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Hamid Karzai

IT WAS A VERY Afghan moment, just the sort of good news–bad news dichotomy that had plagued Afghanistan's recent history. In the 1980s, the Afghans had beaten the Soviet Union, but their efforts to govern their own country had devolved into years of ruinous internecine violence. In the mid-1990s, the Taliban had brought law and order, but only by the imposition of a medieval regime as harsh as anything the Spanish Inquisition ever dished up, and along with them had come a fanatic Saudi and training bases for international terrorism. The Afghans couldn't win for losing.

The date was December 5, 2001, less than three months after the al-Qaeda-sponsored attacks on New

York and Washington, D.C. The United States and Britain had begun to attack Afghanistan overtly, from the air, on October 7, although special forces from both countries had been conducting covert operations inside the country in advance of the bombing campaign, trying to organize the so-called Northern Alliance into a unified force to oust the Taliban. The Taliban branded the bombing "an attack on Islam." The objective of the United States and its allies was not only to unseat the odious regime of the Taliban, whom, incidentally, the United States had initially supported, but also to destroy the bases and training camps inside Afghanistan operated by al-Qaeda, the shadowy terrorist organization led by the wealthy Saudi Osama bin Laden. Meanwhile, an emergency conference had been convened in Bonn, Germany, to plan the shape of a post-Taliban Afghan government. Hamid Karzai, at that point the man most likely to head an interim Afghan government, had slipped into the southern part of the country shortly after 9/11 to rally the mostly Pashtun population of the area against the Taliban. With American airpower and Special Forces support, Karzai's small but growing force had been taking villages and towns one after another. On November 12, the Northern Alliance came down from the mountains and attacked Kabul, driving out the Taliban without firing a shot. Northern Alliance fighters entered the capital in triumph the following day, to a raucous welcome by the long-suffering citizens. The Taliban, in headlong flight in their hallmark white pickup trucks, had signaled that they were ready to surrender.

Karzai and a few dozen Afghan fighters, along with U.S. Special Forces advisers, were in a village called Shah wali Kot, just north of Kandahar. American planes were bombing a nearby ridgeline where a small Taliban force was firing intermittently at the village. The Afghan soldiers, a

number of villagers, and some of the Americans had gone up a small hill at the edge of the village to watch the air strikes. Karzai had started up the hill when he was told by an aide that some elders from the area wanted to meet with him, so he turned back and entered a small house where the tribal leaders were seated. Suddenly a massive explosion shattered the windows of the house, blew off the door, and rained debris down on Karzai and the chiefs. A huge 2,000-pound satellite-guided bomb, dropped from an American B-52, had been directed to the wrong hilltop. Three Americans, at least two dozen Afghan soldiers, and a number of civilians were killed.

In the little house, an American soldier had thrown himself on Karzai, as had the tribal chiefs. They hustled him out of the rubble and into a sheltered area among some boulders where aides began to clean off the blood, dust, and debris from his head. Just then his satellite telephone rang. An aide answered. "English," he said, handing the phone to Karzai. It was the BBC's Lyse Doucet, calling from Bonn.

"Congratulations," she said. "You have been named head of the new interim Afghan government."

Another phone call came, from an Afghan commander in Kandahar who said that a senior Taliban delegation was en route to Shah wali Kot to deliver their letter of surrender to Hamid Karzai.

Hamid Karzai was born in December 1957 in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. His name, Karzai, means that he is from the village of Karz, which is the ancestral seat of his family. Afghans do not usually note the exact date of a child's birth, nor do they celebrate birthdays, and many Afghans cannot even tell you in what year they were born, but the Karzais are an educated and prominent family.

Karzai's father was chief of the Popolzai tribe, as was his father before him. The Popolzais are a subtribe of the Abdalis, who ruled Afghanistan for more than two centuries, until King Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973. Although Hamid Karzai himself became chief of the Popolzais upon the death of his father, who was assassinated by the Taliban in 1999, he preferred not to talk about tribes. "I am simply an Afghan," he said.

