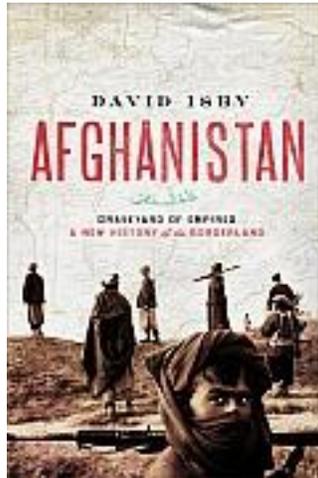


AFGHANISTAN
Graveyard of Empires
by David Isby

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AFGHANISTAN
Graveyard of Empires
A New History of the Borderland

**Revised and updated paperback
edition**

David Isby

ISBN 978-1-60598-189-5 Paper \$16.95 6 x9 xxii, 442 pages Map

The death of Osama bin Laden is unlikely to be a turning point in the conflict in Afghanistan, according to a new book on Afghanistan. "The assassination of Ahmed Walid Karzai, the brother of Afghan

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president Hamid Karzai, is likely to have a more direct impact; he was pivotal in the current government's moves to consolidate power in the south', according to David Isby, author of *Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires*. The book, which includes an afterword on the death on bin Laden, sees his death as important for the US rather than Afghanistan, despite the fact that he was responsible for the deaths of more Afghans than Americans.

The death on bin Laden is not a victory in itself, but the war in Afghanistan is still winnable, but only if both the US and Afghans make immediate and forceful changes to enable them do what is necessary to prevent the Taliban from winning by default by waiting until the world loses patience. The hope for a better life that led Afghans of all ethnolinguistic groups to support the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 has deteriorated and needs to be revived through a cohesive strategy. This is the conclusion of *Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires, A History of the Borderlands*, a revised and updated paperback edition of the book by David Isby, published by Pegasus Books in New York.

The author, who has studied the conflicts in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979, has published three previous books on Afghanistan, written extensively in journals such as *USA Today*, *The Washington Times*, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, *Jane's Defense Weekly* and other publications, testified before House and Senate committees as an independent expert, and has appeared discussing Afghanistan on CNN, *Fox and Friends*, *PBS News Hour*, *the McLaughlin Group*, C-SPAN, the BBC, the Voice of America and many other broadcasts.

This is a book about Afghanistan, the Afghans and conflicts that have come to define them both. The author sees Afghanistan as having become a country defined by five distinct but interconnected conflicts that are currently shaping its future, conflicts against the international terrorism of Al Qaeda, that against the insurgents, especially the Taliban movement; that against narcotics cultivation and trafficking (Afghanistan produces the vast majority of the world's supply of illicit opium), and, finally, Afghanistan's multifaceted internal conflicts. Pointedly, the fifth conflict that will shape the future of Afghanistan is not in that country at all, but in Pakistan, where the insurgency is essentially part of a single trans-border conflict including Afghanistan. Pakistan's internal instability threatens the future of its neighbors as well.

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The book sees Afghanistan's conflicts as having a direct impact on the US. Al Qaeda planned and trained for the 9/11 attacks in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. The Taliban insurgents the US are fighting represent a movement that has the potential to destabilize the three strategic regions bordered by Afghanistan: Pakistan and the subcontinent, Iran and the Gulf and central Asia. A Taliban resurgence would present a model of how Western influence can be forced out of an Islamic country by a radicalized minority with access to external support, here delivered through sanctuaries in Pakistan.

While the book sees the long-running conflicts in Afghanistan as still winnable, losing – allowing the insurgents to achieve their goals – remains a real possibility unless US and Afghans alike change. US disengagement from Afghanistan would be unlikely to reduce the impact of subsequent success by Al Qaeda and the Taliban and prevent future threats both to the US and to the stability of the regions.

The author has spent much time on the ground in Afghanistan and Pakistan, starting in the 1980s. He has met, talked, argued with and listened to many of the leading figures on all sides of each of today's conflicts, as well as those from all walks of life. While the conflicts are about many things, none is more important than what happens to the hope that Afghanistan had in such abundance when the Taliban fell in 2001. What happens to that hope for a better future, whether it can be revived or if what remains of it will turn to dust and Afghanistan will face a future of seemingly limitless conflict, is the central issue of *Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires*.

