan, p. 103.

⁸¹ Poullada, “The Search for National Unity,” in Dupree, ed., Afghanistan in the 1970s, p. 44.

⁸² Dulles to Embassy in Pakistan, July 12, 1955, FRUS, 1955-57, 8: 189.

⁸³ Editorial note, FRUS, 1955-57, 8: 202.

⁸⁴ Peter G. Franck, “Problems of Economic Development in Afghanistan,” Middle East Journal 3 (October 1949) 4: 425.

programs.⁸⁶ Diminishing the transborder flows would eliminate smuggling and the periodic incidents that enflamed the Pushtunistan issue. A complementary dam development project in the Indus Valley, also funded by the United States, settled Pashtun nomads on the other side of the Durand Line.⁸⁷

HAVA's mandate included the social reconstruction of the region. Those seeking land, as well as families already occupying ancestral plots, were required to apply to HAVA for housing, water, and implements. In the late 1950s, HAVA began constructing whole communities for transplanted pastoralists in the Shamalan, Marja and Nad-i-Ali, while simultaneously trying to break the authority of leaders of nomadic clans, known as maliks. Maliks would lead their people "Moses-like, to the promised land," according to a U.S. report. HAVA "always informed the new settlers that they could choose new village leaders, to be called wakil, if they so desired. None did."⁸⁸ Resettled families would receive a pair of oxen, a grant of 2,000 Afghanis, and enough seed for the first year.⁸⁹ To replace the need for winter pastures, the United Nations brought in Swiss experts to teach nomads to use long-handled scythes to cut forage for sheep from high plateaus.⁹⁰ But even with the closing of the border and the attraction of subsidies and well-watered homesteads, it proved difficult to entice Ghilzai Pashtun to become ordinary farmers. Freer and wealthier than the peasants whose lands they crossed, the nomads regarded their new Tajik and Hazara neighbors with contempt. This may have served Kabul's purposes, too. The government, according to

⁸⁵ Clapp Winckel, Helmand Valley Project, p. 8; "Briefing Book, Afghanistan," August 1, 1963, in William Leuchtenberg, ed., President John F. Kennedy's Office Files, 1961-63 (Bethesda: University Press of America, 1989 [microfilm]), part 5, reel 1.

⁸⁶ On official attitudes toward the nomads and the objectives of sedentarization, see, Richard Tapper, "Nomadism in Modern Afghanistan," in Dupree, ed., Afghanistan in the 1970s, pp. 126-143; Vladimir Cervin, "Problems in the Integration of the Afghan Nation," Middle East Journal 6 (Autumn 1952) 4: 400-416.

⁸⁷ James W. Spain, The Way of the Pathans (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 126.

⁸⁸ Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 18.

⁸⁹ Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 18.

Hafizullah Emadi, planned to “use these new settlers as a death squad to crush the uprisings of the non-Pashtun people of the west, southwest, and central part of the country.”⁹¹

The Helmand project symbolized Pashtun power, and the royal government resisted efforts to attach alternate meanings to it. U.S. advisers made several attempts to imitate the “grass roots” inclusivity of the TVA. Aiming to dispel tribal feuds and foster a common professional identity among farmers they established local co-ops and 4-H clubs, but Daoud’s security forces broke them up. Courting the Muslim clergy was also forbidden. Agricultural experts found the mullahs to be a progressive force, “constantly look[ing] for things to improve their communities, better seed, new plants, improved livestock.”⁹² Regarding religion as an inoculation against communism, policymakers wanted to associate the Helmand project with Islam. In 1956, the U.S. Information Agency produced “a 45-minute full color motion picture, which featured economic development, particularly the Helmand Valley Project, and the religious heritage of Afghanistan.”⁹³ Daoud, however, regarding the mullahs as a subversive element, discouraged their contact with foreign advisers and resented, according to U.S. intelligence, “any reference made in his presence to Islam as a bulwark against communism or as a unifying force.”⁹⁴

In 1955, Afghanistan became the first target of Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s “economic offensive,” the Soviet Union’s first venture in foreign aid.⁹⁵ Over \$100 million in credits financed a fleet of taxis and busses and paid for Soviet engineers to construct

⁹⁰ Ritchie Calder, “Hope of Millions,” The Nation, August 1, 1953, pp. 87-9; Donald N. Wilber, ed., Afghanistan (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1956), p 222.

