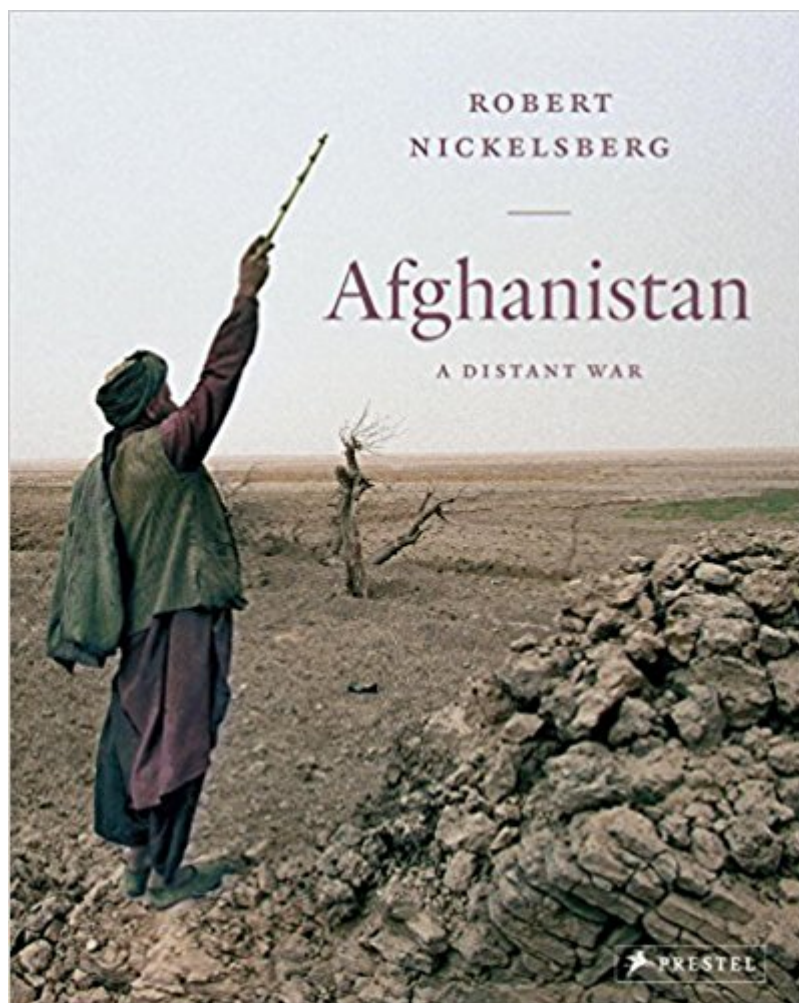


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Afghanistan: A Distant War



Synopsis

Noted documentary photographer Robert Nickelsberg's photographs help bring into focus the day-to-day consequences of war, poverty, oppression, and political turmoil in Afghanistan. Since the attack on the World Trade Center, Afghanistan has evolved from a country few people thought twice about to a place that evokes our deepest emotions. TIME magazine photographer Robert Nickelsberg has been publishing his images of this distant yet all too familiar country since 1988, when he accompanied a group of mujahideen across the border from Pakistan. This remarkable volume of photographs is accompanied by insightful texts from experts on Afghanistan and the Taliban. The images themselves are captioned with places, dates, and Nickelsberg's own extensive commentary. Timely and important, the book serves as a reminder that Afghanistan and the rest of the world remain inextricably linked, no matter how much we long to distance ourselves from its painful realities.

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Customer Reviews

Noted documentary photographer Robert Nickelsberg's photographs help bring into focus the day-to-day consequences of war, poverty, oppression, and political turmoil in Afghanistan. This remarkable volume of photographs is accompanied by insightful texts from experts on Afghanistan and the Taliban. The images themselves are captioned with places, dates, and Nickelsberg's own extensive commentary. Timely and important, the book serves as a reminder that Afghanistan and the rest of the world remain inextricably linked, no matter how much

we long to distance ourselves from its painful realities.

ROBERT NICKELSBURG has been a photographer for Time magazine for nearly thirty years. His work in Afghanistan has also appeared on The New York Times "Lens" blog and his images have appeared in Newsweek, The Wall Street Journal, the Financial Times, CNN, and NBC. His photographs have been exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the International Center of Photography in New York City, and The New American Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Nickelberg is one of the unsung heroes of photojournalism. His reportage covering most American conflicts since El Salvador. His coverage of Afghanistan is extensive and very poignant and visually intriguing. Nickelsberg is one of the last of a vanishing breed of true professionalism in photography and war coverage. This is a must see book on the long war in the 'Stan.

