INVISIBLE HISTORY

Afghanistan's Untold Story

by Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould

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Introduction

by Sima Wali

Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story is a phenomenal compendium of history, research and critical analysis of the complex dynamics that has led to the death of my home country Afghanistan—a nation as old as history itself. For Afghanistan, the aftermath of the Cold War resulted in large-scale genocide of more than two million civilians and five million war victims, as well as a million handicapped and scores of internally displaced Afghan people.

Before I met Paul and Liz I had spent two decades seeking an explanation for why Afghanistan was sacrificed in the war against the Soviet Union. *Invisible History* unravels this great mystery as it bears testimony for all humanity about one of the great invisible injustices of our time.

I fled Afghanistan for the United States in 1978 after the first Marxist coup overthrew the last member of a dynasty that had ruled my country for nearly 250 years. During that time my family was put under house arrest simply because, as allies to the West, we were on the wrong side of Afghan politics. In my youth my family was very close to the Americans. We admired them. We all believed they shared with us a vision of a greater Afghanistan, where men and women could share in a bright future through education, cultural exchange and economic development. Despite the many obstacles inherent in moving an underdeveloped country like Afghanistan into the twentieth century, it was a time of hope, enthusiasm and promise. Kabul was a peaceful international city then with ancient ties to the East and the West. Tourists flocked from all over the world, especially from the Middle East, to enjoy a cosmopolitan Islamic culture, free from the strictures of extremism.

When I was forced to flee Afghanistan, I left behind that era and a culture that was striving on the path of democracy. It had been a golden era, where the voices of empowered women were heard and recognized by their male counterparts as legitimate and necessary to the development of our country. Back then I was accustomed to the visibility and contributions of women in the Afghan democracy. I was exposed to empowered women in my own immediate family and the larger society who held cabinet posts and worked alongside men in the government. I promised to remain a voice for these people, and I dedicated myself to their memory. I still grieve for the Afghanistan I left behind and the lost opportunities for the democratic-minded Afghan people.

In 1981 I established Refugee Women in Development (RefWID), an international nonprofit tax exempt organization dedicated to helping the world's displaced women and victims of war and genocide make a new way of life for themselves. For twenty-five years my colleagues and I worked to empower women who were affected by major socio-political transformations such as war, civil strife and human rights abuses. From our offices in Washington, D.C. we supported war-affected women and their male counterparts by building their leadership capacities in the nongovernmental sector (NGOs). We conducted our work by providing training, networking and advocacy support to enable local NGOs to provide better services in their communities. Although we worked primarily with women, we also included men in our programs. Our aim was to build the capacities of women to organize their communities and to fully participate in the rebuilding process. By empowering these women and men to reestablish their own shattered lives, Refugee Women in Development helped set the stage for a reconstructed, functioning civil society.

For the twenty years preceding the downfall of the Taliban, Refugee Women in Development was unable to conduct its program inside Afghanistan. Most of our programs were centered in Pakistan. There, I listened to the voices of hundreds of increasingly desperate men and women. I anguished over how to explain what I learned—that despite the growing awareness of the total destruction of the war, the Afghan people were mostly absent from campaigns waged on their behalf in the United States.

I realized then that this callous treatment of my people, who had served the United States in the war against the Soviet Union, would leave them vulnerable to a far more pervasive and determined enemy. That enemy emerged as the Taliban.

During my visits to Pakistan prior to 9/11, the women of Afghanistan and their male escorts braved minefields and dangerous mountain passes to secretly meet with me. I listened to the voices of the Afghan women who ran schools, provided health services and conducted human rights activities while providing social services to Afghans inside Afghanistan and Pakistan. Traumatized and desperate, they constantly spoke of severe poverty, suicide and the growing hopelessness that saw their dreams for a free Afghanistan swallowed by an army of Islamist mercenaries from all over the world armed and supplied by Pakistan. How did the world community allow such heinous crimes to be committed against a nation of twenty-six million people with a large majority of women?

