BLOOD AND GIFTS
by J.T. Rogers
directed by Bartlett Sher
LINCOLN CENTER THEATER

TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE
LINCOLN CENTER THEATER
AT THE MITZI E. NEWHOUSE

under the direction of
André Bishop and Bernard Gersten
presents

BLOOD AND GIFTS

A New Play by J. T. Rogers

with (in alphabetical order)
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Welcome to the Teacher Resource Guide for *Blood and Gifts*, a play written by J.T. Rogers and directed by Bartlett Sher that you and your students will see at Lincoln Center Theater (LCT). The play is a political thriller set amid the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan from 1981 to 1991. With a deft ear for language and an eye for detail, playwright J.T. Rogers has wrought a dramatic world where politics and culture intersect. The urgency of this spy tale will stimulate students’ minds and imaginations as the vibrant characters enliven a set of complicated issues and make them immediate. In LCT’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater, students will be close to the action and to the questions the play raises.

The United States has been enmeshed in Afghanistan for decades at great cost. Students may know the current war began as part of a U.S. response to the September 11th terrorist attacks. But, most students will be unfamiliar with America’s actions in Afghanistan before 2001. The events in *Blood and Gifts*, which take place a generation ago, happened before the rise of the Taliban and the formation of Al Qaeda by Osama Bin Laden.
In 1981, when the play opens, communism not terrorism loomed as our nation’s primary enemy, and the Cold War consumed U.S. foreign policy. The world could not have imagined that the Soviet Union would disintegrate nor that Islamic fundamentalism would become a political force. Thirty years ago, no one predicted that 2011 would mark a decade of war for the U.S. in Afghanistan.

*Blood and Gifts* is a lens into our nation’s recent history and it challenges us to consider how past actions have shaped our current situation. The play looks at the personal dynamics of political alliances and the logistics of weapons and money in guerilla warfare. Questions of responsibility and morality emerge. The play may propel a study of Afghanistan’s history, politics and culture and a careful examination of U.S. foreign policy then and now. In *Blood and Gifts*, students will experience an excellent piece of new American theater full of humor and intrigue and have a chance to engage in a reflective and critical conversation about America.

This guide is designed to help you prepare your students to see the production and to extend the play’s learning opportunities into your classroom. The guide features information about the play and its historical and cultural context. Included are classroom activities and discussion questions for before and after the performance that address the New York City Department of Education’s Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in Theater. There are also links to online resources for additional study.

We are excited for you and your students to see the U.S. premiere of *Blood and Gifts* and we hope you enjoy the resource guide and the performance.
SECTION 1: THE PLAY

The Playwright: J.T. Rogers

J.T. Rogers is an American playwright whose work includes *Blood and Gifts*, *The Overwhelming*, *Madagascar*, *White People* and other plays that have been staged throughout the United States and in England, Germany, Canada, and Israel. Among his awards are the Pinter Review Prize for Drama, the American Theatre Critics Association’s Osborne Award, and the William Inge Center for the Arts’ New Voices Award. He is a member of New Dramatists and the Dramatists Guild and holds an honorary doctorate from the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.

“...The wonderful thing about being a playwright is that each production of one of your works changes it, making it new again—often in ways you would never have foreseen. This metamorphosis can be deeply satisfying—in essence, showing you, that you the author become superfluous; it’s the play that goes on to have an ever changing life.”

J.T. Rogers

Background on Blood and Gifts

*Blood and Gifts* was first commissioned as a twenty minute play by the Tricycle Theatre Company in London for their 12-play cycle, *The Great Game: Afghanistan* in 2009. The cycle explored the history of Afghanistan and was nominated for the prestigious Olivier Award. Lincoln Center Theater commissioned Mr. Rogers to write a full-length version of *Blood and Gifts* which was first produced at the National Theatre in London in 2010 directed by Howard Davies. Follow this link to
read more about the London production of the play and view a video interview with the playwright:  
http://tiny.cc/NTBG. Follow this link to download the Background Pack for *Blood and Gifts* which includes interviews with both the playwright and British director Howard Davies:  http://tiny.cc/BGpack.

The Lincoln Center Theater production marks the play's American premiere. Follow this link to LCT's blog for *Blood and Gifts* and read “J.T. Rogers Unwraps *Blood and Gifts*,” an interview with the playwright by LCT blogger Brendan Lemon http://tiny.cc/ztxd0. For Mr. Rogers, witnessing his play interpreted by two different directors emphasizes the creative possibilities of theater.

