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Afghanistan less puzzling when you consider its history

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- For centuries, Afghan society has been complex and divided, despite efforts by so many contemporary government officials and news analysts to transform those complexities into a black-and-white battle of good against evil.

Widespread poverty challenges the best efforts to improve the Afghan economy. Internal ethnic and political rivalries have been divisive for centuries.

Women's rights, an infant mortality rate of 50 percent, an illiteracy rate of nearly 90 percent and massive narcotics trafficking continue to undermine stability.

Alexander the Great and Genghis Kahn failed in their efforts to control Afghanistan.

More recently, Afghanistan has been targeted for control by Russian czars, Napoleonic France, German Kaisers and Nazis, as well as leaders from China, Iran, Pakistan, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and United States.

Other nations repeatedly sought to make Afghanistan a "buffer state" to protect their own imperial interests, stunting local economic development in the process.

Today, Afghanistan remains in the center of international trade routes, some of which could pipe oil from Central Asian nations to the Indian Ocean and other seaports.

Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould's new book *Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story* provides insight into these complexities and their origins.

Today, many analysts across the political spectrum question whether our reliance on military force can ever bring solutions to that troubled country.

Conservative columnist George Will and the libertarian Cato Institute believe we should withdraw as soon as possible. So do analysts such as Andrew J. Bacevich, a Boston University professor who graduated from West Point and fought in Vietnam, and Steven M. Walt, a mainstream professor of international affairs at Harvard.

Efforts to "stabilize" or "democratize" Afghanistan have already killed nearly 900 American soldiers.

Today, the United States spends \$65 billion a year in Afghanistan. Ultimately, those costs will be much higher, since they do not include future long-term veterans' benefits or costs to replace military equipment.

But "nuance and vision were never the strong points of American diplomacy," the authors argue.

Ahmed Rashid, a renowned Pakistani reporter and author of *Taliban and Descent into Chaos*, said:

"Invisible History is a defining work of great wisdom and depth in which the authors get to the bottom of the cauldron that is Afghanistan. We cannot fully understand today's Afghanistan without reading this insightful book."

Justifications and alliances

Invisible History provides a wealth of often generally-unknown details about the tribal and ethnic alliances that created current divisions and government instability.

"Like other interventions in modern times, the British denied that they were invading Afghanistan but claimed they were merely supporting the legitimate government," Fitzgerald and Gould write.

British imperialists and American occupiers both aligned themselves with the religious right.

"Afghanistan's most reactionary Islamists and Britain found a perfect marriage," the authors write.

To undermine the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during the 1980s, the United States allied itself with Muslim fundamentalists, playing a major role in creating, funding and strengthening the Taliban.

During the Carter administration, top security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski believed an alliance with the Islamic right would help undermine the influence of the Soviets, who invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

During a 1998 interview, Brzezinski admitted U.S. policies of arming Afghan rebels in the late 1970s to help provoke a Soviet invasion were a mistake.

U.S. policies were often developed in close coordination with leaders in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Pakistan is not an ally in the peace process, the authors stress.

With a population of 181 million compared to Afghanistan's 25 million, Pakistan seeks to dominate its fractured neighboring country for its own advantage.

In recent decades, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI, has routinely allied itself with the CIA to promote the "radicalization" of local tribes on the Pakistan's northwestern border with Afghanistan.

"The recruitment of Arab Al Qaeda fighters and the very creation of the Taliban itself were all part of a grand plan by the CIA and Pakistan's ISI agency to conquer South Central Asia," the authors write.

What will the future bring?

Today, Afghanistan has become "a neo-feudal, corporatized playground of international greed, warlords, NATO troops, private military companies and radicalized Islamists," the authors write.

In 2005, former British House of Commons leader Robin Cook appealed to a G8 summit meeting:

"The breeding grounds of terrorism are to be found in the poverty of back streets, where fundamentalism offers a false, easy sense of pride and identity to young men who feel denied of any hope or economic opportunity for themselves.

"A war on world poverty may well do more for security of the West than a war on terror," Cook said.

Today, any possibility of creating a democratic government in Afghanistan faces new questions.

Bacevich warns, "The United States is in a fight for its life - not because of what happened on that Sept. 11, 2001, but because of the way America responded to it."

Ballot-box stuffing and fraudulent vote counts undermined the Aug. 20 presidential election won by incumbent President Hamid Karzai.

United Nations investigators threw out more than a million votes, requiring Karzai to face a run-off election on Nov. 7 against former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah, his leading opponent.

Last Wednesday, the New York Times reported Ahmed Wali Karzai, Hamid's brother, has been paid regularly by the CIA since 9/11 and is probably a major player in the growing Afghan opium trade.

The CIA pays Karzai to recruit fighters for Afghan paramilitary forces operating under its direction near Kandahar, a southern Afghan city.

During a Senate floor speech 10 days ago, Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., said, "There is no profit in making the same mistakes over and over again, and no future in building a foundation of shifting sand.

"Our military planners and our Afghanistan policy analysts as well as members of this Senate would do well to spend some time considering the history, geography and cultures of Afghanistan."

So would all of us. Invisible History is a good start.

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