

How U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan Changed That Country. “New Afghan State Built on US Legacy of Torture and Impunity”. Stanford Historian

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Among the more than a million refugees that have flooded into Europe over the past year are the Afghans, the second-largest group behind the Syrians. Yet the humanitarian crisis affecting this land-locked South Asian country, like most news regarding Afghanistan, has received little attention in the United States.

[Robert Crews](#), an associate professor of history at Stanford, said,

“In Washington, it has become common to view Afghanistan as a country defined by a never-ending struggle among warlords, tribal chiefs, and religious fanatics. This has been particularly attractive as a way of explaining why the American intervention in that country, despite costing more than 2,300 American lives and roughly a trillion dollars, has achieved so few of its goals in over 14 years.”

Crews examines America’s role in policies that have fueled Afghanistan’s economic and cultural crises in his [book](#), *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation*. The work explores the extent to which U.S. influence has shaped Afghanistan over the past seven decades, including the American intervention against the country’s fundamentalist Taliban in 2001 in response to their presumed role in the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

“Long before 2001, Americans came to Afghanistan with the goal of remaking their lives along lines that would advance U.S. interests,” said Crews, a historian whose research and teaching interests focus on Afghanistan, Central and South Asia, Russia, Islam, and global history.



Afghanistan's history and culture are very different from U.S. portrayals, Stanford historian Robert Crews argues in a new book. (Image credit: Andrew Duhan)

Enduring images

Crews starts from the premise that the way Americans conceptualize the country – in journalism, public-policy debates and scholarly work – remains mired in stereotypes that bear little resemblance to historical reality.

“One of the most enduring images of Afghanistan evokes a desolate, inward-looking, primitive and isolated place,” said Crews, whose recent courses at Stanford include *The Global Drug Wars*, *The Islamic Republics* and *Modern Islamic Movements*.

Drawing on a variety of archival and secondary sources in Afghanistan, Europe and the United States, as well as first-hand oral histories he collected personally from Afghans in half a dozen countries, Crews portrays an Afghanistan that is hardly a static and backward collection of tribes or ethnic groups, but rather a central global player in modern politics.

Among the people whose stories inform his narrative are Afghan traders in Africa, poets in Iran, scholars in Iraq, pilgrims in Jerusalem, seafarers in India, entrepreneurs in Australia, carpenters in California, students in Turkey, workers in London and a novelist in Denmark.

Crews became fascinated with Afghanistan in the late 1990s, when he lived with Afghan merchants in Uzbekistan while working on a project in Central Asia. “I was struck by their generosity, hospitality and cosmopolitan sophistication, which clashed with the American image of Afghans as being medieval peasants,” he said.

Making of a global state

Crews begins his book by examining the making of the Afghan nation-state within and beyond its borders as they exist today, exploring interactions between a sizeable Afghan diaspora abroad and the rulers of the kingdom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

He then takes up the pivotal period of the 1930s and 1940s, in which Afghanistan became deeply embedded in global financial networks. With the onset of the Cold War, Afghanistan was awash with foreign advisers and experts eager to turn Afghan elites' rush toward the industrial era to the advantage of one or the other superpower. Along the way, the country became a major supplier of opium and cannabis to satisfy world demand.

Crews turns his attention to the seizure of power in 1978 by an underground Afghan socialist party, which, he says, "triggered a proxy war between Moscow and Washington." He describes the struggle between Soviet communists and Muslims that ensued, later spawning al-Qaida, the Taliban and other revolutionary groups.

"U.S. backing for the mujahedeen – the Islamist groups that mounted resistance to the leftist government and its Soviet backers in the 1980s – would have fateful consequences for Afghanistan and the world for years to come," Crews observed.

The American intervention against the Taliban, claimed to be responsible for the 9/11 attacks, opened up yet another distinctive era in the history of Afghan globalism, he demonstrates. "Afghans became the object of an American-led humanitarian mission that was, simultaneously, a campaign to remake Afghans in the name of American security," he noted.

A critical view

Afghan Modern is a scathing critique of U.S. military policies in the global arena. "In the aftermath of the war on that country," Crews asserted, "Americans bear considerable responsibility for a government whose rule has been authoritarian, corrupt, and, in the eyes of so many Afghans, illegitimate."

When the Bush administration decreed Afghanistan a place that was beyond international law, he said, "Washington was merely ratifying what many officials had already concluded: that this was a wild place, where force was the only language of communication."

Reliance on Afghan militias, night raids, assassinations and imprisonment without charge were the logical outcomes, he added.

"The new Afghan state was built on an American legacy of torture and impunity," Crews said. Moreover, the United States has been shockingly stingy in compensating civilians for unintended casualties, paying as little as \$2,500 per fatality – and, in one documented case, less than \$200.

Afghan Modern chronicles how by 2014, facing stalemate with the Taliban movement, Washington had abandoned many of its earlier ambitions. "Over the decades, the United States has not only lacked the capacity to fix Afghan society, but has played an essential role in breaking it," Crews said.

"The current American approach – maintaining a modest contingent of special operations forces to prevent total victory for the Taliban or other insurgents – is unlikely to forestall the

downward spiral of the Afghan state," he argued. "It is a formula for war without end."

Crews calls for new approaches to Afghanistan, especially how we imagine its past and act in the present.

"One of the remaining alternatives, long-neglected by Washington, is a sustained commitment to a political settlement to Afghanistan's civil war and its regional entanglements," he said. "This is a challenging but not impossible proposition."

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