

Books on Afghanistan for Mid-Term Exam

Berntsen, G. (2006). *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda: A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al Qaeda will certainly go down in history as a brilliantly executed military victory in an entirely new age of warfare. But its glory was a bit marred, just as in Operation Desert Storm, by the failure to kill or capture Dr. Evil. Despite a huge and costly effort by the media, the public still has an incomplete picture of what really happened during the first post-9/11 war and of how Osama bin Laden survived it. While not intended to be a comprehensive history of the campaign, Gary Berntsen's *Jawbreaker* provides a valuable new account by a major participant that fills in many blanks.

Brodsky, A. (2004). *With All Our Strength: The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*. New York: Routledge.

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan came to Western attention in the wake of the fall of the Taliban, but its history long predates the Taliban. In 1977, in an environment hostile to women's rights and secularism, a 20-year-old woman named Meena founded RAWA to empower Afghan women and promote democracy in Afghanistan (in 1987, Meena was murdered by RAWA's opponents). Community psychologist Brodsky's groundbreaking account studies this important organization's evolution from an 11-member student group to the most powerful voice for women in Afghanistan, with thousands of volunteers. Heavily sprinkled with perceptive interviews, the book relays RAWA's story through the voices of its members and supporters, skillfully bringing to life those whose sacrifices have sustained the organization. The first writer with in-depth access to RAWA, Brodsky writes a passionate narrative of an organization that has helped its members overcome illiteracy, abuse, war and death. As Brodsky intends, RAWA emerges as a highly successful model of the resilience that, Brodsky believes, can empower women everywhere. Although RAWA's incredible story keeps the reader engaged, the book is occasionally repetitive. Brodsky also inadequately addresses one of the most fascinating aspects of RAWA—the clandestine manner in which the organization grew into a sophisticated transnational organization without infrastructure and designated leaders. However, her work stands out as a lone and important study of a remarkable organization that has transcended war, misogyny and fundamentalism and spread its message of Afghanistan's horrific history and its current reconstruction.

Burke, J. (2004). *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*. New York: I.B. Tauris.

Not many reporters have firsthand experience of terrorist camps, but Burke, chief reporter for London's *Observer*, achieved it during the 2001 war in Afghanistan. His nuanced investigation into Islamic extremist groups benefits as a result; his depth of knowledge is clear as he paints a complex portrait of al-Qaida and related groups. The outfit often called al-Qaida is, he says, actually a loose amalgam of groups that share a similar worldview: a belief in Islamic fundamentalism and antagonism toward the West. This is not new, but Burke writes clearly, and his descriptions of terror camps and religious schools—even a brief description of a bombing campaign in Afghanistan—make his work more lively and powerful than most of the recent books on the subject. Similarly, he shows that Osama bin Laden is less central to the enterprise than Western leaders think; the Islamist movement is longstanding and widespread: "This movement is growing. Osama bin Laden did not create it nor will his death or incarceration end it." As a result, he argues, the U.S. focus on bin Laden and al-Qaida is misguided and ultimately a waste of time—in fact, he says, it will only create more bin Ladens. Only a battle to "win the hearts and minds" of the Islamic world will effectively counteract the terrorist phenomenon. Unfortunately, Burke fails to address how this might be done, but he's made a strong argument that it is the road to take.

Coll, S. (2001). *Ghost wars: The secret history of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin*

Laden, from the Soviet invasion to September 10, 2001. New York: Penguin.

Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* offers revealing details of the CIA's involvement in the evolution of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the years before the September 11 attacks. From the beginning, Coll shows how the CIA's on-again, off-again engagement with Afghanistan after the end of the Soviet war left officials at Langley with inadequate resources and intelligence to appreciate the emerging power of the Taliban. He also demonstrates how Afghanistan became a deadly playing field for international politics where Soviet, Pakistani, and U.S. agents armed and trained a succession of warring factions. At the same time, the book, though opinionated, is not solely a critique of the agency. Coll balances accounts of CIA failures with the success stories, like the capture of Mir Amal Kasi. Coll, managing editor for the *Washington Post*, covered Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992. He demonstrates unprecedented access to records of White House meetings and to formerly classified material, and his command of Saudi, Pakistani, and Afghani politics is impressive. He also provides a seeming insider's perspective on personalities like George Tenet, William Casey, and anti-terrorism czar, Richard Clarke ("who seemed to wield enormous power precisely because hardly anyone knew who he was or what exactly he did for a living"). Coll manages to weave his research into a narrative that sometimes has the feel of a Tom Clancy novel yet never crosses into excess. While comprehensive, Coll's book may be hard going for those looking for a direct account of the events leading to the 9-11 attacks. The CIA's 1998 engagement with bin Laden as a target for capture begins a full two-thirds of the way into *Ghost Wars*, only after a lengthy march through developments during the Carter, Reagan, and early Clinton Presidencies. But this is not a critique of Coll's efforts; just a warning that some stamina is required to keep up. *Ghost Wars* is a complex study of intelligence operations and an invaluable resource for those seeking a nuanced understanding of how a small band of extremists rose to inflict incalculable damage on American soil.