I still hear their cries. During this entire time I carried with me their pleading voices and ultimately their screams, while the world looked away. Now, as we conclude still another decade of war, their screams rise again within me as I witness a Taliban resurgence. The draconian Taliban rule stripped women of their basic human rights. Their edicts against women in Afghanistan led to an introduction of a new form of violence termed "gender apartheid." Strict limitations on women's public space and education led to the galvanization of American women on behalf of Afghan women. This worldwide solidarity with the most oppressed women in the world itself was novel. From that day on, the women's alliance across the globe and their influence on foreign policy was seen as a new and powerful factor in the resolution of the worldwide refugee problem. I can safely state that Afghan women were the canaries in the mineshaft, bearing witness to the inhumanity of a regime against its own citizens.

Still, in the United States today there remains a profound lack of understanding about the Taliban, what political forces they represent and what their objectives are. The void of accurate historical information on their origins has resulted in a succession of dangerous, counterproductive policy initiatives fromWashington. The consequences of these initiatives have

negated any chance for a successful restoration of an Afghan republic, opened Afghanistan to cross-border raids from Pakistan while at the same time providing a platform for the resurgence of the Taliban.

When the Americans washed their hands of Afghanistan once the Soviets were defeated, many desperate Afghans living in Pakistan became indoctrinated into the Taliban's fundamentalist mentality. Due to the dismal economic conditions following the war, many young Afghan men were either forcibly recruited or voluntarily joined the Taliban out of desperation. Over the years as I witnessed the continuing breakdown of civil society due to the long term effects of war on the Afghan people, I also witnessed the growth of the madrassa system of fundamentalist education in Pakistan. While I was in Pakistan, Afghan refugee familes—with few options to care for their children—confirmed to me that the only way for their boys to receive education was through the madrassas. During that time, the Taliban's influence grew over the Afghan refugees in Peshawar as well as across the border into Afghanistan as the war continued to drain all resources required to maintain civil society. Encouraged by Pakistan but apparently "overlooked" by the Americans, these Pakistani madrassas continued to provide the major source of indoctrination and recruitment for the Taliban and grew stronger by the day.

To set the record straight, the term "Taliban" and the movement itself were unheard of in Afghanistan until 1996. Prior to the Soviet invasion, the Taliban mentality and the madrassa structure did not exist. As an invention of Pakistan's military intelligence with outside help, the Taliban were not recruited from inside Afghanistan but from Pakistani madrassas. This process was funded, not by Afghans, but by the Saudis and other Arab countries who continue to seek the longterm goal of a political and religious transformation of South Asia combined with the dissolution of Afghanistan as a nation state. As Zalmay Khalizad said in his April 1, 2004 remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), historically the version of Islam practiced by Afghans was moderate. The Taliban version of Deobandi Islam practiced in Pakistan and the Wahhabism practiced in Saudi Arabia were both alien to Afghan practice. Suicide bombings did not exist in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation nor even when the Tal-

iban arrived in 1996. The Afghan people never willingly embraced extremist Islam. These ideas were forced upon them under circumstances beyond their control.

Regardless of these understandings, during the debates establishing the post-Taliban government for Afghanistan in 2001, Islamist principles that had never been considered Afghan and were never a part of previous Afghan constitutions were infused into the new constitution. Even the chief justice and the ministry of justice are composed of former Taliban madrassa students. Many in leadership positions in the current government of Afghanistan also subscribe to extremist ideologies of the Islamic kind that were never a part of Afghan politics. And so, where in the past, extremism held little sway within the political process, the conflict between moderates and extremists has now become the norm.

