

4-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Canfield, Robert L. Ph.D. (2011) "Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould. Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story. San Francisco: City Lights. 2009.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 6.

DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1051

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol2/iss2/6>

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**Paul Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Gould. *Invisible History: Afghanistan's Untold Story*.
San Francisco: City Lights. 2009.**

This book comes recommended by such eminent authorities as Robert Dreyfuss, Noam Chomsky, Selig S. Harrison, and Ahmed Rashid. Publishers Weekly describes it as “deeply researched, cogently argued and enormously important.” In the introduction, Sima Wali, founder and director of Refugee Women in Development, says it is “a phenomenal compendium of history, research, and critical analysis of the complex dynamics that has led to the death of my home country, Afghanistan” (1); it “clarify[ies] and correct[s] the record, and build[s] a foundation upon which the whole story of Afghanistan’s past can be appreciated” (1).

Such indeed are the intentions of Fitzgerald and Gould. They expose the many blunders of Americans and Europeans in creating the situation that caused Wali such despair: a broken civil society, a government riddled with corruption and espousing Islamic ideas that were alien to all previous constitutions, a persisting war with the Taliban, and the continued practice of honor killings and other forms of violence against women. The story they tell is less invisible and unknown or even new than it is an assemblage of details on what has gone wrong in Afghanistan history, most seriously in the period when Americans have been involved.

The narrative eventually settles on the culprits whose views have informed the most recent blunders in Afghanistan: the American “defense intellectuals,” whom the authors describe as “modern-day high priests” who have been “elevated to an almost mystical level” and who have prospered “in a morally and intellectually detached universe,” one in which “cabalistic mathematical game theories” have been mixed with Marxist-Leninist propaganda” (88). In the administration of President Ronald Reagan, these intellectuals included such notables as Richard Pipes, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Paul Nitze. These core figures constituted “Team-B” and were charged with the task of “reading” the Soviet mindset better than (they said) the CIA. They insisted that the Soviet military was far more sophisticated and its intentions far more sinister than the CIA ever acknowledged. As it turned out, virtually everything Team B affirmed was wrong (206).

The “defense intellectuals” in the George W. Bush administration were of the same ilk, only even more arrogant and, as it turned out, equally wrong. What one of their number told New York Times reporter Ron Suskind about their activities exposed their inflated self-importance:

[He] said that guys like me were “in the reality-based community,” which he defined as [including] people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world works anymore,” he continued, “we are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that—judiciously as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.” (270)

When the Americans came into Afghanistan in the fall, 2001, they made three mistakes, according to the authors: (1) They placed reconstruction plans in the hands of “free-market ideologues” who contracted with American companies that “burn[ed] up precious reconstruction money on beefed up security while padding their bottom line with little if anything to show for it” (page). (2) They empowered corrupt and brutal tribal leaders who had been trafficking in illegal narcotics. (3) Believing their own “fabricated press releases,” they turned away from Afghanistan to the conquest of Iraq, “thereby dooming the job that [they] had just begun” (254).

Fitzgerald and Gould also have a problem with their colleagues in the media. As they put it, “The American media ... allowed itself to miss the real war, [being] snowed under by the make-believe struggle of good versus evil” (207). The media, the authors say, maintained the illusion that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was purely aggressive, “not in reaction to American subversion”—a reference here to the admission made much later by Zhibigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Adviser, that the Americans had sought to provoke the Soviets into invading Afghanistan, which of course they did, in December, 1979 (163). Fitzgerald and Gould are also peeved that ABC “rejected out of hand” their request to present on TV their proposal for a negotiated Soviet and American withdrawal from Afghanistan (189).

Throughout the book, the authors attempt to explain behavior in terms of mystical or religious incentives. Early in the book, they draw a line from the ideas of Zoroaster, who lived in Central Asia over a thousand years before Christ, to the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations of recent generations. The parallel the authors draw between the Zoroastrian cosmology of light versus dark and the American rhetoric of good versus evil is assumed to constitute a compelling logic. To support their strained connection between the ancient past and contemporary affairs, the authors find mysticism and sacred agendas throughout history in this region. Afghanistan has indeed been the home of a number of mystical movements, notably the Roshaniya cult (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and many sufi orders (Bektashi, Mevlevi, Chishti). And in the nineteenth century, Abdul Rahman (r. 1880 -1901), the powerful Amir of Kabul, who subjected much of the country to his rule, was “guided by prophetic visions and dreams” (49), though the authors provide no sources to support this claim. Upon these local “mystical” views, say the authors, the Europeans who arrived in the eighteenth century laid their own occult outlooks. According to Fitzgerald and Gould, the Russians and British were “mystical imperialists”; Kaiser Wilhelm in World War I, who had interests in Central Asia, was, in truth, waging a “holy war,” and Hitler’s chief ideologue of Arianism believed in “a cosmic cycle” that would return humanity to a “pre-human godlike state” (70-71). Even in recent days, they contend, many key figures in Afghanistan have been in thrall of unseen forces: CIA director William Casey was a “mystical imperialist”; Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev was enchanted by theosophy (204), and President George W. Bush was “driven with a mission from God” (273). The authors describe the “defense intellectuals” of the American administrations as “mystical holy warriors” who believe they are involved in a kind of Zoroastrian “final act in an ancient historical drama” (17).

