

2013

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Roundtable Review

[www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables)

Volume XIV, No. 18 (2013)

28 January 2013

*Roundtable Editors:* Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

*Roundtable Web/Production Editor:* George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Introduction by Thomas Maddux

**Tim Bird and Alex Marshall. *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way*.** New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. ISBN: 9780300154573 (cloth, \$30.00).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-18.pdf>

## Contents

---

Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge.....	2
Review by Peter John Brobst, Ohio University .....	6
Review by Benjamin D. Hopkins, The George Washington University.....	11
Review by Anthony King, University of Exeter .....	15
Review by Bruce E. Stanley, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College .....	20
Author's Response by Tim Bird, King's College London .....	22
Author's Response by Alex Marshall, Scottish Centre for War Studies at Glasgow University	26

---

## Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

---

Tim Bird and Alex Marshall in *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* offer a comprehensive study of the strategy of the United States and its NATO allies towards Afghanistan from the aftermath of September 11 2001 through 2010. Although Bird and Marshall examine some selective military operations such as counterinsurgency (COIN) in the town of Marjah in Helmand province in February 2010, the focus from the start to the last sentence is on strategy or the lack thereof. “It all began so well,” (1) the opening sentence of the introduction, refers to the sweep of the Northern Alliance forces with U.S. Special Forces and U.S. airpower to drive Al Qaeda and Taliban forces across the border into Pakistan, and foreshadows Bird and Marshall’s emphasis on the failure of the U.S. and its allies to develop a coherent strategy to deal with the complexity of Afghanistan and the many interested and involved neighbors of Afghanistan. The authors’ critical perspective throughout is captured in their concluding assessment: “At key points in the depressing story of the intervention in Afghanistan, only one actor had the capability to bring genuine coherence to the ends, way and means calculations that should have informed the international effort. That actor was the US, and it failed to do so” (262).

The reviewers are impressed with the focus on strategy, the organization of the study and its central thesis. Benjamin Hopkins praises the study “as one of the best, if not the best analysis of the American led-involvement,” and Anthony King, noting the complexity of Afghanistan, the interests of the neighbors, the involvement of NATO and the UN, the many players in Washington and the interested military and non-governmental participants in Afghanistan, as well as the divisions among the Afghans, concludes that “Bird and Marshall brilliantly illustrate the way which this bewildering, if not pathological, institutional complex has generated the current situation in Afghanistan.” Bruce Stanley emphasizes the fairness of the study in that “all of the actors involved in Afghanistan” are held “accountable for the devastating outcome of the past ten years ... but Washington bears the lion’s share.” As Peter Brobst emphasizes, “one comes away from this provocative and engaging book not so much knowing how or where the West lost its way in Afghanistan but wondering whether there was even a trailhead.”

Neither the authors nor the reviewers question the initial decision of President George W. Bush to invade Afghanistan after the Taliban regime led by Muhammad Omar refused to turn over Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Yet from the start they agree on the lack of a clear strategic framework which identified what objectives were to be achieved and what were the available means to achieve these ends. President Bush and his advisers came up with a threat list, as noted by Bird and Marshall, that “included an individual (bin Laden), a group (Al Qaeda), a tactic (terrorism), hostile governments, neutral governments, and a state of mind” which left “no clear way to differentiate the vital from the peripheral; the essential from the desirable; or the threatening from the merely problematic” (57). Further undermining a focus on Afghanistan was the almost immediate preoccupation of Washington officials, led by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his advisers, with Iraq and Saddam Hussein (57-58). Hopkins and the other reviewers find the authors’ central emphasis on the lack of strategy and the confusion of ends with means a persuasive

central theme. Stanley points out how U.S. strategic objectives expanded from getting bin Laden and Al Qaeda and removing the Taliban regime to “state-building, counterinsurgency, winning hearts and minds, democratization, counterterrorism, development and regional stabilization,” and the authors note that “each objective had different international sponsors, thus different operational approaches and means allocated to addressing the objectives. The results were a disturbing lack of strategic clarity.”

In developing this perspective on strategy, Bird and Marshall move from the initial American invasion to the effort to build a new Afghan political system, the disruptive impact of the Iraq war on Afghanistan, the return to the “forgotten war” in 2006-2008, the challenges posed by Pakistan, and the perception of counterinsurgency as a silver bullet. Through this approach the authors develop a second theme which the reviewers endorse: the U.S. and NATO effort to build a neo-liberal political and economic order in Afghanistan. As Brobst highlights, “beyond forming a ‘graduate school’ for counterinsurgency, Afghanistan has become a laboratory in which to test liberal-democratic theories of state-and-nation building.” As King and the authors emphasize, in the quest to create a centralized democratic state (a common ideal for all of the western participants) the International Security and Assistance Force (ISSAF), the UN and U.S. governmental and non-governmental participants ignored the reality that “ethnic, tribal, clan and qawm networks ... at the heart of the society are inimical to central government” (250). Stanley agrees that a nation-building campaign as in Afghanistan that assumes that “all peoples universally crave some approximation of Western social, political and economic life and will rise up to create these structures” is a “most glaring ideological bubble”. One consequence of this approach that King notes is Bird and Marshall’s account of how the CIA identified and worked with Afghan leaders such as Hamid Kharzai which in turn led to the creation of a “new patrimonial regime of an elite group of patrons, each with its own powerful network of clients which ran down to the village level” and with most patrons involved in the most dynamic, expanding private sector of the Afghan economy, drug production and trafficking.