Years after being driven from power by the American military intervention of 2001, today the Taliban enemy is once again reemerging as a tenacious and relentless insurgent force. But even with a military occupation that has lasted more than seven years, the United States and the West in general, do not perceive that their failure in Afghanistan remains a direct result of the long-standing inability of western institutions to adjust to the realities of what needs to be done. It is also a result of the failure to listen to the voices of the vast majority of willing Afghans who are capable of ushering in democratic change. This is a bias that permeated American thinking before September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, despite a wealth of new and empirical evidence, misconceptions about Afghanistan remains in place today.

Following the fall of the Taliban, our central effort was to build a democratic civil society in Afghanistan. Our basic philosophy at Refugee Women in Development has been that the grassroots leadership found in local NGOs play a vital role in promoting a balanced, tolerant, and open society. We developed training programs and networking opportunities for local Afghan organizations by strengthening their institutional and leadership capacities through training programs.

At first we were confident that with a combination of American aid and security, the civil society that I had known in Afghanistan could be restored and expanded throughout the country. This was not to be.

Today, Afghanistan is again depicted in the worst possible light—as a haven for extremists who have hijacked Afghan cultural and religious traditions. The media often promote this misconception, and fail to recognize that the Afghan people have themselves been held hostage to external invading forces. These forces have a vested interest in keeping Afghanistan destabilized and weak. They also have a vested interest in maintaining misconceptions about Afghanistan that prevent the country from getting enough western commitment to realistically establish democratic institutions. The international system of law and diplomacy broke down once over Afghanistan. It must not be allowed to break down again.

Following 9/11 we temporarily had the semblance of a new society, but the Afghan people are yet again seeing the glimmer of hope rapidly dissipate. Although 9/11 was a wake-up call, the realization that events in Afghanistan are directly tied to security in the United States is clouded by a profound misunderstanding.

I no longer fear that Afghanistan will again be abandoned. My fear today is that despite all the initial good intentions, America's overreliance on military methods, targeted missile strikes, chemical spraying, and imprisoning and torturing suspected militants has turned popular opinion in the wrong direction. Combined with an inability to improve the lives of the average Afghan by even a small measure, America is now viewed as an occupier, instead of the friend and ally we want her to be.

While many strides have been made to bring women along in reconstruction schemes, today these advances are tempered by rampant poverty, violence, and lack of water, electricity, and employment among other things. Under current circumstances women are abducted, even jailed, for refusing to accept forced marriages. Honor killings continue and sexual and physical violence have not been adequately addressed especially in the provinces where warlords rule.

Today, the common Afghan man and woman have fear in their hearts and uncertainty about their future.

Although we now have a new constitution in place that guarantees the rights of both men and women, the advances are tempered by rising repression of women's social and political prominence. We, as women, are at peril

of anti-modernist forces that are committed to rolling back the newfound gains of Afghan women by hijacking our language and by resorting to the so-called "Islamic" argument. The protection of women as equal citizens does not figure prominently under the new constitution. After having suffered flagrant abuses for more than two decades we cannot and will not stand for unequal protection under the highest law of our nation.

The world community must not be acquiescent with rhetoric, tokenism, or symbolic assurances. What Afghanistan and its people desperately need at this critical juncture is not misplaced charity but long-term strategies for sustainable democracy. This can only be done if the international community makes a permanent commitment to: 1) staying the course of nation building; 2) committing enough finances to sustain long-term development; 3) heeding the voices of the Afghan people especially the moderate Afghans; and 4) involving ever-increasing numbers of women. Afghan women constitute 67 percent of the Afghan population. Building a ravaged nation with only 33 percent of its human resources is simply not sound economics.

As we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world community and especially the United States realize that Afghanistan is a country of very special interest. But despite the West's commitment to Afghanistan it still remains a country whose history and struggle for democracy is largely obscured by myth and propaganda.

In the pages ahead Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould clarify and correct the record, and build a foundation upon which the whole story of Afghanistan's past can be appreciated.