Cooley, J. (2002). *Unholy wars: Afghanistan, America and international terrorism.*

New York: Pluto Press.

Cooley, an ABC correspondent who has spent many years in the Middle East, calls his book a "narration," and indeed it reads more like a conversation than a traditional book. He focuses on the numerous riots, uprisings, and terrorist acts in the Arabic-speaking parts of the Middle East over the last two decades, which began when freedom fighters in Afghanistan returned to their home countries after the Afghan war. Cooley carries such ties even to the World Trade Center and Kenyan and Tanzanian embassy bombings. Since the CIA (and others) funded the fighters in Afghanistan, we are reaping a strange harvest for our efforts. Although there are minor factual errors and some of the movements may have fewer ties to Afghanistan than Cooley implies in his more sweeping statements, this provocative book certainly will provide insight into many events in the Middle East for the general reader.

Crews, R. D. & Tarzi, A. (2008). *The Taliban and the crisis of Afghanistan. Boston:*

Harvard University Press.

Observers in the 1990s marveled to see the Taliban bring order to a chaotic Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal. Admiration vanished as the Taliban proceeded to oppress men as well as women and massacre opponents. When they refused to surrender Osama bin Laden after 9/11, the U.S. invasion helped sweep them from power. Then dismissed as reactionary zealots, the Taliban have since been revived and are now steadily expanding their influence. Historian Crews and reporter Tarzi have assembled eight revealing essays on this widely reviled movement. The Taliban are ethnic Pashtuns who make up perhaps half the country's population and whose elite have traditionally ruled the country. This ragtag army of Islamic clerics and religious students presented itself as a superior alternative to ruling Pashtun elites and successfully manipulated tribal politics. Despite accusations of being a medieval throwback, the Taliban are Islamic counter modernists. Their use of mass spectacle, surveillance, the media and even their strict regulation of gender roles is consistent with other modern totalitarian movements. The authors' 58-page introduction adds

additional clarity and context to Afghanistan's tortured history, making for an engrossing read that is more accessible than most academic collections.

Dreyfuss, R. (2006). *Devil's game: How the United States helped unleash fundamentalist Islam*. New York: Holt.

One of the CIA's first great moments of institutional reflection occurred in 1953, after American covert operatives helped overthrow Iran's left-leaning government and restored the Shah to power. The agency, then only six years old, had funded ayatollahs, mobilized the religious right and engineered a sophisticated propaganda campaign to successfully further its aims, and it wanted to know how it could reapply such tradecraft elsewhere, so it commissioned an internal report. Half a century later, the most prescient line from that report is one of caution, not optimism. "Possibilities of blowback against the United States should always be in the back of the minds of all CIA officers," the document warned. Since this first known use of the term "blowback," countless journalists and scholars have chronicled the greatest blowback of all: how the staggering quantities of aid that America provided to anti-Marxist Islamic extremists during the Cold War inadvertently positioned those very same extremists to become America's next great enemy. (Indeed, Iran's religious leaders were among the first to turn against the United States.) Dreyfuss's volume reaches farther and deeper into the subject than most. He convincingly situates America's attempt to build an Islamic bulwark against Soviet expansion into Britain's history of imperialism in the region. And where other authors restrict their focus to the Afghan mujahideen, Dreyfuss details a history of American support—sometimes conducted with startling blindness, sometimes, tacitly through proxies—for Islamic radicals in Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Syria. At times, the assistance occurred openly through the American private sector, as Dreyfuss describes in a fascinating digression on Islamic banking. But ultimately, too few government officials were paying attention to the growth and dangers of political Islam. A CIA officer summarizes Dreyfuss's case when he says, "We saw it all in a short-term perspective"—the long-term consequences are what we're facing now.

