

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

### **Kabul Vendors of Stolen U.S. Goods Fret About Future**

Source: Richard Leiby, WashingtonPost.com, February 16, 2013

KABUL — If a case of soap is pilfered from a U.S. military base here or pinched from a NATO shipping container, it will probably, sooner or later, end up for sale in the Bush Market, a sort of thieves' outlet mall in central Kabul.

Named after George W. Bush, the U.S. president who launched the war in Afghanistan, the bazaar has flourished for more than eight years, thanks to the long presence of foreign troops that provided war booty aplenty. But in the Obama era, with its steady withdrawal of U.S. forces, the good times are ending in the sprawling hive of vendors who hawk mountains of Pop-Tarts and enough Head and Shoulders shampoo to combat the dandruff of untold army divisions.

In a way, the market serves as a microeconomic barometer of the concerns of Afghans across class lines when 2014 ends — and with it, the U.S.-led coalition's combat mission. President Obama's announcement in his State of the Union address Tuesday of the accelerated pullout of 34,000 troops in the coming year has only heightened many merchants' worries about what happens after Western forces finally step on their air hose of cash and material support.

"My business once was good," lamented a shop owner named Sabor, standing next to a shelf packed with Stridex acne pads and Just for Men hair dye. "But it has become a depression."

Several vendors said sales have already fallen by 50 percent since last year as the "surge" troops that began arriving in 2009 have departed. The amount of military goods available to be pilfered has dropped, they said, and prices have gone up. Also, fewer foreign development workers come to shop for familiar Western brands.

"If Obama had announced, 'I don't want to withdraw the soldiers,' business would grow," said Sabor, 47, who goes by one name and is among the Afghans who oppose a pullout, despite President Hamid Karzai's fervid argument — repeated this week — that it is long overdue.

Sabor credited the 11-year U.S. presence with bringing his war-ravaged country increased security, opportunities for girls and women and a functional government.

"Some people say that Americans should leave this country, but it is a loss for us," he said.

Others in the bazaar, like 20-year-old Samiullah, clad in a T-shirt sporting a fake U.S. Army logo, said they trust their fates to a power higher than the American greenback.

"God is kind, and if Obama doesn't give us bread, God will give us bread," he said.

### **Five-Finger Discounts**

A warren of some 600 shops and stalls, Bush Market also exemplifies in miniature the massive corruption that has flourished with the flow of hundreds of billions of dollars in military and development aid to Afghanistan, where skimming Yankee dollars is common from the very top social rungs on down.

Most shopkeepers expressed ignorance about the origin of their goods. But as one longtime merchant explained, Afghans who get military-base jobs are ingenious when it comes to obtaining five-finger discounts on bulk items.

Trash trucks leave U.S. installations with crates of supplies concealed under tarps, said the merchant, who declined to be identified.

"My neighbor got very rich doing this," he noted.

The market is rarely subject to raids by Afghan authorities, unless U.S. forces suspect that something sensitive has ended up there. Vendors said the last time they remember seeing U.S. troops accompanying Afghan security forces was about two years ago.

The U.S. military did not respond to a request for comment about the market's inventory. But the problem of looted on-base goods, as well as diverted shipments, has not escaped official notice.

Last May, Army Maj. Gen. Richard Longo, who directed the U.S. forces' anti-corruption task force here, visited the market on the invitation of the Stars and Stripes, the independent military newspaper.

"I'm certainly not going to deny that pilferage is going on," he told the paper, observing that merchants bagged customer purchases in plastic sacks made for the U.S. Army and Air Force Exchange Service.

Many of the stalls stock military-style goods, but Chinese-made knockoffs of official watches, boots, T-shirts and backpacks seem to outnumber the genuine articles. There are rows of knives and brass knuckles of the sort you'd find in a U.S. military-surplus store.

The market has a historical antecedent: Kabul residents recall the "Brezhnev Market" of the Soviet occupation era, where black-market and discarded military materiel — including weapons — were sold and traded.

### **"30 Million Thieves"**

A visitor to the Bush Market this week found on offer the U.S. military rations known as Meals Ready to Eat, or MREs, stamped with warnings that resale is illegal. But no matter: Nearby, men unloaded boxes of Clif energy bars still bearing labels identifying them as meant for delivery to base exchanges.

"People bring supplies, we don't know from where," said Sahli Mohammad, 59, whose shop featured an ample stock of the bars, which cost \$1 retail in the United States and about 40 cents here.

"Afghanistan has 30 million thieves," said Mohammad with a wry smile, referencing one estimate of his country's population, "and 200,000 international outsiders who are also corrupt."

In this muddy and cold capital, where towering blast barriers and sandbagged sentry posts are punctuated by open-air butcher shops arrayed with grisly, dangling carcasses, stores in the Bush Market provide a Sam's Club kind of relief for American eyes, a weird oasis of trademarked plenty.

But the variety seems to depend on what fell off the truck that week: An army of miniature bottles of Frank's RedHot sauce, mounds of 43-ounce pouches of StarKist tuna, towers of Myoplex protein drinks, a forlorn complement of Borden EggNog.

They may be stolen, but that doesn't mean everything is a bargain. A pack of Wrigley's 5 gum fetches \$2, more than in the States.

Merchant and weightlifter Rahmatullah Khan, 21, was proud to note that his store's stock of MET-Rx, a bodybuilding supplement favored by soldiers, came directly from the Bagram Air Field and other military installations throughout Afghanistan.

His shop was dim — Kabul had been hit with yet another electrical blackout — which suited Khan's assessment of the future.

"We're Afghans, we want to keep our country for ourselves," he said. "But nowadays we don't have jobs, we don't have money. What will we do when the Americans leave?"

It was a question for which he had no answer.

### **Possible Response Topics:**

- Explain the connection between Obama's State of the Union Address and the concerns of the vendors of the Bush Market.
- What does it mean that the "market serves as a microeconomic barometer"?
- What do you think of Mohammad's comment that "Afghanistan has 30 million thieves"?
- Who do you think is responsible for addressing the concerns of the Bush Market when US leaves?