

# Rebooting Country Studies

[Anna Simons](#)

December 31, 2013

[Commentary](https://warontherocks.com/2013/12/rebooting-country-studies/) <https://warontherocks.com/2013/12/rebooting-country-studies/>



For all the talk about “big data,” what about deep understanding? Surely in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan—and faced with other conflicts burbling all over the place—some enterprising office in the Department of Defense or Department of State is busy re-conceptualizing the nature of what constitutes a good country study for those deploying abroad in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And surely that office is being run by individuals with ample experience both in non-Western countries and with the U.S. military. Right?

I ask because the field grade officers I know and teach at the Naval Postgraduate School need more than just data (facts), information (assemblages of facts), and knowledge (cumulative information). Until the pendulum swings back and Congress proves willing to issue declarations of war in circumstances that permit no-holds-barred fighting, the military will continue to be asked to act with finesse. Yet, one problem with finesse is that it requires more than just being able to populate databases with names, dates, and information about who’s connected to whom. Data, information, and knowledge certainly matter. But, what they can’t do—*ever*—is make what others do make sense. They can’t explain how others perceive events, conditions, their predicament, or *you*.

Meanwhile, there are two ways to gain a sense of what makes others tick. You can either acquire understanding experientially, which is sometimes hard to come by. Alternatively, you can acquire understanding second-hand. In a perfect world, both methods should be iterative. Arguably, great drama—and television series, like *The Wire*—can help convey a “sense of” and “appreciation for.” Maybe, too, someone will be able to convince me someday that simulations can likewise build understanding. But, for now I want to extol books.

The kinds of books I have in mind are narratives, non-fiction accounts that tell a literal story (with a beginning, a middle, and an end)—books that are just long enough that they can’t be read in a single sitting, and books that can’t effectively be skimmed. The kinds of books I have in mind impel the reader to want to come back to them for more. They are also books that educate, in the sense that they rearrange their readers’ point(s) of view.

For years, I have contended that the best journalists do a better job than most of the rest of us at evoking the principles that underpin life in foreign places and foreign systems. Twenty years ago, David Remnick ([\*Lenin’s Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire\*](#)), Tom Friedman ([\*From Beirut to Jerusalem\*](#)), and Joseph Lelyveld ([\*Move Your Shadow: South Africa, Black and White\*](#)) topped my list. This wasn’t just because these reporters wrote fluidly about complicated situations, but because at some point during the 1970s and 1980s academics started to indulge in truly awful writing. In fact, to earn tenure you were given little choice, but to learn to write tortured prose.

Consequently, I still prefer to assign journalists’ accounts, since at least then there’s a greater chance students will actually read them. Current favorites include Andrew Rice’s [\*The Teeth May Smile but the Heart Does Not Forget\*](#) set in Uganda, Peter Godwin’s [\*When the Crocodile Eats the Sun\*](#) and [\*The Fear\*](#), both set in Zimbabwe, and Douglas Rogers’ [\*The Last Resort\*](#) (also set in Zimbabwe). What makes these works resonate is that they zoom in and out from past to present, and from micro to macro levels, which means they educate as well as inform. They are also written in the first person and each does an excellent job of humanizing the otherwise incomprehensible.

But, I have also discovered that even when I come across what I consider to be the best single overviews of other countries, these books don’t always work for students. For instance, Richard Cockett’s [\*Sudan: Darfur and the Failure of an African State\*](#) is probably the single most insightful recent book about both Sudans. But, when I assigned it a couple of years ago, students were overwhelmed. Despite all of Cockett’s skill as a correspondent, students came away convinced of the complexity, but feeling nothing for the place or the people. No one in the book grabbed them, which meant they walked away with no “sticky” principles for how either of the two Sudans worked. Thus, I didn’t dare assign the next single country book I liked, Daniel Branch’s [\*Kenya: Between Hope and Despair, 1963-2011\*](#). I worried that the very thing that most impressed me about Branch’s account would be the very thing to turn the students off; there would be too much that *couldn’t* be familiar to people who had never been to Kenya. This brings me to Tamim Ansary.

Unlike Branch (a professor) and Cockett (a correspondent), Tamim Ansary is an author who, until 9/11, specialized in children’s books. He is also half Afghan and half American and

happened to grow up both in Afghanistan (until the age of 16) and in the U.S. I came across [\*West of Kabul, East of New York\*](#), Ansary's first adult book, in the public library right after it was published in 2002. As soon as I read the first few chapters I knew: here was someone who could do a better job than I could at transmitting the very things I was trying to teach, whether about the strength of extended families or the significance of faith. Even better, Ansary could do so in such a way that even students who had already served in Afghanistan put down his book wishing they had read it before they deployed. A significant number also passed it on to their wives, just because.