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About the Author

David Isby



DAVID C. ISBY is a veteran observer of Afghanistan and Afghan wars. He is the author of three previous books on Afghanistan: *WAR IN A DISTANT COUNTRY: AFGHANISTAN, INVASION AND RESISTANCE*, *WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: THE SOVIET EMPIRE AT HIGH TIDE*; and *RUSSIA'S WAR IN AFGHANISTAN*. He is also the author of, among other works, of books on the forces that fought in Afghanistan, *WEAPONS AND TACTICS OF THE SOVIET ARMY* and *ARMIES OF NATO'S CENTRAL FRONT* (with Charles Kamps). He has written over 350 articles on national security in *International Defense Review*, *USA Today*, *The National Interest Online*, *Military Intelligence*, *Jane's Defense Weekly*, *Defense News*, *CTC Terrorism Sentinel*, *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, and many other publications. He was an editor for *Strategy & Tactics* magazine and has designed several award-winning conflict simulations.

A former congressional staff member and a Washington-based attorney and consultant on national security issues, he has testified before both House and Senate committees as an independent expert on Afghanistan and frequently appears in print and electronic media, including *PBS NewsHour*, CNN, VoA, C-Span, *the McLaughlin Group*, *Fox and Friends* and others. He has lectured at staff colleges and other institutions on Afghanistan.

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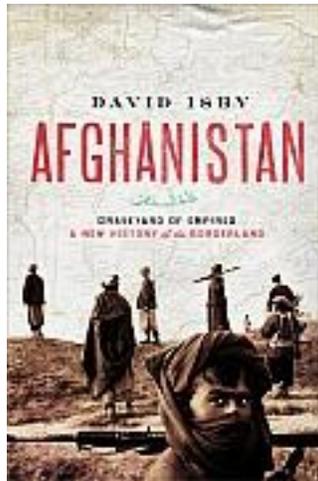
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Quotes and Reviews – David Isby



“David Isby is ...a scholar with a broad understanding of both military history and the current situation”. *The Washington Times*

“*Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires* is a comprehensive, exceptionally researched survey of the events, actors, and issues that have shaped the current situation in this crucial region. It is highly recommended for anyone wishing to better understand the developments in post-9/11 Afghanistan and Pakistan in the appropriate historical context”. *Journal of Military History*

“If you want to grasp what the Afghans, the United States, and their Western allies are up against, and will be fighting for the foreseeable future, read this book. Isby’s depiction of that violently networked netherworld is the most cogent description yet of the threat facing Afghanistan. This book is the best one on the subject – and it will be for some time to come.” *Sean M. Maloney, author of Fighting for Afghanistan: A Rogue Historian at War*

“David Isby’s *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland* is a sweeping, insightful and authoritative account by one of

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the leading experts on that country, who began trekking through its rugged countryside in the early 1980s". *The Washington Times*

"This is an excellent book for anyone who wants to develop a detailed understanding of the war in Afghanistan and gain a nuanced appreciation of the difficulty the U.S. faces in bringing it to a satisfactory conclusion." – *Phi Beta Kappa Key Reporter* magazine

"An accomplished author". *Ralph Peters*

"David C. Isby, an American defense expert, attorney and pilot" *British Army Review*

"David Isby gives his readers [*in Leave no Man Behind*] one of the most thoroughly researched and well-written accounts to date of the high risk subset of Special Operations" *Journal of Military History*

"Isby has written a volume that superbly analyzes the past with a clear look to the future". *Infantry* [*on Leave No Man Behind*].

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Sample Interview Questions for David Isby

Does the death of bin Laden end the rationale for the US commitment to Afghanistan?

Has the US military surge turned around the situation in Afghanistan?

Has the Obama administration's rhetoric and policy been effective in Afghanistan?

How is the Karzai government trying to consolidate power in Afghanistan? Is it going to work?

How important is Pakistan and the situation there?

Is Afghanistan worth a US commitment with its attendant cost in lives and money?

Is Afghanistan Obama's Vietnam?