Beautiful stories and photography.

Terrific book! Had the experience to see him live at a get together in Aspen, Colorado. Very fascinating
fascinating
Photographer

Robert Nickelsberg has been traveling to Afghanistan since the late 1980s as a photojournalist to document the seemingly endless wars that have engulfed that fascinating and unfortunate country. This book presents a retrospective of Nickelsberg's extraordinary work in Afghanistan, from the final days of the Soviet occupation to the U.S.-led war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda following 9/11. The book's final pages include images taken earlier this year of the U.S. drawdown in anticipation of next year's definitive pullout. As such, this definitive document captures in images a quarter century of Afghanistan's tumultuous history -- including the haunting portraits of commanders, warlords, drug smugglers, bomb makers, foot soldiers, as well as riveting shots of the ever-present and ever-suffering civilians. Through it all, Nickelsberg documents what he sees with an unwavering eye and exceptional courage. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in war photography, reportage, Afghanistan, current events and history. There will come a time when this book becomes scarce and hard to find. Now is the time to get one while you can. An indispensable addition to collections of photojournalism and libraries on Afghanistan and South Asia.

Aesthetically, "Afghanistan: A Distant War," is nearly flawless. Nickelsberg's beautiful photographs;

Prestel's elegant design and printing; and Jon Lee Anderson's dead-on Foreword (which should be subtitled "Afghanistan for Dummies") together create a model for war photography books in an era where bound books, especially expensive, large format photography books, are an endangered literary species. When one reads "Afghanistan" and sits staring at the double page, three-dimensional contrast of shadow and light and the rhythmic synergy of action shots against somber portraiture, it's possible to believe that print photography is not summarily doomed after all. Nickelsberg understands the need for synchronicity of photographs and text. Not all photographers have the good sense to do so, since more than a few, along with editors and curators, believe that a photograph that somehow requires words to explain it must not be "art." It supposedly speaks for itself if it captures the "decisive moment" or, in the case of war photography, offers shock value, a bar that seems to get higher by the minute. "Afghanistan" contains a solid stable of riveting and even heart-stopping images, and there are too many good ones to list them in a book review: An Uzbek fighter firing on the enemy (p. 55); a wounded civilian in a pitched battle scene (p. 61); and Taliban soldiers attacking; the retreating Northern Alliance army (p. 83) are all testimony to Nickelsberg's mettle under extreme circumstances, and they squarely position him in photo critic Susie Linfield's pantheon of acclaimed war photographers. American military veterans of the Afghan conflict would likely find that this book offers an elegiac, yet unsentimental perspective on their time there, a perspective that likely would deepen as the years go by; the photographs devoted to the wars-before-the-American-war contribute to that long perspective. Nickelsberg's photographs are enhanced, not diminished, by his inclusion of meaty captions, which provide factual counterpoint to the beauty, horror, or seemingly mundane image. Moreover, what distinguishes Afghanistan from the shock and awe of the in-your-face wide angle images that characterize so many other photo books are the other photographs that temper the battles scenes. These images, together with their captions, are what give Afghanistan its rich texture. Page 39, for example, shows two nearly faceless Chinese Uighur fighters disassembling Kalashnikovs, in a camp in Khost in 1990. The image is not spectacular in itself, but the caption, which notes that the camp was funded in part by Osama bin Laden and Pakistani military intelligence, gives the image another layer of significance. On page 116, the image of a U.S. soldier in side profile seems like thousands of others until one reads the caption and realizes the dangers. Full disclosure: I met Nickelsberg back in the day, in the early 1980s, when we were both freelance Time photographers in the wars of Central America. Though Bob was ambitious, he was also the good guy with an honorable agenda; in contrast to other press agency Alpha-males in the business, Bob, the tough skinny dude with the Domke bag and the million pocket safari jacket stuffed with light meter and

