

UnTextbooked

A history podcast for the future.

Transcript: [Did anyone win the Cold War?](#)

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Guest	Odd Arne Westad, PhD
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Gabe Hostin 0:05

There's a common trope in American history that the Cold War was a straightforward conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. For half a century this rivalry represented a binary freedom first tyranny, First World War, Second World, good versus evil. And eventually, the United States triumphed over the Soviet Union. That's how I'm textbook producer Ania. Dua learned it too.

Anya Dua 0:28

I had sort of learned that it was a battle between the United States and the USSR which was really representative of the battle between capitalism versus communism, and that the Soviet Union was trying to make all the other countries communist. And it was sort of an idea like they started it, you know, and we just responded and I think it's much more nuanced than that.

Gabe Hostin 0:56

On your read the book, the global Cold War, which tells a story from much product perspective, is written by Dr. Odd Arne Westad, who grew up in Norway during the Cold War. Dr. Weston thinks that imagine the Cold War as a binary conflict between the US and Soviet Union is incomplete. They may have been the main actors, they fight each other using tactics like trade embargoes, and proxy wars, which affected the entire world.

Anya Dua 1:20

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Most other countries in the world have been directly impacted by what happened in the Cold War, and they wouldn't be the same had the Cold War, not happened had it gone a different way. So I would say in that sense, everyone is directly or indirectly affected by the Cold War.

Gabe Hostin 1:40

In this episode of UnTextbooked Anya interviewed Dr. Westad about the shockwaves from the Cold War continues to reverberate around the world decades after it ended. That's coming up after the break. I'm Gabe Hostin and you're listening to UnTextbooked

Anya Dua 1:59

So just to start off, I wanted to ask if you could explain how the Cold War has led to the situation we have in Afghanistan today.

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 2:14

In order to understand the more fundamental aspects of the Cold War, you have to globalize the issue you have to look at the consequences that this had with regard to other countries, even outside of Europe, so in Latin America and Africa. Afghanistan is a really good example of this because what you put led to this very narrow, very authoritarian interpretation of Islam that you know, find among Taliban leaders came out of that time period. But the most important thing to understand is that Afghanistan has spent more than a generation at war. The starting point, was very much back in the 1960s and 70s. When a lot of younger people in Afghanistan, particularly those who lived in the capital linkable people came from a relatively, you know, privileged background, why African standards held that the country wasn't developed fast enough towards modernization, and that they needed to move on that much more quickly than what had been the case in the past. And these people joined various political groups. One of them a very popular one was, if not communist that is very strongly influenced by by Communism, and became the party that then took power to a military coup in in 1978. And when that group now in power started having significant trouble with I think the vast majority of Afghans who simply didn't want to be ruled by a group of relatively young people from the Capitol who had political aims that they felt were in conflict with the religion or with the traditions, then the Soviets had to come in and support that government. The fact that this country young people in the country haven't really known peace. That's of course a critical part of why the country has ended up in the predicament that it's, it's in today, the attraction, that very authoritarian interpretations of political Islam is the cause of all the instability that they have known in the past, the kind of Islam that is mainstream that was practiced in Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion was nine so away from this very narrow minded, very authoritarian version of political Islam that is now held up by Solomon. It was a very inclusive, very tolerant, deeply culturally rooted form of Islam. That of course existed for centuries in that country. You know, when you have institutions for your parties and groups that provide kind of services that people are looking for. People will will accept that or whatever even actively supported to a degree that is very hard for us who haven't lived under those kinds of circumstances, to actually understand. I was just reading some interviews with people living in rural area of South Afghanistan today, who basically said, you

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know, what the Taliban have done is at least they have brought peace, right? And that becomes the problem when a country is torn apart. By war. It's very easy to accept any kind of peace, any kind of order and stability over the chaos. So I think that is given the Taliban the chance to build up the support build up their adherence in Afghanistan leading to the kind of result that is enough.

