

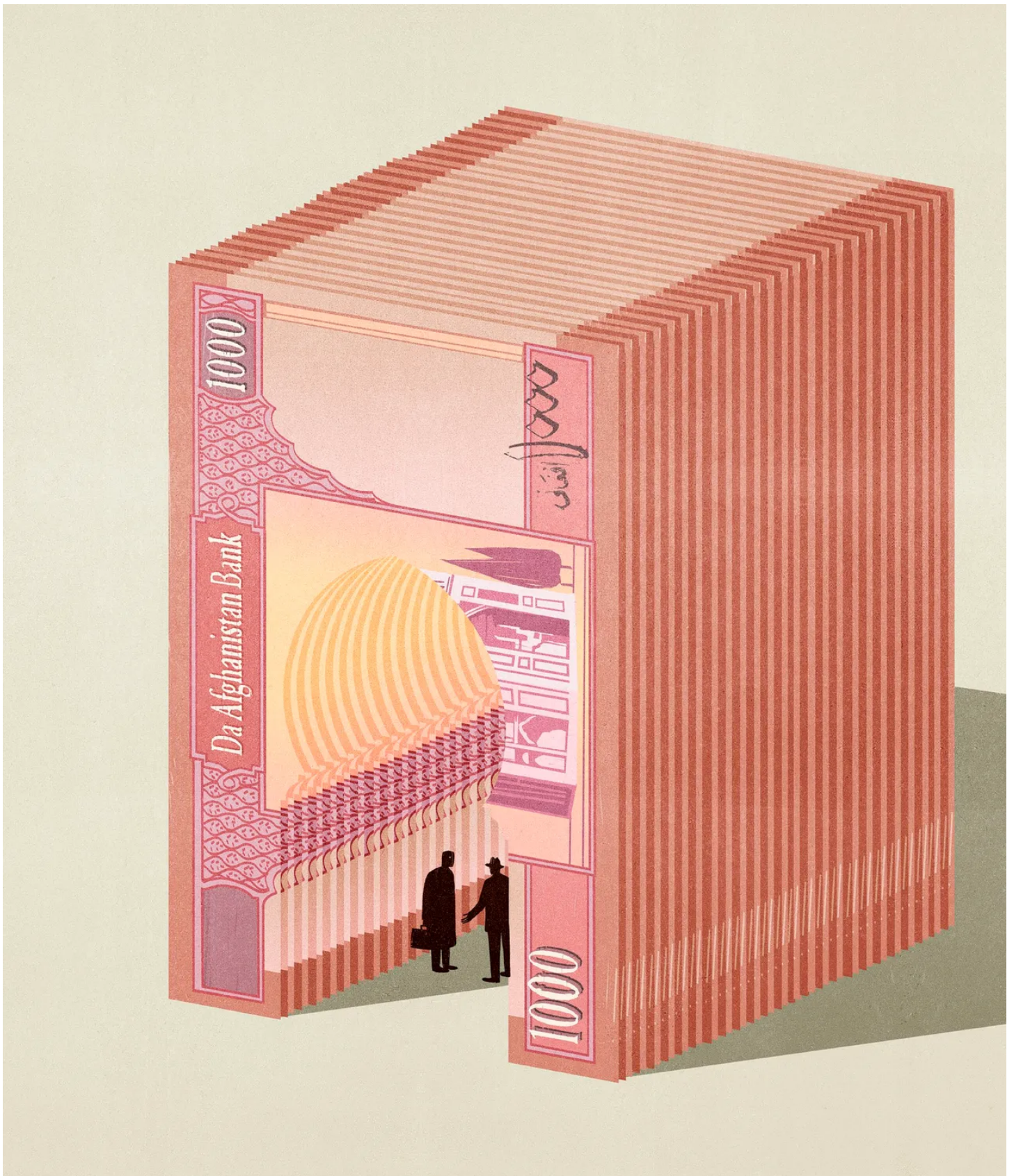
DEPT. OF DEVELOPMENT

# CORRUPTION AND REVOLT

*Does tolerating graft undermine national security?*

**By Patrick Radden Keefe**

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Much of the hundred billion dollars the U.S. spent to rebuild Afghanistan was stolen. Illustration by Shout

**I**n October, 1951, a band of thieves hijacked a large shipment of opium in the port town of Punggol, in northeast Singapore. The Singapore of that era bore little resemblance to the one we know today: as a key entrepôt in the

drug trade between India and China, the island was beset by crime and corruption. When British colonial authorities investigated the theft, they discovered that the culprits included several high-ranking members of Singapore's police. In the aftermath of the scandal, the colonial administration created the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau. When Singapore achieved independence, some years later, the new Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, announced that he was "sickened" by decadence and corruption, and pledged to rid Singapore of graft. Members of his government wore white shirts and trousers when they were sworn into office, as a signal of the purity of their intentions.

