

# Reviews and Abstracts

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## Book Review

**Larry P. Goodson, *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of the Taliban.*** Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001. 264pp., maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN: 0-295-98050-8. \$22.50 paper.

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A country shaped and molded by its experience with more than two decades of war, Afghanistan has been in the news for sometime now and will probably remain so for a long time to come.

The Afghan War from 1978 to the 1990s was one of the deadliest and most persistent conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century. Millions of Afghanistan's indigenous population became casualties — they were either killed, wounded, driven into refugee status outside of Afghanistan or internally displaced. Every region of the country has been touched by the war. The countryside was ravaged, with widespread destruction of villages, fields, orchards and irrigation systems. Large sections of major cities were reduced to rubble, roads turned into dirt tracks and farms made unsafe after being sewn with mines instead of seed. The economy collapsed. The education system and other modernizing sectors of Afghan society were completely disrupted. The country became home to deepening ethnic tensions, drug traffickers, international terrorists and bloody warlords. The struggle for control of Afghanistan not only delayed efforts to improve the situation, but also deepened the crisis.

Afghanistan's strategic position, sandwiched between the Middle East, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent along the ancient silk route, means that it has long been fought over despite its rugged and forbidding terrain. It was at the center of the so-called "Great Game" in the nineteenth century when Imperial Russia and the British Empire in India strived for influence. It became a key Cold War battleground after thousands of Soviet troops invaded in 1979 to prop up a pro-Communist regime, leading to a major confrontation that drew in

the United States and Afghanistan's neighbors. However, the outside world eventually lost interest after the withdrawal of Soviet forces while the country's prolonged civil war dragged on.

The emergence of the Taliban in 1994, the so-called group of "Islamic students," formed a new elite with limited governing capabilities and with qualifications often derived from their gun barrels and misunderstanding and misapplication of Islamic Law. They brought a temporary measure of stability after two decades of conflict, but their extreme version of Islam attracted widespread criticism. Even those who supported them soon recognized that the Taliban were incapable of governing the country. Their leaders were too inexperienced and uneducated in government and politics to rule effectively and they were too committed to their ideology to compromise. Until recently in control of about 97 percent of the country, they were initially supported and assisted by several countries including the U.S. However, they had been in dispute with the international community over the presence on their soil of Osama bin Laden, who has been accused by the U.S. of masterminding the bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and the attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001. After the Taliban's refusal to hand over bin Laden, the United States initiated intensive aerial attacks on Afghanistan in October 2001, paving the way for opposition groups to drive the Taliban from power in December 2001. The tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the U.S. and the American government's response to these have complicated the situation further in Afghanistan, probably leading to another major confrontation involving yet another superpower. It is as if history is repeating itself in Afghanistan. What is wrong

with Afghanistan today is what was not right yesterday and what is happening today seems to be a repetition of the past. Although Larry P. Goodson's book *Afghanistan's Endless War: State Failure, Regional Politics and the Rise of the Taliban*, provides us with little information about the involvement of the U.S. with the victorious Mujahidin, and disputes the United States' initial involvement with the Taliban, the book is an excellent study of Afghanistan and its society in the last twenty years. It remains an outstanding work on the range of transformations that more than two decades of the enormously destructive Afghan war have produced in that country.

Larry P. Goodson, a US scholar and an associate professor of International Studies at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts, has set forth to examine and explain what has been happening in Afghanistan in the last twenty years. Goodson sees much of the recent scholarship on Afghanistan's modern period, which focuses on one or a few factors at a time, as falling short in helping us to understand Afghanistan. He thus views his book as an attempt to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of how various factors intersect and combine to shape that country today. Approaching the topic from theoretical and empirical perspectives, Goodson focuses his work from the 1980s to early 2001 with references often made to the history of Afghanistan. In his opinion, the Afghan war against the Soviets increased some powerful centrifugal forces within Afghan society, even as it discredited and destroyed the country's governing institutions. The seeds of Afghanistan's state failure had been well planted by then. He believes that the deepening of ethnic tensions, the rising of Islamist ideology and the entrenching of a narcotics economy were all becoming the defining characteristics of the country, and that all the features that were emerging as problems during the 1980s caused the collapse of the country in the 1990s.

According to Goodson, in order to understand Afghanistan and the region it anchors, we must focus attention on six critical factors: Afghanistan's ethnic-linguistic cleavages, its social structures, its religious ideology, its long and devastating conflict, its geopolitical position and its limited economic development. He then spells out how the relative weight of each factor in understanding the country shifts with time, making it impossible and invalid to suggest that one or several of them are sufficient to explain the situation there.

*Afghanistan's Endless War* is divided into six chapters. The first chapter focuses, in some depth, on two of these six factors, the ethnic-linguistic cleavages and the social structures, and examines Afghanistan's early history of inadequate state and nation building. Chapter 2 is devoted to the historical factors that shaped modern Afghanistan, namely the enormous social and demographic transformations because of its geographical location. The chapter gives an outline of Afghan history from the Anglo-Russian competition in Central Asia in the nineteenth century to the Soviet invasion of that country in 1979. In Chapter 2 Goodson also puts in plain words that there developed an increased ethnic consciousness in Afghanistan from the nineteenth century period of anarchy, which laid the foundation for ethnic relationships in the country today, but it was not an ideology of nationalism. The social changes did not occur in a vacuum; there were tremendous political pressures from outside sources. The Anglo-Russian competition in Central Asia ultimately fostered the creation of the modern state of Afghanistan, causing the demarcation of its ethnically divisive borders and beginning the process that has culminated in the Afghan war. In Goodson's view the combination of nineteenth century foreign infringement and simultaneous internal anarchy created a state structure without the concomitant development of an Afghan state.