During the ten years I assigned *West of Kabul*, it always had this same effect. It opened eyes. It gave even the most cynical officers a new appreciation for Afghans and for that country's rich, but tormented history. Of course, Ansary is a gifted writer. But, even more important, he understands what most Americans have such a hard time understanding, which he is perfectly positioned to do since he is one of us.

Up until a few days ago, I would have insisted that *West of Kabul* exemplifies the kind of writing to which members of the military need to be exposed to counterbalance their universe's warping demand for data and information. But, then I read Ansary's most recent book, [\*Games Without Rules: The Often Interrupted History of Afghanistan\*](#), which may hit even more nails on the head.

*West of Kabul* is a memoir. *Games Without Rules* is a country study—though hardly in the sense of a CIA Fact Book or the Library of Congress's [\*Country Study: Afghanistan\*](#). *Games* is more of a primer: here is how Afghanistan used to work and how power used to flow; here are all the things that interrupted Afghans' ability to develop Afghanistan; and here is what (and who) has thrown wrench after wrench into the country since 9/11. Ansary describes both the fixity and flux in Afghans' operating codes over time. He does so using short sentences, colorful anecdotes, not too many tribal names, and plenty of sly asides.

Take, for instance, his take on [\*buzkashi\*](#), a game somewhat reminiscent of polo “that is played only in Afghanistan and the central Asian steppes. . . The game is governed and regulated by its own traditions, by the social context and its customs, and by the implicit understandings among the players.”

Of course, most people invoke *buzkashi* when writing about Afghanistan. So, consider Ansary's first twist: “If you need the protection of an official rule book, you shouldn't be playing.” And his second: “Two hundred years ago, *buzkashi* offered an apt metaphor for Afghan society. The major theme of the country's history since then has been a contention about whether and how to impose rules on the *buzkashi* of Afghan society.”

By the time Ansary gets to his postscript, readers should appreciate exactly what he means when he writes, “The rules may be hard to discern in part because there isn't just one set.” In fact, one theme throughout the book is that every time Afghanistan—and a sense of Afghan-ness—begins to coalesce, outside forces come barreling in, and,

Every foreign force that comes crashing in thinks it's intervening in ‘a country,’ but it's actually taking sides in an ongoing contest among Afghans about what this country is. . .The foreign

power essentially tries to swing the pot by grasping its handle, but the pot shatters, and the foreign power is left holding only a handle.

It is hard for me to imagine former students, many of whom have now deployed to Afghanistan multiple times, not nodding their heads throughout their reading of this book and then voicing the same “woulda, coulda, shoulda” regrets they have after reading *West of Kabul*. Though, in this case and at this point in time, the questions I would pose them—and would really like to pose to the three and four star general officers who have been in charge—are: why didn’t you know any of this? Where could (or should) you have gone to learn it? Why didn’t you? And, wouldn’t a deeper understanding have done everyone a greater service?

It is this last question that matters most. Syria. Libya. Central African Republic (let’s hope not). Policy intellectuals might like to talk about a globalized world. Yet, the places where troops are sent are exactly the places where intelligence is hard to come by, the hunt for information turns desperate, and no one in uniform has the time, let alone the inclination, to develop understanding.

Meanwhile, as U.S. coffers shrink, the pressure to get things done quickly in such locations will only intensify. [Elsewhere I have written](#) about the problems finesse poses and why force and an altogether different rubric suits the U.S. better. But, presuming that Washington persists in sticking to its current path, it seems only prudent—nay, responsible—to develop a new kind of country study. In other words, not just reference books or smart cards, but narrative accounts—the kinds of books those in uniform will *want* to read, and the kind that will help them grasp what is most essential to understand: no society exists without rules *and* every system gets gamed. At the same time, the who, what, when, where, and why of how systems get gamed will always be locally contingent.

To be clear, reading only one book should never suffice and overviews will never provide the granular local-level information operators, analysts, and commanders also need. But, there is a reason that J.K. Rowling’s books appealed to an entire generation: she *vividly* described a whole other reality. For this reason alone, twenty-first century country studies shouldn’t just humanize others the way great novels do. Instead—or rather, in addition—they need to bring to life other people’s operating principles, so that those sent abroad on behalf of the U.S. understand a) what they are up against; b) what there is to work with; c) how different other peoples’ sensibilities *can* be; and d) how others are likely to improvise and adapt in order to try to overcome.

*Anna Simons is a Professor of Defense Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School. Most recently, she is the co-author of [The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security](#). The views expressed are the author’s and do not necessarily reflect those of the Naval Postgraduate School, the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*