Such is the general message of the book. Unfortunately, the problems with the text are numerous. A book that aims to expose what has been “invisible” invites us to expect a carefully constructed case, a new story with convincing evidence and plausible argumentation to support it. Rather than setting the record straight, however, this book displays an absence of the disciplined thought and explication that their claims would appear to require. Instead of

providing critical analysis, for instance, the authors argue in non sequiturs. Some of the most confounding examples include the following claims: (1) During the Cold War, the Americans “found it politic to make common cause with the Islamic right,” and so “in the birthplace of the Zoroastrian war of light against darkness,” they developed a “black-white” policy that was “regressive, dualist, and especially antimodernist” (83-4). (2) Because British foreign policy was “steeped in mystical imperialism,” it would in the twentieth century “guarantee Pakistan’s chronic instability” (78) and foster the appearance of “Afghanistan’s most reactionary Islamists” (61). (3) The “efforts of Afghanistan’s leaders to bring the country into the modern age and unite the various tribes” was “aborted by the increasingly toxic mix of Soviet bureaucrats, Afghan communists, RAND defense intellectuals, Wall Street brokers, and religious fanatics on both sides of the Pakistani border” (222). (4) The American media was taken in by “the make-believe struggle of good versus evil manufactured by a *Three Stooges* producer and an unholy alliance of liberal Democrats, neoconservatives and right-wing Washington insiders” (207, sic).

Another sign of indifference to the usual canons of disciplined argumentation and demonstration is their tendency to level broad and unsubstantiated attacks against individuals. They claim that Zbigniew Brzezinski “made the rise of radical Islam in Afghanistan a reality” (248), which is both unsubstantiated and unduly broad. They also argue that the Afghan Relief Committee and Freedom House were “concerned more with advancing Saudi and Arab interests in establishing an extremist Wahhabist presence in Afghanistan than with democracy” (190), which is not only unfair but also transparently untrue. The authors also allege that a “prominent,” unnamed Afghan says that “Robert Oakley was—along with the CIA—the creator of the Taliban” (230) when Oakley and the CIA have no place in any of the several versions of Taliban origins, and if such an attack is to be taken seriously, the credentials of the attacker should be provided. Equally disturbing is the authors’ claim that Zalmay Khalilzad advanced “the Islamic extremist cause in Afghanistan” for as long as three decades (290), which is both unfair and unsubstantiated. Finally, they claim that “the Trotskyisc philosopher” Albert Wohlstetter created the worldview” of the Bush administration as “a weapon of war against Soviet Russia” (291), which is altogether implausible.

There are also egregious errors in the book. The authors repeatedly claim—without a source—that the mujahedin who fought the Soviets and the Afghan communists in the 1980s targeted “power plants, factories and schools, especially schools for women” (179, 183-4). The mujahedin were indeed culturally and religiously conservative, but if ever a school was burned (I know of no such incident during the 1980s), it was not a mujahedin practice or policy; it was, of course, famously the policy of the Taliban, who arose a decade later. Another error is the authors’ misidentification of the largely Tajik Afghan fighting organization, Jamiat-i Islami, headed by Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Masoud. This is not the same organization as the Pakistani Islamist organization Jamaat Islami, founded by Abul Ala Maududi (190). The Pakistani party is indeed an Islamist organization. Its structure and practice are Leninist in nature, and its agendas include replacing democratic process with Sharia Law. However, Rabbani’s organization is no such outfit. Assembled largely as a Muslim organization to fight the communists, it had only ambiguous social agendas, most of which focused primarily on reinstating a society like that which was presided over by Zahir Shah in the 1960s, whose return they favored.

We share the authors’ desire to have the “untold” stories of Afghanistan revealed, for like them, we suspect much has been veiled from public knowledge. But whatever Fitzgerald and

Gould have done to reveal the invisible or tell what has been untold is mitigated by the interlarding of inflated rhetoric, flimsy evidence, and implausible logic. The volume falls short of its billing.

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