It takes courageous hearts, minds and souls to travel the path that Paul and Liz have pursued—particularly for Afghans who have endured and continue to endure unspeakable trauma. Witnessing the massacre of members of my extended family has altered my life and has been the driving force in my quest to inform the world of the insanity in the current war. To this day, I am exposed to the impact this war has on women, men and children, and bear witness to their families' lifelong trauma. It has led me to question why anyone or any institution can claim the right to sacrifice innocent victims while pursuing their own political agendas and economic interests.

Invisible History is filled with ground-breaking analysis, not only for those interested in the more recent politics of Afghanistan, but also for those wanting the larger historical context necessary to grasp the immensity of this tragedy. It will stand as a twenty-first century guide not only to what was lost in the destruction of Afghanistan but to what can still be done to reconstruct a future where all Afghan women and men can live with the peace and plenty they deserve. I commend Paul and Liz for their dedication, courage and professionalism in treading in areas where no soul has dared venture before and in unraveling the complex dynamics of the story of Afghanistan.

PROLOGUE

A Clockwork Afghanistan

It's a battle for the air and the airwaves. As well as dropping bombs and food ration packs into Afghanistan, military strategists in Washington have a new secret weapon in their war on terrorism—the wind-up radio.

—"Clockwork Warfare," *BBC News*, October 10, 2001

I

Round and round like a clockwork Afghanistan: the symbolism didn't really hit home until we returned from our latest trip to that desperate country in the late fall of 2002. Over the course of our stay at a small hotel catering to an international cadre of journalists, aid workers, and UN staffers, we encountered a local artist in the act of painting American icons on the whitewashed wall of the narrow stairwell. During the first few days we witnessed the detailed completion of the New York City Police Department logo overlooking the small first-floor dining room, while in ongoing days the New York City Fire Department logo came to dominate the second-floor stairwell. It was an understandable expression of appreciation from the Afghans, we thought. Throughout our trip we had encountered nothing but thanks from our Afghan hosts who wished America well for liberating them from the oppressive Taliban regime while breaking the cycle of violence that had taken two million lives since 1978.

But when the artist chose to decorate the third-floor stairwell with an artistic rendering of the poster from Stanley Kubrick's classic *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), we came up short. Why mix the real image of sacrifice and

public service represented by New York's heroes of 9/11 with the most indelible symbol of Anglo-Saxon cultural savagery ever invented?

In the thirty years since we'd seen the movie, we'd forgotten the sedated, Orwellian future ruled over by criminal thugs that Anthony Burgess's antique British expression had warned of. At the time, it was the tentacles of communism we were persuaded would turn us into the clockwork oranges of Burgess's 1962 book—mind-controlled Sovietized automatons with all "the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State."[1] But the idea that our own "state" would seek such controls over us freethinking Americans seemed an improbable, if not impossible, prospect.

Since then an endless series of wars in Vietnam, Grenada, Nicaragua, Panama, Somalia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan have inched the United States further and further from the principles and practices of a just society while the media's endless fascination with tabloid and video-game warfare has reduced America's collective moral conscience to a vague numbness. But not until 9/11 and the subsequent unilateral engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq did the inevitable outcome of this step-by-step process become apparent.

And so here, thirty years later, we were reminded by an Afghan artist of what we had been warned about by a book and film decades ago, and the meaning of the metaphor was suddenly "[c]lear as an azure sky of deepest summer,"[2] to quote Burgess's protagonist. We in the United States had become the "clockwork oranges," of Burgess's book—the unsuspecting beneficiaries of Britain's violent nineteenth-century imperial obsession with conquering Afghanistan and controlling the gateway to Eurasia. But a story about windup radios didn't shed a clue about how Afghanistan had been stage-managed to turn the clock back on America's disillusioned hearts and minds after Vietnam and Watergate nor how Afghanistan had been used as a pretext for undermining the power and the promise of American democracy.

II

Our involvement in this story began in the summer of 1979 when we began production of a documentary we called *Arms Race and the Economy: A Delicate Balance*. The big international news story of the day was the second round of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT II), which had been completed that June. Begun under President Richard M. Nixon in November 1972, it was hoped that the agreement signed by President Jimmy Carter and General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev would further the era of détente and end, once and for all, the Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union.

