



## ASIAN REVIEW OF BOOKS

BOOKS, ARTS & CULTURE

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### “Le Cri afghan” by Michael Barry



**C**hekhov advised that if you talk about a gun in a play’s first act, you’d better shoot someone in the third act. Mike Barry, the Franco-American historian and humanitarian aid activist, saw the gun in the early 1970s, when he first observed the fault-lines in Afghan state and society. In *Le Cri afghan*, he shows how implacably the drama has unfolded. The gun goes off with the chaotic departure of the Americans

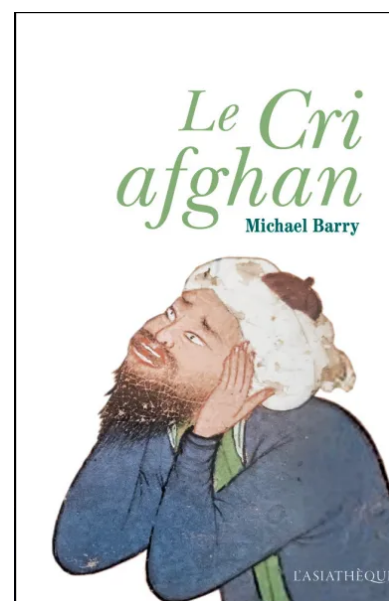
From Kabul in August, 2021, and it is Afghanistan which gets shot. As a historian, Barry makes it clear that America's adventure in Afghanistan was doomed to failure. As a humanitarian, he cannot help arguing that it should have ended differently.

In 1954, the Afghan foreign minister Prince Na'im flew to Washington to meet Eisenhower's secretary of state John Foster Dulles, the architect of the USA's post-war alliance strategy. Na'im asked to join CENTO, an alliance that included Pakistan. Since Pakistan and Afghanistan were at daggers drawn over their colonial-era border, Dulles rejected Na'im's request, and advised instead that Afghanistan resolve its border dispute. Barry writes that this was a fatal mistake on the part of Dulles, because it pushed Afghanistan into the Soviet sphere and laid the ground for the Communist takeover 25 years later. But another interpretation is that Dulles gave good advice and if Na'im had followed it, Pakistan would not have spent the last 57 years trying to destroy the modern Afghan state.

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Moving up to the present, Barry paints President Joe Biden as a man torn between his desire to put an end to America's endless war, and haunted by the humanitarian disasters which will inevitably ensue. Barry argues that there would have been little cost to leave an American military presence in Afghanistan with no exit date. This assumes that the Taliban would have continued to observe their cease-fire agreement with the US forces after the withdrawal dates committed by President Donald Trump. That cannot be said with any certainty. But Barry is convinced that the loss of American credibility and moral



*Le Cri afghan*, Michael Barry  
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authority is very great. “C’est pire qu’un crime, c’est une faute,” he concludes, citing a well-known aphorism, “It’s worse than a crime, it’s a mistake.”

What is certain is that the American adventure in Afghanistan has been a bookend to that of the Soviet experience. Both superpowers deployed 130,000 troops to maintain in power regimes incapable of governing the country.. The brutality of the Afghan Communists and the Red Army was truly horrific, as Barry experienced first-hand during his humanitarian missions for Doctors without Borders: children maimed by mines, mass graves of class enemies, aerial bombing to empty hostile villages. While America did not perpetrate war crimes as part of its policy, in the age of instant information and social media, extensive collateral damage caused a revulsion among the Afghans to the American occupation equivalent to that of the Soviets.

In explaining America’s failure, Barry underlines both its lack of commitment to and its lack of respect for their ally. Barry regrets that the Americans considered Afghanistan a sh\*thole, to use President Trump’s inelegant term. As one of the finest historians of Persian art on both sides of the Atlantic, Barry sees Afghanistan as the birthplace of great paintings, poetry, music, and philosophy. He suggests that if more Americans had been aware of that heritage, they would not have behaved as brutally or as incompetently. When one considers how the American blasted its way through Renaissance and Baroque treasures in Europe in 1943-1945, one is entitled to doubt Barry’s point. War is hell. But defeat is even worse.

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But who are the winners of this war? Barry emphasizes how ambiguous must be the answers to this question. The Taliban are like the proverbial dog that caught the car—now they are in control of a country 25% urbanized, with Internet and mobile communications, unlike their first occupation in 1996. The Pakistani military and

Intelligence services have won a huge tactical victory, eliminating Indian influence in their rear and neutralizing Afghan irredentism over their 2,000 mile frontier. On the other hand, Islamabad faces the specter of the Pakistani Taliban emulating the success of their comrades in arms in Kabul. That is why, writes Barry, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan pleads for an inclusive, pragmatic government in Kabul. But will the hard men of the Taliban listen to him?

Barry's prognoses for both Afghanistan and Pakistani are bleak. In Afghanistan, the Taliban, Pashtun chauvinists, imbued with a sense of national and religious superiority vis-à-vis the majority of Afghans, convinced that women must observe strict purdah, will not make good on the promises of their emollient spokesmen. Civil war is likely to resume, with both ISIS and anti-Taliban forces motivated to fight. He also predicts the Taliban will not be satisfied to establish Islamic Law "in one country" (Barry refers here to Stalin's pragmatism about "socialism in one country") but will blow back even more strongly against their former minders in Pakistan and even further abroad.

Readers of *Le Cri afghan* will recognize Mike Barry's exuberant erudition, extending from the Federalist papers to Macbeth to Antonio Viera. He brings the same enthusiasm and love for learned digression that one enjoys during his university lectures posted on YouTube. Nevertheless, the combination of Barry's own role in events of the last 50 years with copious documentation from other contemporary participants, gives this book the solidity which Barry's convictions merit. While many recent books published on Afghanistan echo some of Barry's themes, this book is different in focus. It is less about politics and more an examination of the class of civilisations. The clash is not between the West and Islam, but rather between humanism and totalitarianism.

If this book is translated into English, would it be "Elegy for Afghanistan" or "A Plea for Afghanistan"? The tireless and courageous humanitarian activist that is Mike Barry does not admit the war is over. He argues passionately that the cause of women is to the 21st century what the cause of enslaved Black people was to the 19th century, and that this combat cannot be over simply because the Americans lost their war.