New leaders often condemn the venality of their predecessors, only to exceed it when they assume office. From Duvalier, in Haiti, to Fujimori, in Peru, to Erdoğan, in Turkey, it's a predictable twist in the drama of political transition. But Lee delivered on the rhetoric, enacting new anticorruption legislation and bestowing real power on the anticorruption bureau. He raised salaries for civil servants, to minimize any temptation to sell their influence, and instituted harsh jail terms for those caught taking bribes. In 1986, Lee's minister of national development, an architect named Teh Cheang Wan, was investigated for accepting kickbacks from two real-estate developers. He killed himself with a fatal dose of barbiturates, maintaining, in a suicide note addressed to Lee Kuan Yew, "It is only right that I should pay the highest penalty for my mistake."

By the time Lee stepped down as Prime Minister, in 1990, Singapore had gone from being one of the more corrupt countries on the planet to one of the least. According to Transparency International's most recent Corruption Perceptions Index, Singapore now ranks seventh in the world for transparent government—less corrupt than Australia, Iceland, or (by a good margin) the United States. The story is heartening but anomalous. It is almost unheard of for a nation to expunge a culture of corruption so thoroughly. Some countries



get slightly better, some get slightly worse, but, the world over, corruption tends to endure.

“Everybody does it,” John Noonan, a federal judge in California, wrote in his eight-hundred-and-thirty-nine-page volume, “Bribes: The Intellectual History of a Moral Idea” (1984): “Romans and Visigoths, Englishmen and Africans, Catholics and Jews, pagans and Protestants, capitalists and Communists, imperialists and patriots.” The word “corruption” derives from the Latin *corrumpere*, which can mean to bribe, but also to mar or destroy. Yet, on the available evidence, corruption has always permeated so many fields of human endeavor that it may be not a *corruption* of anything—but, rather, a regrettable feature of our natural condition. Accountable government is an ideal, to be sure. It may also be an aberration.

Definitions of corruption tend to focus on the conflict of interest that arises when private imperatives intrude upon the public sphere. Robert Klitgaard, an economist who has done field work on corruption in dozens of countries, once posited a formula: Corruption = Monopoly Power + Discretion - Accountability. In Klitgaard’s reckoning, corruption is a crime of calculation. If that’s the case, shouldn’t the problem be susceptible to rational solutions? Any country could simply take Singapore as a blueprint and tinker with the variables, as Lee Kuan Yew did, recalibrating the risk/reward ratio for officials who might feel inclined to betray their office. Scholars and activists who focus on corruption often describe the problem as one that might eventually be eradicated, like smallpox. Even Noonan concludes his sprawling chronicle of millennia of graft on an improbably hopeful note, arguing that, just as slavery was once widely accepted and is now reviled, bribery may one day “become obsolete.”

But corruption has outlived all predictions of its demise. Indeed, it appears to be thriving. According to the African Union, during the nineteen-nineties a quarter of Africa’s gross domestic product was siphoned off by graft. The United Nations estimates that corruption adds a ten-per-cent surcharge to

the cost of doing business in many parts of the world. Corruption infects every level of government, bedevils foreign development, enables terrorism, and fuels transnational crime. It is a recurring conundrum in business, in religious institutions, in education, in sports. Yet our conceptual vocabulary for understanding this pathology, let alone combatting it, remains conspicuously meagre. The very term “corruption” is so inclusive as to be almost meaningless, encompassing bribery, nepotism, bid-rigging, embezzlement, extortion, vote-buying, price-fixing, protection rackets, and a hundred other varieties of fraud.