We had no idea at the time of the key role that Afghanistan would shortly come to play in keeping the Cold War very much alive. As the host of a weekly public affairs program (*Watchworks*) on Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network affiliate in Boston, I found that the issue had taken on a personal relevance. I had been hired in an effort to balance the ultraconservative Apocalypse-is-coming programming of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, and others, that streamed out of the network's headquarters in Virginia Beach. For someone who had worked on the political campaigns of liberals Barney Frank in 1972 for the Massachusetts House of Representatives and Ed Markey in 1976 for the U.S. House of Representatives, this was not difficult to do. But it was Robertson's decision to repeatedly air an anti-SALT documentary titled *The Salt Syndrome*, produced by the American Security Council as "public service," that enabled us to engage the topic of the nuclear arms race. So, on a shoestring budget, we began interviewing individuals who would begin explaining the mechanism of the twentieth century's arms race; its growth and mutation into the domestic economy following World War II, and the mythology that had been created to maintain it.

During the next months Ted Kennedy, Henry Cabot Lodge, John Kenneth Galbraith, George B. Kistiakowsky, Paul Warnke, and numerous others lent their experience to our understanding of SLCMs and GLCMs, Cruise and MX missiles, throw weights, and the all-important canon of the nuclear age—Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). But the picture that was emerging was anything but clear. It appeared that strategic

thought wasn't only a matter of numbers and throw weights, but a dark world of business, science, and politics ruled over by a self-described "priesthood" of experts.[3] A visit to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in Washington, D.C., that fall revealed a bureaucracy under attack from not only the Left but also the Right, which accused it of betraying the security of the United States by appeasing an enemy who was bent on America's destruction. But not even after the Soviets crossed their border into Afghanistan that December 27 did anyone realize the full measure of what was occurring. Suddenly and without warning a supposedly insignificant little country called Afghanistan had managed to roll the clock back thirty years on U.S.-Soviet relations and usher in a new and dangerous era of U.S.-Soviet competition and pave the way for a "conservative revolution" in American politics.

By the time our program aired on February 17, 1980, the delicate balance of the arms race and the economy—that is, whether our government should call a halt to the nuclear arms race or commit new trillions to strategic weapons—was no longer at issue. Another set of assumptions had taken hold of the nation, with the media echoing a return to Cold War rhetoric, and the debate refocused on how much was to be spent to counter this "historic moment" of Soviet aggression. Viewed by the emerging right-wing neoconservative establishment as a vindication of their long-standing belief in Soviet iniquity, Afghanistan had reset the clock back to the darkest days of the Cold War and the creation of the national security state in 1947. But in July 1980 an odd new aspect of that war began to emerge.

III

Colin S. Gray and Keith Payne's *Foreign Policy* article "Victory is Possible" (Summer 1980) went unnoticed by the political pundits of the day. Even after three years of attempting to provide a balance to Pat Robertson's apocalyptic philosophy, the stridency of the rhetoric came as a surprise. "Nuclear war is possible," they wrote that summer. "But unlike Armageddon, the apocalyptic war prophesied to end history, nuclear war can have a wide range of possible outcomes."

No longer was biblical prophecy confined to the broadcasts of the Christian Broadcasting Network. Because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the domain of strategic thinking was now being challenged. It seemed that Afghanistan was more than just a "historic moment" in East-West relations as declared by Harvard historian Richard Pipes. Afghanistan had somehow enabled a philosophical shift away from a policy of "realist" diplomacy to a policy of nuclear-war fighting and the New Right was rushing to graft it to an archaic spiritual agenda.

