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Retirement Association of Portland State

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Retirement Association of Portland State

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Farr on Afghanistan: 'We have ourselves stuck in a real problem'

That Afghanistan is a country of complexity and nuance comes as no surprise to anyone who has glanced at a news report during the past eight years. Grant Farr, the PSU sociology professor who knows Afghanistan as well as most Portlanders know their local Starbucks, described just how complex and nuanced Afghanistan is at the Nov. 19 edition of the RAPS 2009-2010 Program/Speaker Series.

Farr has made three trips to Afghanistan since 2001, when American forces first entered the country. "Each year it gets a little worse," Farr told RAPS members. "And this year was the worst. In other words, eight years of more troops and more troops, and it's gotten worse and worse."

Just as troubling, Farr said, is that more than \$36 billion in aid has poured into Afghanistan since 2001—about \$1,000 per Afghan—with almost no result. Afghans' standard of living, health care, life expectancy, human rights, and educational opportunities have all deteriorated.

Farr first traveled to Afghanistan in 1966 as a Peace Corps volunteer, fresh out of the University of Washington with a bachelor's in math. "When they said, 'Congratulations, you're going to Afghanistan,' I had to look at a map," Farr recalled.

Farr found a people who were kind, respectful, and hard working. He also found a harsh countryside of burning deserts and high mountains—several over 24,000 feet. "It's a country of tough people," he said, "who, at times, can use violence. These people are not peaceniks. The Soviet Union found that out, and now we're finding out that these are tough people who can fight."

Afghans are oriented around their villages, families, clans, and tribes, but being a citizen of a nation-state is lost on most of them. "As a Peace Corps volunteer, talking to villagers, they had little concept of being Afghan," Farr explained. "If you happened to ask an Afghan who he was, he'd say, 'I'm so-and-so from that village, or that family.' They are a people who believe in family above all else. That's their whole life."

Pashtuns make up the largest ethnic group, and they've always dominated the country. The Taliban is largely Pashtun, as is Hamid Karzai,



Photo by Larry Sawyer

Grant Farr

NEXT UP

It's the annual RAPS Holiday Party! Food, drink, music, and chatting up old friends . . .

Thursday, Dec. 17, 5 p.m.
Multnomah Athletic Club

See preview story on page 3.

President's Message

LARRY SAWYER

Thanks to all of you who responded to my informal question on a lunch or dinner for the December holiday party. Although there were several different reasons given for your preference, the major ones for the lunch centered around driving at night and the lateness of the event. The RAPS Board considered these comments and moved the starting time up by one hour. We are also asking anyone who would like a ride to the party to contact MiMi Bernal-Graves in the RAPS office at 503-725-3447, and she will try to find a ride for you. She is a grad student and works mostly on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but you can leave a voice mail. The phone message states her current office hours. Anyone willing to give a colleague a ride may also let MiMi know. This is typically the only evening event of the year.

At the last report, the RAPS scholarship fund was at \$200. I urge you to consider a contribution. As soon as there are sufficient funds, scholarship(s) will be offered. Presently, the fund is money-in and money-out, not an endowment fund. We will need to ask you again next year. Make your check payable to the PSU Foundation and send it to the RAPS Office, Portland State University, PO Box 751, Portland, OR 97207. To be sure it is credited to the correct account, write the account number and name, 3511302—Retirement Association of Portland State Scholarship, on your check.

Thank you!

No nice, neat solution in Afghanistan . . . *continued from page 1*

Afghanistan's president. "They're organized into very bellicose tribes—warlike tribal confederacies," Farr said, explaining the Pashtuns' knack for taking charge. "The other people, Uzbeks and Tajiks, are farmers and much more peaceful people."

Such tribal tradition—coupled with poverty, illiteracy, and dismal health care—makes building a constitutional democracy very tough sledding. "Our constitution is based on the idea that each person independently has a vote or say in an issue," Farr said. "Afghans never work that way. Your family, your tribe, is a group, and your tribe makes a decision as a tribe. This notion of individual voting has never worked. We found that out in the last election (Karzai's re-election)—it was corrupt, but what did we expect?"

And corruption doesn't stop with the election process. "In Afghanistan, your family will take care of you," Farr said. "The other side of that is that you are obligated to take care of your brothers and cousins. So if you're made a minister of an important ministry, who are you going to hire? Your brothers and cousins, and they bring in their brothers and cousins."

