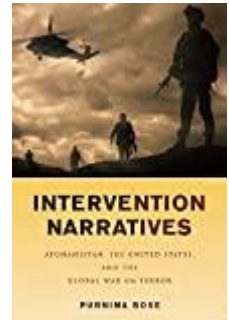


**Purnima Bose.** *Intervention Narratives: Afghanistan, the United States, and the Global War on Terror.* War Culture Series. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020. 234 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-978805-98-9.



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In this new book, Purnima Bose, an English professor at Indiana University, examines the cultural myths that mask and legitimize the use of US power in Afghanistan. Using postcolonial and feminist critical approaches, she explores the narratives underlying cultural texts, like films, novels, and memoirs, about US involvement in Afghanistan since the 1980s.

Although the language of critical theory often leads to dense prose, Bose offers a valuable critique of how cultural narratives act as the “soft weapons” of what she calls an imperial and neo-liberal policy, subtly justifying the use of US power to consumers at home (p. 2). The most compelling chapter examines the “premature withdrawal” narrative through such texts as the movie *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007) and the novel *The Black Tulip* (2002). Aside from relying on tired Orientalist tropes, these texts portray the key US error in Afghanistan as withdrawing its attention after the

Soviet retreat and permitting the country to slide into civil war and Taliban rule.

These texts encourage audiences not to question the original US policy of supporting the mujahedin, which contributed to the rise of Islamic extremism in Central Asia, while also justifying the post-2001 intervention as a corrective to a decade of neglect. She shows, for instance, that screenwriter Aaron Sorkin wanted to end *Charlie Wilson’s War* with allusions to September 11 that would challenge audiences to see how US policies helped set the context for the rise of Al Qaeda. However, conservatives involved in the film’s production objected and ensured a more feel-good, morally simplistic ending. Bose demonstrates how these texts selectively deploy history to encourage audiences not to criticize the US intervention in Afghanistan before and after September 11 while also depicting Afghan peoples as in need of rescue and enlightenment.

Echoing Melani McAllister's seminal work, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (2001), Bose shows that these narratives justify the US presence in Afghanistan to a variety of audiences. Texts that use the "capitalist-rescue" narrative, for instance, celebrate women's empowerment through their engagement in capitalist enterprises backed by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), like sewing dresses and opening beauty salons. Bose argues that these texts simultaneously portray the Afghan War as a feminist mission, an argument also endorsed by the George W. Bush administration, and justify Afghanistan's integration into neoliberal global capitalism. This is an important insight into how cultural forms have helped sustain popular support and/or indifference to this war among such populations as liberals and feminists that might otherwise oppose US military interventionism.

Despite these valuable contributions, *Intervention Narratives* features some significant problems. For one, Bose deploys a rigid framework of US policy as imperialism in which the real goal of intervention is not "to contain 'terrorism' per se" but to "consolidate global power through the creation of permanent military bases in Afghanistan and to maximize the profits of particular industries" (p. 168). How exactly US power has been "consolidated" through the loss of more than two thousand soldiers and two trillion dollars in Afghanistan since 2001 is not explained. She also downplays that the core reason for US intervention was not imperialist expansion but counterterrorism: destroying and disrupting Al Qaeda and other groups that had attacked the United States and preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven for such groups. Moreover, this imperialist framework ignores that Afghanistan has retained its sovereignty since shortly after the 2001 US invasion and that the United States has hardly succeeded in bossing around leaders like

Hamid Karzai. In this work, "imperialist" seems more an accusation than a useful analytical tool.

Furthermore, Bose erases the complexities of US policy in Afghanistan by fixating on negatives and shortcomings. She stresses all the problems that US intervention has not resolved in Afghanistan, from government corruption to political violence to opium cultivation. Yet she omits the ways life has improved since the Taliban's fall, including child mortality, literacy, education, life expectancy, access to safe drinking water and health care, and consistent if patchy economic growth. The messy truth is that US intervention has featured shortcomings and tenuous successes, but Bose's one-sided portrayal handicaps the book's goal of promoting informed, critical debates about US foreign policy, debates that must include a full accounting of positives and negatives.

Occasionally, these imbalances veer into indefensible moral equivalences, particularly in Bose's discussion of the ethical frameworks of George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden. She sees Bush and bin Laden as religious fanatics sharing a "similar logic of reciprocity and violent punishment" and a "parallel structure of binary thinking" (pp. 17, 141). These are not tenable claims. Bush clearly distinguished between the radical fringe and the peaceful majority of Muslims, and the armed forces under his control sought to minimize civilian deaths. Bin Laden, in contrast, excluded not only non-Muslims from the circle of humanity but also millions of Muslims; he sought to impose theocratic tyranny on the world and aimed to maximize the slaughter of civilians. One need not agree with Bush's conduct of the war on terror to acknowledge the moral gulf between these actors. Furthermore, Bose views Bush's invasion of Afghanistan mainly as "payback" or "retribution," ignoring the clear legal basis of the conflict in self-defense and the widespread international sanction for the invasion (pp. 129, 130).

It is always valuable to see how cultural texts select and omit history and human beings from

their narratives and provide justifications for the exercise of power. As Bose shows, popular culture has played a key role in encouraging complacency and self-righteousness in Americans' views of their nation's global actions, a point reinforced by McAllister's work on media and culture and Andrew Bacevich's critique of a popular culture that encourages uncritical militarism. Her analysis provides teachers with the tools to help students break down the agendas of these seemingly innocuous forms of entertainment.

However, this book's imbalanced, oversimplified portrayal of the United States as an imperialist supervillain and its neglect of the complexities of history limit its ability to inform more responsible public engagement with the Afghan War. These shortcomings reflect a larger problem with critical theory-informed analysis of US foreign policy. The US perception of threats and injustices around the world may be shaped by racial, Orientalist, gendered, and other biases, and it is worth understanding how those distortions originate and affect policy. Yet those problems are not mere products of cultural discourses or figments of those biases and fantasies but often complicated, real challenges that leaders must address.

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