Have the Taliban split from Al Qaeda? Is there any reason to assume that Al Qaeda would be able to use Taliban-controlled parts of Afghanistan to plan and train for terrorism as they did before 2001?

Do the Afghans resent the US and foreign presence in their country?

What changes have you seen in Afghanistan recently compared with the immediate post-Taliban period?

Are the five conflicts you talk about in Afghanistan primarily military?

How quickly can we withdraw more troops from Afghanistan?

Why is corruption a major problem in Afghanistan and what can be done about it?

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Why should the US support the Karzai government given its record with corruption and election fraud?

Is not Afghanistan so hostile to foreign forces and influence that the best thing we can do, and what Afghans really want, is to end our presence?

The US failed in Southeast Asia, in Lebanon, in Somalia, each time withdrawing its troops and leaving in control the people we were fighting. None of these failures had an adverse effect on the United States or its population. Why would failure in Afghanistan be any different?

With the global economy still in the grips of the Great Recession and the US confronting political crises at home, can we afford a commitment to Afghanistan?

Is not Afghanistan a peripheral commitment, where we have neither long-standing links nor vital economic interests? Would we not be better served, in light of constrained US resources, in triaging Afghanistan away?

Is the Pakistani military America's enemy? Why are we giving them aid?

Opium cultivation - what can be done about it?

What has been your most memorable experience in Afghanistan?

What have your experiences with Afghans been like?

How did you become interested in Afghanistan?

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An Interview with David Isby
Author of *Afghanistan,*
Graveyard of Empires



Has the death of bin Laden changed the conflict in Afghanistan?

While bin Laden was important as a symbol and for his personal links to the leadership of both the Taliban and transnational terrorism, his death is unlikely to affect either or make it possible for the US or Afghanistan to change policies.

Has not the death of bin Laden removed the US rationale for involvement in Afghanistan?

He was more a symptom of the lack of involvement that marked US policy in the 1989-2001 period. This created a policy vacuum. Pakistan's military tried to take advantage of it, but were unable to do so. They made things worse. What emerged to fill this vacuum was bin Laden and transnational terrorism.

Is the assassination of President Karzai's half-brother Ahmed Walid Karzai likely to have an impact?

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The death of Ahmad Walid Karzai was important. He was a key part of the government's political strategy. Karzai wants to consolidate political power his way, on the model of the Durrani leaders of pre-conflict Afghanistan. This is going to be difficult to reconcile with all that has changed in Afghanistan in the last 40 years, including the constitution and elections that have taken place since 2001. But making it work as the outside military commitment draws down is the single most crucial thing needed in Afghanistan.

What's really going on in Afghanistan?

The insurgency in Afghanistan absorbs the vast majority of coalition troops and resources. But at the same time, threats from transnational terrorism, narcotics trafficking and Afghanistan's internal conflicts undercut many of the policies that an effective counter-insurgency strategy requires. All of these conflicts also are affecting Pakistan. Insurgency, terrorism, and a set of internal crises can turn Pakistan into the ultimate bad-dream scenario, a nuclear-armed failed state. Multiple conflicts in two countries ensure policies effective against any one are likely to be counterproductive against the others.

What matters most about the current conflict in Afghanistan?

The US, the UK, and others are fighting a long and costly war, in terms of both casualties and money. The goal is to turn security in Afghanistan over to the Afghan National Security Forces by 2014, although these forces will depend on outside aid for long after that. In many ways, this is a good thing. Minimizing outside involvement and increasing Afghan responsibility will be part of any solution. The fundamental fact is that this war is about Afghanistan. Afghanistan's conflicts have their roots in events that took place long before the US military intervention in 2001, after 9/11. In my book, I tried to always keep the focus on Afghanistan and the Afghans and, as far as it shapes the future of Afghanistan, Pakistan as well. Afghans, rather than the White House, the Pentagon, or the Congress, will have to put together the eventual solution.

What should be the US policy objective in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is a war that needs to be won. What is at stake is much greater than preventing another 9/11 attack being prepared in Afghanistan. Losing in Afghanistan would not be like losing in Vietnam.

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The US forced to retreat like the Soviets would be a victory for transnational terror. It would make them the wave of the future to people throughout the Islamic world. The narrative that the Americans came after us, but they could not beat us and now, we're back and they've gone home would be a compelling one.

