Brian Glyn Williams


Afghanistan Declassified is written to provide basic information about Afghanistan’s geographical, political, historical, and cultural context to the ongoing war in Afghanistan and to do so, as the author says, in “an effort to bring the real beauty of this country to life for Westerners who might see his land only through the lens of the war on terror.” The work is an expanded and declassified version of a field manual originally written for U.S. forces in Afghanistan. In terms of what it sets out to do, it is a considerable success but it is not intended as a deep or comprehensive study of Afghanistan.

The writing is lively and the history is interspersed with accounts of the author’s travels across Afghanistan and his often fascinating encounters with a variety of locals, from power brokers and warlords to simple villagers. Its style, depth, and anecdotes make it a substantially better read than many other surveys of the country. What it presents is generally accurate. In short, the book provides a good basic understanding of the situation with colorful local vignettes of personalities. However, it should not be taken as a substitute for a deeper understanding of the country available in more scholarly works such as those of Louis Dupree’s classic Afghanistan, Thomas Barfield’s Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History, or Vanda Felbad-Brown’s, Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State Building in Afghanistan.1

For example, Williams’ account of Afghan history is a sort of hop, skip, and jump through the past. It does a fine job highlighting the Afghan resistance to rapid social change that caused rebellions against Amir Amanulla and the Afghan communists alike; something that Westerners intent on social change should certainly bear in mind. Yet it leaves out Amir Habibullah, who was assassinated for much the same reason. It talks little about the struggles for power among the Pushtun ruling clans, yet the memories of these old fights influence tribal allegiances today.

The account of the first Anglo-Afghan war reflects the well known mistakes of the British but does not cover the disunity that often affected Afghan tribal

politics and led to repeated fallings out among resistance leaders both before and after the expulsion of the British in 1842. These constant divisions and the unstable pattern of personal alliances that fail to be institutionalized are also a recurring theme of Afghan history. That said, and remembering that this is a survey work, perhaps the account of a hundred year old war is sufficient for the casual reader and ought not to be a criticism. Yet readers who are really interested in the lessons of the time would be well advised to read William Dalrymple's magisterial account, *The Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan 1839–1842*.²

*Afghanistan Declassified* contains several small mistakes. For example, Williams, referring to the period of aid to the Afghans fighting the Soviet occupation, attributes Pakistani suspicion of America, in part, to U.S. sanctions of Pakistan for the development of nuclear weapons (p. 148). The bottom line of suspicion is correct, but the U.S. sanctions of the Pressler amendment were not applied until after the Soviet withdrawal in 1988–1989.

The book repeats the standard line that because Pakistan largely controlled the distribution of American assistance to the mujahidin resistance that aid was furnished almost entirely to the more radical Islamic forces. While those groups did get the bulk of the arms, there was significant financial support distributed to Ahmad Shah Masoud, as the CIA base chief serving in Peshawar at the time has recounted to me. The extreme difficulties of getting the Afghan resistance forces to act with any degree of unity could have been given more attention. However, none of this changes the correct bottom line that Islamic extremists gained strength during the period of the resistance.

The recounting of various political and resistance groups is necessarily brief and sometimes leaves out details that continue to be important in understanding current Afghani politics and developments. For example, the discussion of the resistance to the Taliban by the minority Shiʿi Hazara community presents the Hazars as more unified than was or is the case. There were numerous Hazara resistance groups that split and re-split over time despite Iranian attempts to achieve more unity. Major leaders like Khalili and Mohaqeqq continue to pull in different directions. The struggle for influence has repeated itself since the war in contests for leadership in the parliament and the two leaders are supporting different candidates for president in the 2014 elections. While the details of these inter-ethnic power struggles may not be important, their effect on the political strength of the Hazara community remain significant. That said, the book’s main points about the status of the Hazaras and their resis-

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