The Karzai family was very close to the king, and one of Hamid's first acts as president of the interim government was to bring the king back to Kabul from his long exile in Italy and install him in comfortable quarters in his former palace, surrounded by friends and family.

Karzai is one of eight children—he has six brothers and one sister—and in age he is roughly in the middle. "We are an educated family," he said, "but conservative and traditional. We were not rich; there were many families in Kandahar who were far wealthier." But the family was prominent by virtue of its long history and close ties to the ruling families, and so was privileged by Afghan standards, living a comfortable life in a large walled compound. While his father was a powerful khan, Karzai remembers his mother as a very spiritual person who fasted often. "I learned a great deal about high moral standards from her," he said.

Karzai was born in the last—and one of the few—peaceful periods in Afghan history. The king was on his throne, ruling benignly over a loose federation of tribes that included the populous Pashtuns in the south, Tajiks and Uzbeks in the north, and Shiite Hazaras, long the persecuted minority, in the center. Although Karzai spent the first few years of his life in Karz, and began his schooling there, after his first year of school the family moved to Kabul. Karzai's father had been elected to the parliament, which met in Kabul during what Afghan historians refer to

as the Decade of Democracy. The government of Zahir Shah was a constitutional monarchy, and the elections for parliament were conducted just as democratic elections are today. The candidates campaigned both for themselves and their like-minded friends who were also standing for election by making speeches, hosting lunches for voters—the normal repertoire of political campaigners. The senior Karzai was then in his forties.

Kabul in those days was a clean, orderly, and fairly cosmopolitan city, with broad tree-lined avenues. It was a favorite posting for Western diplomats, who found themselves awed by the spectacular Hindu Kush mountains and enchanted by the rough-and-ready Afghans, whose culture and customs seemed to spring straight out of the days of Genghis Khan, especially in the villages beyond Kabul. Photographs from those days picture a capital enjoying a tranquility that was soon to be shattered, government officials wearing Western suits, and modern, well-appointed ministry buildings.

Kabul was also a destination for wanderers, adventurers, and hippies, who found Afghanistan's opium potent and affordable and the country's attitudes toward drugs laissez-faire. Afghanistan's poppies were well-known to the drug culture of Europe, but the era of wealthy and powerful drug lords, their heroin factories and worldwide export channels, was still a few years away.

While Afghanistan had a monarch and a parliament, much of the work of government was done at the provincial and village levels, and much of Afghanistan's political power was vested not in elected officials or even in the monarchy but in local khans. There was a government in Kabul, to be sure, but tradition ruled the countryside. Many things were done, many issues were settled in traditional Afghan ways that go back hundreds of years and for

which there is nothing written down. Karzai recalls how his father would settle local disputes on the strength of his role as tribal chief, not from any powers he derived from being an elected official.

"My father was often called upon to settle disputes," Karzai told me. These might be disputes over land, property, water, marriage, or any number of things. Depending on how major the issues are, they may be settled by a subchief or they may require a group of important chiefs. Testimony is heard from all the affected parties, a decision is made by the chief, and that's that. No paperwork is issued, no signatures are required, but the verdict sticks. Daily life in the Karzai household was full of such business.

Afghan homes have a guest room, where visitors can meet with the head of the house and his sons, drink tea, and munch on almonds or grapes or even take meals, while the rest of the family, especially the women, remain out of sight. Unless the visitor is a close relative, he will never see any part of the home but the guest room. The guest section of the Karzai house was entirely used for local politics—the settling of disputes, the granting of favors, the arrangement of marriages.

Sometimes the dispute was on a larger scale, involving too many people for the khan to receive the disputing parties in his guest room, so the elder Karzai and other chiefs would travel to a village to settle things. Karzai remembers one land dispute that required all the heavyweights of Kandahar to settle. Hamid accompanied his father to this event, in a village called Neesh, which is located between Kandahar and Oruzgan, probably as part of the education of a young man who might one day become chief of the tribe. For the village, this was a major event, and at least a hundred people from the area had gathered, some to give testimony and others just to gawk at the visiting chiefs and

wait for the outcome. Both sides of the dispute presented their arguments, and Karzai's father and the other chiefs listened carefully. Then the chiefs huddled by themselves and discussed the case. "When they had arrived at a decision," Karzai said, "they called the two sides together and told them, 'This is how it will be.' Both sides accepted the decision, and that settlement stands to this very day."