Combining the high-tech weaponry of America's nuclear arsenal with the medieval Catholic doctrine of Just War, Gray and Payne proposed to break the stalemate over the use of nuclear weapons and create a new rationale that would free America from nuclear restraint. Added to Robert Scheer's January 1980 *Los Angeles Times* article in which presidential candidate George Herbert Walker Bush was reported as suggesting that a nuclear war was winnable, it seemed that Afghanistan had become the most important story of a strange and dangerous new era.

Our decision in the fall of 1980 to request exclusive permission from the Afghan government to enter Afghanistan and see for ourselves what the Soviets were up to grew from this realization, and our journey there in the spring of 1981 under contract to CBS News would forever immunize us from the haze of propaganda and chest beating surrounding U.S.-Soviet competition.

Afghanistan was a complex problem—far from the simplistic portrait of black and white, good against evil, portrayed by the American media and the U.S. administration. Ethnic feuding, modernization, chronic poverty, women's rights issues, a 50 percent infant mortality rate, and massive narcotics trafficking were all factors in the country's political instability. Added to that were two hundred years of colonial pressure from Russia and Britain that saw Britain's armies occupy broad swaths of Afghan territory during three separate wars of conquest. But even our personal look at the Soviet occupation couldn't explain why the Kremlin had risked international condemnation in overthrowing the nominally Marxist government of Hafizullah Amin. Nor did it explain the disproportionate American response to the Afghan crisis. Something other than the presence of 75,000

Soviet troops appeared to be driving Afghanistan as the major East-West conflict of the late twentieth century, and we were determined to find out what it was.

Against this backdrop, a return trip in 1983 accompanied by Harvard Negotiation Project director Roger Fisher for ABC's *Nightline* revealed a major clue. Far from being a preparatory step toward the Persian Gulf, the Soviet Union was anxious to extricate itself as quickly as possible from the Afghan quagmire. Talks with Soviet officials in Kabul that spring indicated a Soviet willingness to admit that a "mistake" had been made, to withdraw its forces, and to cool international tensions. Yet this discovery, made by one of the world's foremost experts on crisis negotiation was ignored by the powers that be in both the press and the government of the United States.

A deeper long-range plan seemed to be unfolding in Afghanistan, a plan that even after the events of 9/11 would never make it to the evening news. But that was a deeper story that went far beyond Osama bin Laden and the veneer of American foreign policy. It was a mystical story—apocalyptic in nature, one that bound America's destiny to the ancient mechanism of good versus evil culminating in a great battle at the end of time in a place where civilization began.

Following the attack on the World Trade Center towers on September 11, 2001, we were given the opportunity to speak about our experience to the national media and to provide insight into whom and what the United States might expect from this sudden and shocking turn of events. During this time it came as a great surprise to find that after two decades of direct American involvement in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and a previous bombing of the Twin Towers by Afghan-related fighters, Americans knew virtually nothing about how such a thing had come about. The acquiescence of the major American media in maintaining a silence on the largest covert operation in American history following the invasion of a "limited contingent" of Soviet troops in 1979 had left the greatest democracy on earth without a clue as to who had really just attacked it or what was to be done about it.

In the end, of course, Afghanistan was bombed by American planes and again invaded—this time by a "limited contingent' of American forces. But

even after years of direct American involvement in the internal affairs of Afghanistan little was known and less understood about how it brought about the events of 9/11 or the importance of this ancient crossroads to the future of the United States. Even less was known about the evolution of Afghan history, its people, and the centuries of interaction with outside forces that caused Afghanistan to become the staging ground for the end of an old world and the beginning of another. The impact Afghanistan has made on political life in the West and especially in the life of American politics is significant. Manipulated into a mechanism for change by a handful of insightful geopoliticians and defense intellectuals, it has worked like clockwork to produce a series of historic and unstoppable events that have brought our civilization to the edge of a great transformation. The chances that this land, the very place where western civilization began, will soon play a final and decisive role in our future are all but certain. But for most, Afghanistan remains behind the veil—a country whose true purpose and beauty remain hidden from sight, but whose future we ignore at our own peril.