



Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History

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Afghanistan traces the historic struggles and the changing nature of political authority in this volatile region of the world, from the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century to the Taliban resurgence today. Thomas Barfield introduces readers to the bewildering diversity of tribal and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, explaining what unites them as Afghans despite the regional, cultural, and political differences that divide them. He shows how governing these peoples was relatively easy when power was concentrated in a small dynastic elite, but how this delicate political order broke down in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when Afghanistan's rulers mobilized rural militias to expel first the British and later the Soviets. Armed insurgency proved remarkably successful against the foreign occupiers, but it also undermined the Afghan government's authority and rendered the country ever more difficult to govern as time passed. Barfield vividly describes how Afghanistan's armed factions plunged the country into a civil war, giving rise to clerical rule by the Taliban and Afghanistan's isolation from the world. He examines why the American invasion in the wake of September 11 toppled the Taliban so quickly, and how this easy victory lulled the United States into falsely believing that a viable state could be built just as easily.

Afghanistan is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand how a land conquered and ruled by foreign dynasties for more than a thousand years became the "graveyard of empires" for the British and Soviets, and what the United States must do to avoid a similar fate.

Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History Details

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Kate says

Thomas Barfield is an anthropologist and professor of anthropology at Princeton whose experiences in Afghanistan stretch back to the 1960s, when he travelled overland through the country as a student. He began ethnographic field studies there in the 1970s and witnessed the overthrow of the Afghan King Zahir Shah in 1973.

In his own words "Critics of the university tenure system undoubtedly put me among those useless faculty who purveyed esoteric and irrelevant knowledge to the young without fear of termination. Wise policymakers had already determined that such remote places and people could be safely excluded from America's New World Order. . . . On September 11, 2001, Afghanistan suddenly became relevant" and Barfield became one of the few Americans who had the intimate knowledge of the country, its people and its history that we so desperately needed.

Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History is a broad overview of the history of Afghanistan and its culture. For a reader like myself, who reads the *New York Times* daily and a couple of other works on the country, namely Rory Stewart's *The Places In Between* and thinks they know everything, this book was a much needed corrective to my cultural biases, misunderstandings and creative ignorance of the country that we went to war with almost ten years ago. *Afghanistan* is blessedly well organized, with a clear goal set out in the introduction: to answer for the reader the following questions:

1. How did Afghanistan, which was overrun and ruled by a series of foreign dynasties for more than a thousand years, become renowned as the "graveyard of empires" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after forcing the withdrawal of both the British and Russians in a series of wars?
2. Why did the U.S. invasion of 2001 that toppled the Taliban **not** immediately set off a similar national insurgency (as it did in Iraq), and despite that, still fail to bring stability to the country?
3. Why have foreign attempts to change Afghanistan's politics, social structures, and government proved so ineffective?
4. How did a ruling dynasty established in 1747 manage to hold power over such a fractious people until 1978, and why has the Afghan state since then experienced such difficulties in reestablishing a legitimate political order?
5. Why did a country for which the term "Balkanized" appeared ideally suited show so few signs of disintegration as a national state in spite of its many divisions?
6. How and why have splits in Afghan society since the 1920s over the structure of government and its policies led to so many periods of state collapse?

The chapter on the American-led invasion of Afghanistan was particularly enlightening. There are so many clichés about Afghanistan - that it can't be governed effectively because of its warring tribal factions won't

allow it, the belief that it would become a new Yugoslavia, fracturing along ethnic lines that its history is one of constant insurgency and the belief that the country is mired in a medieval mindset are all simply untrue. Barfield demonstrates for the reader that Afghanistan's long political history gives the lie to these suppositions and shows how a Western mindset regarding political institutions might lead us to believe them anyway.

I have two small gripes: 1. There are typos. I feel like an academic press shouldn't have any 'teh's in their text. 2. There isn't much cultural history here. While I disagree with other reviewers who say that this is a dry read, I will add that it is an extremely dense one, packed with a lot of information in a relatively small number of pages. With that said, however, I highly highly recommend this book for anyone looking to educate themselves on Afghanistan's history and its current political climate. As Barfield says in his closing, Afghanistan is becoming more than just a backwater where the US fought the Taliban; with its rich mineral deposits and border with Pakistan (a soon-to-be-failed state with nuclear capabilities. *Aside: I am scared shitless by Pakistan.*) and other central Asian powers like Iran, Afghanistan will continue to be a focus of international interest for generations to come. I have, through reading this book, gained a tremendous amount of respect for Afghanistan and its people. I wish the country the best and hope that the US, Russia, China, India and whoever else can behave themselves there and work with the Afghan people to achieve the rich future that they deserve.