⁹¹ Emadi, State Revolution, and Superpowers, p. 41.

⁹² Dana Reynolds (AID Extension Adviser in Afghanistan), “Utilizing Religious Principles and Leadership in Rural Improvement,” n.d. c. 1962, John H. Ohly papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence Missouri, box 125.

⁹³ National Security Council, “Progress Report on NSC 5409,” November 28, 1956, FRUS, 1955-57, 8: 15.

⁹⁴ State Department, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, “Biographic Report: Visit of Afghanistan’s Prime Minister Sardar Mohammad Daoud,” June 13, 1958, DDRS, 1996-11.

⁹⁵ On U.S. reactions to the economic offensive see, Robert J. McMahon, “The Illusion of Vulnerability: American Reassessments of the Soviet Threat, 1955-56,” International History Review 18 (August 1996) 3: 591-619.

airports, a cement factory, a mechanized bakery, a 5-lane highway from their own border to Kabul, and, of course, dams. The Soviets constructed the Jalalabad Dam and canal and organized a joint river development scheme for the Amu Darya River.⁹⁶ By the 1960s, Afghanistan had Soviet, Chinese, and West German dam projects underway.⁹⁷ It was receiving one of the highest levels of development aid per capita of any nation in the world.⁹⁸ U.S. News described it as a “strange kind of cold war,” fought with money and technicians, instead of spies and bombs. The Atlantic called it a “show window for competitive coexistence.”⁹⁹ Publicly, U.S. officials said this was the kind of cold war they wanted, just a chance to show what the different systems could do in a neutral contest. Afghanistan had become a new kind of buffer, a neutral arena for a tournament of modernization.

As cultural historians have shown, Americans imagined the stakes and the price of the developmental encounter through literary and cinematic forms. The Rogers and Hammerstein musical The King and I and bestsellers such as The Ugly American and Deliver Us From Evil validated modernization theory by associating it with mythic conventions in which “a ‘hostile’ [Asian] is converted into a ‘friendly’ by the White American’s display of honor and competence.”¹⁰⁰ In a 1962 novel, James A. Michener drew Afghanistan into a legend of American regeneration. The turbulent Helmand “symbolize[d] the wild freedom of Afghanistan,” a kind of freedom that once belonged to American

⁹⁶ “Soviet-Afghan Communique,” Pravda, April 30, 1965, in Current Digest of the Soviet Press, 17 (May 19, 1965) 17: 26.

⁹⁷ Many of these were as poorly conceived as the Helmand scheme. West Germany built a hydroelectric dam at Mahipar that, because of low rainfall, held water only four months a year. A 1973 study concluded that it “may never be productive.” Marvin Brandt, “Recent Economic Development,” in Dupree, ed., Afghanistan in the 1970s, p. 103.

⁹⁸ Marvin Brandt, “Recent Economic Development,” in Dupree, ed., Afghanistan in the 1970s, p. 99.

⁹⁹ “Atlantic Report: Afghanistan,” The Atlantic, October 1962, pp. 26-36.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), p. 449; James T. Fisher, Dr. America: The Lives of Thomas A. Dooley, 1927-1961 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Christina Klein, “Musicals and Modernization: Rodgers and Hammerstein’s The King and I,” in Staging Growth; and Jonathan Nashel, “The Road to Vietnam: Modernization Theory in Fact and Fiction,” in Cold War Constructions, ed. by Christian Appy ***publisher*** pp. 132-154.