The Playwriting Process

J.T. Rogers' plays often cross international borders and explore multiple and complex viewpoints. Before he begins to write a play, he undertakes intensive research. For *Blood and Gifts*, he dove into texts such as *Ghost Wars*, a book about the Soviet Afghan war by Steve Kohl, an American journalist and writer. Once he has built a strong base of knowledge, Mr. Rogers seeks out people who have first-hand experience with the subject of his play including experts in the field. His long conversations with these individuals help him to create authentic depictions of character, time and place. Once he is ready to write, he embarks on the solo process of drafting the script which he freely admits is unavoidably arduous:

“Writing is like everything else: to do it well requires practice, practice, practice. Nothing good comes without spending your own blood, sweat, and tears. The skill you learn over time is how to hide the effort that went into the work...but the actual making is never easy.” J.T. ROGERS

Mr. Rogers aims to use language precisely, so hearing the script is important to getting it right, and he often reads the words aloud as he develops the characters and dialogue. He works through several stages of revisions before arriving at his script for performance. In rehearsal, Mr. Rogers collaborates with the director, rewriting as needed. Because of his extensive background knowledge, he becomes an invaluable resource to the cast and production team. To learn more about the playwright, read the Lincoln Center Theater Review’s issue for *Blood and Gifts* that features an interview with J.T. Rogers by John Guare:  http://tiny.cc/rcp3r
The Director: Bartlett Sher

Bartlett Sher is a leading American director whose acclaimed work has included plays and musicals for LCT where he is currently a Resident Director. He directed LCT’s revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* for which he won the 2008 Tony Award. He was nominated for Tony Awards for best direction in 2005 for Craig Lucas and Adam Guettel’s *The Light in the Piazza*, in 2006 for Clifford Odets’ *Awake and Sing!* and in 2009 for August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, all produced by LCT. He has staged theater and opera productions across America and abroad. For ten years, he was the Artistic Director of Seattle’s Intiman Theatre.

On Approaching Blood and Gifts

Mr. Sher’s vision for *Blood and Gifts* was to create a piece of theater that engaged the audience in a dialogue. Mr. Sher explained, “What is wonderful about theater in general and working in the Mitzi E. Newhouse in particular is that it gives us an opportunity to experience the argument of the play as a community. The audience surrounds the thrust stage in the Newhouse and can see one another, so they will be aware that they are watching a part of our history together.”

The story of *Blood and Gifts* is epic because it chronicles a decade of war in a distant land. Mr. Sher aimed to portray the time, place and emotion of the story not by relying on elaborate sets and costumes but rather by focusing on the actors. As a result, the set and costumes transmit an idea of time and place, but the actors’ words and actions convey the meanings of the play. When not in a scene, the actors watch the dramatic action from the sides of the stage visible to the audience and witnessing the story along with them. Transitions between scenes are fluid and originate from within a scene rather than as distinct breaks. Mr. Sher aimed to make the audience conscious throughout the performance that they are reflecting on the past.

He believes American audiences will welcome the play’s historical and political relevance. He pointed out, “Audiences come to the Newhouse expecting to see theater that will engage them in ideas.” Mr. Sher’s approach to his work reflects an ideal that theater in its best incarnation allows audiences to reflect on their lives as individuals and as a society.

A former high school teacher, Mr. Sher sees the play’s subject matter as crucial for young people to encounter regardless of the depth of their knowledge before seeing the play. Whether or not Afghanistan is part of students’ daily lives, the situation will continue to impact the United States and as a result to impact them. Mr. Sher explains, “Theater lets us learn about and see life in different ways, and it can inspire us to want to know more.”
The Directing Process

As a director, Mr. Sher sees carefully casting the roles with the right actors as central to the success of a production. In a 2008 interview on The Charlie Rose Show, Mr. Sher explained, “Casting is 90% of the work, and if you get it right you have the chance to get deeper and deeper into the story.” As he shapes a production, he focuses on finding the rhythm in a text and translating it to the performance. He is passionate about the entire rehearsal process and works tirelessly with actors and designers to tell a clear theatrical story. He has developed his craft as a director over thirty years and is the first to remind himself and others that it takes a long time and great effort to reach the highest level of artistic expression.

Synopsis

It is 1981 and for two years, Soviet armies have occupied Afghanistan in an attempt to stabilize the new communist government. Afghan resistance fighters, the mujahideen, hold back the invasion with guerilla warfare. United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent Jim Warnock arrives in Pakistan under the guise of working at the American embassy. His real mission is to covertly supply weapons to the mujahideen to defeat the Soviets as part of the ongoing Cold War. He meets his ally, British secret agent Simon Craig and his enemy, Soviet secret agent Dimitri Gromov. Forbidden from entering Afghanistan, Warnock must negotiate with the intelligence agency in neighboring Pakistan as his intermediary. The Pakistani agent Colonel Afridi ultimately controls the weapons and sends them to a notorious warlord. Warnock meets secretly with Abdullah Khan, a sympathetic Afghan tribal chief who he supplies with guns and money. The mission stretches over years. Warnock sacrifices everything, including the truth, for what he believes is a greater good. He brings Khan to Washington D.C. to lobby for continued funding. Khan demands top secret Stinger missiles to crush the Soviets but Warnock’s superiors hesitate to escalate the conflict. At last, the Soviets withdraw but not before a final showdown in Pakistan that finds Warnock supplying the most militant and dangerous mujahideen. The Soviets are defeated but the nation spirals into civil war. Warnock glimpses the future as the U.S. weapons are sold to Iran and the Afghans turn toward Islamic extremism as a means to regain control of their fractured country. For a scene by scene plot summary, see pages 3 and 4 of the National Theater’s Background Pack for Blood and Gifts: [http://tiny.cc/BGpack](http://tiny.cc/BGpack).
Main Characters

The play is based on actual events but the characters who appear are fictional.

**JAMES “JIM” WARNOCK** is the American CIA agent and main character whose mission is to arm the mujahideen and defeat the Soviet invasion. Deeply committed to doing the right thing, he carries guilt from an earlier failed mission in Iran.