Corruption creeps in, unnoticed, “like some odorless gas,” Sarah Chayes writes in her new book, “Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security,”\* and confounds policy objectives without attracting much policy attention. Chayes spent most of the past decade living in Afghanistan. Her book, which is part memoir and part treatise, argues that the United States has a tendency not just to ignore international corruption but to compound it, and that in places like Afghanistan this willful ignorance can be destabilizing and dangerous. Chayes tells the fascinating story of her own quixotic effort to launch a Singapore-style anti-corruption campaign in one of the most corrupt countries on earth.

Chayes arrived in Afghanistan, in 2001, as a correspondent for National Public Radio, covering the fall of the Taliban. She ended up in the arid and dusty southern city of Kandahar, which she once described as “like the moon, with goats on it.” She had not been in Afghanistan long before she decided to give up journalism and join a nonprofit called Afghans for Civil Society. Her remit was ambitious but diffuse: develop a sister-school program, establish a radio station, rebuild a village that had been destroyed by allied bombing. Afghans for Civil Society was established by Qayum Karzai, an exiled Afghan businessman who had been living in Baltimore before the U.S. invasion and happened to be the older brother of Hamid Karzai, the man coalition forces installed as Afghanistan’s interim President, in 2002.

“The classic error that outsiders make in Afghanistan is to single out a proxy,” Chayes writes. The predicament is familiar: the foreign interloper, whether a journalist, a general, or a colonial administrator, arrives ignorant of the local languages and customs, and needs someone who can serve as interpreter and guide. The foreigner often pays (or overpays) for this arrangement, with money or some other inducement, and thus a codependence between proxy and patron is born. A central theme of *Thieves of State* is the subtle power that these proxies can accumulate and the tendency for the unschooled yet profligate outsider to become hopelessly stymied by his man on the ground.

Because the soldiers and civilians who flooded into Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban did not know how to (or, in some cases, care to) engage with the local population except through their designated fixers, the fixers ended up controlling the aperture through which key members of the international community perceived the conflict. Chayes’s use of the word “proxy,” with its Cold War connotations, seems deliberate; the United States has a history of falling for strongmen in dicey locales and overlooking their sins in the interests of some larger strategic agenda. Mobutu was a hedge against the Communists. Mubarak was a hedge against regional war. The Saudis are a hedge against paying too much for gas. The culture of warlordism in Afghanistan that we know today took shape not in this recent conflict but in an earlier one—during the nineteen-eighties, when the United States paid local surrogates to fight the Soviets. As American military and intelligence operatives entered the country after September 11th, they sought out regional brokers, empowering a new generation of hard and unscrupulous partners.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

## **1 Kilo - 3 Euros: A Parcel Shop Bonds an Immigrant Community Together**

In an irony that Chayes dwells on perhaps too briefly, her own initial proxies in Afghanistan were all members of the Karzai coterie. Qayum Karzai had

ambitious plans for his country, and became something of a mentor to Chayes. Her fixer was a man named Abdullah, whom another Karzai brother—the shady power broker and reputed drug kingpin Ahmed Wali Karzai—had commended to her. In Chayes’s account of her gradual education in the politics of occupied Afghanistan and her belated revelation that the Karzais were a bunch of crooks, the creeping transition from naïveté to disillusionment is not so different from what the United States encountered, on a broader level. In a December, 2002, interview with the *Boston Globe*, Chayes said that Hamid Karzai, whom she had not yet met, reminded her of her father: “a dyed-in-the-wool political animal, and yet such a deeply good person that he instinctively believes good of everyone around him.” It was only later that she began to reconsider the Karzais. Qayum’s charity was incorporated in Delaware, yet he seemed curiously indifferent to bookkeeping. At a dinner in 2003, Chayes watched as Ahmed Wali took delivery of foil-wrapped bundles of cash.

Eventually, Chayes cut ties with the Karzais and set out on her own, establishing a soap factory in Kandahar, in 2005. Most Westerners who came to Afghanistan during this period tended to cycle in and out of the country, and to live in fortified residences, insulated from the general population. But Chayes effectively went native. She lived in a compound with a large Afghan family. She grew close to her colleagues and neighbors and became known around Kandahar as an oddity: a tall American woman who dressed like an Afghan man, spoke Pashto, and slept with a Kalashnikov propped beside her bed.