Anya Dua 5:40

And to bring it more to what's happening right now. How is that, you know, history that destabilization impacted recent US intervention in Afghanistan,

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 5:52

working to extend became what a in Afghanistan whether the aim of the US operation was to capture bin Laden and the leadership of al Qaeda who had perpetrated terrible acts of terror in the United States and elsewhere. But whether it was also to overthrow the Taliban, you know, Taliban Afghan government and build a new kind of State Society in Afghanistan. And therefore, there was a significant aspect of what you know, some people call mission creep, that it became increasingly about defending the government in Afghanistan that had been put in place by the United States to begin with, and, and it's ours against the opposition, which was not only the Taliban but but mainly the Taliban. And that's, that's the main reason for me why it became The Forever War, because winning that kind of war without much broader American military efforts would have been impossible, simply because the Taliban had, as I explained earlier, significant popularity among many Afghans. So that I think became the problem. Therefore, this became an endless war. The Taliban couldn't defeat United States, but it says couldn't defeat the Taliban either. So you know, and in the end, I think what happened was that this country, ran out of political patients with the project and simply decided to withdraw.

Anya Dua 7:24

Yeah, I mean, I'm sure a lot of it scary emotion driven, right. In the aftermath of 911. How could the US not strike back?

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 7:33

I think that's a discussion that is really worth having. I mean, for you, your generation, is how does we'll handle situations like that? I mean, terrorist attacks or even terrorist attacks on American soil because unfortunately, I'm pretty sure that in some form or another, that's going to happen again. And one of the things that we sort of felt coming out of the Cold War was that both Russia and United States had learned a few lessons about the futility of some of these foreign interventions. I mean, the Russians in Afghanistan, the United States, in Vietnam and elsewhere, and then when you get into the 2000s, you know, we get post 911 And the decision to invade Iraq. It seems like all of those lessons of the Cold War about the futility of these particular projects seem to be gone. And there is almost an elegant history repeating itself in this. So I'm not you know, I'm not a pacifist. I'm not in favor of of not attempting to capture and punish people who have perpetrated terrible deeds, whether in their own country or abroad. I'm

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all in favor of that, but it has to be done in a way that is conducive to that particular purpose. It would not entail the long term invasion and occupation of the countries in which these organizations operated.

Anya Dua 9:01

Yeah. And so given this discussion about US involvement in Afghanistan, as influenced by 911 and as influenced by the Cold War, I think something that is a theme throughout this whole time period we've been discussing is us. nation building. Do you think that it's time to leave that policy behind?

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 9:22

Yes. I mean, I think the concept of nation building is, in many ways, a very false concept because it assumes that the nation is something that can be built by outside forces in this case, but even by domestic forces, I mean, creating nations cohesive units of people, at least up to a point is something that takes a very long time. And it's very hard to make that happen by you know, forcing people to do what you want them to do. And the Soviets experienced that in their sector. The Americans experienced it during the same time period. But, you know, it's also been true going back in history, if you think about all of these various empires that have been, you know, taking over other countries and they've been saying you know, we want to put in place political and social and economic forms of order in these countries, then we then that we don't expect to last, you know, after we withdraw or after decolonization, or whatever you call it, and in reality, you know, these kinds of measures are rarely successful, or if they are, if they have a measure of success, it goes in very different directions and what was first intended.

Anya Dua 10:39

And so, just like on a broader scale, about the approach to US foreign policy, a lot of us textbooks talk about the idea that the US is destined to play a leadership role in the world. How do you think cultural ideas like that or others have shaped us foreign policy in the last 100 years? I think

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 11:00

that is really influenced the sort of overall direction the United States in many ways was born as an anti colonial project again, against Britain when it wanted to its independence, and it was put together or people who came from very many different backgrounds. So of course came to this country against throw will people who have been enslaved and brought to the United States, people came from such diverse backgrounds. So you couldn't put this together in the kind of cultural framework that would often happen with nations in in Africa or in Europe. So you got this idea. That the political institutions especially that had been built in the United States that these would be valid and good not just for this country, but for other countries as well and for the world in general. And that I think, has led particularly the 20th century, well as American power group, to a lot of us interventionism abroad. The idea that one has to set things right, according to this American Standard. You know, some of these has been very good in many ways, because it

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has meant that United States has been able to help other countries it means that it meant for instance, that he joined with other countries in in fighting Nazi Germany during the Second World War. So I'm, you know, I'm not arguing for some kind of American isolationism here. But I do think it is really important when a country gets to be as powerful as the United States is today, to think through some of these values and ideas and perhaps conclude sometimes that, you know, forms of political organization or or laws and institutions that can work well in the United States do not necessarily work as well in other countries.