THIS BOOK IS THE INSTRUCTOR'S RECOMMENDATION FOR FALL 2009

Fitzgerald, P. & Gould, E. (2009). *Invisible history: Afghanistan's untold story*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.

Journalists Fitzgerald and Gould do yeoman's labor in clearing the fog and laying bare American failures in Afghanistan in this deeply researched, cogently argued and enormously important book. The authors demonstrate how closely American actions are tied to past miscalculations—and how U.S. policy has placed Afghans and Americans in grave danger. Long at cultural crossroads, Afghanistan's location poised the country to serve as a fragile buffer between rival empires. Great Britain's 1947 creation of an arbitrary and indefensible border between Afghanistan and the newly minted Pakistan from the Afghan point of view... has always been the problem, but particularly after 9/11 American policymakers have paid scant attention to the concerns of Afghans, preferring to shoehorn an imagined Afghanistan into U.S. power paradigms. The United States is in a fight for its life, not because of [9/11]... but because of the way America responded.... That response was at once wildly exaggerated, dangerously reckless, and... ineffective, the authors argue, calling on the incoming president to make radical changes. Osama is not beating the United States.... The United States is beating itself, and beating itself badly.

THIS BOOK IS THE INSTRUCTOR'S RECOMMENDATION FOR FALL 2009

Giustozzi, A. (2007). *Koran, Kalashnikov, and laptop. The Neo-Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Since the Allied invasion of Afghanistan in 2002, the Bush administration has celebrated the imminent demise of the Taliban, with claims of a "moral and psychological defeat" playing a prominent role in the presidential elections of 2004. Some commentators suggested that "reconstruction and development" had won over the Afghan population, despite widespread criticism of the meager distribution of aid and failed attempts at "nation building," not to mention the infamous corruption of Kabul's power-hoarding elites. In March 2006, both Afghan and American officials continued to assert that "the Taliban are no longer able to fight large battles." Unfortunately that theory would soon collapse beneath the weight of a series of particularly ferocious clashes, causing the mood in the American media to turn from one of optimism to one of defeatism and impending catastrophe. Suddenly faced with a very sophisticated and creative form of guerilla warfare, the West found itself at a loss to fight an insurgency that bore little resemblance to its former enemy. In the first book ever to be published on the neo-Taliban, Antonio Giustozzi provocatively argues that the appearance of the neo-Taliban should in no way have been a surprise. Beginning in 2003, a growing body of evidence began to surface that cast doubt on the official interpretation of the conflict. With the West cutting corners to maintain peace within the country, which included tolerating Afghanistan's burgeoning opium trade, the Taliban was able to regroup and grow in strength, weapons, and recruits. Giustozzi's book poses a bold challenge to contemporary accounts of the invasion and its aftermath and is an important investigation into the rise and dangerous future of the neo-Taliban.

Kolhatkar, S. & Ingalls, J. (2006). *Bleeding Afghanistan: Washington, warlords, and the propaganda of silence*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

In the years following 9/11, US policy in Afghanistan has received little scrutiny, either from the media or the public. Despite official claims of democracy and women's freedom, Afghanistan has yet to emerge from the ashes of decades-long war. Through in-depth research and detailed historical context, Sonali Kolhatkar and James Ingalls report on the injustice of US policies in Afghanistan historically and in the post 9-11 era. Drawing from declassified government documents and on-the-ground interviews with Afghan activists, journalists, lawyers, refugees, and students, the book examines the connections between US training and arming of Mujahadeen commanders and the subversion of Afghan democracy, to the sad state of warlordism, women's oppression, and poverty today. *Bleeding Afghanistan* boldly critiques the exploitation of Afghan women to justify war by both conservatives and liberals, analyzes uncritical media coverage of US policies, and examines the ways in which the US benefits from being in Afghanistan.