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*“Could you repeat that confirmation number?”*



At the factory, employees complained about the demoralizing toll of corruption. Reconstruction money was entering the country in torrents, but managed just as quickly to disappear. Infrastructure projects seemed never to be completed, while contractors, subcontractors, and cronies grew rich. It was no secret who the profiteers were: they would “thrust around town in slick S.U.V.s worth years of an ordinary farmer’s harvest.” A private security industry sprang up to meet the needs of the international community and morphed overnight into a lucrative protection racket. Every day, millions of dollars in cash were declared by couriers at Kabul International Airport, and then flown to the United Arab Emirates, where the new Afghan élite invested in real estate and Bentleys. According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the United States has, since 2002, spent a hundred and four billion dollars on rebuilding the country (nearly as much, in today’s dollars, as was spent on the Marshall Plan), a large but



untold fraction of which was skimmed away by middlemen before it could produce any tangible improvement for the Afghan people. “We know all this money is coming in,” a farmer outside Kandahar told Chayes, yet there was little the local population could do as it vanished. For the average Afghan, it was like watching a slow-motion heist in broad daylight.

A certain reliance on foreign largesse was not exactly new to the country. In “Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History” (2010), Thomas Barfield observes that payment to leaders by wealthy outside powers has been a regular feature of Afghanistan’s history since the nineteenth century, and, indeed, that the distribution of these spoils has often constituted “the main glue that held the Afghan state in one piece.” Any highly corrupt society is bound together by a series of interlocking reciprocities: the local policeman who shakes down a passing civilian must in turn pay tribute to his police supervisor, who must pay *his* supervisor, and so forth; favors or spoils may be distributed in the other direction. The durability of these relationships makes corruption difficult to eradicate, but it may also have the paradoxical virtue of drawing together an otherwise fractious society. In a 1968 essay, “Corruption Is Not Always Scandalous,” the political scientist James Q. Wilson suggested that a blinkered Puritanism prevents Americans from being able to make pragmatic distinctions between “harmful and not-so-harmful varieties of corruption” and from “allowing our moral outrage to be proportional to the problem.”

Some scholars have argued that corruption can be not just benign but useful in states that are undergoing political transition. Samuel Huntington, the political theorist, once suggested that some amount of corruption could be a “welcome lubricant,” easing the path to modernization, and that if economic growth is what you are after “the only thing worse than a society with a rigid, over-centralized, dishonest bureaucracy is one with a rigid, over-centralized, honest bureaucracy.” Economists often maintain that corruption is a bar to development, but many countries—most notably, China—have enjoyed

tremendous economic growth in spite of rampant graft. Some observers contend that China's economic boom would not have been possible if the leadership hadn't tolerated a symbiotic and often corrupt relationship between government and business interests. Beijing has now instituted an anti-corruption campaign that some worry may slow productivity. "In the past, with corruption, you could pay an official and get something done," a Chinese economist, Mao Yushi, recently said to the *Times*. "Now the officials won't accept money, but don't approve things, either."

Was the corruption that was flourishing in Afghanistan a necessary exigency at a precarious moment in its history? The economist Mancur Olson described the transition from anarchy to some nascent political order as one in which roving bandits become stationary bandits. The roving bandit will plunder what he can and move on, but at a certain point he realizes that he will be able to steal a lot more in the long run if he performs the minimal state functions necessary to increase economic production and institutionalize his theft—"in the form of taxes." Thus he is driven, purely by his own self-interest, to "settle down, wear a crown, and replace anarchy with government." This is what George Washington Plunkitt called "honest graft": a scenario in which there is no conflict of interests, at least in theory, because the selfish interests of the leader and the broader interests of the state are aligned.

But, as Chayes studied the graft of the Karzai government, she concluded that it was anything but benign. Many in the political élite were not merely stealing reconstruction money but expropriating farmland from other Afghans. Warlords could hoodwink U.S. special forces into dispatching their adversaries by feeding the Americans intelligence tips about supposed Taliban ties. Many of those who made money from the largesse of the international community enjoyed a sideline in the drug trade. Afghanistan is often described as a "failed state," but, in light of the outright thievery on display, Chayes began to reassess the problem. This wasn't a situation in which the Afghan government was earnestly trying, but failing, to serve its

people. The government was actually succeeding, albeit at “another objective altogether”—the enrichment of its own members. Washington supported Hamid Karzai and his ministers and adjutants in the hope that they could establish a stable government, help pursue Al Qaeda, and keep the Taliban at bay. But the Karzai government wasn’t a government at all, Chayes concluded. It was “a vertically integrated criminal organization.” The United States was treating Karzai like a stationary bandit, when he was really a roving bandit in disguise.