**DIMITRI GROMOV** is Warnock’s Soviet counterpart and Cold War enemy who seems to know everything about him. Gromov, like Warnock, spends months at a time away from his family.

**SIMON CRAIG** is Warnock’s British counterpart and ally who is endlessly frustrated by his own lack of political power. He struggles with his marriage and is conflicted about being a parent.

**ABDULLAH KHAN** is an Afghan warlord who leads a group of mujahideen and receives weapons from Warnock. Khan believes deeply in tribal law and in the importance of having a son.

**SAEED** is a young assistant to Abdullah Khan who fights to defeat the Soviets and, like Khan, questions who can be trusted. He loves American popular music and often quotes lyrics.

**COLONEL AFRIDI** is head of the ISI (Inter-Service Intelligence), the Pakistani intelligence agency, and acts as the go-between for supplying arms from the U.S. and other countries to the mujahideen. A hard bargainer, Afridi uses his position for personal gain.

**SENATOR JEFFERSON BIRCH** is a conservative U.S. senator who Warnock and Abdullah Khan must convince to continue funding for the weapons program to arm the mujahideen.

**WALTER BARNES** is a former CIA agent and Warnock’s mentor and supervisor.

Costume designs by Catherine Zuber for Lincoln Center Theater’s production of *Blood and Gifts*. 
Historical Figures

The names of the following actual historical figures are mentioned throughout the play but they do not appear onstage.

GULBUDDIN HEKMATYAR is a powerful Pashtun warlord widely distrusted because of his extreme interpretation of Islamic law. Khan calls him “man with face of wolf.” He receives major U.S. funding but is suspected of killing other Afghans. Colonel Afridi demands that weapons be sent to Hekmatyar.

AHMAD SHAH MASSOUD is an ethnic Tajik leader of the mujahideen widely supported by Afghans and favored by the U.S. and Britain. He is religious but moderate in his interpretation of Islam. He is called the “Lion of Panjshir” for his relentless resistance to the Soviets.

MOHAMMAD NAJIBULLAH is the final communist leader of the Soviet-backed Afghan government. He remains in power after the Soviet withdrawal but is widely opposed by the majority of Afghans, including Abdullah Khan and other mujahideen.

Themes to Follow in Blood and Gifts

AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: Blood and Gifts explores America’s actions on foreign soil and raises questions about our nation’s foreign policy. Warnock’s efforts to arm the Afghan resistance fighters represents a larger American ideal of defending the world against communism. The play looks beyond political ideals to the realities (the “blood and gifts”) of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan’s politics. Ask students: Do you agree with the ideals that Warnock seems to represent? When the senators agree to continue funding the Afghan resistance fighters, what is the basis for their decision?

NEGOTIATING ALLIANCES: Jim Warnock must build alliances to arm the anti-Soviet fighters. His negotiations are long and slow. Each encounter presents unpredictable challenges and cultural dynamics that he must carefully navigate or risk damaging the relationship. CIA boss Walter Barnes compares the process to a chess game. At times these alliances involve a gesture of friendship, but not always. Colonel Afridi warns Warnock, “this is not a friendship...this is business. Only.” Ask students: What is at stake for each side? What tactics does Warnock use in his negotiations?

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE: The characters represent different cultural beliefs and values. Each man’s culture is revealed in his manner, dress, words, and actions. Cultural misunderstanding and ignorance is awkward, funny and potentially dangerous. Ask students: How do costumes, sets and props represent cultural identity? How does the playwright highlight a character’s cultural beliefs through dialogue and action?
TRUST AND INTEGRITY: As Warnock builds alliances, trust is crucial and elusive. Once Warnock finds a trustworthy person, he risks all to protect the relationship as with Abdullah Khan. Yet, Khan struggles with “who to trust?” even within his own tribe. Integrity is equally important. Warnock repeatedly insists, “I give you my word” as if his integrity demands trust. **Ask students:** Who would you trust? How is integrity measured? Can trust be guaranteed? When Warnock tries to get Saeed to spy on Khan are trust and integrity compromised?

MORALITY: All of the characters, except for the Senator and staff in Washington D.C., have killed people and caused harm. The characters accuse one another of atrocities while denying their own ethical wrongdoing. Each man argues that the end result justifies the methods. **Ask students:** How does each man defend his actions? Are these men capable of being moral? What determines right from wrong in this story? When religion is a moral imperative, does it override other ethical systems?

AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE: References to American music and films are featured in the play as an obsession of the young Afghan fighters. Saeed, a tough warrior, begs Warnock to get him the latest Duran Duran release. Later, we learn Warnock went to great lengths to get Saeed a Tina Turner album. These scenes add humor to the serious storyline, but they also tell us something about America. **Ask students:** How do you think America is viewed abroad through the lens of its music and films? What cultural ideals does American music emphasize? Why do you think Saeed is so drawn to American popular culture?

FAMILY AND CHILDREN: Many scenes include conversations about family. For Gromov, Warnock, Craig, and Khan, separation from their families represents the countless personal sacrifices each man has made for his cause. **Ask students:** How do the conversations about children bring humanity to these interactions? What do children and fatherhood seem to represent for these characters? In what way does Khan make the ultimate sacrifice?