Øivind says

An excellent book. Makes one proud to be a social scientist.

Jon says

Well there were parts of this book that were very interesting and compelling reading and other parts that dragged. This is a completely subjective point of view I realize that because I am more interested in the current state of affairs in Afghanistan and this is my second book that is somewhat related to this. I read last In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan by Seth G. Jones which I found to be a more enjoyable read. Having said this, some might find it fascinating to read about the various dynasties since the 16th century and previous wars but I had a hard time with it and it seemed Barfield dedicated too much of the book to this subject. I realize he was establishing context but I think most of his readers are more familiar with the 20th and 21st century Afghanistan, so I think he short-sighted that analysis a little bit. I did enjoy the first chapter discussing the cultural aspects of Afghanistan as well as the later parts of book covering the 2nd half of the 20th century, the 21st century and the conclusion chapter was air tight. This only comprised about 150 pages of the 350. Nonetheless as a number of people have stated, this is unquestionably in my opinion the quintessential book about understanding Afghanistan, particularly its importance on the world stage. I do recommend anyone who has some degree of patience and doesn't mind some dull reading in parts that has a curiosity about Afghanistan to give this book a try. But if you are looking for pleasurable historical reading this isn't it.

Lis says

I was assigned this book for a class I took, Development and Change in Iraq and Afghanistan with a great

professor, and I could not recommend this book ENOUGH for how much it taught me about recent Afghan history, the impact of the U.S. intervention, and the nuances of Afghan identity and cultural history.

It's a seriously comprehensive, thoroughly researched and very readable book, and definitely a must-read for people who are interested in learning more about Afghanistan.

Joseph says

Excellent study by an scholar who actually lived in Afghanistan for a long time. Love his use of Medieval scholars like Ibn Khaldun. His work is detailed, but his writing is very readable. His discussion of ethnic groupings is excellent as is his analysis of the situation there now. Wish our politicos would read this book.

JDR says

This is one of the few, true instances where I could implore on the ability of a book to make me feel knowledgeable on a subject that I had zero experience to begin with. Afghanistan by Thomas Barfield, published by the Princeton University Press (I always feel a little more subconsciously assured whenever I see the publisher being the Press of a major university) makes me feel that exact way. It taught me in two weeks more than I had learned about the entire region perhaps my entire life. This is not something that is not even breathed a word of in our high schools and I understand that there's a lot in the world and it's more important to focus on the most pressing history for our area, but not even an optional course covered anything in this! I honestly would tell friends that it felt like stepping into a fantasy world because it was so unknown to me, so different. The other day I caught myself giving a lecture to my father on the difference between Afghani Pashtuns and Arabs of Middle Eastern countries. Afghanistan is not in the Middle East, it is in South Asia! Afghans are not Arabs, they are Afghans! Afghanistan translates into the Land of the Pashtuns, ethnically a majority of them are Pashtuns, not at all Arabs! Oh the horror of broad generalizations!

Putting that aside, it reads very much like a textbook. And I do not mean that in an insulting manner, but only that it serves to be very informative – not exactly told in a narrative like *Bush* by Jean Edward Smith. If you want to see an exact difference of what I mean, read an excerpt from Smith's *Bush* and Peter Baker's *Days of Fire* and note how the exact same content is told in different ways. Here, Afghanistan is told from an all-seeing perspective, with the minimum of bias and fullest with historical accuracy. I could not tell you what the author's political ideology was, or towards the end of the book whether he supported Bush or Obama. Pure, unbiased details. That is all an avid reader can ask for in his nonfiction. I'm not looking for a politician's autobiography here, I'm looking for something that I can use to educate myself and I think a wonderful job is done here.

I am a little obsessed with trying to maximize my knowledge on a topic. My first impulse upon seeing the bibliography would be to read all the books in it but that is extremely preposterous and the compulsive aspect to me is something to manage because Barfield's account is something extraordinary, do yourself the favor of getting a copy if you want to have a good overview on Afghanistan's history. You can read it, reread, take notes from it as if it was a textbook. It will do the job splendidly and prove plenty informative!

Matthew says

A fairly concise and interesting overview of Afghan history. If you're looking for an antidote to the argument that Afghanistan has always been some kind of war-riddled, postapocalyptic hellscape, then read this book.

Amy says

Ever since *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *Three Cups of Tea*, I've found Afghanistan to be a strangely compelling region. In those books, there was a different sense of the humanity of the people compared to what is seen on the nightly news, and it was difficult to align the two in my mind. Mention Afghanistan to someone and all they usually come up with is the notorious Taliban or the crumbling ruins that appear on the news. How accurate is that image?