What should the US be doing to win the war in Afghanistan?

Even the best US soldiers or the most caring aid workers can only do so much. The most important thing Afghanistan needs from the US is to keep the neighbors – especially Pakistan – from fighting out their own proxy wars in Afghanistan. Aid to rebuild the infrastructure and human resources and create a functional private sector economy has too often been absent since 2001.

What do you think about the US policy debate regarding Afghanistan?

Many policy arguments are really about the US rather than Afghanistan. To some, Afghanistan is another Vietnam, an open-ended foreign war that threatens plans for widespread and expensive domestic social reforms. Others invoke the US withdrawals from Lebanon in the 1980s and Somalia in the 1990s as potential lessons. There, the local population felt the effects, rather than people in the US. In Afghanistan, Americans may not be as fortunate. People tend to make up the Afghanistan that best supports their own preferences in the highly polarized US political environment rather than trying to come to grips with unclear and often contradictory reality.

Why should Americans care about Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is a great place. The Afghans are wonderful people. Neither deserves what is happening. Yet United States policy towards Afghanistan must be considered in terms of national interest. The US disengagement from Afghanistan in the 1990s proved to be disastrous from that standpoint – it helped create the vacuum Al Qaeda filled – as well as for the Afghans. The US supported countries such as the Republic of Korea and Israel back when they were poor and weak. Today, they are neither. Afghanistan may never make it to their level. America fought a bloody war in Korea, while Israel has never required US forces. US commitment helps them prosper despite neighbors that are adversaries and creates a world order where conflicts do not directly

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affect the life of the average American. The 9/11 attacks, planned in Afghanistan, aimed at destroying this order.

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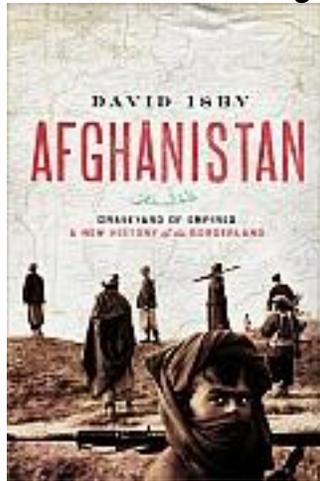
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Why I Wrote This Book: *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires* David Isby



The children seemed not to know what to make of it. But they could see that their parents were happy and so they decided to smile and chatter with each other. There were cameras and foreigners and much talking, and their parents seemed to think that great good would come of that day's events. It was 21 March 2002; in Afghanistan, *Nawroz* (New Year's Day) of the year 1423 A.H.. The schools were reopening throughout the country on the traditional first day of spring classes.

The parents smiled at of the happy children, now clutching aid-donated books and pencils handed them for the benefit of the cameras. ,To others at the ceremony, the children were evidence of how much Afghanistan had changed in the few months since the US and its coalition allies, through the use of a few hundred special operations forces personnel and intelligence agents, supported by the judicious use of airpower, had enabled Afghanistan's Northern Alliance to topple the Afghan Taliban regime and their Al Qaeda patrons and drive them over

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the border into Pakistan. While they were in power, the Taliban had barred girls from attending school throughout most of Afghanistan as anathema to their fundamentalist vision of Islam. Boys' education had been cut back. But today, boys and girls would go to school together in Afghanistan. The donated notebooks were an earnest of the promise of outside aid, making education available to them all. That was what had made their parents happy. Surely, the parents thought, with the Taliban gone and the conflicts that had embroiled Afghanistan since 1978 finally over, a bright future seemed to be opening up that morning along with the schools.

The reopening of Afghanistan's schools on Nawroz in 2002 was the first act by an Afghan government that had been accepted and implemented countrywide in Afghanistan since 1978. Then, the Communist putsch had been the first step in a long chain of events that plunged the country into the start what was to become decades of conflict. Since then, Afghanistan had always been a country at war. But on Nawroz, 2002, with the children clutching their donated books and going off to school, Afghanistan was a country full of hope. Afghans of all ethnolinguistic groups were happy to see the end of the Taliban. They were sure that the international intervention that had brought it about was going to be the start of a new and better era for Afghanistan.