men.¹⁰¹ “It’s great to be an Afghan man,” he affirmed. “You wear a beard and carry a gun. You don’t pay too much attention to what the government says.”¹⁰² Among these nobles, men who risked their lives to build irrigation works enjoyed precedence. They were “given extra pay, extra clothes, extra food, and extra women.”¹⁰³ According to Michener, Soviet projects in downtown Kabul never received the respect Americans earned by meeting Afghans on remote plains and joining the battle against the desert. He captured the dilemmas of progress in two characters: Nur Muhammad, religious, proud, suspicious of change, and Nazrullah, a foreign-educated expert, impatient, outspoken, and eager for help from the Americans if possible, the Soviets if necessary. Nazrullah was an engineer, damming the Helmand with boulders blasted from a nearby mountain. “Each day we must throw similar rocks into the human river of Afghanistan,” he tells the American narrator. “Here a school, there a road, down in the gorge a dam. So far, our human river isn’t aware that it’s been touched. But we shall never halt until we’ve modified it completely.”¹⁰⁴ The narrator tells him of Nur Muhammad’s doubts. “I don’t have to solve the past,” he replies. “My job is to get water out of that river.”¹⁰⁵

Michener

Competition altered the significance, but not the fortunes, of the Helmand project in the 1960s. Launching the “Development Decade,” John F. Kennedy determined not only to surpass Soviet initiatives but to demonstrate the superiority of American methods of

¹⁰¹ James A. Michener, *Caravans* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 161.

¹⁰² James A. Michener, “Afghanistan: Domain of the Fierce and the Free,” *The Reader’s Digest*, November 1955, p. 162.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Michener, *Caravans*, p. 161. In one passage, an American and an Afghan stand in the ruins of Balkh and contemplate the destruction of New York. “At the apex of their history the people here talked just like you,” the Afghan warns. “The generals boasted, ‘Our forts are impregnable. No enemy can reach us.’ . . . And here is Balkh. And here is New York.” *Ibid.*, p. 313.

¹⁰⁵ James A. Michener, *Caravans* (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. 152, 161, 338.

development.¹⁰⁶ Since the superpowers were offering similar kinds of aid, distinctions were not easily made, but catastrophic crop failures in the Soviet Union and China in 1959 and 1960 clarified the difference. “Wherever communism goes, hunger follows,” Secretary of State Dean Rusk declared in 1962. Famine in China and North Vietnam proved the “humane and pragmatic methods of free men are not merely the right way, morally, to develop and underdeveloped country; they are technically the efficient way.”¹⁰⁷ Kennedy characteristically linked the new policy to the rejuvenation of the United States and the world, calling for a “scientific revolution” in agriculture that would engage the energies of “a new generation of young people.”¹⁰⁸ Diplomats and aid officials carried the message that free men ate better. Presidential emissary Averill Harriman sent to Kabul in 1965, complimented Afghan officials on the new Soviet factories but observed that the real measure of modernity was the ability to grow food. The Soviets couldn’t, he explained “due to character of farm work which requires hardworking individuals with personal stake in operation, rather than hourly paid factory hands paced by machine.”¹⁰⁹

Evidence for the efficiency of American techniques was scarce in the Helmand Valley. The burden of American loans for the project, and the absence of tangible returns was creating, according to the New York Times, “a dangerous strain on the both the Afghan economy and the nation’s morale” which “may have unwittingly and indirectly contributed

¹⁰⁶ On Kennedy’s foreign aid programs, see W. W. Rostow, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Foreign Aid (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Stephen G. Rabe, “Controlling Revolutions: Latin America, the Alliance for Progress, and Cold War Anti-Communism,” in Kennedy’s Quest for Victory, ed. by Thomas G. Paterson (New York: Oxford, 1989), pp. 105-122.

¹⁰⁷ Dean Rusk, “The Tragedy of Cuba,” Vital Speeches of the Day 28 (February 15, 1962) 9: 259.

¹⁰⁸ J. F. Kennedy, “Statement at the Opening Ceremony of the World Food Congress,” June 4, 1963, Kennedy Office Files, Part 1, 11: 1018; on Kennedy-era nation-building as rejuvenation, see Richard Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation

¹⁰⁹ Embassy Afghanistan to Department of State, March 3, 1965, FRUS, 1964-68 (Washington: USGPO, 2000) 25: 1051.