cigarettes, strove to understand what was happening instead of just recording it for posterity and expensed dry cleaning. I lost track of Bob over the years, so it was especially gratifying to catch up with him again on the pages of Facebook, and to see "Afghanistan" featured on them. Particularly striking is Nickelsberg's refusal to position himself as the center of his own decades-long commitment to a place and people. Aside from his informative and sometimes riveting captions, there is little self-reference in "Afghanistan," though judging from some of the images it is clear that the anecdotes, some of them heart-stopping, must abound. In fact, "Afghanistan" s sole short-coming with respect to content is the paucity of Nickelsberg's narrative presence on its pages; one would like to have heard more directly from the photographer who was so deeply invested in the region for almost three decades and whose mental compendium of knowledge is one that Nickelsberg himself surely underestimates. Remarkably, in contrast to the journalists who pose self-aggrandizingly for promotional publicity photos in borrowed combat helmets, "Afghanistan" does not contain even an author photograph. "Afghanistan" is so good that it deserves to be read by people who, like me, cannot do much more than name the country's capital. To some degree it has reached an audience: Thanks to the power of the digital age and instant access to online magazines and blog sites, "Afghanistan" has been widely reviewed by a blue chip stable of online reviewers. Paradoxically, the publication of images from "Afghanistan" on NationalGeographic.com and David González's LensBlog page in the New York Times (to name just two of the many online reviews) unintentionally underscores the challenge that photography books face these days. The limited print version, a modern day David, confronts a digital Goliath, no slingshot in sight. Most great ideas never find their way into print, and even those that do are remaindered within months. Because its quality is so high, "Afghanistan" provides a useful vehicle for discussing the purpose of war photography books in our era of disposal news and disposable images. Put another way, in an age where over a billion people possess smartphone cameras, is there value in a professional war photographer's coffee table book? The paradox of digital photography is that today it is both easier and harder to produce a photo book. In 1987, for example, when my text-and-photo book on Guatemala's thirty-year armed conflict was published, photography books were expensive. Even if one cobbled together the funding, the process was lengthy and cumbersome. In my case, proof sheets shuttled via courier between New York and Tokyo for over half a year, and my editor and I spent afternoons squinting at the image corners armed with photo loupes and grease pencils. Marketing was another Sisyphean task; once published, one held one's breath to see if the high priest of reviewers, the Sunday New York Times, and then the legions of other print newspapers and magazines that followed in its wake, would acknowledge one's life's work. If the book sold well,

there was a second or third print run, but once those books sold out, the book died a quiet death on the remaindered shelves of the local second-hand bookstore. Today, by contrast, it is easier to publish photography books because the digital era has made everyone not just a photographer but a potential publisher as well. A few thousand dollars and you are off and running; without leaving the home office one can produce and market a digital photo book. Moreover, the power of Facebook and the avalanche of online blogs and magazines now make publicity cheap and instantaneous; this stands in stark contrast to the 1980s, when Google was a distant glimmer in someone's eye, and so was Mark Zuckerberg. In fact, the very efficacy of the digital age now makes physical book publishing seem cumbersome, expensive, and obsolete. One need not buy "Afghanistan" to see a surfeit of pictures, many of them excellent photographs, of the region's conflict. Open the newspaper that gets thumped at your door and there is a photo-shopped image above the fold with a link to more images online. For example, the New York Times' on-line compendium of last year's stellar photographs contains multiple spectacular images from the Middle East. (Sergey Ponomarev needs to do a book, soon.) Google the region, and a cornucopia of images appears that you can complement with text cribbed from that search - provided, anyway, that you know enough to be able to do so. Though production costs for publishing top-quality hard copy photo books have fallen, free online access still makes the economics of photo book publishing inefficient. "Afghanistan" illustrates the point. It weighs over three pounds, not an easy haul from coffee table to night table (and shipping costs not negligible, either, even if you have Prime), and its sticker price of sixty dollars induces hesitation among those of us with no trust fund in sight. The subject is depressing, and although many of the photos are gorgeous, their subject matter is not something to peruse while waiting for the Ambien to kick in. Further, despite a good deal of online publicity and glowing reviews, almost fifty remaindered or review copies were for sale on two months after "Afghanistan"'s publication. (Pearls before swine.) This prompts the question of who pays retail for books. While "Afghanistan" is neither as expensive or as hefty as Susan Meiselas' equally valuable, but formidably priced, book on the Kurds (Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History, Random House, 1997, \$162; re-issued ten years later in paperback, University of Chicago, 2008), it raises the question of who will shell out for "Afghanistan," since it is neither a succulently beautiful nor exotic subject ripped from the pages of the Smithsonian catalogue, ripe for arrangement between the cocktails and the olives. Why, then, do we continue to buy political photography books like "Afghanistan," containing images, text, information and punch, and a complex social and political backstory? And should we, or instead just leave it to the amateurs and bystanders in the field with their cell phone cameras linked instantly to the Internet? Consider, for one thing, that professional