Today, some eight years later, there are over six million Afghan children in school (up from 750,000 in 2001), with a third of the primary school children being girls. But Afghanistan's hope, so bright and strong on the day the schools reopened, has faded. Afghanistan is once again a country at war. Schools are burned by the Taliban as the creations of an infidel invader, 1,089 in 2005-07 alone, more have since been destroyed. Teachers are killed or scared away as agents of a puppet government. Afghanistan has a lot of conflict and not much hope.

The story of how Afghanistan went from a country at war to a country with hope and has now gone back again – and whether this can be halted or reversed – is the subject of my book, *Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires. A History of the Borderlands* published by Pegasus Books in New York. A revised paperback edition has been published in July 2011.

This is the fourth book I have written about Afghanistan at war. I have been studying Afghanistan and its conflicts for almost thirty years. I have also written reference books on the armed forces of the Soviet Union and NATO that both, to their own surprise, have ended up fighting there

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in conflicts that will determine their ultimate success or failure. Over the years, I have traveled many times to Afghanistan and Pakistan. I shared the hope that was so abundant on Nawroz, 2002.

It took a lot to go from the hope-filled Afghanistan of 2002 to the looming crises and multiple, overlapping conflicts of the present day. I wanted to show how Afghanistan got there. . The Pakistanis offered a sanctuary to the Taliban and much of Al Qaeda, seeing them as a way to influence the new Afghanistan and hoping that, if they focused their aggression against the government in Kabul, they would not turn on that in Islamabad. Drawing on the “Taliban culture” that had taken root there since the 1980s, a revived Taliban insurgency was able to bring a minority of Afghanistan’s Pushtun population into arms against the new government by 2005-06. Al Qaeda joined forces with Pakistan-based terrorist organizations, previously limited to the conflict in Kashmir, and rallied them to strike back at infidels worldwide.

I had seen the Afghans in bad times and, having shared their optimism in 2002, to see things go back again was a painful personal blow. The Afghans were willing to take the short-term, self-interested view time and again. The Afghans, while proud of the constitution they created, ended up practicing a divisive approach to internal politics that led to a culture of corruption.

In the US, the bipartisan consensus on Afghanistan that had endured since 2001 crumbled in the first nine months of the new administration. The Obama administration soon demonstrated that it perceived Afghanistan primarily through the viewpoint of its US domestic political dimension. In the US, UK, Canada and other countries with troops in Afghanistan, the electorate is losing patience with the casualties and cost of a commitment that is little understood and seems to offer nothing but unending frustration. As a result, the US and UK are reducing their number of troops and Canada is ending its active combat role. What impact this will have on Afghanistan and its enemies has received less concern. No government has been willing to expend resources to explain why, with 9/11 increasingly distant and bin Laden dead, the security of people in the west is served in Afghanistan.

So I wrote this book to explain how, with Afghanistan filled with hope, on the day the schools reopened in 2002, today hope is in danger of drying up and blowing away. How we – the US, the Afghans, everyone – went from the hope-filled Afghanistan of March 2002 to the hope-imperiled

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Afghanistan of today was at the heart of what I wanted to tell. But Afghanistan is not lost past redemption or repair, even in the most insurgent-plagued districts or in the most corrupt ministries.

It is important that hope be kept alive in Afghanistan, important not only for the Afghans but for the countries in the regions that border them and also for people in the US. Afghanistan has a real potential to affect their lives. If the average American saw, when the recession went global in 2008, how interlinked economies are, this conflict is showing threats of fundamentalism and terrorism, unlike armies, cannot be contained across oceans. Afghanistan was allowed to function as a haven for international terrorism under the Taliban. It was where Al Qaeda trained for and planned the 9/11 attacks. But even if Al Qaeda never came back to Afghanistan, if the Taliban insurgents end up back in power, it would not only be dreadful for the people of Afghanistan it would encourage all those that believe that the US, the West and their Moslem allies cannot stand up to radicalism. Terrorists will see a success greater than 9/11. The Muslim world will see that armed fundamentalism can triumph over western-supported democracy. This will have an impact throughout the world. That is why I believe it is important to revive Afghanistan's hope.

