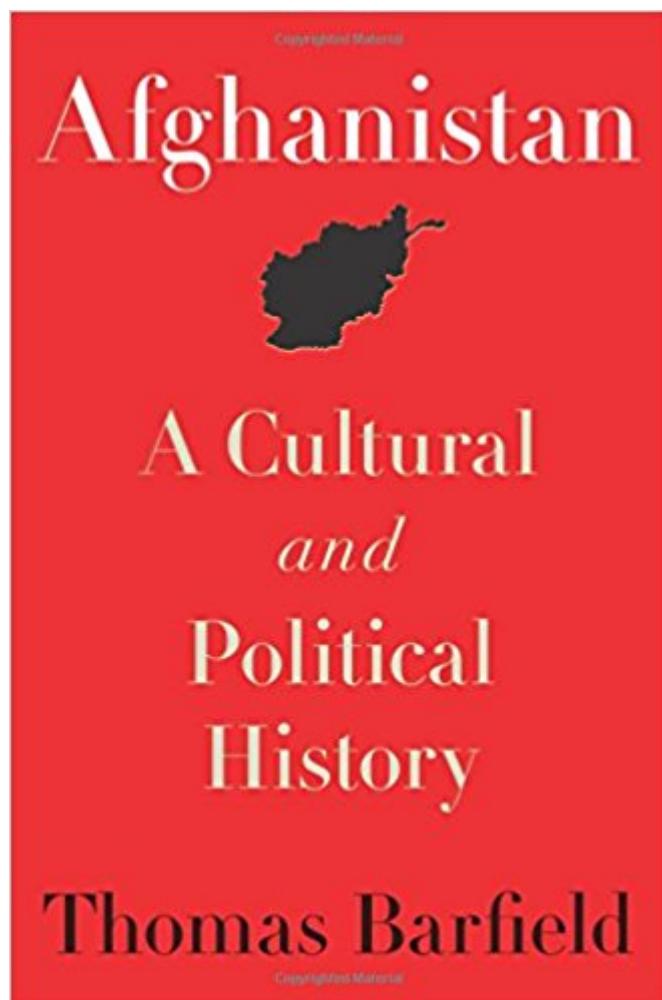


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Afghanistan: A Cultural And Political History (Princeton Studies In Muslim Politics)



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 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.

Book Information

Series: Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics

Paperback: 408 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; Reprint edition (March 25, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691154414

ISBN-13: 978-0691154411

Product Dimensions: 1.2 x 6 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 60 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #39,988 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in Books > History > World > Religious > Religion, Politics & State #40 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Church & State #44 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Middle Eastern

Customer Reviews

"[I]mpressive."--Christopher de Bellaigue, *New York Review of Books*"This book is an authoritative and well-written summary of what we might call the majority view. There is a streak in this book, however, of more radical thinking. . . . It leads him near the end of the book to some startling predictions for Afghanistan's possible futures."--Gerard Russell, *Foreign Policy*"Thomas Barfield's new book offers a remedy for Americans' pervasive ignorance of Afghanistan. . . . *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* is an invaluable book. Mr. Barfield does not give the United States a way out of Afghanistan, but he does provide the context necessary for good policymaking."--Doug Bandow, *Washington Times*"A brilliant book to educate all of us about a country we should know and appreciate. . . . Thomas Barfield's book on Afghanistan is likely to become the first source that serious students turn to as a guide to this complicated country. His comprehensive portrait of Afghanistan is a stunning achievement."--Joseph Richard Preville, *Saudi Gazette*"Barfield, an anthropologist and old Afghanistan hand, has written a history of Afghanistan that weaves in geography, economics, and culture (think tribes, rural-urban dichotomies, value systems) while maintaining a focus throughout on Afghan rulers' relations with their own people and the outside world. [The book] is lightened by many breaks in the narrative to address broad themes or make intriguing comparisons, such as likening patrimonial Afghanistan to medieval Europe."--*Foreign Affairs*"In this riveting study, Barfield does a splendid job of informing us why Afghanistan is the way it has always been."--*Daily Star*"*Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* by Thomas Barfield is a primer for anyone seeking to understand the region, its cultural and political underpinnings."--Raghu Mohan, *BusinessWorld*"Barfield shows how Afghan notions of political legitimacy and social organization are eerily timeless. . . . This book may change the way you think about Afghanistan."--Brian Kappler, *Montreal Gazette*"Impressive. . . . 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."--Harry Eagar, *Maui News*"Despite a plethora of books about Afghanistan in the last few years, a good book on the country has not been published since Louis Dupree's 1973 *Afghanistan*. Maybe the long wait is over. Barfield's new book . . . comes close to matching Dupree's sweeping sense of Afghanistan's complicated history and culture. An anthropologist, as was Dupree, who personally visited most areas of Afghanistan, Barfield is able to put the bewildering complexity of tribes, ethnic groups, religious sects, warlords, and political feuds that is Afghanistan into a coherent whole that is both readable and informative."--*Choice*"Thomas Barfield . . . has provided a rich discussion of the anthropological and historical context for developing such a formula, which is a critical missing piece