Baron; Not = well planned development
Canals, later drains etc.

to driving Afghanistan into Russian arms.¹¹⁰ Waterlogging had advanced in the Shamalan to the point that structural foundations were giving way; mosques and houses were crumbling into the growing bog.¹¹¹ In the artificial oases, the problem was worse. An impermeable crust of conglomerate underlay the Marja and Nad-i-Ali tracts, intensifying both waterlogging and salinization. The remedy—a system of discharge channels leading to deep-bore drains—would remove ten percent of the reclaimed land from cultivation. A 1965 study revealed that crop yields per acre had actually dropped since the dams were built, sharply in areas already cultivated but declines were evident even in areas reclaimed from the desert.¹¹² Withdrawing support from HAVA was impossible. “With this project,” the U.S. ambassador noted, “the American reputation in Afghanistan is completely linked.”¹¹³ For reasons of prestige alone the United States kept pouring money in, even though by 1965 it was clear the project was failing. Diplomats complained about having the US reputation and credibility hang on “a strip of concrete,” but there was no going back. Afghanistan was an economic Korea, but Helmand was an economic Vietnam, a quagmire that consumed money and resources without the possibility of success, all to avoid making failure obvious.

Revisions in modernization theory reinforced the new emphasis on agriculture and the urgency of changing strategy in the Helmand. Dual economy theory, positing a division of each economy into a self-propelling modern industrial sector and a retrograde but vitally important agricultural sector, gained the attention of policymakers in the early 1960s.¹¹⁴

“Agricultural development is vastly more important in modernizing a society than we used

¹¹⁰ Peggy and Pierre Streit, “Lesson in Foreign Aid Policy,” New York Times Magazine, March 18, 1956, p. 56. The loan repayment problem was worsening by the 1960s; see Fletcher, Afghanistan, p. 268.

¹¹¹ Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 55.

¹¹² Stevens and Tarzi, Economics of Agricultural Production, p. 29.

¹¹³ Department of State, “Elements of U.S. Policy Toward Afghanistan,” March 27, 1962, DDRS 1978-65B.

¹¹⁴ See Gustav Ranis, “A Theory of Economic Development,” American Economic Review 51 (September 1961): 533-65; Dale W. Jorgensen, “The Development of a Dual Economy,” Economic Journal 66 (June 1961): 309-334; Benjamin Higgins, Economic Development: Principles, Problems and Policies (New York: Norton, 1959).

Baron: Project could not pay for itself.

to think,” Rostow noted. Agriculture was “a system” like industry, and modernizing it required “that the skills of organization developed in the modern urban areas of the society be brought systematically into play around the life of a farmer.”¹¹⁵ Development was still fundamentally a problem of scarcity, but while the Emkayans had filled voids with water and power, the Agency for International Development (USAID) sought to build reservoirs of organization, talent, and mentality.¹¹⁶ Rejuvenating Afghan agriculture, aid officials believed, would require “a revolution in mental concepts.”¹¹⁷

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations renewed the U.S. commitment to HAVA with a fresh infusion of funds and initiatives, raising the annual aid disbursement from \$16 million to \$40 million annually.¹¹⁸ The “green revolution” approach pioneered by the Rockefeller Foundation would bring a new organizational system into play around the farmer. In 1967, USAID and the royal government imported 170 tons of the experimental dwarf wheat developed by Norman Borlaug in Mexico.¹¹⁹ The high-yield seed, together with chemical fertilizers and tightly controlled irrigation were expected to produce grain surpluses that would be distributed through new marketing and credit arrangements. Resettlement subsidies had paid off by the mid-1960s, and the Helmand Valley was beginning to have a lived-in look. The large corporate and state farms had vanished, and nearly all of the land that could successfully be farmed was privately held, much of it by smallholders. Legal titles were still clouded by HAVA’s inattention to land surveys, but the settlers had nonetheless

¹¹⁵ W. W. Rostow, “Some Lessons on Economic Development Since the War,” Department of State Bulletin 51 (November 9, 1964) 1324: 664-665; see also Rostow, View From the Seventh Floor (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 124-131.

