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Poetry of the Taliban (Columbia/Hurst)

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Overlooked by many as mere propaganda, the poetry of the Afghan Taliban offers unparalleled insight into the organization's wider worldview. These two hundred poems, bound together in this collection, draw upon both Afghan tradition and the nation's recent past, and seamlessly connect with the long history of Persian, Urdu, and Pashto verse. The contrast between the severity of the Taliban's ideology and its long-standing poetic tradition is nothing short of remarkable. Unrequited love, vengeance, the thrill of battle, religion, and nationalism -- even a yearning for nonviolence -- are expressed through images of wine, powerful women, and pastoral beauty, providing a fascinating perspective on the hearts and minds of Western civilization's redoubtable adversaries.

Whether they are describing a wedding party annihilated by an air strike or lamenting, "we did all of this to ourselves," these poems are concerned not with politics but with identity and a full, textured, and deeply conflicted humanity. Such impassioned works -- defeated, enraged, triumphant, bitterly powerless, and bitingly satirical -- ultimately endure as a record of the war in Afghanistan. Two introductory essays contextualize the anthology's poems, relating their significance to Pashtun history and their reflection of a culture inundated by thirty years of war. Faisal Devji, noted Taliban scholar, underscores the link between these poems and the Taliban's emotional and ethical character in a preface.

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