

Afghanistan: Book Review of Books Pertaining to the Present Conflict

The Man Who Would be King: The First American in Afghanistan

by Ben MacIntyre, Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 2004, 351 pages

This is the true story of Josiah Harlan, a Pennsylvania Quaker and adventurer. From 1824 to 1839, he was employed as the surgeon of the Maharaja of Punjab, revolutionary agent of the exiled Afghan King. Later, he becomes General of the Afghan army for the Emir of Kabul, Dost Mohammed Khan. Josiah Harlan was king of the Hazaras for a brief period. Harlan was a man of great talents. He spoke fluent Persian and wrote hundreds of pages on the culture, geography and horticulture of Afghanistan and travelled with all his books. He conducted himself in a way to be respected and appreciated by friends and foes alike because he treated everybody fairly. His writings, which constitute the basis of this book, reveal a complex Afghan society which sounds very contemporary. He discovered Afghanistan fragmented with internecine feuds where each village appeared to be at war with its neighbours fighting for their own immediate interests. A chronic instability with a brutal and complicated civil war had raged with interludes of tranquility. At the same time he noted the grace, dignity and sophistication of the Afghan leaders for their polished manners and ruthless political judgment. They knew how to manipulate Islamic extremism among their people in raising money and stirring up religious fervour in the countryside so they were ready to destroy and die for the sake of God. The book describes the shadowy struggle between Britain and czarist Russia for influence and control in Central Asia which brought Britain to invade Afghanistan with catastrophic results and thousands of lives lost. Harlan firmly believed there was only one way to ensure peace in Afghanistan: co-option and bribery, using the existing system of chieftainships. It is what he called, fiscal diplomacy without incurring the odium of invading and subjugating an unoffending people. A great book for a cultural and political background to today's struggle.

Le royaume de l'insolence: Afghanistan 1504-2001

By Michael Barry, Flammarion 2002, 510 pages

Michael Barry was the representative of Médecins du Monde in Afghanistan during the 1980's and 1990's. He lived and travelled extensively in the country, learning to speak Farsi. Though he is an American citizen, he writes in French. This third edition takes into account NATO's invasion of 2001. At the start of the War of Terror against Ben Laden and the Taliban, which began in late 2001, this book was strongly recommended to me by a History professor as a tool to better understand the contemporary events from past history. The author draws three principles: 1- Afghan people refuse all direct external domination but at the same time need some form of indirect external influence to insure peace and stability in the country; 2- Through history, one learns that at all times, political leaders needed to provide "largesses" to their people to be allowed to govern and money was mostly provided from the outside; 3- The Afghan society seldom managed to unite to form a stable State. Internal divisions, whether between different clans or within the same clans, have created incentives for foreign interventions. As a reaction, Afghans will then unite against foreign invasions since it stimulates their spirit of independence and their lack of fear in front of death. Ethnic solidarity, village hierarchy and Islam are supreme above everything else. As for the "Pure" traditional practice of Islam, it is what gives sense to their life influenced by harsh geographical landscape.

Descent into Chaos: the US and the Failure in Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid, Penguin Books, 2009, 484 pages

Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist whose views are highly respected particularly by The Economist. According to the author, the key to peace in the whole region, is in promoting a dialogue between all concerned States, including Pakistan, India and Iran to first end their mutual disputes, suspicions and competitions and then reach an agreement on non-interference in Afghanistan. The whole region is in fact characterized by lack of basic political freedom, grinding poverty, large economic disparities, and an Islamic extremist political underground. In 2002, the US's priority was the capture of Ben Laden and had a minimalist driven strategy that ignored nation building, in creating real State institutions and rebuilding the country's shattered infrastructures while the Taliban had been defeated. In those critical days of 2003, a few thousand more US troops on the ground, more money for reconstruction, speedier rebuilding of Afghan army and police could easily have turned the tide against the Taliban and enhanced the support of the population for the Government. US's determination to legalize warlord authority against the wishes of the Afghan Government and the people was the most fatal mistake to make. In the meantime, donors undermined their own efforts by not training Afghan officials. The failure to reconstruct early after the departure of the Taliban led to intensified insurgencies. The longer the war goes on, the more deeply rooted the extremists will become.

The Savage War: The Untold Battles of Afghanistan

Murray Brewster, John Wiley and Son, 2011, 320 pages

The author, a Canadian journalist, for 5 years covered the war in Afghanistan, partly embedded within the Canadian military in Kandahar and at other times, alone driving across the country with his fixer. In the introduction he writes: "the disconnect between the stories we tell ourselves and the gritty often uncomfortable reality on the ground was my prime motivation for what you are about to read. My objective is to give a sense of what it looked and felt like to be in the midst of the tempest. Our appreciation of the war in Afghanistan remains painfully shallow." As a journalist his aim is to bear witness, to understand what the soldiers knew, to see it the way the Afghans did and to communicate it back home. He notes that we have caused a lot of harm to ourselves and to the Afghan people who are as divided as they were before. How could anyone have thought that the Afghans would be able to set aside 30 years of blood feuds and homicidal tribal revolts? In many areas, nothing has changed for centuries where Islam and the honour of the tribe are more important than someone's life. As for negotiating with the Taliban, there was the risk of angering the Americans who were never in the mood to talk with insurgents under any circumstances. On one hand, the population embraces the Taliban out of fear or out of ethnic sympathy as is the case with President Karzai who is determined to fight for the supremacy of his tribe, using international forces. In Kandahar, Canada had no policies on a wide range of issues. We just sat back watching as the things deteriorated. The journey to truly understand the shaded heart of Afghanistan has never been completed. Now that the Canadian militaries are out of Kandahar, nobody seems to notice that they were there at all. It is as if nothing ever happened. There is a real possibility of an ethnic war after the departure of NATO forces.

The Long Way Back: Afghanistan Quest for Peace

Chris Alexander, Harper Collins, 2011, 270 pages

The author, after being the first Canadian Ambassador in Kabul for two years, became the Deputy Head of the United Nations' Assistance Mission in Afghanistan for a total period extending from 2002 to 2009. He gives a very personal and honest account of the many meetings he had with a large section of the national and international actors in Afghanistan, including the country's leaders, with the purpose of helping us better understand the Afghans. He writes: "I feel the picture could be made clearer if more of us who have laboured in that country for an extended period of time would give their account of the events we witnessed." He showed a keen interest in the long history of Afghanistan as a crossroad of many civilizations and in the refined culture of its people. He really believes that the country's long way back is a worthy cause. He raises the challenge of creating a legitimate Afghan government while noting the "special role" of Pakistan and Iran in destabilizing the country. He stressed that two ingredients are essential: a regional consensus and a massive commitment, politically and financially to the long-term stability of Afghanistan by donors which have not yet shown that they will get involved on the scale required. He argues that Pakistan is fearful of a stable and prosperous Afghanistan. Pakistan's objective is similar to a neo-colonial aggression with the desire to occupy part of Afghanistan. There is an unspoken understanding that it is acceptable for neighbouring countries to arm and train their chosen allies in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, a comprehensive peace deal with parties to the conflict including the Taliban and the country various warlords has not yet been attempted. Against that, the government would have to deliver physical protection and material benefits, at the local level in creating jobs for the youth. He states that the country would have to reclaim the tradition of love and pluralism created in the 13th century by one of its illustrious son, the Sufi called Rumi.

Prepared by Yves Morneau,
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