¹¹⁶ Morrison Knudsen left in 1960, turning its operations over to USAID.

¹¹⁷ Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 52.

¹¹⁸ “Tangible Tokens,” Time, April 7, 1967, p. 18.

¹¹⁹ Lester R. Brown, Seeds of Change: The Green Revolution and Development in the 1970s (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 19.

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sculpted wide tracts of empty land into irregular 15-acre parcels divided by meandering juis, tree-lined canals that served as boundary, water source, and orchard for each farm.¹²⁰

Unfortunately, the juis system proved incompatible with the new plans. The small, hilly, picturesquely misshapen fields contributed to runoff and drainage problems and prevented the regular, measured applications of water, chemicals, and machine cultivation necessary for modern agriculture. A green revolution would require, in effect, a land reform in reverse: merging small holdings into large, level fields divided at regular intervals by laterals running from control gates on the main canals. As the wheat improvement program got underway, a team of U.S. Department of Agriculture advisers proposed that HAVA remove all of the resettled families, "level the whole area with bulldozers" and then redistribute property "in large, uniform, smooth land plots."¹²¹ HAVA adopted the land preparation scheme but implementation proved difficult. Farmers objected to the removal of trees, which had economic value and prevented wind erosion, but they objected chiefly to vagueness of HAVA's assurances. HAVA itself acknowledged, as bulldozing proceeded, that questions of what to do with the population while the land was being prepared, how to redistribute the land after completion, and whether to charge landowners for improvements were "yet to be worked out."¹²² When farmers "met the bulldozers with rifles," according to a USAID report, it presented a "very real constraint" that "consumed most of the time of the American and Afghan staffs in the Valley throughout the 1960s."¹²³

The valley's unrest coincided with Afghanistan's brief experiment with political liberalization. Daoud stepped down in 1963, and the monarchy issued a constitution permitting

¹²⁰ Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 44.

¹²¹ Cynthia Clapp-Wincek, The Helmand Valley Project in Afghanistan, AID Evaluation Special Study #18 (Washington: AID, December 1983), p. 5; Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 50.

¹²² Baron, Sector Analysis, p. 53.

¹²³ Clapp Wincek, Helmand Valley Project, p. 5.

an independent legislature and government ministries. The economy remained under central guidance. Political parties were banned, and the king continued to control the army and maintain a paternal supervision over government, but high ministerial posts went for the first time to persons outside the royal family.¹²⁴ Laws requiring women to wear the burqua were lifted (although custom maintained the practice in much of the country), and restrictions on speech and assembly were eased. In Kabul, an energetic student and café politics emerged, with daily street demonstrations by socialist, Maoist, and liberal factions while outside of the capital dissent coalesced around Islamic mullahs who articulated, according to U.S. embassy officials, “latent dissatisfaction with the low level of economic development and progress in the Afghan hinterland.”¹²⁵ In the partyless parliament, ethnic politics took precedence as minority representatives attacked Pashtun privileges while the majority defended them.¹²⁶ Legislative deadlock, the stalling modernization drive, and the growing burden of external debt fed perceptions of official ineptitude. The government of prime minister Mohammad Maiwandwal, which initiated the wheat improvement effort, needed modernization to produce tangible results.

By 1969, the new grains had spread to a modest 300,000 acres, leading to expectations of an approaching “yield takeoff,” but in 1971 a drought destroyed much of the crop. Monsoon rains failed through 1973, reducing the Helmand to a rivulet.¹²⁷ In 1971, the Arghandab reservoir dried up completely, a possibility not foreseen by planners.¹²⁸ With the

¹²⁴ Louis Dupree, “The Decade of Daoud Ends,” *AUFS Reports*, South Asia Series, 7 (May 1963) 7.