photographers take more images of their subject than amateurs, because that is what they do for a living. Talent, persistence, and the whirring of the motor drive result in the production more good photos, more "decisive moments" and, as in "Afghanistan," more cohesive stories that explain otherwise inscrutable subjects. Although amateurs sometimes grab the fortuitous and occasionally spectacular image, so far, with the spectacular exception of nanny-photographer Vivian Maier (Vivian Maier: Street Photographer; powerHouse Books, 2011), I cannot recall a memorable photography trade press book produced by an amateur in recent years. As for the immediate flood of images on the Internet in the case of an immediate event, they are both valuable and evanescent; as a result, what now separates the men from the boys is, despite the ever- apparent threat to the book industry, the publication of political photo books running the gamut from self-indulgent door-stops, varnished in political self- righteousness, to the thoughtfully-contrived, longitudinal recordation of events, as found in the pages of "Afghanistan." In addition, we trust photographers for whom the camera is a tool, not a cause or a mission statement, to provide a less manipulative view of the world. Although by-standers provide many images from immediate disaster scenes, many of the brutal combat photos posted over the Internet today are taken by partisans and fighters who seek to convey a message. Many war photography books advocate a point of view, of course, and the photographers who make them often hold opinions one way or another regarding the different sides in war and their hopes for the outcome. At the same time, however -- and in contrast to the participant or by-stander with his cell phone camera -- people who buy war photography books rely on professionals not to coerce the "decisive moment" in the field. Professional photographers draw the line in part because they are paid to photograph, not to advocate; no matter how much one may covet the next Pulitzer or Capa award, no earnest war photographer wishes to become the Janet Cooke or Stephen Glass of war photography. The advent of digital photography has undoubtedly forced photographers to defend the integrity of their images: the ability to photo-shop a politician's head atop a centaur for viral sharing on Facebook is mere parody since the alteration is obvious. The real issue is when digital manipulation means to change the photographs, and hence the news reporting, of a real event in a war zone. There are still lines to be drawn between players, posers, and poseurs. As a result, for all the riveting and sometimes shocking images "Afghanistan" contains, Nickelsberg's reputation in the field gives "Afghanistan" the gravitas of authenticity. This might seem counterintuitive - what is more authentic than the insurgent fighter under mortar fire in the rubble sending out an image from his cell phone? But taken collectively, all of those cell-phone photos are not so much "authenticity" and "authoritative" visual representation as they are a kind of shallow, posing Internet TV reality show. Real authority still

tends to accrue to the professionals who invest long term and with an eye to facts of the moment, the long-run context of culture and history, and yet also the beauty and elegance of the well done photograph as frankly aesthetic object. Finally, the Bob Nickelsbergs of the world still look to the print edition to do justice to their commitment and their talent. A photo book is sui generis: it is not the trashy, dispensable airport kiosk novel or the unwieldy academic tome ripe for Kindle (if anywhere). Photography books demand a face-off between photographs and text and the ability to watch a story unfold. People like flipping back and forth among the pages, they like feeling the heft of one hundred gram paper and seeing the little holes where the book has been sewn. They like showing it to their friends over a beer. You don't share a large format photo book over an iPad, over a beer, at least not where I come from. Although "Afghanistan" will certainly appear in electronic form, and it will be lighter and cheaper, the irony of digital books is that their very convenience is ultimately what makes them unsatisfactory to peruse. Perhaps that will change through the advance of technology; it certainly holds for now. Perhaps the purpose of photography books is finally just to get the book out there. The judicious curation of images with a cohesive story line, when synchronized with informative and supple text, is an exercise in historical memory as against the inundation of ephemeral online images of battle. When done right, as in the case of "Afghanistan," there is a place for war photography books on one's shelf; among the library stacks; or merely nestled in the time capsule, awaiting some unimaginable brave new world of viewers to peruse it in shock and awe and perhaps, beyond shock or awe, toward a better understanding of the lessons therein. (Jean-Marie Simon first traveled to Guatemala in 1980 as a freelance photographer, and later reported for Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International during the 1980s civil war. Her book of photographs and text, "Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny" (WW Norton 1988), was re-published in 2012 in Spanish ("Guatemala, eterna primavera, eterna tiranÃa," Print Studio, Guatemala). The iTunes digital version is forthcoming in April 2014.)

If you buy just one book on Afghanistan, this is the one. Robert Nickelsberg brings a whole new meaning to the word commitment with this stunning photography book, covering decades of conflict and life in Afghanistan. His pictures are courageous, haunting, often beautiful, and always insightful. The essays accompanying the powerful images are just as good, written by leading commentators like the New Yorker's Jon Lee Anderson. I have spent quite a bit of time in Afghanistan myself, but learned more from this book than from any more academic account. Nickelsberg had produced a masterpiece, and this is a masterpiece that literally took decades of trips to this beautiful and tragic country. You'll discover a country both tragic and magic, as you accompany Nickelsberg on his

journey through time. This book will become a classic, and you'll find yourself revisiting it often and sharing it with friends.

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