SECTION 2: BACKGROUND

The circumstances surrounding the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan are complicated. *Blood and Gifts* provides enough background within the dialogue so that the characters and story are compelling. But, students will need to know more about the geography, history and politics of the region to participate in a critical conversation. The brief overview outlined in this section will provide basic knowledge and may motivate further study of this vast and fascinating subject.

Timeline of Key Events in Afghanistan

For a detailed timeline of Afghanistan’s history related to the events in the play, follow this link to pages 5 to 7 of the National Theatre’s Background Pack for *Blood and Gifts*: [http://tiny.cc/BGpack](http://tiny.cc/BGpack).

Playwright J.T. Rogers created this timeline as he was mapping out the background of the play.

Relevant World History

**THE COLD WAR**: *Blood and Gifts* is set in an era when the United States and the Soviet Union were the world’s two superpowers, nations with supreme global influence. In 1981, they had been engaged in a decades long Cold War, a term that captures the intense political hostility just short of open warfare. The situation began after World War II and was fueled by opposing political ideologies and mutual distrust. For the U.S., the Cold War against the Soviets was a patriotic fight against communism (the Soviet Union’s form of government) which the American government and media portrayed as an evil sociopolitical movement. The fear of Soviet nuclear war permeated the American psyche. On an international scale, the Cold War manifested in brinkmanship and espionage. America and the Soviet Union openly competed by building up their armies and flexing their military muscle throughout the world. They also undertook covert activities like spying on each other to collect *intelligence* (information with particular value related to national security) and other secret activities to further their positions. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was established in 1947 for just such purposes.

In *Blood and Gifts*, Jim Warnock is a CIA secret agent whose real assignment, to supply arms to the Afghan resistance fighters, is a covert and dangerous act against the Soviets. His Soviet counterpart Dmitri Gromov knows that Warnock has hidden intentions and watches his enemy suspiciously while remaining diplomati-
cally cordial. When Gromov learns that Warnock is supplying assault weapons to assassinate Soviet soldiers, he makes a calm but unmistakable threat of retaliation. **Ask students:** Notice how Warnock and Gromov’s interplay reflects their countries’ mutual antagonism.

**THE BRITISH EMPIRE:** Great Britain was allied with the United States in the Cold War against the Soviet Union but did not have the status of a superpower. For many reasons, the British Empire had declined rapidly since World War II ending its 500 year reign as the largest colonial empire in history. In 1922, the British ruled a quarter of the world’s lands and people. By 1981, nearly all of Britain’s colonies had gained their independence. This contraction meant Britain could play only a secondary role in international politics and follow the lead of the more economically and politically powerful U.S. Simon Craig, the play’s British secret agent, complains bitterly about the British government and envies Warnock’s American money and clout. He has a legacy of experience in the region but, without money, he struggles to assert his relevance. **Ask students:** Notice Craig’s personality and attitude. How does his behavior emphasize Britain’s diminished place in the world order? How does Warnock overlook Craig’s experience to his own detriment?

Britain’s history in Afghanistan begins in the 1800s. At that time, the Russian Empire, which predated the Soviet Union, encompassed large parts of Asia, Europe, as well as North America. These two empires jockeyed for dominance in Central Asia in a century-long rivalry known as **The Great Game.** Britain’s priority in the region was to protect its colonial claim on India, and Afghanistan became the geographical buffer against the Russians. Britain fought three unsuccessful wars against the Afghans to secure its position. In 1919, a war-weary Great Britain relinquished control, and Afghanistan celebrated its independence.

**THE RISE OF PAKISTAN:** Meanwhile, the region southeast of Afghanistan that is modern day Pakistan was part of British India. Pakistan was born in 1947 as India gained freedom from British rule. Muslims in India who had fought to oust the British separated themselves from India’s non-Muslim majority to form their own nation. **Blood and Gifts** highlights the deep scars of colonialism. The British Empire left in its wake resentment that contributed to distrust of the West and of outsiders by many of its former colonies. **Ask students:** Notice when the characters refer to Britain’s former imperialism, particularly in scenes with British agent Simon Craig and Pakistani Colonel Afridi.

Afghanistan and Pakistan are inextricably linked by Islam and tribal culture but the relationship is often strained. The border that separates the two na-
tions, known as **The Durand Line**, was drawn in 1893 by the British. This arbitrary boundary cut through the homeland of the Pashtun tribe and has been ignored and disputed by the two nations. Colonel Afridi compares Pakistan to Israel telling Simon Craig, who is Jewish, that both nations are surrounded by enemies and can trust no one. Regardless of shared religious faith and tribal roots, ultimately Pakistan is loyal only to itself. Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, Pakistan sheltered more than three million Afghan refugees, and its primary spy agency, the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), trained Afghan resistance fighters and supplied weapons to the rebels from sources outside the country. In the play, Khan and Saeed reflect the views of Afghans who believed the ISI was corrupt and questioned its ties to religious extremists. **Ask students:** Notice when Warnock talks about Colonel Afridi’s new Jaguar. What does it mean that he owns this kind of car?