¹²⁵ U.S. Embassy Kabul to Department of State, “Afghanistan’s Clerical Unrest: A Tentative Assessment,” June 24, 1970, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 59, October 26, 2001, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB59>.

¹²⁶ Janata, “Ethnic Dimension,” p. 62.

¹²⁷ The 1971-73 drought, resulting from an “El Niño event,” affected much of south and southeast Asia. See Mike Davis *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 244.

¹²⁸ The catastrophe allowed engineers to measure the rate of siltation, which was proceeding faster than expected at a rate of .8% a year. The 20-year-old dam was already 15 percent silted up. Baron, *Sector Analysis*, p. 50.

coming of détente in 1970, levels of aid from both the United States and the Soviet Union dropped sharply. The vision of prosperous, irrigation-fed farms luring nomads into their green embrace proved beyond HAVA's grasp. Wheat yields were among the lowest in the world, four bushels an acre (Iowa farms produced 180); farm incomes in the valley were below average for Afghanistan and declining.¹²⁹ State Department officials found it difficult to measure the magnitude of the economic crisis "in Afghanistan where there are no statistics" but student strikes and the suspension of parliament pointed to a "creeping crisis" in mid-1972. "The food crisis," the embassy reported, "seems to have been the real clincher for which neither the King nor his government were prepared."¹³⁰ In July 1973, military units loyal to Daoud deposed the king, who was vacationing in Europe, and terminated both the monarchy and the constitution. U.S. involvement in HAVA was scheduled to end in July 1974, and USAID officials strenuously opposed suggestions that it be renewed. Nonetheless, when Henry Kissinger visited Kabul in February, Daoud described the Helmand Valley as an "unfinished symphony" and urged the United States not to abandon it.¹³¹ Kissinger relented. Land reclamation officers remained with the project, while making little progress against its persistent problems, until the pro-Soviet Khalq party seized power in 1978.

Drainage
Project

Soviet economic development also failed to create a stable, modernizing social class. The Khalq was not broadly based enough to hold onto authority unaided. Against the threat of takeover by an Islamic party, the Soviet Union launched the invasion of 1979.¹³² During the Soviet war, both sides found ways to make use of the Helmand Valley's infrastructure. In early 1980, according to M. Hasan Kakar, "about a hundred prisoners" of the Khalq "were thrown

¹²⁹ Kamreny, Peaceful Competition, p. 36; Clapp-Wincek, Helmand Valley, p. 4.

¹³⁰ Robert A. Flaten, "Afghan Politics, The Creeping Crisis," May 31, 1972, National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book No. 59.

¹³¹ Clapp-Wincek, Helmand Valley Project, p. 6.

¹³² The misfortunes of the Khalq are analyzed in M. Hasan Kakar, Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

out of airplanes into the Arghandab reservoir.¹³³ ~~The project's concrete water channels~~ provided cover for Mujaheddin fighters, and its broken terrain was the site of intense fighting between the resistance and Soviet forces as well as among ethnic factions. Soviet troops felled trees to smash the irrigation canals and extensively mined the fields and orchards, driving the population into refugee camps in Pakistan.¹³⁴ The Taliban movement began here, and the valley provided one of its chief sources of revenue. The opium poppy grows well in dry climates and alkaline and saline soils.¹³⁵ In 2000, according to the United Nations Drug Control Program, the Helmand Valley produced 39 percent of the world's heroin.¹³⁶

Kandahar

Official and unofficial post-mortems identified misperceptions at the root of the project's failures. Lloyd Baron, an economist given access to the U.S. aid mission's records in the 1970s, noted a "development myopia" that identified water scarcity as the sole obstacle to agricultural abundance. Planners subordinated complex social and political problems within the more manageable engineering problem of overcoming the water constraint.¹³⁷ An official USAID review in 1983 concluded that the project suffered from a commitment/leverage paradox. The perception that HAVA was a "donor project" relieved the Afghan government

¹³³ Kakar, Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, p. 203.

¹³⁴ Ahmed Rashid, Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 20.