Afghanistan: Graveyard of Empires. A History of the Borderlands is published by Pegasus Books in New York. It is available at bookstores nationwide as well as on-line at Amazon.Com, Barnes & Noble, Powells.com and elsewhere.

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Afghanistan's Underlying Conflicts

David Isby

The current conflict in Afghanistan will not be won on the battlefield. Purely kinetic military actions constitute perhaps a fifth or a quarter of what is required to prevail in the multi-faceted conflict of troops, lives and ideas represented by an insurgency. Using firepower against the Taliban may kill insurgents, but more will be recruited to replace them as long as the "Taliban culture" remains strong among the ethnic Pushtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Taliban movements in both Afghanistan and Pakistan aim to seize control of the Pushtuns' rich and centuries-old culture, which many feel is besieged by change from outside. "The most common Pushtun feeling is that there is a war on our culture," is the sentiment according to Massoud Kharokhail of the Kabul-based Tribal Liaison Office, a developmental non-governmental organization (NGO). The insurgents aim to mobilize this feeling to achieve political power, with the ultimate goal being the overthrow of the elected governments in both Kabul and Islamabad.

Security and economic opportunity are vital to the people of Afghanistan. The campaign in the Kandahar area (*Loya Kandahar*), the focus of the 2010-11 US military surge, aimed to bring these benefits to the population of an area where the Taliban is strongly entrenched. In that, it has largely succeeded. But cultural issues also need to be part of effective counter-insurgency.

The kinship-based and collectivist orientation of traditional Afghan society is by no means limited to Pushtuns. It has led to suspicion of the influx of ideas and media and the market economy of today's Afghanistan. The appearance of imported goods (unaffordable to most Afghans) and

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the large houses built by Afghanistan's political and business elites in Kabul or in the Panjshir valley have given Afghans ample scope to exercise their propensity for envy that Mountstuart Elphinstone, the first British envoy to Afghanistan, noted back in 1815. Afghan resentment of the West, while coveting its material gains, dates back to the nineteenth century. It became a powerful cultural force post-2001 with the appearance of satellite television and bootleg Bollywood DVDs in every village in Afghanistan. Afghans now compare their situation not with their neighbors, but with the outside world. While, in the past, the average Afghan was a devoted listener to shortwave radio broadcasts, today's media provides a much greater engagement with an outside world that does not reflect Afghan culture and does not appear to value it, yet fascinates and, often, repels the rural and uneducated majority.

Afghanistan's insurgents have been able in some areas to transform this cultural unease into active or passive support for their cause. Even many of the Taliban's Afghan enemies share their desire to defend their culture against the outside world.. Yet Afghanistan's deep cultural conservatism is by no means an across-the-board rejection of change or nostalgia for the Taliban. Afghans, even the most conservative, are proud of their political process and constitution, one reason why the Taliban felt compelled in 2006 to issue their own version, something that they had previously scorned as non-Koranic.

Marginalizing the Taliban culture is important not only for the coalition war effort in Afghanistan, it is vital to ensure that the future of the diverse Pushtun people is not hijacked by those – Al Qaeda and Pakistan's homegrown transnational terrorists among them – who would use them as the front rank in a global clash of cultures. The coalition war effort is missing someone to pull together all the diverse actions that fighting a battle of ideas requires, with the skills of an Alastair Campbell (Tony Blair's spinmaster) or a Karl Rove. It will be difficult to both negotiate the cultural minefield and deal with the realities of Afghanistan's dynamic media. Words coming from foreigners or the Kabul government are viewed with distrust. In a country that is profoundly religious, much of the cultural war must be waged in Islamic terms. This may require involving Moslem allies who wish to show they are on the right side of the climate of change seen in recent months and to counter the Taliban's claim to fundamentalist legitimacy.

