



Opium Season: A Year on the Afghan Frontier

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A young American working on the brutal fault line where the war on terror meets the war on drugs. Joel Hafvenstein signed up for a year in Afghanistan in the heart of the country's opium trade, running an American-funded aid program to help thousands of opium poppy farmers make a legal living, and to win hearts and minds away from the former Taliban government. The author was soon caught up in the deadly intrigues of Helmand's drug trafficking warlords. Click here to read the review in The New York Times or for more information on this title go to opiumseason.com.

Opium Season: A Year on the Afghan Frontier Details

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From Reader Review Opium Season: A Year on the Afghan Frontier for online ebook

Nathan says

Disclaimer: I'm a bit biased since this book was written by my cousin (not sure how many times removed... close enough to be family). A tremendously well-written contemporary narrative about the complexities of Western involvement in Afghanistan during the US intervention from the perspective of a young professional working for an NGO.

Mike Edwards says

Joel has been an aid worker in Afghanistan for years, and wrote this book about his many personal experiences there. In the process, he becomes very familiar with the various programs that the Afghan government and NATO use to control opium production--both what worked for brief periods of time and what failed. It's an excellent read and an interesting story in general, and the lessons learned are incredibly useful interested in the ongoing war in Afghanistan and for understanding the supplier-side of the international war on drugs.

Evan says

This is a good look at what it's like to be thrown in over your head as a development worker in a post-conflict environment. Also, if you're wondering what happens when the shit hits the fan, this book will illuminate you.

It's also an interesting look at the politics and consequences of opium eradication, in Afghanistan and on a global scale.

Susan says

I learned a lot about Afghanistan and a few of the varied people who live there and some about the people who choose to work there in USAID development activities. The countryside sounds like the muted colored canvas of our basin and range province, with more mountains. The people, like people everywhere, only more poverty and no security-- except that provided by feuding warlords driven by an opium economy. Fascinating time travel...

Jason says

Opium Season is a very personal yet erudite account of Joel Hafvenstein's year working on an alternative livelihoods project in the Helmand province of Afghanistan. I met Joel in Washington, DC, before he

shipped out to Lashkargah and kept in touch as much as we both could during his time in Helmand. I was already familiar with most of the anecdotes Joel relates in his first book but benefited greatly from the additional context and elaborations the book includes. Yet I was still unprepared for the stark account of the premeditated assassinations of his friends and coworkers -- I know the folks sitting beside me on the train were equally unprepared for my own emotional reaction.

Although my perspective is bound to be highly biased, I found Joel's first book to be a very approachable and human account of an individual coming to terms with the bewildering contrasts and contradictions of managing a politicized development project in southern Afghanistan in 2005. In the tradition of the best memoirs and travel literature, Joel deftly places his experiences in their proper social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. Opium Season is a must-read for those of us grappling with how to effect local development in the most difficult regions of the globe as well as for those individuals trying to understand the real stories behind all the headlines.

Best wishes to Joel and Fiona as they pursue new adventures and friendships in Badakhshan. I can't wait for book number 2.

Jens says

I'm biased, but ... Mr. Hafvenstein can write.

DoctorM says

Joel Hafvenstein spent a heartbreak tour doing development work in central Afghanistan--- part of a project to provide jobs to entice local farmers away from growing opium. The book is an account of good intentions gone horribly wrong. Months of hapless if well-meaning work and building local ties come to a sudden, unexpected bloodstained end. "Opium Season" is a book about...failed hopes and the pain of watching poorly-planned efforts come to grief. A well-written book, and one worth handing out to any development contractors trying to re-shape a culture and political space that they have no way of understanding.

Jennifer says

Excellent portrayal of both the decimated conditions in Afghanistan as well as the inability to implement effective aid programs.