When I first received *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, I hoped to find that answer and at the same time, that the book wouldn't be too dry or heavy on political rhetoric. I was pleased to find that it's an incredibly readable history book that makes the subject understandable and reveals the complicated lives of the people of Afghanistan. The author manages to compile the history without a political agenda or motive.

First off is recognizing that culturally, Afghanistan is made up of both tribal and nontribal ethnic groups. These groups mean everything to the people, and unlike some cultures, "tribal and ethnic groups take primacy over the individual." In other words, "individuals support decisions made by their group even when such support has negative consequences for themselves." This is a somewhat unique trait, and contributes to the devotion many have for their leaders. They also have an intense oral history that is repeated through the ages that also creates a sense of cohesiveness between past and present. These people live in a land crisscrossed by history, from Genghis Khan to Alexander the Great (see the photo of his castle above right). It was conflict between tribal regions, a civil war, that made the ordinary Afghan people eager to have the US come in to intervene with the Taliban, as "a drowning person is not too picky about who throws him a line....Afghanistan had either been ignored or abused by the outside world as it descended into chaos."

The Taliban, known for their desire to spread extremely conservative Islam, had riddled the nation with violence towards women and other religions. They've managed to alienate even those countries that were providing needed humanitarian aid. They do not have the support of the 'ordinary' citizen, as at times the Taliban members have numbered below 150 members. A good portion of the book deals with how and why the Taliban gained such power. Another portion discusses the occupation by Britain and Soviet Russia prior to more recent actions with the US.

The historical details are interesting, but it was the smaller things that were more revealing. For example, why is it that on the news you usually see only children or old people? Their hardscrabble lives, tending outdoors to agriculture and focused on manual labor, shows up on their faces and they appear prematurely aged. Are the devastated streets of broken concrete typical? Actually no, as the majority of citizens live in small villages far from urban areas such as Kabul. Is it just a land of dust and opium poppies? No again, as stone fruit, grapes, nuts, citrus fruits, melons, and rice are grown in different parts of the country, depending on what areas are irrigated. The famous mountainous region, known to have been a hiding place for bin Laden, is in the center of Afghanistan. Its steepness creates dynamic changes in climate in just a few hours of travel, and creates a diverse variety of crops.

The current situation in Afghanistan is covered in the sixth chapter, where Barfield addresses the complicated social concerns that continually plague the country. The resurgence of the Taliban and their religious ideology reverses social progress, while modern policies want to focus on reducing the religious power of clerics. Additional goals include establishing rights for women, tolerance of non-Muslim faiths, implementing educational policies, and modernizing archaic laws to better represent the desires of the majority.

Paul says

I knew shamefully little about this country that has dominated international relations for the past decade or so, but this book has thankfully rectified that.

Afghanistan is a complex and historically rich country, and it's a shame that people only really associate it with the Taliban nowadays. This book deals with that well: tellingly, the section on the history of Taliban rule in Afghanistan is only a few pages long, which is fitting as they've only been around since the mid-1990s.

I must admit, I skipped quite a bit of the 19th-century history. British colonial history turns me off, and I was itching to get to the PDPA and Soviet intervention. Still, I expect I will come back to this book in the future - it's an invaluable historical source and will serve me well for many years.

Barfield is an anthropologist by trade and it really shows in his ethnographical survey of the different tribes, their interactions and ways of life. I now have more of an appreciation of the heterogeneity of Afghanistan's groups, and the paradox of Afghan nationality and unity.

Four thumbs up.

James Trexler says

A fascinating introduction to one of the world's most complex hot spots. I can hardly count how many times I thought, "Oh for god's sake, why did you do that?" So many foolish and shortsighted actions have been taken by actors both internal and external. I give you, 1) the British putting Shah Shuja on the throne with no public support, 2) America failing to support the government of Najibullah after the fall of the Soviet Union, enabling his deposition and the country's disastrous civil war, and 3) the refusal of Massoud to take a more prominent role in unifying the county before the could dissolve into that civil war. Not to mention basically anything done by the Soviets or Hamid Karzai...

Still, an enlightening read, one which gave me some hope that the country can see a brighter future.

Robert says

Barfield's Cultural and Political History of Afghanistan acts as a solid introduction to those who haven't a clue as to the country's past before the headlines of the 21st century. Though such a rich tapestry of history, culture, politics, and sociology is hardly done justice in the less than 400 pages of this book. After reading Hopkirk's "The Great Game," which was written predominantly from a western storytelling viewpoint, Barfield attempts to make his prejudices more apparent and at least attempt to better portray and explain cultural and societal norms of different Afghan peoples. Unfortunately, due to the brevity of this book, he too falls back into stereotypes in order to fit complex sociological issues from a long and complicated history into this short introduction. Regardless, this book is a worthwhile read for anyone looking to better understand Afghanistan and its place in history, the present, and the global future.