Which results in the ministry grinding to a halt under the weight of bureaucrats who often don't bother to show up for work, let alone are competent at their jobs. That's why, in Kabul, electricity cuts out, garbage isn't picked up, sewers overflow, and roads aren't built.

Adding more troops—President Obama announced on Dec. 1 that he ordered 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan—is not an answer, said Farr. "I don't see it," he said. "I think we learned a couple of things with Vietnam, with Iraq, and one of the things we learned is that there is no military solution." In Afghanistan, that's the lesson the Russians learned 20 years ago and the British learned 100 years ago.

Farr respects the U.S. military. "It's not that I think they're duplicitous or dummies and don't get it," he said. "They get it. They're really smart. But they're military people, and if you ask military people what they need to solve a problem, (they'll respond that) they need more military."

So what's the solution? Farr recently attended a meeting on Afghanistan that included military experts, intelligence experts, academics, and the Afghan emissary to the United States. "We were universally gloomy," he said. If the U.S. leaves, Afghanistan will likely tumble into civil war. "What do we do? People really didn't know." One thing is certain: the issue is more than just Afghanistan; it's a regional issue that involves both Pakistan and Iran.

"I hope (Obama) is smart enough to know that there has to be a larger issue, a larger strategy, a way to think about this in a different way than just more troops."

RAPS club reports

Book Club: 'The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo'

The RAPS Book Club will meet on Tuesday, Dec. 15, at 1:30 p.m., at the home of Maxine Thomas, 6535 SW Canyon Ct., Portland. Contact her at 503-291-1279 or ondangwa@yahoo.com to RSVP and for directions. We will discuss *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, by Stieg Larsson. On the cover, it is described as:

At once a murder mystery, family saga, love story, and tale of financial intrigue wrapped into one satisfyingly complex and entertainingly atmospheric novel. Harriet Vanger, scion of one of Sweden's wealthiest families, disappeared over 40 years ago. All these years later, her aged uncle continues to seek the truth. He hires Mikael Blomkvist, a crusading journalist recently trapped by a libel conviction, to investigate. He is aided by the pierced and tattooed punk prodigy Lisbeth Salander. Together they tap into a vein of unfathomable iniquity and astonishing corruption.

Six of us met in November to talk about *Out Stealing Horses*, an international best seller. We found it to be an interesting character study as the author slowly revealed the past, omitting some information for the reader to fill in. We all liked this book.

We will not meet in January because of busy schedules, but will read *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, by Debra Dean, for February.

—Mary Brannan

Bridge Group: Plays Dec. 14

The RAPS Bridge Group will next meet at Willamette View, 12705 SE River Road, on Tuesday, Dec. 14, at 1:00 p.m. For information please contact Colin Dunkeld, 503-292-0838.

—Colin Dunkeld

Hikers: Staying indoors

On Nov. 20 six hikers hiked a short distance from the Audubon Society to Lower Macleay Park. Lunch was at the Dragonfly Café at NW 24th and Thurman. The trail was in good condition and not as wet as the October hike. We welcomed Mary Brodie back as an active hiker.

Due to the holidays, our December event will be a potluck and hiking planning session for active and past hikers only.

—Larry Sawyer

RAPS' Holiday Party scheduled for Dec. 17

Join friends and renew acquaintanceships at RAPS' annual Holiday Party on Thursday, Dec. 17, at the Multnomah Athletic Club, 1849 SW Salmon Street, Portland. Cost to attend is \$49 per person.

The party begins with a social hour at 5:00 p.m., followed by dinner at 6:00 and entertainment at 7:00. Dinner choices are chicken breast, beef pot roast, and delicata squash.

RSVP to MiMi Bernal-Graves, RAPS Office manager, no later than Friday, Dec. 11, and include your dinner choice. You can reach Bernal-Graves by phone at 503-725-3447 or by e-mail at raps@pdx.edu.

If you need transportation to the holiday party, be sure to tell Bernal-Graves when you RSVP.

Past Tense

PRESIDENT JOSEPH C. BLUMEL

Joseph Blumel, fondly known to many as Joe, is Portland State University's longest serving president. During his lengthy tenure, from 1974 to 1986, Joe Blumel led the University through difficult times that included the Vietnam War, student protests and riots on campus (including threats of personal violence), double-digit unemployment, and inflation.

The challenges embedded in an environment marked by retrenchment and financial exigency were perhaps the most difficult for him. He persevered, though, and his policies helped build the foundation from which Portland State would ultimately prosper.

