

Book Review: Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror by Barnett R. Rubin

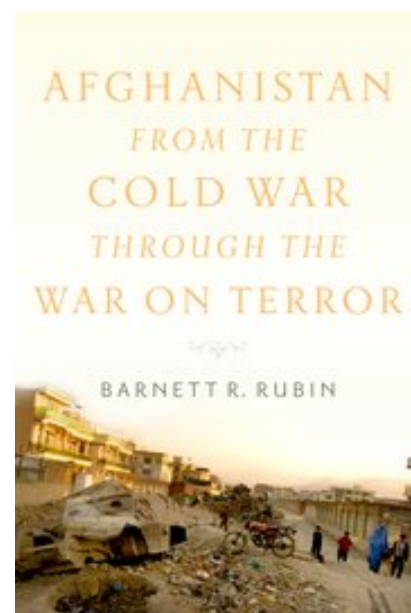
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Barnett R. Rubin's Afghanistan From the Cold War through the War on Terror is an essential read for those interested not only in the socio-economic and political history of Afghanistan but also for those interested in the role that foreign powers can have on a state, writes Samaya Borom. Essays cover human rights, security, the narcotics trade, and post-conflict statebuilding.



Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror. Barnett R Rubin. Oxford University Press. April 2013.

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Not long after the 24th of September 2001, a Central Intelligence Agency operative carried \$3 million in cash into the Panjshir Valley to disperse money to Afghan commanders to try to overthrow the Taliban and to ensure strategic alliance with the United States. After the funds were initially dispersed, the CIA Counterterrorist Center dispatched \$10 million more and as the cashed up commanders exchanged their USD funds for local currency they flooded the market, devalued the dollar and effectively crippled Afghanistan's economy.

The insights revealed throughout Barnett Rubin's *Afghanistan, from the Cold War through the War on Terror* come from essays collated over more than a decade whilst Rubin was employed by the Council of Foreign Relations and the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, and crucially while he was also acting as a consultant to the United Nations mission to Afghanistan. Rubin is a world renowned political science expert, if not the expert, on Afghanistan and it is his intimate understandings of the country and the international and domestic political forces that have shaped it (and continue to shape it) that make this book a must read. Rubin's previous book, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* detailed the troublesome period of Afghan political history from the 1978 coup to the fall of Najibullah and the subsequent mujahideen taking Kabul. His newest collection of essays on Afghanistan cements his standing as a pre-eminent scholar of contemporary Afghan political history. The introductory chapter provides an illustration as to how deeply involved Rubin is with the country, from speaking to refugees camped by the road after fleeing fighting in Kabul to attending a meeting of the US State Department shortly after the 9/11 attacks and listening to intense debate about the role the US could or should play in nation building.

Though the book was written over a timespan of ten years, a common thread exists between the essays in that Afghanistan and its people have been shown to have suffered tirelessly and often needlessly at the hands of people and groups funded by powers that work towards an unseen strategic roadmap. It is a subject that Rubin revisits in most essays and is backed up with comprehensive evidence or references so that the collection is not merely looked upon as a collection of memoirs but rather a solid reference material in its own right.

In the chapter "Blueprint for Afghanistan" Rubin explores how the country's lack of monetary transparency or accountability

allowed for international terrorism to gain a foothold in the region. Increased global awareness of the country saw a decrease in



An elderly Afghan man at an International Red Cross Distribution camp. Credit: [United Nations Photo](#). CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

domestic participation in governmental and non-governmental institutions. The increase in external interest in 'assisting' Afghans to build institutions often saw donor and non-governmental agencies establishing themselves with relatively little frameworks in place to ensure that the requisite Afghan participation in activities occurred. The appearance of external groups on local real-estate markets was often disastrous and Kabul saw rent increases from \$100 to \$10,000 per month to accommodate the influx – to the detriment of local establishments who were unable to compete with the inflation and had to either move elsewhere or dissolve.

This chapter segways nicely to “The Politics of Center-Periphery Relations in Afghanistan”, co-researched with Helena Malikyar, an independent researcher and writer based in Kabul with extensive experience on governance related projects with the United Nations and USAID. It argues that the current administrative approach of the government is not a new approach, and that the country often looked to foreign support in order to maintain balance and control. This background proves essential in moving forward through subsequent essays that broach topics such as the difficulty in crafting a Constitution as a roadmap to re-establishing government institutional processes, and implementing and deploying a successful strategy to deal with insurgents where the occupying foreign forces disagree with local government.

The essays covered in the book vary in length and detail, however are all clearly well-researched. It is common for Rubin to include figures and graphs where referring to economic indicators or reconstruction efforts and these help to paint an intimate image of the Afghanistan he so clearly feels deeply about. Rubin's professional standing, both at the international and domestic level, afforded him access to people and areas outside of the normal writer/researcher gaumut and this has allowed him to present material rich in observation as well as facts. The essays themselves work seamlessly together which is fortunate for the reader as it provides an authentic aggregated view of Afghanistan.

Barnett R. Rubin's *Afghanistan From the Cold War through the War on Terror* is an essential read for those interested not only in the socio-economic and political history of Afghanistan but also for those interested in the role that foreign powers can have on a state.

Samaya Borom is a Masters student in Public and International law at the University of Melbourne, Australia, with a specialisation in international criminal law. She is a web and communications professional who also works as a freelance journalist and author. Samaya has a working interest in human rights, international law, privacy and surveillance. [Read reviews by Samaya.](#)