**Afghan Identity**

**TRIBAL GROUPS:** The people of Afghanistan have belonged to tribal groups for thousands of years. Based on ethnicity and kinship, these groupings are the foundation of cultural identity for Afghans. The tribes existed long before any form of centralized government and have endured centuries of invasion, occupation, and civil unrest. The overall tribal structure is divided first by **ethnicity** with the **Pashtuns** as the largest and most powerful ethnic group in Afghanistan and the **Tajiks** as the second largest group followed by several smaller groups. Ethnic groups are sub-divided into **tribes** (the primary way Afghans identify themselves) that generally represent geographic areas. Tribes are divided further into sub-tribes and clans based on locale and family. Tribes are affiliated through tribal confederacies within the ethnic groups. Relationships between tribes are complex and vary from friendly to hostile. **Ask students:** Notice when the characters refer to tribes. What reasons related to tribal group do Khan and Saeed give Warnock for why they cannot support Hekmatyar, another mujahideen warlord?

![A jirga in the Nawa district of Helmand province, Afghanistan in July 2009. Photo: U.S. Marine Corps, Cpl. Artur Shvartsberg](image)
TRIBAL LAWS: Afghan tribes follow a system of unwritten laws and customs that are passed down through generations. **Pashtunwali**, or “code of life” includes nine major principles: hospitality, asylum, justice/venge, bravery, loyalty, righteousness, trust in God, self-honor/dignity, and honor of women. The principles are interpreted and practiced differently tribe by tribe but these customs are the basis for Pashtun tribal identity. **Ask students:** Notice how tribal principles are depicted in the play. For example, Khan shows **hospitality** to Warnock in serving him tea and treating him as a protected guest. Saeed demands that Warnock give him **honor**. Khan and Saeed show **bravery** in fighting the Soviets. In the final scene, Khan tells of his plans to seek **revenge**.

RELIGION: **Islam** has been the primary religion of Afghanistan since the seventh century. In brief, Islamic beliefs center on an almighty God, the teachings of Mohammed as the last prophet of God, and the holy book the Quran as the literal word of God. For Muslims, the followers of Islam, religion is more than just a spiritual path, it is a way of life that centers on worshipping God, although there is great diversity in practice. Nearly the entire population of the Afghanistan region is Muslim divided among the major branches of the Sunni (80-90%) and Shia (10-20%). These branches share basic Islamic beliefs but differ in their religious practices and on ideas about leadership. Sunnis believe religious leaders should be elected. Shias (or Shiites) believe leadership should be a hereditary right.

**RELIGIOUS LAWS:** Sharia, the religious law of Islam, influences all areas of Muslim life from prayer and clothing and social customs to politics, education, and justice. Based on interpretations of the Quran and examples of the prophet Mohammed, the practice of sharia can differ considerably between Muslims. **Ask students:** Notice religion in the play. When Warnock negotiates with Khan, he cries “Allahu Akbar!” which is an Arabic expression of faith meaning “God is Great.” Why does Warnock do this and what is the effect? How do Khan and Saeed differentiate their own Islamic beliefs from the practices that they ascribe to Hekmatyar? What is the significance of Warnock being “atheist?” When Senator Birch invokes Jesus what does it highlight between him and Khan?

Because Afghanistan’s tribal structure is not centralized, Islam has played a role in unifying the nation across different tribal beliefs and practices. Although Islam regards sharia as the law of God and therefore supreme law, for many Afghans, tribal law supersedes Islamic law. Some Afghans believe this localized interpretation of religious laws compromises Islam and destabilizes the nation. **Ask students:** Notice how Khan’s view of religion shifts during the play. At the end, he commits to an extreme view of Islamic law as the only means to stop the civil war and save the nation.
AFGHAN GOVERNMENT: Following its independence from Great Britain in 1919, Afghanistan struggled to find political balance. Efforts to modernize were seen in opposition to conservative religious and tribal beliefs. Meanwhile, the Russian Empire had ended in 1917 and the Soviet Union emerged by 1922. Soviet influence on Afghanistan increased in the ensuing decades. In 1933, Afghanistan established a monarchy under King Zahir Shah who ruled for forty years and tried to introduce progressive ideas. By the 1950s, the Soviets were providing Afghanistan with economic and military support and influencing its politics. U.S. President Eisenhower visited Afghanistan in 1959 and the U.S. provided a steady stream of aid and diplomacy to the nation. In 1973, King Zahir Shah was overthrown in a non-violent coup headed by former Prime Minister Mohammed Daud Khan who abolished the monarchy and established a republic. Daud tried to reach out to the West and to end the Soviet influence. In 1978, he was killed in a coup by the Soviet-backed Afghan communist party. The new government’s communist agenda was very unpopular with Afghans as it conflicted with religious and tribal beliefs. For example, laws that forbade men and women from dressing in traditional Islamic fashion were seen by most Afghans as deeply offensive.

MUJAHIDEN (MOO - JA - HA - DEEN): In protest of the newly installed Soviet-backed government, the mujahideen (“strugglers in the path of God”) emerged. These young Afghan rebels aimed to regain control of their nation in the name of Islam. They came mostly from local tribes and were led by tribal chiefs who became known as warlords. Initially, the mujahideen were not well organized, but they soon became a threat to national security because the government was unable to control their random and brutal attacks. The fractured nation became further destabilized. Many see the mujahideen as the beginning of the fundamentalist movement that would spawn the Taliban. But, the mujahideen and Taliban differ significantly. While the mujahideen invoked Islam as their right to control their nation, the Taliban would seek to control their nation as a way to enforce Islamic law.