Lewis, B. (2004). *The crisis of Islam: Holy war and unholy terror*. New York: Random House.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, many Americans yearned to understand why Muslim extremists felt such passionate animosity toward the Western world, particularly the United States. Since that historic attack there have been many books and discussions about this very question, but few of them offer such a readable and relevant response as this excellent offering by renowned historian Bernard Lewis (*What Went Wrong?*). For modern Westerners, Islam is an especially foreign religion and culture to understand. For instance, Westerners typically dismiss things as unimportant when using the expression "that's history." But for those raised in Muslim households, history—even ancient history—is just as important (if not more important) as the present. And to better understand the hostilities rooted in this history—one could start with recognizing the long-standing resentment the Islamic community harbors from having its homelands torn apart and re-packaged into random political states by occupying Europeans (Westerners). Or stretch back in time to the brutality of the Crusades. Or go straight to the U.S. political meddling in the region throughout the latter 20th century. This is not a pity fest for Muslims. Lewis even-handedly explores the sources of Islamic antagonism toward the West while also explaining how a supposedly peace-worshipping religion could be so distorted by violent extremism. He notes that the American way of life—especially that of fulfillment through

material gain and sexual freedom—is a direct threat to Islamic values (which is why night clubs—places where men and women publicly touch one another—are targets of bombings). But it is basic Western democracy that especially threatens Islamic extremists, notes Lewis, because within its own community more and more Muslims are coming to value the freedom that political democracy allows. For anyone wanting an intelligent and accessible primer on the Islamic-Western conflict, this is an excellent place to begin.

Mahajan, R. (2002). *The new crusade: America's war on terror*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 and the US government response, especially after the bombing of Afghanistan, transformed US and global politics. Will the US-led war on terrorism rid the world of this scourge, or fuel the hatred and suffering on which it feeds? Will the middle East and central Asia be stabilized once Afghanistan is reduced to rubble and starvation, or become a zone of enduring war? Within the United States, will it bring about new forms of patriotism and solidarity, or provide a platform for intensified racism, new assaults on civil liberties, and on the living standards of ordinary Americans? This book locates ongoing events in the aftermath of September 11 in historical context, analyzes their motive forces and possible outcomes, and examines the alternatives that face the anti-globalization movement and opponents of racism and war. The New Crusade sets out the main historical and political issues at stake clearly, accessibly, and comprehensively. It examines US policy in the middle East from the break-up of the Soviet Union, ongoing sanctions against Iraq, and the quest for a US oil pipeline from the former Soviet republics through Afghanistan; the ideology of the National Security State and its implications for global conflict; the nature of humanitarian interventions in the Third World; and the questions of international law raised by terrorism. It concludes with a fresh appraisal of the options facing us today. Reflecting both deep knowledge of the region and the commitment and hands-on experience of a seasoned activist, Mahajan provides a powerful interpretation of events that will be decisive in the making of our time.

Mortenson, G. & Relin, D.O. (2007). *Three cups of tea: One man's mission to promote peace...one school at a time*. New York: Penguin Books.

Some failures lead to phenomenal successes, and this American nurse's unsuccessful attempt to climb K2, the world's second tallest mountain, is one of them. Dangerously ill when he finished his climb in 1993, Mortenson was sheltered for seven weeks by the small Pakistani village of Korphe; in return, he promised to build the impoverished town's first school, a project that grew into the Central Asia Institute, which has since constructed more than 50 schools across rural Pakistan and Afghanistan. Coauthor Relin recounts Mortenson's efforts in fascinating detail, presenting compelling portraits of the village elders, con artists, philanthropists, mujahideen, Taliban officials, ambitious school girls and upright Muslims Mortenson met along the way. As the book moves into the post-9/11 world, Mortenson and Relin argue that the United States must fight Islamic extremism in the region through collaborative efforts to alleviate poverty and improve access to education, especially for girls. Captivating and suspenseful, with engrossing accounts of both hostilities and unlikely friendships, this book will win many readers' hearts.

Rashid, A. (2008). *Descent into chaos: The United States and the failure of nation building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. New York: Viking Press.

Long overshadowed by the Iraq War, the ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan and Central Asia finally receives a searching retrospective as Rashid (*Taliban*) surveys the region to reveal a thicket of ominous threats and lost opportunities—in Pakistan, a rickety dictatorship colludes with militants, and Afghanistan's weak government is besieged by warlords, an exploding drug economy and a powerful Taliban insurgency. The author blames the unwillingness of American policymakers to shoulder the burden of nation building. According to Rashid, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan and subsequently refused to commit the forces and money needed to rebuild

it; instead the U.S. government made corrupt alliances with warlords to impose a superficial calm, while continuing to ignore the Pakistani government's support of the Taliban and the other Islamic extremists who have virtually taken over Pakistan's western provinces. With his unparalleled access to sources—I constantly berated [Afghan President] Karzai for his failure to understand the usefulness of political parties—Rashid is an authoritative guide to the region's politics and his is an insightful, at times explosive, indictment of the U.S. government's hand in the region's degeneration.