Kathy says

The author has worked off and on in Afghanistan for many years with a US development agency. This book concerns the time he spent supervising a group of Americans who were authorized to come into the country quickly with millions of dollars and instantly create jobs for local Afghans in order to show them that they could earn money in other ways rather than growing poppies for the opium trade. It was well-written,

knowledgeable and fascinating. The author has a deep love for the Afghan people but comes to realize that throwing money at a problem is seldom the solution. By the end of the book, it's very clear that the complexity of Afghanistan's problems almost defy solution. Whenever I read anything about Afghanistan in the news now, I will know that the proclamations of its president are only words and have nothing to do with the layers of tribal warlords, drug traffickers and Taliban supporters from Pakistan who truly keep the people snared in poverty.

Caroline says

This book is about Joel Hafvenstein's experiences whilst working on a short-term project in Afghanistan in 2004/5, for a company called Chemonics, who are subcontractors to USAID - The United States Agency for International Development. The project was short, but broad in scope. Its aim was to employ roughly 50,000 people for roughly 50 days labour. Work included clearance and maintenance with water tunnels, canals, drains, wells and roads - in various parts of Afghanistan.

At this time, Afghanistan's production of poppy gum, the raw material for opium and heroin, was overwhelming.

"By 2004, the largest sector of the Afghan economy was narcotics (generating well over one-third of its gross domestic product), and Afghanistan produced a staggering 87 percent of the world's illegal opium."

George Bush and Hamid Karzai – the Afghanistan president – both had elections to win – and Afghanistan's huge poppy gum output was not going to help either of them. It was decided to undertake major initiatives with poppy eradication – with crops being destroyed, either by physically mauling them or through the use of sprayed herbicides. In order to do this peacefully the poppy farmers and workers needed to be given alternative methods of employment, otherwise there would be extreme distress and unrest. Hafvenstein's project was to provide some of this alternative employment.

Most of this book is diary-like description of Hafvenstein's experiences in Afghanistan – the lovely people he worked with – both the charming Afghan people employed in his office and his fellow Americans, all larger than life, feisty characters. He also gives wonderful descriptions of the stark landscape.

"Before coming to Afghanistan, I had never really understood how much of the world's colour was buried under a comfortable cladding of grass and trees. In the arid mountains, nothing hid the vibrant palette of dirt and rock. One ridge line was a rich pomegranate hue with shining slate-dark veins, its neighbours rusty orange and vermillion. Around us the curious alchemy of the earth was made visible; and overhangs of reddish stone crumbling into inexplicably purple rubble, or silver scars on the landscape that faded along their edges to drab yellow and ochre dust. Along the valley floor, the ribbon of lush greenery glowed all the more vividly for the riot of colour in the sterile cliffs."

The major theme of the book though is the project and its people, and the over-riding sense of danger and anarchy that stays with Hafvenstein throughout his time in Afghanistan. He is in charge of paying the workers who are labouring on the project – and getting their wages out to them safely is always a huge concern. In the wake of Afghanistan's war with Russia and the takeover by the Taliban, peace has not been restored. The country is run largely by war lords and powerful drug traffickers, and the Taliban are still active and militant. Every project in Afghanistan needs protection – and this usually comes in the form of hired police protection. Time and time again though Hafvenstein discusses the wide-ranging corruption and ineptitude of the police force – each unit usually under the jurisdiction of a local war lord. The only merits that Hafvenstein can find in the police group protecting his project is that they are anti rather than pro Taliban. In

all other respects they are poorly trained and disciplined. Certainly they come across in the book as worryingly incompetant.

In the end eleven people are killed on his project. In another project that Hafvenstein debates working on thirteen people have been killed in the last year. The danger money that people are given to come and work in Afghanistan seems wholly realistic. Regrettably this bonus is not given to the Afghan employees on the project – the ones who usually end up being murdered.

I found this book fascinating. My one criticism is a lot of things only began to drop into place towards the end of the book – I would have preferred a clearer outline in the beginning – an in- depth overview of the situation, before getting stuck in to Hafvenstein's day to day experiences on the project. I felt I learnt a lot though, both about the Afghanistan people and their culture, and about the nature of aid projects in this very difficult and demanding situation.