The power of Afghan tradition, on full display that day, sufficiently impressed the young Karzai that he remembers the occasion well even now. But he was given another reason to remember it. The Karzais were guests of the village's most prominent family, "a very spiritual family," Karzai recalled, who still reside in that village. The host family's status was enhanced by a stable of handsome horses. Afghans are legendary equestrians, and greatly prize their horses, which are bred for quickness, endurance, and courage.

All these traits are on display in buzkashi, the closest thing the Afghans have to a national sport; its greatest players are the northern tribesmen. Buzkashi—the literal translation of the word is "goat grabbing"—in its purest form is played without teams on the open plains. A goat or a calf is sacrificed, beheaded, and disemboweled, then the carcass is laid on the ground. The horsemen—and in the old, freeform days there might have been fifty or even a hundred—clenching their short, brutal, wood-handled whips in their teeth when not beating their own horse or someone else's, try to maneuver their mounts into position over the dead goat, producing a wild scrum of plunging, whinnying, biting horses. In the midst of the madness, a rider will reach down, hooking one leg around the saddle and the other under the horse's belly, grasp the seventy-five-pound carcass, lift it off the ground, and try to ride away with it, while other riders pursue and try to wrestle the carcass away. To

score a point, the horseman with the carcass must ride "free and clear" of all pursuers. Sometimes this scrimmage will culminate with two riders each holding a leg of the unfortunate goat as their horses race at full gallop over the plains. Such is the strength of the men that often a leg will be ripped from the carcass, leaving one rider victorious and the other holding a leg of goat. In more recent times, the contestants have been divided into teams and the matches confined to a soccer stadium. This is somewhat safer for spectators, who on the open plains often had to run for their lives as the seething herd bore down on them, but the freedom and individuality of the old game is lost.

The buzkashi was a formal, elaborately arranged event that took place over a number of days. A khan who felt he had the wealth and the power to stage one would plan for weeks. Invitations would be issued, food would be stored, sleeping quarters would be arranged, and the best players would be invited to participate. Should the khan be snubbed by an important invitee or a star horseman, or if he failed to provide adequate food and shelter for his guests, or if fighting broke out among rival clans, or if the prize money was insufficient, he would lose status and power.

This buzkashi mentality—do not attempt to use or display your authority unless you're sure you can pull it off, or risk losing what authority you possess—informs and influences the entire process of Afghan governance, and would influence Karzai himself after his rise to power. As president of a newly democratic Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai is acutely aware of the limits of his power and doesn't attempt what he knows he can't accomplish. This has been evident in his dealings with various warlords—some of whom he has succeeded in removing from their power bases—and with the country's drug production, which he knows he is powerless to halt at present.

Back at the village of Neesh, as Karzai and his father were taking tea with their hosts in the village, someone brought one of the family's horses around for them to admire. Young Hamid decided he wanted to ride this horse, although he had never ridden before. He got on the beast and managed to make it move, then rode it slowly a short distance away from the village. "So far, so good," he recalled with a wry smile. "But when I turned the horse's head back toward the village, he took off running at a full gallop, eager to get back to his home." This being his first time on a horse, Karzai didn't know how to stop him, and so he just hung on for dear life. The horse ran straight for his stable. As he went through the stable door, Karzai had the presence of mind to grab the crossbeam over the door. The horse ran right out from under him, and he hung there in the stable doorway and then dropped to the ground, unhurt. "That was scary," Karzai said. "Everyone rushed to see that I was all right, and one old man of the village said to me, 'Very good! You're a clever boy.'" Later, as the Karzais were leaving the village, a man came up to them leading a "beautiful little horse" and presented it to Hamid as a gift. "I named it Guli Badam, which means almond blossom, because of its light brown coat with small white spots that looked like the petals of the almond flower," Karzai said. He kept the horse for many years, and often thinks of that incident as an example of the Afghan character and tradition that he reveres. Despite his country's brutal history and the Afghans' reputation as fierce and unforgiving warriors, Karzai believes in the essential generosity and hospitality of his people.