One explanation for why some countries are more corrupt than others and why so few have managed, like Singapore, to dramatically curtail corruption is that graft may be endemic in certain cultures. In “Economic Gangsters: Corruption, Violence, and the Poverty of Nations” (2008), the economists Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel describe an experiment in which they sought to determine whether corrupt behavior was governed more by cultural background or by the relative severity or permissiveness of the law. In order to test the question, they examined five years of unpaid parking tickets in New York City that were associated with cars driven by foreign diplomats who worked at the United Nations. Lee Kuan Yew believed that if you introduced tough penalties for corruption you could curb behavior. Fisman and Miguel sought to test the opposite hypothesis: who, in the absence of any legal penalty—the diplomats enjoyed immunity and would never be punished for failure to pay parking tickets—would pay, rather than abuse this prerogative? They discovered that diplomats from some countries had no unpaid parking tickets, whereas diplomats from other countries had many. In a single year, one fellow accumulated five hundred and twenty-six unpaid tickets. (He was from Kuwait.) Using a corruption index from the World Bank, the economists correlated these results with levels of corruption in the relevant nations. Diplomats from countries where corruption tends to be high were very likely to generate unpaid parking tickets; those from countries where corruption was low tended, if they racked up tickets at all, to pay them. The Norwegians, needless to say, were without blemish.

Even so, there could be explanations for this data that aren't neatly determinist. If you take a Norwegian out of Norway, her respect for the law may tell you less about some deep, immutable cultural DNA than about a series of civic reflexes that she has been taught as a citizen of Norway. "The Confucian theory was man could be improved, but I'm not sure he can be," Lee Kuan Yew once told an interviewer. "He can be trained, he can be disciplined." The example of Singapore would seem to indicate that, if you change the laws, you can eventually change people's outlook, too.

Noonan notes, in his history of bribery, that while some amount of corrupt behavior may be a constant feature across cultures and across historical epochs, a certain moral revulsion toward corruption is just as common: even in nations where bribery is part of daily life it tends to be publicly frowned upon, and is almost always at least technically illegal. Noonan likens corrupt behavior to another human practice that is no less widespread for all the moral and religious opprobrium—sex. To the jaded expats of Kabul, an easy cultural essentialism suggested that Afghans simply like corruption, that it is the way they have always done things. But in her workshop Chayes heard something different. In the face of flagrant misappropriation, she found, ordinary citizens could experience a sense of grievance so potent that it filled them with something worse than anger—a desire for revenge. Nurallah, an employee at the factory who once worked as a police officer, told her about the humiliation that his brother experienced during a shakedown by Afghan police. "If I see someone plant an I.E.D. on the road, and then I see a police truck coming . . . I will not warn them," Nurallah said. This is the central revelation in *"Thieves of State"*: at a certain point, systemic corruption became not just a lamentable by-product of the war but an accelerant of conflict. All those bribes and kickbacks radicalized the local population, turning it against the Afghan government and, at least some of the time, toward the Taliban.

Chayes cites a survey conducted by U.S. military commanders in Kabul, in which captured Taliban prisoners were asked why they joined the insurgency.



The leading reason, according to Chayes, “was not ethnic bias, or disrespect of Islam, or concern that U.S. forces might stay in their country.” It was “the perception that the Afghan government was irrevocably corrupt.” There is by now an extensive literature on the revival of the Taliban after the invasion of 2001, and Chayes may be somewhat reductive in her handling of the evidence here, in order to support her thesis. But in another recent book, “No Good Men Among the Living,” a searing account by Anand Gopal of the unintended consequences of the invasion, one of the central figures is Akbar Gul, a Taliban commander who gave up the insurgency and returned to civilian life, only to grow demoralized by the outlandishly predatory corruption of the Afghan national police—and reënlist.

