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An Afghanistan the News Clips Miss | BY GILBERT BURNHAM



Kabul is surrounded by mountains. Although Afghanistan lies on major earthquake fault lines, there are few building codes, particularly for housing.

Afghanistan has a long and rich history. Branches of the Silk Road passed through its valleys. On his march to India, Alexander the Great married a local king's daughter, Roxanne, and on Afghanistan's northern borders, founded Greek cities, which were to last for several centuries. Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire, grew up in Kabul, and went on to rule much of northern India. His last wish was for his body to be carried from Delhi, India, to Kabul, Afghanistan, for burial under the open sky. Arnold Toynbee called Afghanistan the "Roundabout of History." Travel writers from Marco Polo to Bruce Chatwin, Eric Newby, and Wilfred Thesiger were enchanted by the country.

As a modern state, Afghanistan came into existence in the eighteenth century as a buffer between an expanding Russia, seeking an outlet to the Indian Ocean, and British India, anxious that they not succeed. The shadowy intrigue between the two states played out in Afghanistan, and became known as the Great Game. It was repeated during the Cold War, with the Soviets and the Americans competing for influence. One of the casualties was the killing of the American ambassador, Adolph Dubs, under mysterious circumstances. A Soviet proxy government came to power, but soon stumbled. Rather than see the prize slip away, Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the Soviet Union after Nikita Khrushchev, ordered the Soviet



Left: Access to households on mountainsides is difficult. Yet for its residents, the city offers a brighter economic future, and security from the Taliban-driven conflict in rural areas.

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From left: The death rate of children under age five has now dropped from 257 deaths per 1,000 births by age five, during the time of the Soviet occupation, to under 100 deaths. This has been achieved largely since 2002.



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occupation to bolster the socialist factions. Seizing an opportunity to harass the Reds, US President Ronald Reagan aggressively armed traditional leaders, the Mujahedeen, to harry the Soviet forces, and in doing so, sowed the seeds of the Taliban as a religious-military force. When Mikhail Gorbachev, as Soviet president, finally recalled Soviet forces, American interests walked away, creating a power vacuum and a decade of internal conflict. Eventually the Taliban gained the upper hand, creating a missionary state for their brand of primitive Islam. Osama bin Laden and his followers flourished in this environment.

The Taliban have their roots among the Pashtuns, Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group, though not a majority. The unsettled Pakistan-

Below: A truck stop four hours out of Herat in western Afghanistan. On the left is the Johns Hopkins project manager, Ayan. Her mother frequently telephoned her, begging her to leave Afghanistan for the security and safety back home, which was in Somalia.



Afghanistan border bisects the Pashtun tribal territory, following the Durand Line, a sphere-of-influence limit that is an artifact of colonial India. The rise of the Taliban (from *talib*, or “religious student”) caused some five million Afghans to flee to neighboring countries, where two million still remain. Following the September 11 attack, the US-led forces reinforced the Northern Alliance, the remaining opposition force, causing the Taliban government to collapse almost overnight, in November 2001.

With the Berlin Conference of 2001, many countries pledged assistance to transform Afghanistan into a modern state. Hamid Karzai was a Pashtun leader acceptable to the non-Pashtun Afghans. In the intervening years, billions of



Left: The massive construction in Kabul creates a great demand for building supplies. Here, two sons are helping their father manage his hardware store.

Below: In good weather, laundry is everywhere. Houses on the mountains can overlook the courtyards of others. This is not acceptable in Afghan culture, so barriers are often erected to maintain privacy for women (upper right).



dollars in military and nonmilitary assistance have poured into Afghanistan. Twelve new universities have been founded, education is widely available to both boys and girls, and there are currently some twenty-seven television stations broadcasting. The health services have dramatically improved, one of the factors behind a dramatic drop in child and infant mortality. The city of Kabul has grown from 500,000 to some five million, and is a thriving entrepreneurial metropolis. These changes have occurred against the background of a corrupt government, which is increasingly losing the support of conservative rural populations. A fertile ground has been created for the Taliban, reinforced from Pakistan, and funded by religious conservatives throughout the

Muslim world. Their goal is to reinstate their vision of primitive Islam, free of secular government and all traces of what they see as alien cultural influences—which also includes centuries of Islamic jurisprudence. This then would be a people living in harmony with the wishes of Allah, and scrupulously following the instructions of the Prophet, as they interpret these.