Hopkins does raise concerns about Bird and Marshall’s assessment of state building which Hopkins suggests come close to putting the blame on Afghan corruption. “A more nuanced discussion of how Western efforts at reconstructing the central state interact with ... local alternatives would provide a more compelling understanding of what is actually happening in the Afghan countryside,” Hopkins suggests, and “it would also do much to explain the violence provoked by Western efforts which challenge, displace, or in many instances destroy local hierarchies and orders of authority.” Hopkins also notes that in a book that focuses on the West and strategy, the Afghans are “in the main an undifferentiated collective providing the backdrop to the story.”

In evaluating Barack Obama’s approach to Afghanistan, Bird and Marshall emphasize that Obama inherited a flawed approach in Counter-Insurgency (CI) which was a tactic in an operational approach that depended on a functioning Afghan central government to move in with a successful CI clearing of areas and to win the “hearts and minds” of the populace. (238) The authors suggest that Obama and his advisers, in their 2009 review on

Afghanistan, did narrow U.S. objectives down to the defeat of Al Qaeda and suggested negotiations with the Taliban, but at the same time continued the disconnect between “stated US ends and the ways and means of getting there” which included many of the same state-building, economic development, anti-corruption and anti-narcotics objectives of the Bush administration (220, 232). The authors suggest that pressure from the military, especially the new NATO commander General Stanley McChrystal, as well as from General David Petraeus with the misleading example of the “surge” in Iraq, as well as a CI lobby in Washington and Republican critics, pushed Obama into a continuation of an incoherent strategy. The reviewers again agree with Bird and Marshall’s assessment of Obama’s approach although King suggests that McChrystal’s surge of which added 30,000 U.S. troops did have some success.

What do Bird and Marshall as well as the reviewers suggest as more viable strategy than what the West pursued? Brobst endorses Bird and Marshall’s attention to Pakistan and its geostrategic perspective that is central to its unwillingness to break with the Taliban and other groups contesting with the U.S. and the Karzi regime in Afghanistan. In reviewing various proposed strategies to resolve the conflict and facilitate an exit by the U.S., Brobst supports the authors’ call for a broad regional approach although also noting the multiple complex issues that would be involved with Iran, Russia, Pakistan, India and China, since “Afghanistan lies athwart any number of geopolitical fault lines—global and regional. The country cannot be discounted as a ‘worthless’ place in the Asian balance.” Yet Hopkins suggests that “Afghanistan is a debacle playing itself out from day one. There is no redeeming story here, no silver lining, no positive policy prescription to rescue this well-advanced disaster.”

### **Participants:**

**Tim Bird** joined the Defence Studies Department of King’s College London in July 2004, and is permanently based at the Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) at the UK Defence Academy in Shrivenham. From September 2008 – August 2009 Dr Bird was on secondment at the MoD’s Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) as part of the team writing the new British Joint Operational Stabilisation Doctrine (JDP 3-40 Security and Stabilisation: the Military Contribution). He is currently writing a book on the last 30 years of U.S. and UK approaches to military strategy and operations.

**Alex Marshall** is a lecturer at the Scottish Centre for War Studies at Glasgow University, and was formerly a lecturer at the Defence Studies Department of King’s College London. His publications include the monograph *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1800-1917* and a variety of articles on subjects ranging from Russian military intelligence in the First World War to the Soviet withdrawal strategy from Afghanistan in 1987-89. His latest publications are *The Caucasus under Soviet Rule* (RoutledgeCurzon: 2010) and the co-authored monograph with Tim Bird for Yale University Press, *Afghanistan. How the West Lost Its Way* (Yale: 2011). He is currently working on a history of Soviet relations with the Third World, and on a political economy of illicit drugs.

**Peter John Brobst** is Associate Professor of History at Ohio University, where he teaches imperial and international history. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, and is the author of *The Future of the Great Game: Sir Olaf Caroe, India's Independence, and the Defense of Asia* (University of Akron Press, 2005). He is currently completing a book about strategy and globalism in the Indian Ocean during the later stages of decolonization in the 1960s and 70s.