¹³⁵ Tim Weiner, "With Taliban Gone, Opium Farmers Return to their Only Cash Crop," New York Times, November 26, 2001, p. B1.

¹³⁶ United Nations Drug Control Programme, Afghanistan Programme, Afghanistan: Annual Opium Poppy Survey 2000 (Islamabad: UNDCP/A, 2000). Afghanistan produces the bulk of the world's opium, largely as a result of poverty and war. Production has grown steadily since the Soviet invasion, peaking in 1999, when 90,000 hectares were under cultivation. In 2000, the Taliban imposed an opium ban, which eliminated cultivation in the Helmand and the principal producing areas in the 2001 growing season. The ban may have been motivated by a desire for international aid and recognition, or to sell existing stocks at an elevated price. United Nations Economic and Social Council, World Situation With Regard to Illicit Drug Trafficking and Reports of Subsidiary Bodies of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (Vienna: ECOSOC, March 2001).

¹³⁷ Lloyd Baron, "The Water-Supply Constraint: An Evaluation of Irrigation Projects and the Role in the Development of Afghanistan," Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1975, p. 2.

of ultimate responsibility and left the United States without influence to demand corrective steps.¹³⁸

The ongoing critique of modernization theory furnishes a broader context for these conceptual flaws. James C. Scott explains that the “high modernist” experiments of the mid-twentieth century were founded on a schematic view of the human and natural world that failed to account for the full range of variation—in motivations, climate, effects (“even a 20% margin of error...”), and human ingenuity—actually encountered.¹³⁹ The project’s human subjects were rendered as productive units, “abstract citizens” whose motives conformed to the goals of the planner.¹⁴⁰ “Any anthropologist could have predicted with confidence,” Arnold Fletcher observed in 1965, “that the happy notion of settling Afghan nomads on the reclaimed lands would not work out.”¹⁴¹ Nonetheless that prediction was not made, or if made, not listened to, just as two years later HAVA failed to anticipate settlers’ unsurprising objection to being turned off the land so their homes could be bulldozed.

The goals and effects of the project were never viewed outside the distorting mirror of modernization theory. Pastoralists produced the country’s primary export and most of its foreign exchange revenue, and yet HAVA’s plan to convert them into wheat farmers was never seriously questioned. The outcomes that were hoped for—tax earnings, political stability, creation of a middle class, resolution of the Pashtunistan issue, national prestige—were seen as concomitants of eventual developmental success, rather than as goals to be pursued directly. Precautionary moves were easily brushed aside by the same assurance that time and effort

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¹³⁸ Clapp-Wincek, Helmand Valley.

¹³⁹ Scott, Seeing Like a State pp. 347-349.

¹⁴⁰ On this point, see also C. Douglas Lummis, Radical Deocracy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 64.

¹⁴¹ Fletcher, Highway of Conquest, p. 268.

would bring improvement. Belief in development imposes, according to Gilbert Rist, a “social constraint” on the expression of shared doubts.¹⁴²

If illusions doomed the project they also created and sustained it. HAVA’s evolutionary advantage was an ability to take on the protective coloration of a succession of modernizing myths. The disastrous effects of dam-building were visible in 1949 and only became more obvious as the project grew. But camouflaged by dreams of Pashtun ascendancy and invisible American influence, HAVA was as resilient as modernization theory itself, able to survive repeated debunkings while shedding the blame and the memory of failure. Proponents of a fresh nation-building venture in Afghanistan, unaware of the results of the last one, have resurrected its imaginings. Development aid to the new Pashtun-led government in Kabul, supporters claim, will provide a buffer against terrorism and “prevent future Osama bin Ladens from arising.”¹⁴³ The centerpiece of the modernization effort, a writer for the New York Times suggests, should be “dams to provide water for irrigation.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Rist, History of Development, p. 239.

¹⁴³ Nichols D. Kristof, “Give the Afghans a Hand,” New York Times, December 13, 2001, p. A31.

¹⁴⁴ M. Ishaq Nadri, “Rebuilding a Ravaged Land,” New York Times, November 26, 2001, p. A19.