Eric Haas says

Excellent work by Thomas Barfield. This work, published in 2010, provides one of the most straightforward and understandable depictions of Afghan society, especially the period from 1978 to the present. As an anthropologist who lived in northern Afghanistan in the early 1970s, Barfield provides a detailed, but well put together layout of Afghan history and how it relates to the cultural developments in the country.

Major points not found in other works on Afghanistan:

1) A more nuanced approach to the Soviet invasion / occupation of Afghanistan from 1978 - 1989. Barfield works to layout what the USSR hoped to accomplish and true impacts of the USSR invasion. Specifically, he details the competing communists elements in Kabul versus the tribalism outside the urban center that provides the reader with greater understanding of what happened to the country.

2) A more thorough layout of the Taliban as a Pashtun movement versus an Islamic movement, specifically laying out how the Taliban had not truly consolidated power in Afghanistan before the attacks of 9-11. This then sets conditions for many of the issues facing the US and their Allies in the military operations that followed.

Outstanding work, though it would be beneficial if Barfield is able to produce another edition that address the post-2010 developments (or lack there of), especially after the departure of Hamid Karzai from the presidency.

Tim says

I pre-ordered this book before it was published specifically because Barfield is one of the most legit Afghan experts in the west. I read this after having done substantial research on Afghanistan, but nonetheless found this to be an engaging read that would also be accessible for someone who is just beginning to learn about Afghanistan.

The book begins with a thorough overview of the ethnic groups, settlement patterns, religion, and geography. It then discusses the social structures of the dominant Pashtun tribes and traces their rise as the power brokers of Afghanistan from the 1700s onward. He then narrates enough history, in sufficient detail, to help the reader understand current events in context. He offers plausible explanations for the failure in state building that has occurred since 2001, spreading blame around liberally but fairly. In my opinion, the only weakness in the book concerns military specific criticisms. For about 4 pages, he strays outside of his area of expertise and offers assertions regarding military operations, but offers no references to support those assertions. That is really the only criticism that I can muster - 4 pages out of nearly 400.

This is a very insightful book. It is a good first start in beginning further research on the country. But, even people well acquainted with Afghanistan will find this to be a very good read.

James says

In his history, Barfield states the people that know the least about Afghanistan are often the ones that seem to possess the most certainty about its past, present and future. Reading this book is a great way to avoid making a similar mistake. The book recounts the development of the Afghan state from premodern times to the present in fairly chronological order. In the process, it dispels several widely held notions, such as the ideas that Afghanistan has never been “conquered” or experienced stable rule. Both are false. The book also illustrates how Afghanistan has long relied on foreign assistance to govern, but how various rulers have harnessed this assistance in different ways (to varying degrees of success). The last chapters on the current situation are refreshing, especially in their evaluation of the current government, the insurgency and the very strong influence of Pakistan on Afghanistan today. Ultimately, this is a very nuanced and informative description of Afghan history and politics that helps put in perspective the challenges Afghans face today.

Ajk says

Thomas Barfield is probably one of the foremost American scholars of Afghanistan, and he's been doing it for long before it was politically relevant. And his book really shows this, cutting through 500 years of history in 350 pages. Barfield is concise when he needs to be, chatty when he needs to be, and does a good job connecting threads and generally making things logical and readable. For an intro to Afghanistan -- or if you're going to read one book about Afghanistan -- this is probably it.

At the same time, I think it's somewhat obvious that there are ellidations to bring the book to a conversational level and there are some clear editorial nudgings towards "Hey Tom! Make this about Terrorism!" that he accepts begrudgingly. I'd rather he have had 600 pages then to try and crush everything down into a book you can easily be seen carrying.

Some of the historiography, especially, seems rushed. He keeps on mentioning ibn Khaldun without mentioning any of the historians that come from his tree of theory. This really flies in the face of "Islam is an always-changing religion with an always-changing story", which is one of his biggest points. The constant references back to Khaldun come at the expense of constantly updating Khaldun and adjusting how Afghans saw themselves in the world order. It makes things too black and white when he's spending many of his words impressing upon the many shades of gray.

So it's a great introduction. Barfield knows this stuff way better than I do, and is certainly one of the few people you can lean back and trust in a book about Afghanistan. There are quibbles, of course, but goodness, there are quibbles about everything. Don't let that stop you.