Afghanistan's hard-bought military successes will be undercut if the enemy can win the cultural battle. The enemy in this battle is more than

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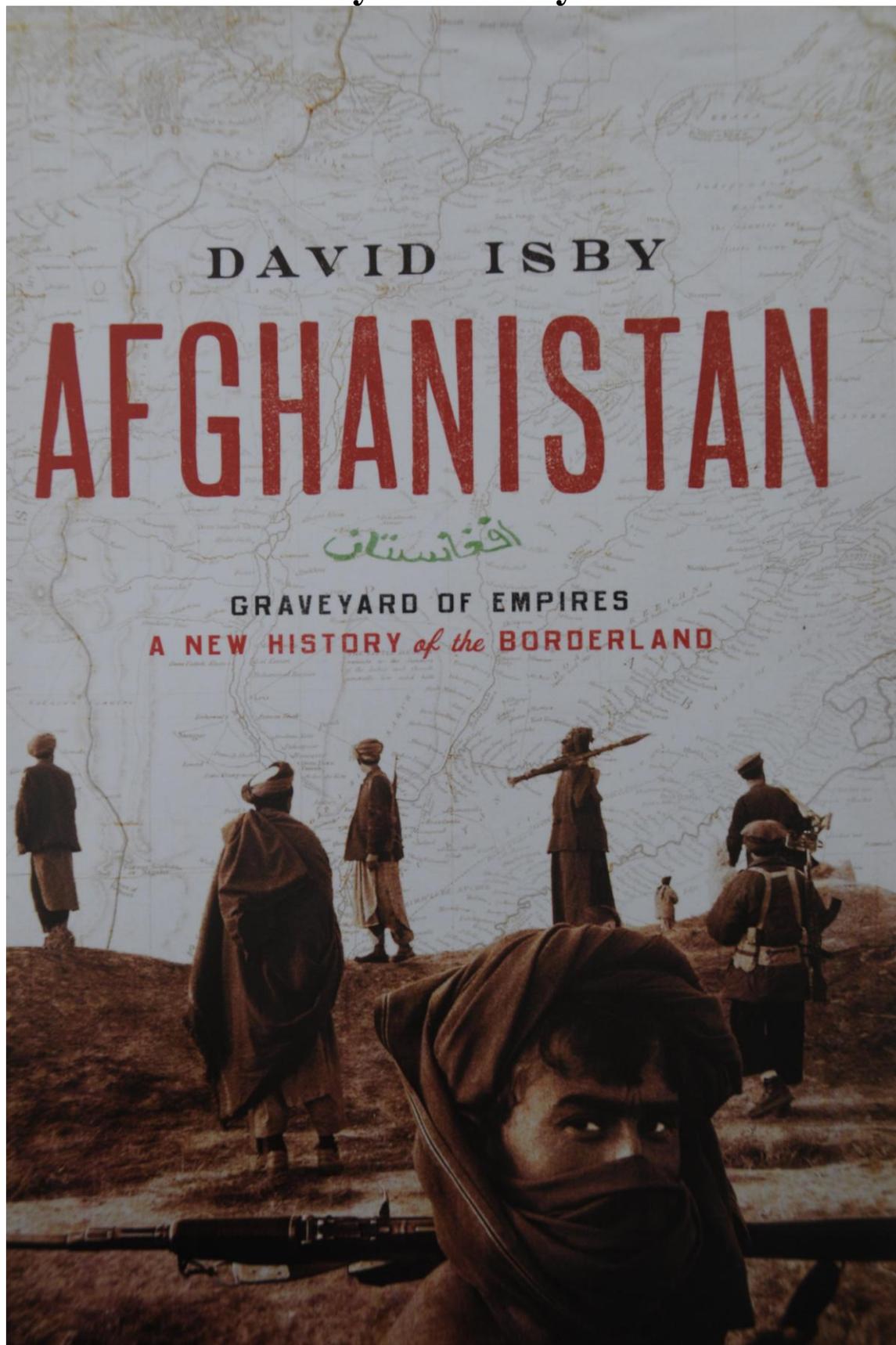
the insurgents with Kalashnikovs, but those wearing business suits or military uniforms in Pakistan, the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. They hope that, if the US follows the Soviets and limps away from Afghanistan, they can use the momentum to mobilize Moslems against infidels and the governments that cooperate with them. The “Taliban culture” has spread, laws banning kite-flying or music outside the tribal area that are that culture’s stronghold in Pakistan are one of many indications that its appeal is not limited to Pushtun culture. The outcome of Afghanistan’s culture wars will have an impact, not just on that country’s insurgency, but potentially on the future of the regions around it.

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David Isby is the author of *Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires*, published by Pegasus.

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