Rashid, A. (2001). *Taliban: Militant Islam, oil and fundamentalism in Central Asia*.

New Haven: Yale University Press.

This is the single best book available on the Taliban, the fundamentalist Islamic regime in Afghanistan responsible for harboring the terrorist Osama bin Laden. Ahmed Rashid is a Pakistani journalist who has spent most of his career reporting on the region—he has personally met and interviewed many of the Taliban's shadowy leaders. *Taliban* was written and published before the massacres of September 11, 2001, yet it is essential reading for anyone who hopes to understand the aftermath of that black day. It includes details on how and why the Taliban came to power, the government's oppression of ordinary citizens (especially women), the heroin trade, oil intrigue, and—in a vitally relevant chapter—bin Laden's sinister rise to power. These pages contain stories of mass slaughter, beheadings, and the Taliban's crushing war against freedom: under Mullah Omar, it has banned everything from kite flying to singing and dancing at weddings. Rashid is for the most part an objective reporter, though his rage sometimes (and understandably) comes to the surface: "The Taliban were right, their interpretation of Islam was right, and everything else was wrong and an expression of human weakness and a lack of piety," he notes with sarcasm. He has produced a compelling portrait of modern evil.

Scott, P. D. (2008). *The road to 9/11: Wealth, empire, and the future of America*.

Berkeley: University of California Press.

This is an ambitious, meticulous examination of how U.S. foreign policy since the 1960s has led to partial or total cover-ups of past domestic criminal acts, including, perhaps, the catastrophe of 9/11. Peter Dale Scott, whose previous books have investigated CIA involvement in southeast Asia, the drug wars, and the Kennedy assassination, here probes how the policies of presidents since Nixon have augmented the tangled bases for the 2001 terrorist attack. Scott shows how America's expansion into the world since World War II has led to momentous secret decision making at high levels. He demonstrates how these decisions by small cliques are responsive to the agendas of private wealth at the expense of the public, of the democratic state, and of civil society. He shows how, in implementing these agendas, U.S. intelligence agencies have become involved with terrorist groups they once backed and helped create, including al Qaeda.

Sinno, A. H. (2008). *Organizations at war in Afghanistan and beyond*. Ithaca: Cornell

University Press.

While popular accounts of warfare, particularly of nontraditional conflicts such as guerrilla wars and insurgencies, favor the roles of leaders or ideology, social-scientific analyses of these wars focus on aggregate categories such as ethnic groups, religious affiliations, socioeconomic classes, or civilizations. Challenging these constructions, Abdulkader H. Sinno closely examines the fortunes of the various factions in Afghanistan, including the mujahideen and the Taliban, that have been fighting each other and foreign armies since the 1979 Soviet invasion. Focusing on the organization of the combatants, Sinno offers a new understanding of the course and outcome of such conflicts.

Wright, L. (2008). *The looming tower: Al Qaeda and the road to 9/11*. New York:

Vintage Press.

Wright, a *New Yorker* writer, brings exhaustive research and delightful prose to one of the best books yet on the history of terrorism. He begins with the observation that, despite an impressive record of terror and assassination, post-WWII, Islamic militants failed to establish theocracies in any Arab country. Many helped Afghanistan resist the Russian invasion of 1979 before their unemployed warriors stepped up efforts at home. Al-Qaeda, formed in Afghanistan in 1988 and led by Osama bin Laden, pursued a different agenda, blaming America for Islam's problems. Less wealthy than believed, bin Laden's talents lay in organization and PR, Wright asserts. Ten years later, bin Laden blew up U.S. embassies in Africa and the destroyer *Cole*, opening the floodgates of money and recruits. Wright's step-by-step description of these attacks reveals that planning terror is a sloppy business, leaving a trail of clues that, in the case of 9/11, raised many suspicions among individuals in the FBI, CIA and NSA. Wright shows that 9/11 could have been prevented if those agencies had worked together. As a fugitive, bin Laden's days as a terror mastermind may be past, but his success has spawned swarms of imitators. This is an important, gripping and profoundly disheartening book.