

January 9, 2000

Our Own Islamic Radicals

A correspondent blames the C.I.A. for creating a rebellious monster.

By **GRAHAM E. FULLER**

The veteran Middle East correspondent John K. Cooley provides a detailed treatment of a fascinating topic: the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the heavy American and Muslim world support for the mujahedeen's guerrilla war against the Soviet Union and the international consequences of these new radical Islamic forces.

UNHOLY WARS Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism.

By John K. Cooley.
276 pp. Sterling,
Va.:
Pluto Press. \$29.95.

BARNES & NOBLE
ON SALE NOW [CLICK HERE](#)

The invasion was, of course, a pivotal event in the eventual collapse of a fatally flawed Soviet Union, and many observers have seen American support for the Islamic militants in Afghanistan as a stunning Western victory that hastened the end of the cold war. But Cooley, the author of several books, including "Payback: America's Long War in the Middle East," looks at the downside of that momentous series of events; he examines the widespread negative fallout that flowed directly, in his view, from the tragically shortsighted and flawed C.I.A. policies in Afghanistan.

Successive chapters of "Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism" treat those unanticipated consequences: the unleashing of

militant Islamic fanaticism across the entire Muslim world, with dire results for most of its governments; the opening of the floodgates of narcotics from a now uncontrolled Afghan-Pakistani territory; regional anarchy and the criminalization of political structures across many of the new republics of the former Soviet Union; and, above all, the creation of an international cadre of Islamic terrorists whose actions continue to negatively affect the United States down to the present day.

Cooley's story involves a parade of intelligence officers and religious enthusiasts of diverse countries, international adventurers, weapons merchants, statesmen, bankers, sheiks, businessmen, drug runners and terrorists -- all interwoven in complex relationships that are linked, directly or indirectly, to the Afghan events. He has amassed a large body of material on all of these topics -- much of it fascinating -- as well as material on less well-known subjects, like China's involvement in the Afghan war, with dangerous consequences to its own Muslim regions.

The book ultimately disappoints, however. First, Cooley is unable to conceal a powerful bias against anything that the C.I.A. touches, and his distaste for the agency infuses nearly every page. To be sure, there is much that the C.I.A. can be faulted for in its recruitment of international Islamist "freedom fighters," its considerable dependency upon Pakistan to distribute the weapons and the financing of the struggle and the eventual spread of many of those weapons and guerrilla fighters back to the Middle East. (These programs of course reflected the policies of three United States presidents for whom the C.I.A. served as executive arm.) But one searches in vain for any balance, a few things that maybe went right in American policy, like the fact that the Muslim guerrillas dramatically checked the advance of Soviet ground troops into Asia. Cooley owes us thoughtful debate here, but we get none.

More seriously, Cooley superficially attributes to Washington's "holy war" in Afghanistan the emergence of most subsequent regional viciousness, ignoring the deep roots of most of these crises. For

example, drug running in Afghanistan and Pakistan was already rife before the war, and it went on during the war and increased after it -- the natural fruit of feckless rule and chaos. To be sure, the fighting in Afghanistan did accelerate the concentration of international weaponry and guerrilla training that are still having an impact today. But Cooley tends to turn a broad range of diverse regional events into simplistic cause-and-effect relationships. One searches for an appreciation of grander world forces at work along with the failures of American policy in Afghanistan.

The fall of the Soviet Union, to name one, created a vacuum, even chaos, into which drugs and criminality have readily moved. And Islamic militancy has been a growing force over the second half of the 20th century. Rising democratic expectations after the cold war encouraged opposition forces, especially Islamic movements, to challenge entrenched rulers. Muslim anger with Western colonialism, imperialism and interventionism has historic roots. Islam is now entering an extraordinary period of intellectual ferment and evolution, exhibiting both encouraging and worrisome aspects. Political Islam is currently the primary source of change and resistance against authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, based on an ideology long predating Afghanistan. C.I.A. support was an important element of Afghan mujahedeen success, but Islam provided an international rallying point that transformed the bravery and will of the mujahedeen into ultimate victory.

Cooley furthermore indiscriminately lumps conservative and radical, violent and nonviolent, authoritarian and moderate Islamist movements all into the same the-Muslims-are-coming basket. He uncritically bases much of his material on information from regimes like those in Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, whose closed political systems and authoritarian violence against any Islamic opposition represent a key source of that opposition. He sometimes acknowledges other factors, but the flow of his narrative drowns them out in a reductionist thesis that blames the conflict in Afghanistan for everything.

Finally, the book is carelessly put together, a kind of

reportorial pastiche of details -- many of undeniable interest, many not relevant, many repeated more than once -- that constantly bounce backward and forward over four decades. To anyone not deeply familiar with the material, the sequence of events as it is presented here is likely to be quite confusing. (Strangely, one chapter, "The Contagion Spreads: Egypt and the Maghreb," is written in a far more objective, thoughtful and balanced style, and seems almost tacked on to the often bewildering narrative of the other chapters.)

Cooley is to be commended for undertaking the ambitious task of tracing the repercussions of the Afghan war and for coming up with a great many details of value and interest. But the topic awaits a more thoughtful and balanced treatment than the present effort, which often goes barely beyond journalistic muckraking.

Graham E. Fuller is a former vice chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the Central Intelligence Agency and the author of "A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West."

[Return to the Books Home Page](#)

[Home](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Site Search](#) | [Forums](#) | [Archives](#) | [Marketplace](#)

[Quick News](#) | [Page One Plus](#) | [International](#) | [National/N.Y.](#)
| [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Sports](#) | [Weather](#) |
[Editorial](#) | [Op-Ed](#) | [Arts](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Books](#) | [Diversions](#) |
[Job Market](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Travel](#)

[Help/Feedback](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Services](#) | [New York Today](#)

[Copyright 2000 The New York Times Company](#)