SOVIET INVASION: At the end of 1978, the Afghan government asked the Soviets for support in regaining control of Afghanistan and eliminating the mujahideen. The Soviets installed Hafizullah Amin as a pro-Soviet Prime Minister. Under Amin, the Afghan government still struggled against the mujahideen and the threat of massive tribal insurgency loomed. In December 1979, 80,000 Soviet troops arrived in Kabul, the capital of
Afghanistan, to control the resistance. The Soviets killed Amin and installed Babrak Karmal as Prime Minister. The U.S. saw the Soviet actions as an aggressive invasion. The Soviets saw it differently. In the play, when Warnock accuses the Soviets of invasion, Gromov argues, “We were invited.” The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan soon became known as the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Fighting between the Soviet-Afghan armies and the mujahideen was brutal and killed many civilians. Millions of Afghans fled to Pakistan as refugees. In the play, Gromov and Warnock attend a sporting event at an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan.

**U.S. INVOLVEMENT:** To the U.S., the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was an expansion of communism and a threat to America. The U.S. wanted to push the Soviets out of Afghanistan but avoid open warfare, so it armed the anti-Soviet resistance fighters and participated in the conflict indirectly as a “proxy war.” Europe, England, China and Saudi Arabia also supplied weapons to the mujahideen via Pakistan, but the U.S. weapons had the most fire-power. In the play, Khan and Saeed want U.S. Stinger missiles, powerful rocket launchers capable of large scale destruction. Warnock’s superiors are reluctant to provide the Stingers because the Soviets may recognize them as distinctly American and retaliate. As the play depicts, the U.S. eventually sent Stingers to the mujahideen, a turning point in pressing the Soviets to withdraw.

In the play, Warnock talks about his previous failed mission in Iran and his guilt at leaving his Iranian contacts who were killed. In the early 1950s, the U.S. government installed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as the Shah of Iran and backed him as the pro-U.S. leader of the nation. He modernized Iran in many ways but was a tyrannical ruler and widely opposed. In 1978, the Iranian revolution broke out as Iranians protested the Shah’s corruption. The Shah fled the country amid the revolution’s chaos and Islamic militants made a grab for power successfully creating an Islamic Republic. U.S.-Iranian relations deteriorated. In 1979, the U.S. embassy was infiltrated and fifty-two Americans were held hostage for 444 days. Iranians who had supported the Shah and the U.S. fled the country, some were imprisoned and others were killed. Warnock escaped, but his contacts did not. **Ask students:** Notice at the end of the play when Warnock discovers that Khan has sold the U.S. weapons to Iran. What is Warnock’s reaction?

**SOVIET WITHDRAWAL:** In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union and began to institute economic, social and political reforms including talks with U.S. President Ronald Reagan to end the Cold War. In 1987, Gorbachev announced the full withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan by 1988. In
the months leading up to their departure, the Soviets mounted an attack on Pakistan which the U.S. thwarted by arming the controversial mujahideen warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to fight the Soviets. After the Soviet withdrawal, fighting continued between the mujahideen and the Afghan government led by Mohammad Najibullah who had been installed by the Soviets before their departure. Ask students: Notice when Gromov is preparing to return home for good, he mentions Gorbachev and what the new leader means for the Soviet Union. How does Khan feel about Najibullah as leader of Afghanistan?

The Soviet war in Afghanistan resulted in upwards of 5 million Afghan refugees; 15,000 Soviet soldiers killed and 54,000 wounded; approximately 18,000 Afghan soldiers and 80,000 mujahideen killed and tens of thousands more wounded; and between one and two million Afghan civilians killed. It is estimated that the U.S. spent billions of dollars on training and equipping the mujahideen.

TALIBAN, OSAMA BIN LADEN AND AL QAEDA: The story of Afghanistan and the U.S. involvement in the region continues after the end of Blood and Gifts. In the years immediately following its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. Its republics claimed their independence and the central government dissolved in 1991. In 1992, the Afghan government that had been backed by the Soviet Union collapsed and the nation fell into civil war as mujahideen groups fought for power.

The Taliban (Tali meaning “student”) arose in the 1990s in reaction to the raging Afghan civil war. The members were primarily young male students from rural Pashtun tribes who wanted to purify Afghanistan through extreme Islamic law. Beginning in 1994, the Taliban began taking control of the cities in Afghanistan and by 1998 controlled 90% of the country. Their rule was marked by severe violence and violations of human rights particularly against girls, women and minorities. Al Qaeda was an Arab terrorist group led by Osama Bin Laden that was sheltered by the Taliban. When the Taliban refused to turn over Osama Bin Laden following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. and its allies attacked Afghanistan. The Taliban government collapsed, but the leaders of the Taliban and al Qaeda escaped. The occupation of Afghanistan by the U.S. and its allies, continues today. The Afghan government is going through a reconstruction process which has included adopting a new constitution and holding elections. In 2011, after a ten year hunt, Osama Bin Laden was killed by U.S. troops in Pakistan. As the U.S. continues to support building a democratic government within Afghanistan, U.S. troops continue to fight against opposition.
SECTION 3: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & RESOURCES

Before and After the Performance

CHARACTER EXPERTS: Give students a copy of the character list from the resource guide. Ask each student to choose a character to track through the performance and pay particular attention to how he changes during the play. After the performance, ask students to write a profile of their selected character. Writing prompts might include: What was that character’s point of view? What surprised you about him? What motivated his actions? How did that character contribute to the play’s plot and themes? What about the actor’s performance of that character was particularly effective? What more do you want to know about the character?