in the Obama Administration's policy in Afghanistan. . . . Barfield has given us a valuable effort by a Westerner to decode a very foreign society--never an easy task. As a prism through which to understand the current conflict in Afghanistan, this book reminds us that war is about politics and that policies is about who rules and how rule is legitimated."--Marin Strmecki, American Interest"[Barfield's] deep knowledge brings clarity to a frightfully complicated region that has been and will continue to be of extraordinary importance to policy debates. Scholarly experts in search of an exhaustive reference to the region and those seeking an introduction to the ins and outs of Afghan history will find this book of interest."--Malou Innocent, CATO Journal"Anyone who wishes to comprehend the intricacies of this complex and mysterious country would be wise to consult this exceedingly valuable book."--Raphael Israeli, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs"Overall, Barfield is successful in his attempts to render the history of Afghanistan legible to the trained or casual reader. His clear and approachable writing style, use of narrative, metaphor and personal stories to illustrate his arguments, thoroughness and quickness of pace, and his clear personal joy, investment and fascination with the country make this a highly readable--and more--digestible, historical account. . . . It is, in the end, a fascinating read and a tremendous resource."--Rebecca Gang, *Jura Gentium*"Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History makes a serious attempt to survey and analyze the changing political, cultural, and social landscapes of the country from the ancient time to the present. It provides meaningful and objective insights into governance, state legitimacy, social and economic development, and foreign interventions, and Afghan responses to them, with an admirable degree of thoughtfulness and fluency."--Amin Saikal, Marine Corps University Journal"Barfield has written a magnificent, learned, provoking book. He knows Afghanistan better than almost anyone writing on the topic today. He matches that knowledge with keen insight into how human societies grow and change. Barfield helps us think well about a complex and distant land, which is no small achievement."--Paul D. Miller, Books and Culture"Barfield offers a critique of U.S. and Western strategy in Afghanistan that will likely generate controversy, but strategists, planners, and those on missions in Afghanistan ignore them at their peril. Highly recommended."--Prisco R. Hernandez, *Military Review*"In his admirable volume on Afghanistan, Thomas Barfield has written a real tour de force. . . . No one should venture today into Afghanistan, in whatever capacity, without first reading this guide for the perplexed."--Raphael Israeli, *European Legacy*"Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand either the history of Afghanistan or what is happening there now."--Danny Yee, *Danny Reviews*

"This fascinating survey of Afghanistan is an excellent book for those wanting to go beyond headlines. Written by an expert, with the stylistic flair to be savored by the nonexpert, Afghanistan also has judgments worthy of scholarly reflection. Barfield has captured political, social, and cultural insights of extraordinary importance to the policy arguments of today and tomorrow. Deploying diplomats, soldiers, and aid workers in particular should pay attention."--Ronald E. Neumann, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, 2005-2007"Barfield's book will become the single best source on Afghan history and politics virtually overnight. His deep knowledge of Afghanistan enables him to range widely and knit together a very coherent narrative with a conceptual clarity that is pretty rare. A great deal of learning is evident here, but Barfield wears it lightly."--James C. Scott, author of *Seeing Like a State*"Barfield's book is an excellent general introduction to the country and will be a source of wider debate within and beyond the scholarly community. I am not aware of a history of this kind that explores governance and state legitimacy as its organizing themes."--Magnus Marsden, author of *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*

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 "longe 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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