Two of his major contributions were the advancement of PSU to a research university and the fostering of a PSU partnership with the city of Portland in becoming an urban university.

Portland State is now a nationally recognized urban university, and, in 2008, PSU appropriately commemorated Joe's past achievements by renaming West Hall, the first University-built residence hall under his leadership, the Joseph C. Blumel Residence Hall.

Past Tense features glimpses into Portland State's history. To submit a story (or an idea for one), e-mail the RAPS History Preservation Committee at raps@pdx.edu.



Priscilla and Joseph Blumel

Our traveling retirees: Riding the 'Canadian' across the continent

A train trip across Canada was long a dream of Dawn and Charlie White. Dawn's retirement last year made it possible.

After flying from Portland to the Vancouver, B.C., airport, we walked to the Sky Train station, and had a smooth ride, with a transfer, to the Canadian National train depot.

We boarded VIA train no. 2, the *Canadian*, about 8:30 p.m. and found our compartment. The compartment was quite small, with a water closet and sink in the room and a nice shower with a changing room down the hall. Our car had six compartments plus four old-fashioned Pullman areas. The beds were comfortable. The track is smooth; Dvorak's *Humoresque No. 7* comes naturally into your consciousness as the train rolls along. The train has three dome cars with 360-degree views.

The food in the diner was excellent and too plentiful. We got three full meals every day, with tasty desserts after lunch and dinner. The staff brought around hors d'oeuvres every afternoon; fruit, juice, delicious muffins, and coffee were available all the time; and there was wine tasting in the afternoon.

Our first day was in the Canadian Rockies, and they are simply magnificent. They are so good, in fact, that in the documentary film on the American West, *The Real West* (narrated by Gary Cooper), some of the mountain scenes were shot in Canada, not the U.S.A. The train climbed continually from Vancouver for 14 hours, and Mt. Robson, the highest point in the Rockies, came into view about noon, hiding its summit in fog. But many other treeless, snow-capped mountains were out in all their glory. Dawn's photo of Mt. Fitzwilliam, taken across Yellowhead Lake, is so appealing it is now our computer's screen saver.

The second day we crossed the plains of Saskatchewan, looking out at perfectly flat wheat fields as far as one could see. The verdant Qu'appelle Valley, contrasting with yellow wheat fields, seemed a rural paradise.

The next day was entirely in the Canadian Shield, with the trees at their height in fall color. The bright red of the maples contrasted with the green pines and cedars and the white bark of the paper birches. The Shield is full of lakes and streams (Canada has nearly half of all the fresh water in the world!) and water was always visible.

The Shield is immense—we traveled around a thousand miles in this wonderland, with only two towns

and a few settlements. But eventually the Shield gave way to the farms in settled Ontario, with maples and birches providing the color. It was about noon Thanksgiving Saturday when we arrived just a few minutes late in

Toronto, end of the line for the *Canadian*.

In Toronto there were virtually no cars nor people on the streets; it was Thanksgiving Saturday. That was not the case in the train station, however, as seemingly infinite lines of Thanksgiving passengers were waiting before each train gate.

We traveled along the Lake Ontario shore for a while, and then north into the Shield again. We arrived in Ottawa a few minutes ahead of schedule and our host, former PSU student Willard Mullins, now a retired professor from Carleton College, was there to meet us.

We spent Thanksgiving Sunday at Jones Falls on the Rideau Canal, which was built shortly after the War of 1812, partly as a defensive measure assuring an all-Canadian supply line in case the Americans invaded again. We had a nice Thanksgiving dinner and then hiked over the locks and up the canal, stopping at a restored blacksmith shop where the smithy forged a heart hook and at the principal defensive structure where we could look out the gun slits in case the American invaders were coming again.

Ottawa is a delightful city. At one of our dinners, one of Will's guests was one of his former students, now a professor himself. It was nice having three generations of professors-students. The new War Museum in Ottawa is superb—and much too large to cover in a few hours. It is divided into periods—we were particularly interested in the early period when the French and the British were vying for continental control, and the period 1770 to 1870 when the principal enemy threat was the United States. The public markets in Ottawa are splendid—it was a nice place to end our seven-day Canadian Odyssey.



Mt. Fitzwilliam and Yellowhead Lake, taken as Via's train, the *Canadian*, went through Yellowhead Pass.

Photo by Dawn White