Indeed, the code by which many Afghans, most famously the Pashtuns, live is comprised of the triad of honor, hospitality, and revenge. An Afghan is obliged to extend hospitality to all under his roof, even an enemy. But

any insult to honor must be avenged; there is simply no choice in the matter. Karzai's father and other chiefs, in rendering decisions and settling tribal matters, understood that the honor of each side in a dispute must emerge intact.

In Kandahar, the Karzais lived in a substantial house with a large garden. The family compound was large enough that Hamid could ride his horse inside the walls. The garden had fishponds, trees, and flowers, and he remembers there being many birds. His memories are of a comfortable life but a very disciplined one. The standards of behavior were quite rigid, but it was "an upbringing that has served me well in my life," Karzai said. "We learned to respect and obey not only our parents, but our elders in general. That's a very Afghan way of life and it's especially strong in the countryside."

After he became president, Karzai invited a provincial governor to meet with him in his office in the Arg, the presidential palace in Kabul, and the governor brought his little son with him. The boy was about two and a half years old. When the father and his son entered the presidential office, Karzai immediately picked up the boy in his arms and said hello, giving him a hug and a kiss. "But he had a job that he had been trained to do," Karzai said, "and this little boy didn't forget it even though I had thrown him off the track with my greeting." The boy had already learned from his family that he must kiss the hand of an elder as soon as he is introduced, and Karzai had not given him a chance to do this. But as soon as the president set the little fellow down, he said hello—*Salaam aleikum*—and took Karzai's hand and kissed it. "Then he felt that he had properly done his job," Karzai said. "That is how we were raised. In the traditional Afghan family, children are taught to be very respectful of elders."

The young Hamid Karzai was a quiet boy and gained a small circle of friends after the family moved to Kabul. "Two small circles, actually—one at school and one in my neighborhood," he said. Each of the friends had to be approved by the families before the boys could visit one another's homes. The boys' parents always knew where their children were and whom they were with. Even as teenagers the Karzai children had to ask for their parents' permission to go places, such as the cinema. "I didn't hang out with my siblings a lot because of age differences," Karzai said, "but sometimes we would gather up relatives—cousins and aunts and uncles—to go to the cinema." Hamid and his friends also liked to play soccer and to go bicycling around the town.

Some of Karzai's favorite memories are of family outings to Istalif, a small village about an hour's drive from Kabul that is famous for its potters and greenery and that attracts city families to this day for picnics or weekend getaways. Istalif was later badly damaged in the fighting in 2001, but in those times it was a green and pleasant resort village, like an oasis, with streams and pools, orchards and forests. Many of its families earn a living producing handmade pottery with distinctive green and blue glazes, which can be found in markets all over the country. Once a year one of Karzai's maternal uncles, who was head of the government printing house, would host a grand party in Istalif. "All the kids in the extended family would be there, all of my cousins, with their parents and grandparents, and we would stay for three or four days, running around, climbing trees, playing in the streams," Karzai said. "Those outings were the most fun times of my childhood."

As a child of privilege, the young Karzai was perhaps a bit too full of himself, and he remembers being taken

down a peg during one outing in Istalif. His uncle had brought an Afghan singer named Natou to perform. Natou was famous throughout Afghanistan for his singing of traditional songs. Hamid, who was "nine or ten at the time," sat down beside him and listened and watched. When Natou had finished singing a song, Karzai said, "Sir?" The old singer looked down at him and said, "Yes, my boy?" Hamid, thinking to show off his knowledge of Afghan music, asked him, "Can you sing a classical song?" He was referring to the ragas, like classical Indian ragas, which were also played in Afghanistan. "But that was like asking a country folk musician to play Beethoven," Karzai said, "and Natou got very angry with me. 'Get away from me!' he growled. 'What do you know about classical music?'"