The notion that U.S. support for despotic, disreputable regimes ends up fuelling radicalism is by now a familiar argument. But, by applying the logic of “blowback” to the issue of graft in Afghanistan, Chayes develops a muscular new vocabulary for talking about the problem of corruption. Good governance is often construed as an essentially humanitarian preoccupation, a civil-society concern that is forever trumped by more pressing strategic obligations. But Chayes became convinced that in Afghanistan kleptocratic rule was actually “manufacturing Taliban,” providing fodder for the expanding insurgency. In unstable and potentially explosive places like Afghanistan, she argues, the dilemma of corruption is not, as it might appear, one in which American values and interests are in tension. Even a hard-nosed realist should regard corruption as a dire concern, she maintains, because it is not merely a matter of the rule of law and democratic principles—it is “a matter of national security.” This is the real intellectual innovation of Chayes’s book: she takes what has always been the losing position in policy debates and imbues it with a new rhetorical power.

When Barack Obama was elected President in 2008, Chayes saw an opportunity to make her case for a reconsideration of the importance of Afghan corruption, and travelled to Washington. Her revelation about the threat that venality poses to national security had provided her with a mode of argument that might prove persuasive with a critical audience—the military. Rather than speak in the soft rhetoric of social justice or development, she fashioned an argument around narrow self-interest: “Corruption, in army speak, was a force multiplier for the enemy.” Chayes is, by her own admission, a “strident” campaigner, and eventually she found herself in the E-ring of the Pentagon, having secured an audience with Mike Mullen, the genial, bookish admiral who had recently become chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As Chayes made her case that coalition forces should recalibrate their priorities in Afghanistan, Mullen opened a spiral notebook and took notes. At the end of the meeting, he inquired, with concern, about her personal safety. Asked a similar question by a PBS reporter in 2003, Chayes had replied that she enjoyed “powerful backing,” adding, “I am connected with the Karzais.” Now she told Mullen that, if he should see President Karzai anytime soon, he might “let it slip” that he and Chayes were friends. “That will reduce the threat to me,” she said.

Mullen took Chayes on as an adviser. The United States was in the process of shifting its military strategy in Afghanistan to focus on counterinsurgency, one element of which was an effort to promote good governance so as not to further alienate the Afghan population. As the Arab Spring began, Chayes travelled to Tunisia, Egypt, and other regional hot spots, taking inventory of the popular antipathy toward kleptocratic regimes and the ways in which it could spark revolt. She returned convinced that a link between kleptocracy and violent religious extremism was “a global phenomenon.” Here Chayes may be overreaching. What are we to make of all those corrupt African

despots whose greed prompted no religious extremism? Or of Russia, for that matter, where vast wealth has been expropriated by a handful of oligarchs and bureaucrats without stirring widespread disaffection? Still, it's hard to dispute her general point—that a state engaged in predatory corruption is gambling with its own political legitimacy and runs the risk of breeding insurrection.

But, now that Chayes could get people to care about corruption, there remained the question of what they could do about it. If you want to turn Afghanistan into Singapore, where do you start? With her access to military decision-makers in Kabul, Chayes suggested a series of practical reforms: Washington could be more discriminating about its partnerships in Afghanistan; local officials and power brokers who were known to be corrupt should be isolated; and U.S. officials should work with Afghan prosecutors to pursue criminal charges against those who were especially shady. Military commanders like Stanley McCrystal and David Petraeus appeared receptive, at least in theory, to Chayes's thesis. But any time she proposed measures that might antagonize President Karzai and his circle she encountered resistance; the perception among American officials in Kabul, both military and civilian, was that these were partners in the fight against the Taliban, and the United States could not afford to alienate them. "If you want intelligence in a war zone, you're not going to get it from Mother Teresa or Mary Poppins," one U.S. official told the *Times*, in 2010.

Even so, with American assistance, Afghan prosecutors prepared a test case against a Karzai aide named Muhammed Zia Salehi, who had been captured on a wiretap soliciting a bribe. As soon as he was arrested, Salehi telephoned Karzai, and was promptly released; the prosecutor who indicted him was investigated and later fired. When Chayes tried to generate a blacklist of especially nefarious Afghans, her efforts were blocked, because, she implies, the Central Intelligence Agency appeared to be making payments to multiple people on the list. The *Times* revealed in 2013 that the agency had been delivering clandestine bags of cash directly to the offices of President Karzai, and the paymaster in this operation turned out to be none other than Salehi.