All this is taking place in a sea of complex and dangerous political and cultural currents. Pakistan sees a natural hegemony over Afghanistan, and has its Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence agents throughout the country.¹ India has powerful cultural, historical, and intellectual connections, which it leverages for maximum benefit. Bollywood movies are a national Afghan

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Above: Afghanistan is defined by mountains that cover much of the country; dry and dusty in summer and snow covered in winter. Melting snow in spring and summer supports abundant agriculture on arable land, which composes only 10 percent of the country.

Below: These girls are watching the few tourists who visit the sites of the Bamiyan Buddhas, as well as thousands of cells carved into the rocks where monks lived while studying the teachings of the sage of Sarnath.



Above: In the grounds of the Gazar Gah, a shrine to a Sufi poet of a thousand years ago, are many graves of notables, including the son of Alexander the Great and an Afghan who constructed the Taj Mahal.

Below: The Kochis, Afghan Pashtun nomads, account for 10 percent of Afghanistan's population. Here, a household is loading up to move on, probably for better pasturage for their animals. Camels are very common, especially in northern Afghanistan.

Below: This man of Wardak is passing through a small town on his way to discuss legal affairs with the district government. Like many Afghans in this very insecure part of the country, he is carrying an ancient rifle as his travel insurance policy.



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addiction. Militant mullahs have tried unsuccessfully to ban the televising of exposed Indian midriffs. When it seems the mullahs might be successful, there is a rush for satellite dishes to continue, uninterrupted, the national fix.

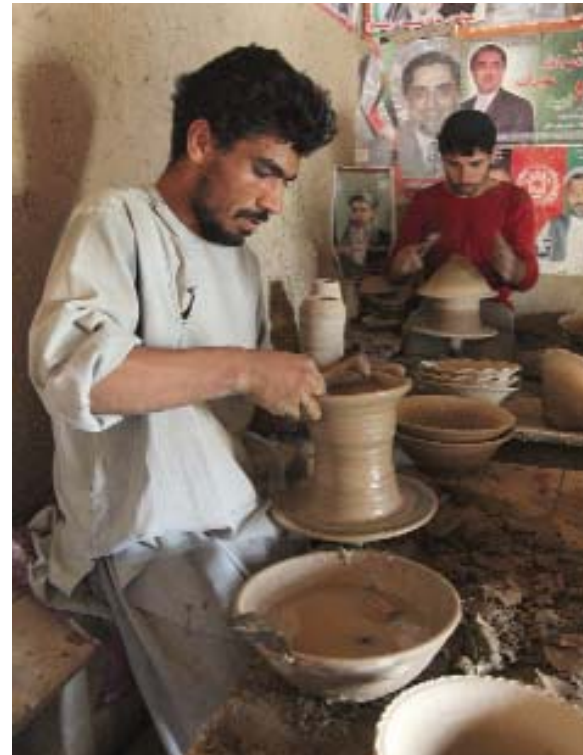
Clearly the appetite among Americans and their allies for continuing war is all but gone. How Afghanistan will manage when US troops leave in 2014 is the open question. Considerable bilateral assistance will continue to flow, although the United States Agency for International Development has little investments in aid planned beyond that date. What will happen then will be further innings in the Great Game.

I have had the opportunity to work almost continuously on public health projects in

Afghanistan, starting immediately after the fall of the Taliban. This has been an opportunity to see much of Afghanistan when foreigners could still travel quite freely in the country and sleep in rural villages. It is easy to sense the spell that the country and its people cast. The landscape is largely barren and hostile. Agriculture is confined to narrow, fertile riverine valleys, which are fed by snowmelt from the jagged Hindu Kush, that great range of mountains dividing southern Afghanistan and the Indus Valley from Central Asia. Lush crops of wheat, abundant fruits, and, of course, opium poppies are watered through elaborate irrigation systems. Many channels run underground, and some stretch a considerable distance back in time. Afghans



Below: Pottery is important in everyday household life. Two potters are making tableware in the town of Istalif, close to a good supply of clay.



have a hospitality toward strangers that is a feature of many Islamic societies, until sadly overwhelmed by ideological violence. A history of migration, war and peace, toil and dignity is present in the faces of its people.

In this group of photos, taken over the course of ten years, I have tried to convey the many and often conflicted feelings that the country conveys. My hope is that these will provide a glimpse of the Afghanistan missed in the headlines and the news clips. ■

References

1. The Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence is the Pakistan intelligence agency linked to bombings and covert activities in Afghanistan and India.

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Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. He established the university's Center for Refugee and Disaster Response, focused on improving the public health response in disasters. The center conducts research worldwide, assists organizations with prevention and response, and

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