Karzai remembers Kabul in that time as not only clean, safe, and "quite chic," but as the seat of a well-functioning government. After he had gone off to India to university—this was after the overthrow of the king—he returned to Kabul for his first winter vacation and was struck by how much more efficient and well-administered things were as soon as he traveled from Pakistan into Afghanistan. Crossing into Pakistan, all the passengers had to get off the bus and line up to go through passport control. But when the bus returned to Afghanistan, the passengers remained seated while a policeman came aboard to collect passports. The foreigners' passports were brought back to them on the bus, but Karzai was told that his Afghan passport would be kept there at the border and sent on to Kabul, where he would be able to collect it at the Foreign Ministry. "Sure enough, when I went to the ministry a week later my passport was there waiting for me," Karzai said. "I was proud that the Afghan administrative system was more efficient." And after traveling by bus through

India and Pakistan, Kabul looked to the young Karzai almost like a European city. Almost everyone wore Western clothing. Photographs from that time support his recollection. There were not many automobiles, but the city had a very good public transportation system, with electric and diesel buses going to all neighborhoods. The Kabulis were quite worldly, and Western influences were apparent. "You could hear the latest music being played—Tom Jones, Engelbert Humperdinck," Karzai said. He liked to frequent a music shop called the Afghan Music Center, which was owned by a family friend, where he would sit in a little cubicle with headphones on and listen to music before deciding whether to buy it. There were also many good restaurants.

The Afghan classrooms of Karzai's early education were places of learning and also of very strong discipline. The classroom played a very important role in shaping the youth of Afghanistan. "We greatly respect teachers," he said. "No matter how bad you might be outside of school with your friends, the moment you saw a teacher, and not just your own but any teacher, you would straighten up and behave yourself."

Hamid liked school "very, very much" at first. But that was before the coup that ousted Zahir Shah and ushered in Communism. In 1973, while the king was traveling in Italy, the former prime minister, Mohammed Daoud Khan, a cousin and brother-in-law of the king, seized power. As prime minister, Daoud Khan, though not a Communist, had been forging strong links with the Soviet Union and had received large quantities of military supplies, including modern weapons. In plotting a comeback, Daoud had also managed to play off the two Afghan Communist parties, the Parchams and the Khalqs, who had been agitating against the monarchy, and had many

allies in the military establishment as well. Daoud's coup was at first welcomed by the U.S.S.R., but he was essentially an Afghan patriot, well to the right of Communism, who believed in a strong one-party central government and centrally controlled economic development.

The Communists who had helped Daoud seize power enjoyed newfound status in the Kabul government, and their influence extended into Afghan schools, including Habibia High School, the largest and best of the city's secondary schools, where Hamid Karzai was enrolled. "We began getting some Communist teachers," Karzai said, "and they were after some people. I was not aware that a teacher could have a grudge against someone like me, but I remember a Communist biology teacher who had it in for me because he thought I lived a privileged life. He had crazy ideas and thought that in my house all we had to do was push a button and food would come out of the kitchen on a rail." One day the tenth-grader Hamid Karzai challenged the biology teacher's ideas about the evolution of man. "It was a subject I had done a lot of reading on, Darwinian theory and all that, and I realized that I knew more than this teacher knew," Karzai said. "When I challenged him he almost beat me. That was the only time I ever got into trouble at school."

The coup of 1973 changed a lot of things, including Karzai's family life. His father came under pressure because of his close association with the king, an association that a few years later would lead to his imprisonment in the notorious Pul-i-Charkhi prison, where over the years the Communists sent thousands of political prisoners, many to be tortured and killed.

When Karzai graduated from Habibia High School, he made the decision to study in India. The coup, and the introduction of Communist teachers, may have influenced

his choice, but his brothers were also a factor. Two of them were studying in the United States, and they urged Hamid to go where he could learn English. He had grown up speaking two languages, Pashto and Dari, which is also called Farsi, the Afghan variety of Persian. Both languages were spoken interchangeably in the Karzai home, which, Karzai says, illustrates a very important aspect of the Afghan character. Kabul, and other Afghan cities as well, was a melting pot, where people from all over the country came together. "And in the making of the educated Afghan character, both languages were spoken and both languages were equally Afghan—there was no distinction," Karzai said. "Nobody thought of Pashto as the language of only the Pashtuns and Farsi as the language of some other groups. No. They were the languages of Afghanistan. That's a very important point. We are bilingual but unicultural."