LISTENING FOR LANGUAGE: Playwright J.T. Rogers is precise in how he uses language to convey character and meaning. Ask students to zero in on a particular scene within the performance and notice how language contributes to the dramatic action. How does it move the scene forward and create atmosphere? For example, what is the effect of interruptions, overlaps, and silences? How do accents contribute to the rhythm of a scene or provide humor? How does language escalate tension? After the performance, ask each student to write a short monologue for one of the characters that reflects the way language is used in Blood and Gifts.

MINING QUOTES FOR MEANING: The quotes below are spoken by characters in the play. Post them at the front of the class, and have each student select a quote that has meaning for them. In pairs, have the students talk about the quotes they selected. Have a class discussion about all of the quotes and what they mean to the students and the ideas each quote represents.

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”
“All great men are almost always bad men.”
“The happy and the powerful do not go into exile.”
“Another’s man’s soul is darkness.”

Ask students to listen for the quotes in performance and then to write a short essay that analyzes the quote and explains how it was used within the play.

LISTEN TO HOTEL CALIFORNIA: Some of the humor in the play revolves around Saeed and his fellow Afghan fighters misunderstanding the lyrics to Hotel California by The Eagles. Have the class listen to the song on YouTube and review the lyrics available for free online. Brainstorm how people might interpret the song’s metaphors differently. The class might do further research about how this very popular song has been analyzed and the band’s intention that it be an allegory for the excessive life of rock musicians. After the performance, discuss how the song was used within the play and to what effect. Why do you think Saeed connected to this song?
TIME TRAVEL TO THE 1980S: Turn your classroom into a 1980s time machine. In teams, have students research and present the cultural significance of these 1980s popular icons that are mentioned in the play: John Wayne, Rod Stewart, Duran Duran, Hotel California, Tina Turner, and Rambo: First Blood. Students can expand their research to include other films, television shows, and music from the 1980s and create collages, displays, or mini-presentations. After the performance, ask students to recall what aspects of the 1980s were depicted in the play and what they added to the story.

NEGOTIATION GAME: Have students work in pairs on their feet. One student can only say “yes.” The other student can only say “no.” Each pair improvises a dialogue using only these assigned words. The goal of the game is for each partner to try to get the other person to switch words and “agree.” The “yes” partner wins if the “no” partner begins to say “yes” or vice versa. Have all the groups improvise their dialogues simultaneously for a minute. Or, have one pair volunteer to demonstrate for the class. Discuss what it took for someone to change his/her word. Try the game again but this time require both students to be saying the same word at the end of the two minutes. What did it take for each pair to come to consensus?

U.S. PRIORITIES IN 1980: Have students read or watch online President Jimmy Carter’s 1980 State of the Union address. Follow this link for text and video versions: http://millercenter.org/scrrips/archive/speeches/detail/3404. Discuss the message of his speech. Ask students to write an essay based on the first line, “This last few months has not been an easy time for any of us. As we meet tonight, it has never been more clear that the state of our Union depends on the state of the world. And tonight, as throughout our own generation, freedom and peace in the world depend on the state of our Union.” How does the line reflect what was happening in the world at that time?

ARGUING THE STAKES: After the performance, explore the stakes faced by characters in the play and the choices they faced by having students enact different sides in the decision making. Start with Abdullah Khan and his decision whether or not to create an alliance with Warnock. Brainstorm all the pros and cons from Khan’s perspective. Divide the class in two with half the class arguing for and the other half arguing against the alliance. Have each side stand in a line and have the lines face one another. Ask for a volunteer to be Khan and to walk down the path between the lines. As Khan slowly passes, each student must speak directly to Khan and argue his/her side. Ask the student playing Khan if the arguments were persuasive.

USING PHOTOGRAPHS AS A WRITING PROMPT: Follow these links to the websites of professional photographer Luke Powell that features beautiful images of Afghanistan: http://www.lukepowell.com/ and http://tiny.cc/LukePowell. Share a series of the photographs with students and have a class discussion about what the pictures capture about the environment and people of Afghanistan. Brainstorm a list of vivid words inspired by the photos. Select a photo to use as a writing prompt for students. Ask students to describe the photograph in detail and then to pose a set of questions that the photograph elicits.