The core of the study, Chapters 3 and 4, examines in detail how the local, low-intensity rebellions of late 1978 evolved into a war of national destruction that changed the course of world history. Goodson analyzes the Afghan War in eight stages in Chapter 3, starting from the coup d'état in April 1978, which overthrew Mohammad Daoud's nationalist regime and installed the Communist Party in power, the rebellions against this and the Soviet invasion in December 1979, leading to heavy fighting in all parts of the country between the Soviet Army and the Mujahidin. This chapter also deals with the emergence of the Taliban movement and its rule over the country. In Chapter 4 Goodson explores the widespread destruction of Afghanistan's physical infrastructure and human resources as well as the profound alteration of its ethnic-religious balance, socio-economic system and sociocultural framework. It also gives special attention to the ideological struggle within Afghanistan which gave rise to the Taliban. His analysis tells us that it is the physical destruction that underlies the rest of the changes wrought by the war in Afghanistan. The physical destruction in that

country took two forms: destruction of population and destruction of property. More than 50 percent of Afghanistan's population has been directly harmed by the war through death, injury or displacement, and the destruction of property has been multifaceted. Since 1978, virtually everything has been a target: cities, towns, villages, houses, mosques and minarets, schools, hospitals, industrial structures, other buildings, roads, bridges, orchards and fields have all been damaged or destroyed during the fighting. The war has destroyed the pre-war elites and the social system that supported them, leading to the development of new political elites — the Mujahidin and the Taliban — that are founded on a newly prominent role for youth and Islamist ideologues. The collapse of a functioning government and social institutions made violence a more common means of settling disputes, and the rise of the Taliban has sharpened the ethnic, linguistic, religious and tribal divisions in Afghanistan.

In Chapter 5 Goodson analyzes Afghanistan's multifaceted role in regional affairs, a role that on the eve of the twenty-first century has altered Afghanistan's geostrategic significance. Goodson describes how, as a linchpin country, Afghanistan connects Central Asia with South and West Asia in the new geopolitics of the 1990s; how its geographical location and cross-border ethnic ties can play a critical role in trade between South Asia, Southwest Asia and Central Asia; and how outside actors influenced Afghanistan during the war years of 1980s and continued to do so in various ways during 1990s. He also reminds us that numerous outside actors have shaped previously isolated Afghanistan over the past twenty years, and without them the Afghan War could never have occurred and been maintained at such high intensity for so long. He stresses that the overlapping of ethnolinguistic and religious identity groups, permeable national borders, and weak state governments throughout the region make possible ongoing ethnic conflicts. Afghanistan has been and remains today a country

that is significantly affected by its neighbors, while affecting them significantly, as well.

In the final chapter, acknowledging the difficulties of predicting any positive future for Afghanistan, Goodson foresees a range of possible scenarios: continued fragmentation, national disintegration, state reconstruction under a Pushtun-led government and national reintegration under a broad-based government. The state cannot reassert itself, nor can there begin to be a reintegration of the Afghan nation, so long as various ethnic militias refuse to cede control over their local areas to a national government run by members of another ethnolinguistic, religious or ideological group. An alternative arrangement in his view would be for local communities to govern themselves, which would require at least the willingness of opposing ethnic-based militias to adopt a tolerant attitude toward the customs and culture of other groups. Leaving aside for a moment the motivations of regional actors, Goodson concludes that for the vast majority of Afghans there is no longer any acceptable reason for the fighting to continue. The reality is that the battle is increasingly over ethnic identity and the regional aspirations of neighboring states. Since significant political fragmentation along ethnic-linguistic-religious lines has already occurred, this will provide the foundation for long-term dominance of the periphery over the center. Afghanistan's current international borders might or might not remain unchanged in the short run, but the reality would be a state divided. However, in the long run, a broad-based government that includes all the major groups and actors, adequately represented and with sufficient guarantees of local authority, is probably the only solution to Afghanistan's problems.

*Afghanistan's Endless War* is certainly a welcome addition to the study of Afghanistan as well as the study of state formation and nation building. It is also a concise analysis of what state failure means both for failed states themselves and for the stability of the regions in which they are located.

## Abstract

*Transitions Online Annual Survey 2001 CD-ROM*. Prague: Transitions Online, Inc., 2002. \$100.

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Annual surveys on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union published by the organization Transitions Online [TOL] (formerly OMRI) have traditionally provided a brief, comprehensive and authoritative review of political, economic and foreign policy developments in this region. Unfortunately, the East-West Institute and M. E. Sharpe stopped publishing hard copy editions in 1998, but the annual surveys did not disappear. TOL began publishing them on its website (<<http://www.tol.cz>>) in 1999, and in 2002 it introduced the annual surveys on CD-ROM.

The *TOL Annual Survey 2001 CD-ROM* is a one-stop guide to the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union. The annual surveys cover the most important political, economic and foreign policy events in post-Communist societies. The reviews of individual countries (28 of them) also include maps, useful links and statistics. The 2001 edition made important changes from previous

online annual reports: the publisher added background analysis by including the most important and interesting articles contributed by field correspondents from the region.

The *TOL Annual Survey 2001 CD-ROM* is an invaluable resource for all institutional and personal libraries. It is also a very useful tool for undergraduate and post-graduate students who would like to get quick and comprehensive comparative references to recent developments in several former Communist countries. The CD-ROM seems to be designed to compete with other sources available on the internet, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and Business Eastern Europe (BEE).

The CD-ROM costs \$100 plus shipping. More information can be accessed at the newly launched TOL Store at: <<http://www.tol.cz>>.