Karzai offered another example of Afghan's uniculturalism. "Recently a friend of mine from Zabul came to see me," he said. "His appearance—his chappan, his turban, his overall dress—and his manners and the way he spoke were not in the slightest any different from the appearance and manners and speech of another good friend from Badakshan. And those places are more than a thousand kilometers apart." And the further back you go in Afghan history, Karzai claims, the less difference you would see from place to place. Karzai's father, from Kandahar, wore a karakul hat. So did another khan, Mahanyar, from the Hazarajat, and other men from elsewhere in the country. "Same hats, same manners," Karzai said. "The best book on the Afghan loya jirgas was written by a man from the north, not from the south where the loya jirgas have taken place," he said. "We are all Afghans."

A lot of young Afghans were going to India to study at that time, and a maternal cousin of Karzai's had gone to Delhi to study medicine. (He is now a leading cancer specialist in the United States.) Karzai went to Delhi but quickly found that he could not tolerate the oppressive heat. After all, he had been living in Kabul, which sits at an altitude of around six thousand feet, and where even in the middle of summer the climate is agreeable. Delhi was simply too hot for him. His cousin suggested that he travel to Simla, in the hills, where there was a university, Himachal Pradesh University. Karzai remembers the train ride from Delhi to Simla as "almost magical. We left the heat of the city behind, and the train rolled through beautiful countryside as it climbed into the hill country. Blossoms from the trees beside the rails tumbled into the car as the train brushed up against the branches, and clouds seemed to pass right in one window and out another." Simla had been a major hill station, where the families of British officers and high-ranking administrators went in the summer to escape the heat of the cities. The British liked it so much they made it the summer capital of India. Karzai was enchanted. "I thought it was wonderful," he said. "The scenery was magnificent, with snowy mountaintops, and the climate was very much to my liking." He applied to the university, and although it would not recognize his diploma from Habibia High School, he was accepted, the first Afghan to enroll there.

The first several months at the university were very difficult for Karzai, as he was the lone Afghan, separated from his family and friends, and the classes were taught in English—a language he did not yet speak. "It was a much harder life than the one I had led in Kabul," he said. At first he stayed at a guesthouse, a palatial Georgian "cottage" in Summer Hill, in the western part of town, where

Mahatma Gandhi stayed during his many visits to Simla. Later the mansion became the guesthouse of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. "The place was lovely, but it offered no food or even tea, and it was more than an hour's walk from my college," Karzai said. "When I returned from my classes, I would walk into the hills to a hut where some construction workers took their meals, and I would eat there. The food was not very good and often had sand in it." After this humble supper Karzai would return to his room and study his textbooks.

He was forced to learn English as he went along. He also discovered that his Afghan education had not prepared him well for the lab exercises in the sciences. In terms of a general education, of science theory, and of world knowledge, he felt he was "miles ahead" of most of the Indian students. "We were tops in mathematics, in physics, in chemistry—all the formulas, the elements, we knew these by heart," he said. "We had also studied American history, the Napoleonic Wars, current affairs, and I knew far more about those things, and about the Amazon and the Mississippi, for example, than my Indian counterparts. But when it came to science lab practicals, they were massively ahead of me." Theories, the young Karzai understood perfectly. But the moment he entered a lab he was lost. He found the class in botany especially difficult in that first term. Those freshman difficulties in Simla led to something of a crusade in Karzai's later life; as president he has spoken many times at conferences of the need to correct the basics of the Afghan education, "so that there is a better balance of the general and the practical."

