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Muslim Americans in the Military: Centuries of Service

Edward E. Curtis IV

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 102 pages.

Edward E. Curtis IV is one of the most important scholars of Islam in the United States. This slim volume is a welcome addition to his work, and should be required reading for all who are interested in the place of Muslims within the history of America. One also wishes that the book be read widely by American Muslims. As the latter day prophet, Bob Marley, once sang about other soldiers in the Americas, “If you know your history /

Then you would know where you're coming from." Curtis' book helps us, as American Muslims, to learn about our own history in our country.

The book is not written for a specialized audience, and could easily be used by undergraduate or even senior high school students in a number of courses on Islam or religion in America. It is a very short volume, coming in at 82 pages of text with a single additional page of notes. The book is divided into five chapters of roughly equal length. The first chapter introduces the contemporary issues of American Muslim soldiers in the United States armed forces through the stories of Captain Humayun Khan and Corporal Kareem Rashad Sultan Khan. Corporal Khan became widely known when a photo of his mother, Elsheba, cradling his gravestone was mentioned by General Colin Powell in the 2008 election. Captain Khan's introduction to the American public was more recent, when his father, Khizr, spoke about his son's sacrifice on the final night of the Democratic National Convention in 2016.

The second chapter provides a brief sketch of Muslims in the Revolutionary War as well as the War of 1812, before moving to a profile of Hadji Ali and the Camel Corps. This was founded a few years before the Civil War by Jefferson Davis, who would later become infamous as the president of the Confederacy. Davis wanted to use camels as military transport in the west, and they were brought to Texas and driven into what would become Southern California. Curtis next tells the story of Sgt. Nicholas Said, who was one of hundreds of Muslims to serve in the Civil War. In a volume of this small size, Curtis cannot tell the stories of all who served, and so he provides information about a few people as examples. This continues with the discussion of Pvt. Omer Otmen and Kassen Rameden, both Syrian Americans, who served in World War I. The chapter ends with a discussion of Sgt. John Omar, who served in World War II.

The third chapter, which reaches from World War II to the Gulf War, recounts the story of the most famous American Muslim, the late Muhammad Ali, who refused induction to the Army in the Vietnam War. One of Curtis' many contributions to the study of American Islam is to help us to understand African American Islam within the context of American religious history. He does that again in this chapter with a discussion of the roles of African American Muslims in the military after the death of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. The chapter ends with a discussion of the service of American Muslim women, focusing on Petty Officer Fatima Ahmed and Lt. Col. Shareeda Hosein.

The fourth chapter examines controversies surrounding Muslims in the military, focusing on the stories of Cpt. James Yee and Maj. Nidal Hasan. Cpt. Yee was a chaplain at Guantanamo Bay who was charged with a number of serious crimes before finally being vindicated with an honorable discharge from the Army. Hasan was infamous for murdering 13 people and injuring 30 more in a mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas. Curtis ends the chapter with a discussion of Major James Ahearn, an example of the many soldiers who have converted to Islam.

The final chapter deals with the modern setting, discussing four different American Muslim soldiers from diverse backgrounds. The chapter ends with a short discussion of the importance of passing on the stories of Muslims who have served in the American Armed Forces. These stories are important for both Muslim and non-Muslim Americans to hear and understand. Both groups may be unaware of the centuries of service that American Muslims have provided to our country. This is a splendid little book, and one hopes that it is widely read by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

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