



In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation

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Afghanistan has been a strategic prize for foreign empires for more than 200 years. The British, Russians, and Americans have all fought across its beautiful and inhospitable terrain, in conflicts variously ruthless, misguided and bloody. This violent history is the subject of David Loyn's magisterial book. It is a history littered with misunderstandings and broken promises, in which the British, the Russians, and later the Americans, constantly underestimated the ability of the Afghans. *In Afghanistan* brilliantly brings to life the personalities involved in Afghanistan's relationship with the world, chronicling the misunderstandings and missed opportunities that have so often led to war.

With 30 years experience as a foreign correspondent, David Loyn has had a front-row seat during Afghanistan's recent history. *In Afghanistan* draws on David Loyn's unrivalled knowledge of the Taliban and the forces that prevail in Afghanistan, to provide the definitive analysis of the lessons these conflicts have for the present day.

In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation Details

Date : Published June 23rd 2009 by St. Martin's Press (first published October 7th 2008)

ISBN : 9780230614031

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Format : Hardcover 288 pages

Genre : History, War, Military Fiction



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Mark Peterson says

A comprehensive book on foreign involvement in Afghanistan starting with the British -- Soviets -- Americans. Very current that shows the challenges that we are facing in trying to bring a centralized democratic government to a tribal country. The last two chapters are very interesting and thought provoking.

Meri says

I didn't finish it. It was informative, but it read like a textbook. There was no hook.

M.W. Duncan says

A great book for anyone interested in the history of conflict in Afghanistan. For me, a lot of what was written was familiar from previous reading and study but the author went into a detail not always found in these types of books. He has a perfect writing style, steering well away from the dry and boring academic word to more a pleasant narrative bringing the interesting and varied characters to life. I would not hesitate to recommend this to anyone with an interest in history. 5 stars

Bakhtiar Safi says

Interesting read - now I have a clearer idea about the current war in my country. It's not something new for sure and has similarity to situation in late 18 and 19 centuries. So thanks to David Loyn for presenting this good read.

Luke Edwards says

I had to read this book for a Military History class my last semester of college and overall I would say that it is "ok." I agree with other user reviews that say it is written in a finger-wagging style of "You should've known better." All-in-all though, the book is well written and does a great job of staying out of the politics of current wars. Loyn gives detailed accounts of what happened to the different troops in each war and gives an overall view of battles that shows the reader how and where the mistakes were made that caused the failures in this nation.

Bob Shepherd says

Loyn's page-turning history of failed British campaigns in Afghanistan will have you wondering why our current policy makers have learned so little.

Aditya Sridhar says

Very informative. Afghanistan is a white elephant for any occupying force. I read it at a time when the NATO forces were suffering setbacks in handling the Taliban insurgency, which put the book more into context.

Edward says

200 years of invasion of this country by the British, the Russians, and now the Americans. The British journalist isn't optimistic that the Americans will succeed any more than their predecessors, both of who had good reasons for wanting to "stabilize" the country, just as we do. Unfortunately, a culture of corruption, ingrained tribalism, and rugged geography are reasons for Afghanistan's mostly ungovernable state. Interestingly, although he is no apologist for them, Loyn feels the Taliban have been demonized.

Mark Wells says

An interesting perspective on the history and cultural considerations that form the background to the ongoing intervention in Afghanistan

Dave says

There are some aggravating things about this book. Among them is that it is written in the finger wagging 'You should have known better' style that is not unusual with historians, and more prevalent with journalists like David Loyn. One also might wish for a little more detail between the Russians leaving and the US attack in 2001.

Still, the book is decently written and gives enough details without bogging the reader down. As one might guess, the book is a cautionary tale. It does not bother me so much that the Russians failed in Afghanistan on multiple occasions. It does worry me that the British also failed numerous times.

Unlike the Russians, the British had the whole 'colonialism' thing down fairly well. One could make the argument that their empire was on the whole beneficial. Their goals in Afghanistan were fairly limited, often reduced to establishing a defensive frontier or propping up a pro-British person in power in Kabul. And despite these things, they failed every time. No one, foreign or domestic (with one notable exception) is able to control Afghanistan for very long.