Some examples of Chemonics' projects in Afghanistan...the video is excellent.

<http://www.chemonics.com/OurImpact/Sh...>

BBC update on current NATO involvement in Afghanistan, and plans for withdrawal.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south...>

Further reading:

Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Parkistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30...>

Seeds of Terror - How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Quaeda by Gretchan Peters

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/64...>

Mikey B. says

Treacherous Development

A very sad story, but simply and strongly written.

Mr Hafverstein worked in Afghanistan as part of a U.S. foreign assistance program to help in the development of this poor, war-weary country.

Mr. Hafverstein's book is written at the grass-roots level. He describes the tribulations and heart-aches of trying to accomplish development in Afghanistan. Part of the purpose of the project he was working on is to take Afghani's off the cultivation of opium and to grow "legal" crops - a difficult enough task in most countries. Their project hires people to pave roads, clean and renew irrigation canals. They employ engineers

from Afghanistan and people from the local community for the manual labour. They travel far and wide through the Helmand province of Afghanistan observing many poppy fields.

Eventually many internal antagonisms within the region lead to tragic consequences. As one reads, one wonders; who is using whom: are the drug lords happy that water is now reaching their poppy fields - but what about the labour that is being removed from the needed harvesting of the poppy fields.

It is not the role of the NATO forces to provide protection to civilian development groups like the one Mr. Hafverstein is working for. Therefore they need to hire protection - employing from the local police forces or the community, which is a militia amalgam that has shifted alliances several times in the last years. This protection consists of AK-47's, grenade launchers...

Sometimes the areas where they work promise protection - they may or may not follow through.

Often these development groups do not want to be linked directly with foreign military forces, but in Afghanistan this can be a lethal Catch-22. There are so many opposing factions(the religious Taliban, the opium traffickers, the Pakistani secret police, competing family and regional alliances - which all leads to great complexity and corruption). It is difficult to know from day-to-day what tensions will erupt to the surface. Tension permeates the entire development process in Afghanistan. At one point hostages are taken and released in a local village but the vehicle is stolen. This simmers and festers for several months - the development groups move back to this troubled locality and stability reigns for a few months. Then there are murders of Afghan development workers.

It is wonderful and sad at the same time to see the friendship's grow between the Afghanistan people and the foreign development workers (not all of whom are American). These friendships and the will to improve the people of Afghanistan are impressive and genuine. After the tragic murders the development process is shattered and interrupted.

A country that has been invaded, had civil strife, had an intolerant religious dictatorship that outlawed basic education; will take several years to intense investment and development to progress close to anything resembling a "modern" state. As Mr. Hafverstein suggests this development will have to move beyond short term goals.

Through Mr. Hafverstein we also get a view of the people of Afghanistan. Religion(in this case Islam) is omni-present at all levels of society - it rules the relationship between people; particularly between men and women. In Mr. Hafverstein's group, there are no Afghanistan women taking any decision making roles. Three are two burqua-clad secretaries in the office - all the thousands of manual employees are male. Mr Hafverstein describes his day at a market where no women are encountered.

Obviously Afghanistan has a long and treacherous path on the road to development.

Kathy says

Interesting, informative and ultimately heart-breaking account of the author's year working on an international development project in Afghanistan.

Kris says

Interesting and seemingly honest look at life in the trenches of a development corporation for hire. Engagingly written.

Barrett says

Hafvenstein should have waited to mature both as an author and to be able to approach his experiences in Afghanistan with the kind of perspective that only time can lend. However, I respect his decision to publish a timely account of U.S. aid efforts and failures in Afghanistan.

Nathan says

A straightforward, effectively rendered look at Afghanistan, its people and culture, and what it's like to be an NGO in that most complex of countries. Hafvenstein's story is most engaging when it focuses on the lives and customs of the Afghans, and stays away from the tangled mess that is beauracratic politics in Afghanistan. This latter aspect of the book was confusing and uninteresting, but fortunately not quite bad enough to sink the rest of it. Earnest and authentic.
