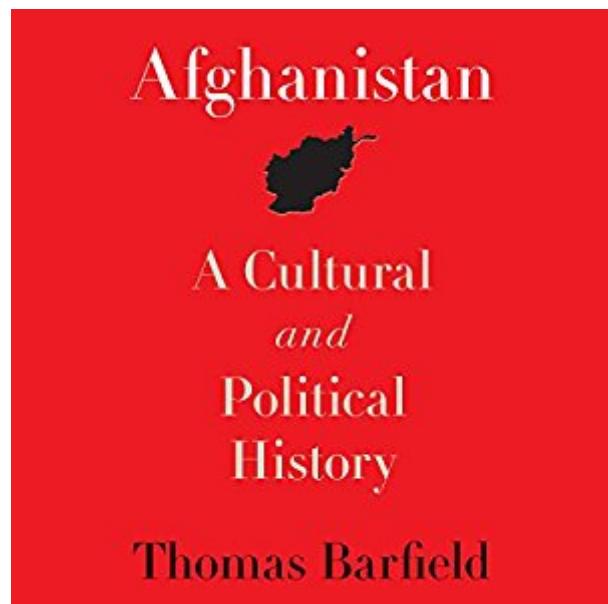


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Afghanistan: A Cultural And Political History



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

According to Thomas Barfield, the only way the Afghans could rid their country of the Russians was to make it ungovernable. Having gotten the Russians out, they have been unable to govern themselves, either. However, based on this impressive review, Afghanistan was never really governed anyway, certainly not in a modern sense. This can be said of any Muslim majority state, with the difference that Afghanistan is, at least according to Barfield, a nation, unlike, say, Iraq or Turkey. It is not quite clear how the Afghans, who divide themselves ethnically, managed to reach and maintain a sense of nationhood, but evidently they have done so. Barfield, an anthropologist at Boston University, did field work in Afghanistan as far back as the early 1970s and is one of few Americans to have lived in the country's rural villages. Since almost all Afghans, until recently, lived in the backwoods, this puts Barfield in a strong position to report. A determinist, Barfield traces much of what Afghanistan is about to its geography and to developments from thousands of years ago, but he also asserts that the decade of Russian occupation changed Afghanistan permanently. Rural Afghans fled to cities, the economy was wrecked, but education was, briefly, expanded. These changes overlie, but they do not erase the ancient geographical, environmental, religious and social structure. It is thus no surprise that President Hamid Karzai, put in power by outsiders because they thought that he was, to some degree, like them, should have lashed out at the powers that keep him in power, choosing deaths of civilians as an excuse.

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).

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