Most worrisome is the apparent pattern with each foreign invasion: 1) Initial overwhelming and fairly easy success, 2) A waiting period, 3) A sudden resurgence that catches the invader off guard and leaves them running away - a pattern that so far fits our involvement (minus the running away part - so far).

I do not want to be doom and gloom over our current involvement in the country, but the persistence of memory is apparently very long in Afghanistan. They may have lost battles, but not wars. We shall see whether or not the Taliban can be marginalized and the Karzai government can win the loyalty of enough key areas and people.

Prabhat Singh says

First things first, have a map (preferably a physical one) handy before you start the book, and mark Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Herat, Helmand and Oxus River on it. This will help you understand the historical significance of this hitherto divided nation's geography.

As is quite evident, Loyn does a great job of bringing out the similarities in Afghanistan-related events of the past 200 years. However, what most readers might have missed is the fact that similarities exist in not just the response of Afghans - with radical Islam at its core, then and now - to foreign invaders, but also in the holier-than-thou, deeply racist attitude of white people towards others, which has been at the heart of their imperialist ambitions since 16th century, and has led to many invasions being botched because the invaders simply didn't bother to understand the local conditions and people. Throughout the 19th and the early 20th century, the three favourite words of the British to describe the Afghans were "barbaric", "beastly" and "savage". While they're rarely heard now in light of the newfound political correctness, there's little doubt that the modern white invaders suffer from the same mindset and hubris. The White Man's Burden of yore has simply been replaced by a perfunctory concern for human rights and democracy. Little wonder, then, that they commit the same mistakes and suffer similar consequences.

The last quarter of the book throws light on the social makeup of the forlorn country. The Taliban - a group that attacks women's rights with unparalleled zeal - is not the cause, but only the most extreme manifestation of a deeply conservative Islamic society, made worse by Saudi-Wahabbist money pouring into the country and neighbouring Pakistan, the western part of which has deep ties with Afghanistan. The strategic miscalculations and rampant corruption in the wake of the US-led invasion led to popular and military resurgence of Taliban, which has left Afghanistan in the quagmire it is in today, 16 years after the invasion.

Ed says

Oh, good, just what we need--another book written by someone who knows a lot about Afghanistan showing how it has been the graveyard of empire. "In Afghanistan" as its subtitle makes clear, covers only the past couple of centuries although that is enough to show the folly of the U.S. war effort there.

Loyn sticks very close to his subject--he doesn't stray into geopolitics, doesn't speculate on whether fighting in some of the worst inhabited terrain in the world is a good way to stop a terrorist movement that operates from Africa, South Asia and Western Europe. He details how everyone who invaded Afghanistan, whether

they came from the north (Russia), over the Hindu Kush (British) or flew into Bagram (United States) started with the same miscalculations regarding how their disciplined forces with superior firepower and resources would have little trouble with a bunch of disorganized poorly armed tribesmen.

Loyn is not a historian. He hasn't done original research for this book but he was the only journalist in the country when the Taliban swept into Kabul. He knows his stuff and writes very well.

Worth reading.

Tim says

Loyn, a BBC correspondent covering south and southwest Asia for 30 years, recounts both British history in the region since the beginning of the 19th century and the contours of current politics skipping only the long relatively stable period in Afghanistan from the 1940s to the late 1970s. This is a well-crafted thoughtful book from a journalist with a wealth of personal experience in and knowledge of the region to which he has given a great deal of thought. It is not a pessimistic book, though clearly the lessons Loyn sees in the past have hardly been learned and the course of events today is deeply uncertain, if not dire.

Brian says

Overall a pretty good over view of the problems the British had in the past, but I thought it lacked a bit on what happened to the Russians during their take over, as well as the USA's support of the Afghan Rebels. It makes a pretty good case that there is no way to win there (what ever winning means).

Kathy says

I agree with another reviewer - a good map of Afghanistan is really needed to accompany your reading of this book. There are a lot of locations mentioned, of battles and key strategic importance, and if you're unfamiliar, a map is really helpful, beyond what's in the book itself. I enjoyed reading this introduction (for me) into the history of Afghanistan through the perspective of other nations that sought to gain control of it for their own gains. I found the more recent history was more readable. As a whole the book left me feeling regretful for all the loss that the Afghans have experienced through the interference and actions of other countries.