COMPARING MAPS TO UNDERSTAND HISTORY: Familiarize students with the geography of Central Asia and how history has impacted Afghanistan and the surrounding region. Follow this link to the United Nations website and a world map of 1945: http://tiny.cc/1945world. Ask students to find Afghanistan on the map and discuss the nations that surround it. Compare the map to a current world map. Follow this link to find a 2011 world map online: http://tiny.cc/2011map. How do the differences in the maps reflect history? As you review the background of the play in Section II of the Guide, refer to the maps.
REFLECTIVE WRITING ABOUT PERSONAL SACRIFICE: CIA agent Jim Warnock proclaims, “I left my life, my wife – because here, right now, I have a chance to do what is right.” Have a class discussion about personal sacrifice and what it means when someone gives up something for a greater good. Brainstorm examples of personal sacrifice. Ask students to write a reflective essay about a personal sacrifice they have made or someone in their life has made to reach a greater goal. What was sacrificed? What did it take for the person to make this sacrifice? Was the greater goal reached? Was it worth the sacrifice?

CLASS DEBATE 1980 OLYMPICS BOYCOTT: To protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. The U.S. and several other nations did not send a team to the Olympics and hundreds of athletes sat out of the competition that occurs only every four years. Ask students to research the arguments in America at that time for and against the boycott. Follow this link to a USA Today article that reflects on the impact on athletes twenty five years after the boycott: http://tiny.cc/1980Olympics. Assign students different sides in the debate and ask the class to imagine they are the 1980 U.S. Olympic Committee that will debate and vote on the boycott.

A MUSLIM TEEN’S EXPERIENCE: As a class, follow this link to WNYC’s Radio Rookies program and listen to this podcast by a New York City teenager who shares what it is like to grow up Muslim in NYC following the attacks of September 11, 2001: http://www.wnyc.org/shows/rookies/2011/sep/08/. What about her story is surprising? How did the story change your ideas about Islam? If any students are Muslim, how was the story similar or different from their own experiences? What can we learn by listening to personal stories? What questions do students have about Islam?

DOES HISTORY MATTER TO AMERICANS?: Discuss: Is the American public interested in history? Why or why not? Do you think the adage “history repeats itself” is true, and if so, why? How important should history be in American life? Ask students to write an essay that explains how they think history should be taught in American schools. What aspects of history should students be learning and in what ways?

INSPIRATION FOR SET DESIGN: Set designer Blood and Gifts Michael Yeargan drew inspiration from Afghanistan’s shrine of Hazrat-e Ali, or Blue Mosque, a centuries old architectural masterpiece in northern Afghanistan. Follow this link to an article from Radio Free Europe and share photographs of the Blue Mosque with students: http://tiny.cc/BlueMos. As a class brainstorm a list of words that capture the feeling and mood of the mosque. Before the performance, have students predict how elements of the mosque might be reflected in the set. After the performance, discuss the set. How did it reflect a sense of place and time? Was the inspiration of the Blue Mosque evident?

A SOVIET PERSPECTIVE OF THE INVASION: Follow this link to Public Radio International’s The World program: http://tiny.cc/PRIpodcast. Have students listen to this excellent 30 minute podcast that digs into the Soviet Invasion in Afghanistan in the 1980s and parallels it with the current U.S. actions in Afghanistan. Ask students to write an essay that answers these questions based on the podcast: Why did the Soviets invade Afghanistan? What role did geography play in the invasion? How were ethnic groups involved? What are the similarities between the Soviet invasion and the current U.S. actions in Afghanistan?

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE: The characters in the play sometimes lie. This acting game explores the physical and vocal dynamics of lying. Ask each student to write down two truths and one lie about themselves. Student volunteers take turns telling the class his/her two truths and one lie trying to make all three sound believable. The class
tries to guess which statement is the lie. This activity can also be done in pairs or in small groups with students taking turns. Have a class discussion about what made the lies believable and the challenges around telling a good lie. After the performance, ask students if they knew when the characters in Blood and Gifts were lying.

Post-Performance Discussion Questions

- What did you learn that you didn’t know before?
- What acting performance did you most enjoy and why?
- Were the stakes faced by the characters clear to you? Was anything confusing?
- Was it strange to see a play with almost no women? What did that tell you?
- Name all the ways that Warnock tried to gain the trust of his counterparts. What made him a good CIA agent? Would you make a good CIA agent? Why or why not?
- Remember when characters spoke a language other than English, in this case, Pashto, Russian and Farsi. What was the effect on you?
- When Warnock meets with Abdullah for the first time, he is escorted by an American soldier. How does the presence of the soldier add to the dramatic tension in the scene?
- Director Bartlett Sher chose to stage the play with the actors remaining onstage between scenes witnessing the dramatic action. What did it mean to you? Was it effective?
Online Resources for Further Study


National Geographic: *Afghanistan*. maps, photos and lesson plans. [http://tiny.cc/NatGeoAfghan](http://tiny.cc/NatGeoAfghan)


PBS NewsHour Teacher Center: *Afghanistan*. Resources and lessons. [http://tiny.cc/NewsHour](http://tiny.cc/NewsHour)

The Public Theater *The Great Game: Afghanistan*. Play guide created for the American tour of The Tricycle Theatre’s 12-hour cycle of one act plays. [http://tiny.cc/GreatGame](http://tiny.cc/GreatGame)

University of Nebraska: *Center for Afghanistan Studies*. Links to relevant websites such as the United Nations, the CIA and the Library of Congress. [http://tiny.cc/UNCA](http://tiny.cc/UNCA)


Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: *Differences between the Taliban and Al Qaeda*. Also essays, materials and podcasts about Afghanistan. [http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1054493.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1054493.html)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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