(Little wonder the President released him so quickly.) When Chayes watched Ahmed Wali Karzai take those packages of money back in 2003, the people handing him the money were American spies.

Singapore's corruption investigators were free to pursue even high-level officials without fear of reprisal. But if the United States was going to make any effort to reform Afghanistan's political culture, it would do so only from the neck down. In practice, though, even investigations of relatively minor players produced fierce reactions from more senior Afghan officials. In the hierarchy of corruption, those senior officials secured the loyalty of junior functionaries by allowing them to shake down their own subordinates—and to steal from the local populace—with impunity. “How well the regime defended even its lowliest officials would broadcast a message throughout the system about the strength of the protection guarantee,” Chayes writes. The effort to prosecute malefactors foundered. One U.S. official who worked alongside Afghan investigators expressed his frustration: “We can’t find a fish little enough to go after.” Following some inconclusive discussion at the White House about tackling Afghan corruption, the question was quietly set aside in 2011.

If “*Thieves of State*” is a chronicle of Sarah Chayes’s ultimate failure to launch an ambitious anticorruption campaign in Afghanistan, one does wonder what such a campaign would have looked like. It might be tempting to extrapolate lessons from a country like Singapore, but Singapore is a tricky analogy for Afghanistan. With just over five million people in a territory of less than three hundred square miles, Singapore is tiny, centrally controlled, peaceful—and rich. And it is not just corruption that has been abolished on the little island but a variety of lesser human infractions, from spitting on the sidewalk to failing to flush a public toilet: the population is subject to an authoritarian penal code. Most important, perhaps, Singapore had, in Lee Kuan Yew, a leader who was truly invested in the anticorruption agenda. When Singapore was ruled by the British—or, during the Second World War, occupied by the



Japanese—corruption prevailed. Only when the outsiders departed did it really get cleaned up. As a general rule, occupying powers tend to push countries into corruption, not pull them out of it. Although Chayes's book does not dwell on Iraq, America's relationship with Nuri al-Maliki has striking similarities to its relationship with the Karzai government. In both instances, Washington sheltered and fattened its proxies until, eventually, they turned into monsters.

It seems unlikely that any outside force can introduce enough carrots and sticks to persuade a country to reform its political system. When Romania was campaigning for admission to the European Union, in 2003, it launched an anticorruption drive, and appointed a tough justice minister who spurred a series of corruption cases against senior officials. As soon as Romania joined the E.U., in 2007, the campaign fizzled, the justice minister was fired, and the cases were dropped. "A fish rots from the head," Chayes observes, and, in the absence of national leaders with integrity and political will, it doesn't appear that the United States will be able to reverse the pathologies in Afghanistan, Iraq, or any other country, notwithstanding Washington's share in creating and sustaining some of those pathologies. Indeed, we may struggle to differentiate between the kinds of patronage that might assuage a population—the "glue" that Thomas Barfield describes—and the state-sanctioned larceny that Chayes argues, convincingly, is a threat not just to Afghanistan's national security but to that of the United States.

Perhaps the soundest course for U.S. foreign policy when it comes to international corruption would be to adopt a Hippocratic precept: significant reform must come from within, but, at a minimum, the United States should do everything it can to insure that it does not exacerbate the problem. This is no small step, given that the money of many a kleptocrat finds its way into the U.S. financial system (and high-end real-estate market), and that the front companies that foreign officials use to hide stolen assets are often registered in this country. American banks reliably accommodate financial shell games, and when these banks are caught facilitating offshore criminality

the U.S. Justice Department tends to let them off with a fine and a warning, rather than file criminal charges. But then that is a reflection of the soft, civilized form that corruption frequently takes in America. We can lecture the Afghans about the evils of kickbacks and patronage networks, but what would an Afghan make of a euphemism like “campaign finance,” or of the fact that next year our Presidential election may come down to the wife of one former President and the son of another? Even upright Singapore, in 2004, elected, as its third Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew’s son, Lee Hsien Loong. Corruption endures, legal and otherwise. In September, the former World Bank official and good-governance expert Ashraf Ghani was sworn in as the new President of Afghanistan, amid widespread allegations of vote-tampering. He has promised to tackle corruption. ♦

\*Clarification: An earlier version of this article misstated the title of Sarah Chayes’s book. It is “Thieves of State.”