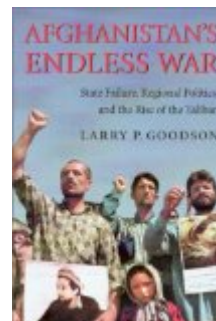


Larry P. Goodson. *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics, and the Rise of the Taliban*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. vii + 264 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-98111-6.



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The Far Reach of Terrorism

The appeal of historical analysis only increases when recent events provide an urgency to learn something about the topic at hand. Such is the case with Larry Goodson's book, *Afghanistan's Endless War*. Goodson, a professor of international studies at Bentley College in Massachusetts, tries to explain Afghanistan's deterioration as a state, though he does so prior to September 11. Given this timing, his study fulfills a more prophetic role than it might have otherwise.

In this book, the Cold War, not terrorism, grabs Goodson's attention as he depicts Afghanistan as a representative example of the many third world countries struggling to maintain themselves as states in the aftermath of the great power confrontation. In fact, so muted is the role of terrorism that neither al Qaeda nor Osama bin Laden appear in the otherwise very useful appendix and glossary listing the major organizations and actors in Afghanistan's recent history. Rather, Goodson tries to indicate that the governments of these weak states are vulnerable and can hardly escape change; but utter collapse can only

be blamed on the neglect of the international community, specifically an indifferent United States and a greatly weakened Russia (p. 8).

>From the perspective of determining state failure, Goodson identifies six critical factors to explain the collapse of this nation: ethnic-linguistic cleavages, social structures, religious ideology, the recent and devastating history of conflict, geopolitical position, and limited economic development. While these factors can be applied to other countries, each relates well to Afghanistan because taken together, they offer a more comprehensive view than past studies. Goodson promises something extra when he labels these components "historically the most influential" in the country (p. xii). So this text looks to extend its analysis further into the past than other books on this topic.

The author does not deliver on this promise, however. Only one chapter establishes the deep historical roots of these "critical factors," and Goodson spends much of his time examining Afghanistan's recent history. His middle chapters recount Soviet intervention in 1980, and the resul-

tant impact of this conflict. The war's importance is far-reaching because it damaged Afghanistan physically. In turn, the widespread property destruction and tremendous loss of life disrupted the country's society and culture. In this respect, the war fostered a cult of violence, and this reality, coupled with the destruction of the leaders of "traditional society," created the Taliban. This youthful and religiously inspired group seized control of a crippled nation, though it offered only a limited future given the inexperience and austere religious outlook of its leaders (p. 131).

This analysis produces a laundry list that sustains the accepted view of Afghanistan. A war-torn country encounters disruption in every way, so it embraces narcotics traffic in lieu of economic development (p. 123), and it accepts an authoritarian regime to counteract lawlessness (p. 109). The consequences are also familiar. For example, Goodson points to the ill treatment of women under the Taliban regime as evidence of the extremism of the new government (p. 119). The practice of the Muslim faith, as mandated by the Taliban, creates the subsequent and inevitable alienation of a substantial portion of Afghan society. The Pushtun ethnicity of the Taliban, though constituting a majority, only furthers the existing racial divisions within the nation (p. 81).

In sum, this text serves as a synthesis more than a seminal work. The lack of primary sources underscores this point. This limits the book, although it does not diminish its utility of offering a well-told story that makes sense of a complicated picture. Still, one wishes the author clarified a point he reaches for but largely stops short of articulating: that Afghans embraced a cultural retreat into the past with a call to religious fever, in order to soften or detract from the reality of Afghanistan's decay as a nation-state. Unfortunately, the past offered more fissures than solace, contributing to Afghanistan's current fate.

Goodson's synthesis also has the advantage of drawing much attention to some other important

areas. For example, Afghanistan's refugee problem takes its place alongside many recent and tragic diasporas in other areas of the world (p. 129). This situation relates to a second significant emphasis, that of regional politics. The Taliban became no more than a client of Pakistan (p. 114), and the resistance formed in opposition to this group became the hope of other neighboring states, such as Iran and India. Ignorance or indifference to the extent of this refugee problem provides more evidence of Afghanistan's neglect by the international community. So too does the lack of outside interest in the "changing regional environment," as the author calls it.

Such was not always the case. One has to agree with the author that the communist government in Kabul would have fallen in 1980, but for USSR military intervention. The Soviets would have overcome the mujahideen resistance, save for American arms imports (p. 157). Goodson occupies safe ground when he argues that intervention was at a premium during the Cold War, but waned after this point. For example, the author dismisses arguments that the United States supported the Taliban to secure oil rights in the area (pp. 123, 165).

Another strength of this book is the author's ability to weigh the cost of this indifference. Global neglect exacerbated this region's woes. After September 11, powerful nations can no longer dismiss regional problems as local affairs. For this reason, the last chapter of the book, titled "The Future of Afghanistan," captures the most interest. Up to this point, one could list Afghanistan, as the author does, as "the cheapest and most significant of [America's] Cold War victories" (p. 147). After September 11, this statement needs to be reconsidered. Clearly, in the post-Cold War era, an extremely wounded nation can extract a pound of flesh from its tormentors. So, while Afghanistan may be an example of a failed state, its larger importance is proving the far reach of terrorism.

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