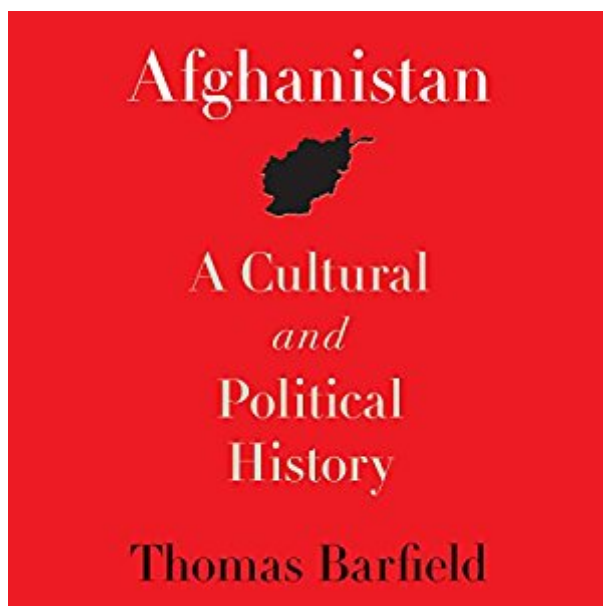


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Afghanistan: A Cultural And Political History



Synopsis

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 16th century to the Taliban resurgence today. Thomas Barfield introduces listeners 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 19th and 20th 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 listening 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I was called to Kabul Afghanistan last August 2012 in response to the Green on Blue murders of 3

of our Border Management Task Force contractors. After 26 years in the military I've seen plenty of war torn countries but this trip to Afghanistan sent me on a mission to better understand what was obviously an extraordinarily complex and multifaceted culture. To do this I selected both this excellent history by Thomas Barfield and the more contemporary view of Ehsan M. Entezar (also reviewed) . For me it took both books, each unique in their perspective, to capture a satisfactory understanding of the ethnic, religious, tribal and political forces at work in Afghanistan. By itself Barfield provides a superb history. Entezar provides very practical insight into every day Afghan culture and is the minimum must read for the western visitor. Together, these two books will serve you well.

Barfield brings an extremely useful combination of skills to bear on his explanation of Afghanistan. In his concise account of Afghani history over the last few centuries he draws on the ability of the social anthropologist to give us the whys of belief, behaviour and process that help us understand the whats of events. He also has the refreshing ability to draw on the whole range of sources in these explanations, including specifically Islamic analyses. One of the best things about this book is the way it avoids the convenient-thinking trap of "eternal Afghanistan": the author can draw sharp distinctions between elements of vigorous continuity in Afghani history and culture, and elements of dramatic and irreversible change. For students of Afghanistan as *The Graveyard Of Imperial Ambition*, I would rank this as one of the two most useful books to read, the other being Gen. Skeen's 1932 "*Lessons In Imperial Rule*", a cheerfully brisk boots-on-the-ground military analysis of why military invaders were inevitably bound for grief.

Afghanistan is a notoriously complex country with a notoriously complex history. Barfield has done a fantastic job of presenting a balanced overview of its history. At times, my head spun as I tried to keep the long cast of characters straight, but when I finished I felt like I had a better grasp on Afghanistan than when I started. If I had to make a light criticism, I would say that the first half of the book is a bit tougher to read because it deals in demographics and geography. It reminded me a bit of the early sections of Louis Dupree's book, *Afghanistan*. The book's biggest strength is the history of Afghanistan since 1901. (I felt like it was the most relevant part to understanding the US effort there.) Since 1901, every Afghan leader has been either killed or exiled. I thought that was a striking piece of information given the US's contentious relationship with President Karzai. I give the book five stars and a must read for anyone interested in the US effort in Afghanistan. For people who follow Afghanistan very closely, some of it will be a review, but I suspect Afghan watchers of all

levels of expertise will benefit from reading this book.

This is the best book if you really want to understand what happened in Afghanistan. This starts with very ancient history and works towards the more modern. He does a great job of delivering a ton of information in a concise and easy to read way. Yes, this book is academic. This is a serious book on a serious subject. It isn't designed for a housewife to read on the beach. If you're really interested in learning about Afghanistan you will need this book. He knocks it out of the park.

Review -Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History"Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History" by Thomas Barfield is a learned, detailed, well written book by an anthropologist, not a historian. Thus we are privileged to see the landscape, the people, and rulers, the events through different eyes. Thomas Barfield not only tells us the history of kingdoms and kings, and battles and wars, but also tells us of the nature of the people of Afghanistan. He tells us of the why and the how of the history. The sweep is broad and the story dramatic.Thomas Barfield writes with an educated tongue. I am glad I have my copy as an ebook so as to use the easy access to a dictionary. But the writing is clear and intriguing. The story is well told and fascinating. The detail is crisp and clear.The book is copyrighted 2010, as a part of the Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics. Looking through the titles in the collection, this book is in highly esteemed company.Thomas Barfield brings us right up to 2010 with many observations on the status of the politics of Afghanistan at that time. He spends time tracing the "longue duree" and how that long history impacts Afghanistan today. Thus, if you are looking for a book placing the current events in Afghanistan in their historical context, this is it. And it does it very well. Some may disagree with his conclusions. But Thomas Barfield supports his conclusions well. The book is well worth the read.

After reading this book, I feel that I have a much better understanding of Afghanistan, especially of the way the past explains the present. The author writes without frills and is not, for example, William Dalrymple (I strongly recommend "Return of a king", about the first contacts between Europe and Afghanistan), but he clearly knows the country very well and is quite convincing.I give it 4 stars instead of 5 because, in my opinion, the "cultural" of the title is quite weak compared to the "political". This is a pity because the author condemns the attempts to impose western cultural values on the local populations. I think he's right, but this issue could have been better developed.

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