Karzai's first-term class in the English language was also difficult for him. Then one of his teachers—"a wonderful man"—saw that he was having difficulty and asked him what he was using for a dictionary. Karzai told him he was

using a Farsi-English dictionary. The professor shook his head and said, "No, don't use that one. You will never learn. Pick up an all-English dictionary." So Karzai went to a shop and purchased a large dictionary, published by Random House, for thirty rupees—about two dollars at the time. After his meals in the evening he would go to his room and pick up his books. When he came to a word he didn't know, he would go to the dictionary. "And in the dictionary definition there would be more words that I didn't know, and I would look them up as well," he said. So in an evening he would fill five or six pages of a notebook with words and their definitions in simple language. "I did this for two or three months, and it was very difficult," Karzai said. "But when I went down to Delhi to apply for an extension of my housing, the Afghan boys I knew there were surprised to hear me speaking English. I hadn't even noticed, but I had picked up English in two or three months."

When Karzai returned to Simla he stayed in a hotel run by a widow and her two daughters, one Karzai's age and the other a little older. The father had passed away. "It was a very good family, and my conversations there helped tremendously in my learning of English," he said. He also noticed differences between Indian and Afghan families. "The Afghan families tend to try to live beyond their means. They overconsume. Everything is taken to excess. They put too much food on the table, they spend money they don't have on clothes, and there is no saving mentality. That's a strange characteristic of Afghans."

The university continued to advance Karzai from one level to the next, but still they did not accept his Habibia diploma and would never tell him what grades he had earned. It was only when he finished his undergraduate studies and enrolled in the master's program that the uni-

versity finally recognized the high school diploma and told him what his grades had been for the past three years. Only then did he discover that he had failed his first-term English-language class but had passed everything else and been allowed to advance.

In 1978, Karzai went home to Kabul for another winter vacation, and while he was there Daoud Khan, the man who had overthrown the king and abolished the monarchy, was himself overthrown and killed in a bloody Communist coup. Karzai was at a friend's house near the Arg Palace when the shooting started and Daoud's opponents laid siege to the palace.

Since Daoud had overthrown the king, with the support of the Afghan Communist parties, he had moved gradually to the right and had purged most of the Communists from his government. He had also moved to wean Afghanistan away from its nearly total reliance on the U.S.S.R for economic and military support, turning south to India and west to Iran and the Arab countries. This trend caused considerable worry in Moscow, which had long viewed Afghanistan as a key to reinforcing Soviet influence in West Asia against the encroachments of China and as a stepping-stone to the Indian Ocean. The Soviets continued to cultivate clandestine relationships within the Afghan military, for use when the need arose. Daoud had also lost the support of part of his Pashtun base because of his softening stand on the hot-button issue of Pashtunistan, the ancestral lands of the Pashtuns that had been arbitrarily divided by the British in 1893 with the Durand Line. With the partition of India in 1948, what had been the Indian portion of Pashtunistan went to Pakistan. Daoud had earlier sided with those favoring a united Pashtunistan, which naturally angered the Pakistanis, but by 1978 he had backed away from his earlier stand and mended fences with Islamabad.

On April 27, 1978, with the backing of the Soviet Union, a tenuously united coalition of the Khalqi and Parchami parties attacked the palace, killing Daoud and most of his family. "Daoud Khan stood heroically against the Communists," said Karzai. "It is said that he was holding the Afghan flag as he faced them." The spot where he was killed is just inside the entrance to the Gulkhana, the stately honey-stone building where Hamid Karzai presides over the day-to-day business of his country. Karzai walks past the spot every day as he arrives, under heavy escort even within the palace walls, to begin the day's work. The physical traces of the assassination have long since vanished, but the mere knowledge of the event serves as a reminder to the president that very few Afghan leaders have left office alive.

The 1978 coup ushered in long years of misery for Afghanistan. The new Communist leaders brushed aside centuries of Afghan tradition and life. They attacked and oppressed everyone in the old order—the educated, the clergy, the tribal chiefs, the landed gentry. They moved violently against everyone whom they suspected of opposing them, as well as many they did not suspect. "Thousands and thousands of people were killed, and the Communists boasted about it!" Karzai said. "They put up lists on the walls of buildings with the names of people they had killed, twelve thousand people. They announced it! And that laid the foundation for the devastation of Afghanistan."