Anya Dua 12:52

There's a quote from your book that I found really striking. You said that the tragedy of the Cold War was the two historical projects that were genuinely anti colonial in their origins, became part of a much older pattern of domination because of the intensity of their conflict. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 13:12

Thought United States of the Soviet Union came out of that very Europe centered colonial world that developed during the 19th century. So the idea that countries suffer European background had a particular position, a particular responsibility with regard to the world as a whole is a kind of colonial idea. Right. And I found that very striking with regard to the courtroom that the idea held both by Russians and by Americans during that era, that they were somehow responsible for the rest of the world, meaning they had a duty to try to shape it in their image or in the image that they deemed to be best for the people involved. That was a really significant part of how the Cold War developed and the line from that going back to this idea that Europeans, people of European extraction has a particular validity, you know, for the rest of the world, I think is a root cause for many of the troubles that we saw during the Cold War, but also to quite some extent after the Cold

Anya Dua 14:24

War. Yeah, and I think something that is sort of an issue with my generation on that topic is a lot of people have the idea that it's either no the US is evil, and we have just been a force for pain across the world. And then there's the other perspective, which is, you know, we bring peace everywhere we go, and we are the light. And I think that these two polar opposite views. Just show how a lot of Americans you know, myself, my friends, we've been talking about this are sort of struggling with what is our responsibility to the world, in light of Afghanistan and just more in general.

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 15:10

So, you see America responsibility towards the rest of the world. I think, this particular point it consists of two things. I mean, one is to put one's own country in better order than what is the situation now. So, you know, the extreme inequality that you have within the United States the political polarization, the difficulties with getting effective health care out to the poorest, poorest Americans, the ongoing racial oppression that you find in different parts of the country, and the

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real difficulties with creating the kind of you know infrastructural improvements that are needed to lift the economy further. But it's also absolutely necessary to say that, you know, to say the United States is still needed in the world. So, you know, the idea of the United States simply retrenching in a form that would mean that it would deal exclusively with its own problems. It's not a good recipe. It just has to be much, much better at figuring out where you need to set to make a positive difference. And where that will be difficult, if not impossible. So, you know, I think on a whole range of issues, we need United States to take the lead on issues, you know, what to do with the recent pandemic, for instance, or climate change with international trade. United States has a role to play us and balance in all of these in all of these questions, but doing it judiciously and based on an understanding of what the United States is capable of doing. That's, I think, what we're really looking for.

Anya Dua 16:53

Well, thank you so much for your time today and talking to us Professor odd Arno West Dodd is the author of the global Cold War, Professor West God, where can people find more of your

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 17:04

work? The best way of actually looking some of this is just to look at my my profile at the Yale University website to get an overview of some of the other things that I've been doing. Right now I'm more interested in where we ended up in this conversation of the era of imperialism and colonialism and up to today, so that's the next topic.

Anya Dua 17:27

Thank you so much. I hope you have a nice day.

Odd Arne Westad, PhD 17:30

Thank you You too.

Gabe Hostin 17:42

Dr. Odd Arne westad is, a history professor at Yale University. Anya Dua it as a high school senior in Florida. Our website is untextbooked.org and we're on social media at UnTextbooked. Our music is by Silas Bowen and Coleman Hamilton UnTextbooked is edited by Bethany Denton and Jeff Emtman. Fernanda raine is our executive producer. UnTextbooked is a project of God history, an organization that believes in a world where all young people can participate in civic well being for themselves. Society and the planet. Thanks for listening