

Always Faithful: A Story of the War in Afghanistan, the Fall of Kabul, and the Unshakable Bond between a Marine and an Interpreter

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contributions to the discussion of Russian sea power and will help correct issues of “mirror-imaging and imposing Western concepts on Russian thinking” that are unfortunately as prevalent today as they were during the Cold War. At the end of the book the reader will understand that the Russian navy struggles with many deep-seated challenges but nevertheless poses an existential threat to its adversaries. In that sense it is not so different from the navy Russia’s admirals face from across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

IAN SUNDSTROM



Always Faithful: A Story of the War in Afghanistan, the Fall of Kabul, and the Unshakable Bond between a Marine and an Interpreter, by Tom Schueman and Zainullah Zaki, with Russell Worth Parker. New York: HarperCollins, 2022. 336 pages. \$29.99.

Always Faithful: A Story of the War in Afghanistan, the Fall of Kabul, and the Unshakable Bond between a Marine and an Interpreter provides a unique perspective on the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Authors Tom Schueman, a major in the United States Marine Corps, and Zainullah Zaki, Schueman’s friend and former interpreter, describe their formative experiences, their service together during the war, and Zaki’s escape from Afghanistan in 2021. At the center of the story is Schueman’s desperate, and ultimately successful, efforts to secure passage out of Afghanistan for Zaki and his family as Kabul fell to the Taliban in late August 2021.

Always Faithful is a first-rate war memoir. The authors describe the camaraderie and exhilaration of combat as well as the shock of seeing fellow

Marines injured and killed. However, three things make this book unique. First, the authors take a long view and show how twenty years of war wove in and out of the protagonists’ lives. They cover their formative experiences and how over the course of the war they matured from boys to men and then became fathers themselves. Schueman also goes into detail on his training in the Marine Corps as well as the stress his service placed on his marriage. From Zaki, the reader gains an appreciation of life under Taliban rule, the initial U.S. invasion and its aftermath, and the Taliban’s resurgence. It is impressive how much ground the authors cover in three hundred pages.

Second, *Always Faithful* provides a first-person account of the chaotic fall of Afghanistan from both American and Afghan perspectives. The authors’ employment of a parallel narrative structure captures Schueman’s desperation as he drew on his connections to help Zaki escape what most likely would have been death under the Taliban. The authors do a masterful job of explaining their thoughts and feelings as the country for which they had fought came apart.

Third, *Always Faithful* is refreshing in that it offers a non-U.S. perspective. Most post-9/11 war memoirs focus on the experiences of U.S. servicemembers. While Schueman’s wartime experiences are central to the story, they make up less than a quarter of the book, with Zaki’s experiences given equal treatment. Similarly, the authors incorporate the viewpoints of their parents, spouses, and children, when possible. By including multiple points of view, the authors do a better job of showing the human costs of war in their totality.

My one concern, which is no fault of the authors, is that heroic accounts of U.S. servicemembers aiding individual Afghans might distract us from a colossal systemic failure. Elliot Ackerman, in his own account of coordinating the evacuation of Afghan allies, regarded the collapse of Afghanistan as “a collapse of our country’s competence as we’ve unconditionally lost a twenty-year war” (Elliot Ackerman, *The Fifth Act: America’s End in Afghanistan* [New York: Penguin, 2022], p. 101). Somewhat surprisingly, America seems to have moved on. Schueman and Zaki’s description of events highlight the need to analyze U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in a transparent manner. How did this happen and who is accountable? Why did the evacuation hang on personal connections rather than a systematic, disciplined process? As the national security establishment turns its attention to China, it is imperative that we do a full postmortem on Afghanistan. While such an accounting is not the authors’ intent, the events they describe should be cause for concern to their readers.

War is a collection of thousands of individual tragedies. Schueman’s actions prevented one more of these. *Always Faithful* is a masterful account of how that came to be. By taking a long view, using parallel narratives, and offering diverse perspectives, the authors make an important contribution to our understanding of the evacuation of Kabul and the U.S. war in Afghanistan. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in these topics or in war in general. *Always Faithful* is a powerful story, and one that is also well told.

NATHAN R. PACKARD



Plato Goes to China: The Greek Classics and Chinese Nationalism, by Shadi Bartsch. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2023. 279 pages. \$33.

In the early nineteenth century, China’s last dynasty, the Qing, began to decay; it would finally end in collapse in 1912. It was a chaotic period politically and a bewildering experience intellectually. In the past, ruling dynasties had dissolved but, in time, a successor would appear and consolidate its power. But the Qing was unique in that its struggles both foreign and domestic were played out against a powerful, Western-derived, intellectual challenge. For some Chinese, the West’s culture was a kind of elixir, the source of its power. How should China’s philosophers, historians, poets, and artists decode this magic formula?

Almost every one of the West’s “isms” was scrutinized—liberalism, constitutionalism, socialism, vitalism, anarchism, syndicalism, and vegetarianism, not to mention Roman Catholicism and Protestantism—hoping that one or more of them might help China escape from its predicament. This ferment reached a high point in the 1920s, when the so-called May Fourth Movement set off a nationwide reevaluation of both inherited Chinese and recently imported thinking.

The free-for-all came to a dramatic end with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The new regime, a brutal one-party police state, ruthlessly enforced intellectual conformity. But, in the late 1970s, the regime, fearing for its survival, adopted a new policy—“reform and opening up.” As the country’s economy opened