**Benjamin D. Hopkins** is an assistant professor of history and international affairs at the George Washington University in Washington D.C. His research interests include modern South Asian history, British imperialism, and the history of Afghanistan. He is author of *The making of modern Afghanistan* (PalgraveMacmillan, 2008/2012) and co-author with Magnus Marsden of *Fragments of the Afghan frontier* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

**Anthony King**, BA (Honors) Archeology and Anthropology (University of Cambridge), MA Political Science (University of Michigan), Ph. D. (University of Salford), is Professor of Sociology University of Exeter. King's most recent book is *The Transformation of Europe's Armed Forces: from the Rhine to Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and he has just completed a monograph entitled "The Combat Soldier" which examines cohesion and combat performance in western infantries from World War I to Afghanistan and will be published by Oxford University Press in late 2012 or early 2013.

**Bruce E. Stanley** is an Associate Professor at the U.S. School of Advanced Military Studies in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Bruce earned his Ph.D. in Security Studies from Kansas State University. He is also a retired U.S. Army officer with over 24 years of service. Stanley served in Afghanistan from October 2001 through June 2002 as an Infantry Battalion Executive Officer.

Review by Peter John Brobst, Ohio University

---

In 1930, Wallace Murray, explaining Washington's reluctance to formalize relations with Kabul, claimed that "Afghanistan is doubtless the most fanatic and hostile country in the world today."<sup>1</sup> Murray was the State Department's point man on the region and a future ambassador to Iran. Judging from opinion polls his sentiment still resonates more than eighty years on. Even expert assessments, at least on occasion, echo Murray. No one less than Edward Luttwak, whose 2009 masterwork on Byzantine strategy Tim Bird and Alex Marshall approvingly cite,<sup>2</sup> has dismissed Afghanistan as among the "worthless places" on the global chessboard.<sup>3</sup> While Bird and Marshall do not go nearly so far in their own critique of the West's ongoing war in Afghanistan, they nonetheless tell an appalling story of dysfunctional strategy born of muddled policy and backward process. All of this reflects a persistent inability in the corridors of Western power to hold in focus and effectively articulate Afghanistan's long-term geopolitical importance in itself.

In fact, one comes away from this provocative and engaging book not so much knowing how or where the West lost its way in Afghanistan but wondering whether there was even a trailhead. To be sure, for all its improvisation, there was clarity of purpose behind the initial and necessarily swift intervention of the United States against the Taliban in the fall of 2001. There was also the considerable and not distant history of positively tectonic interaction between great and regional powers alike in and around Afghanistan, which Bird and Marshall succinctly lay out in their first chapter. Beyond the capture or killing of Osama bin Laden, however, neither seems to have fostered much of a long view, whether in Washington or any other Western capital. The war in Iraq, to accept the convention, distorted what vision there was. NATO, as a separate entity from the United States, ramped up its commitment in Afghanistan as the Americans diverted their attention and resources to the Persian Gulf. But, as Bird and Marshall suggest, NATO decision-makers saw in Afghanistan a way to validate the alliance in the post-Cold War world (and sooth bent feelings in Washington over dissent on Iraq) as much as a basic problem of security and power balancing in Asia.

Perhaps the latter interest demands a strategic approach through counterinsurgency. Yet, the emphasis on counterinsurgency, particularly in Anglo-American circles, does not reflect a clear agenda in that vein. This in turn has generated an upside-down process in which tactics and operational exigency drive strategy in Afghanistan. The conflation of reified doctrine with sound strategy has become increasingly evident since 2006 and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Wallace Murray quoted in Leon B. Poullada, "The Road to Crisis, 1919-1980," in *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* edited by Rosanne Klass (New York: Freedom House, 1987), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Edward Luttwak, "Errors of Backsight Forethought," *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 October 2009, 21.

subsequent ascendancy of ‘population-centric’ counterinsurgency, as typified in the newfound influence of the 1960’s French military theorist, David Galula.<sup>4</sup> Bird and Marshall issue a stinging bill of indictment on this score. Western authorities, they charge, have consistently failed to assess Afghanistan on its own terms. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the need for deep cultural and historical awareness, awkward metaphors and stretched analogies have proven more likely to predominate in the formulation of Afghan strategy. Historians will find Bird and Marshall’s account of the apples-and-oranges math employed by the RAND Corporation to be an especially damning case in point. Many practitioners will no doubt cringe at the sheer anachronism and otherwise decontextualized analysis as well. Frank Ledwidge, a former British intelligence officer, for one, advances a corresponding set of criticisms in his own contemporaneously published study of military failure in Iraq and Afghanistan. Actually, Bird and Marshall should be read in harness with Ledwidge’s *Losing Small Wars*.<sup>5</sup>

The weakness of geopolitical outlook has similarly confused the application of soft power in Afghanistan. To a significant degree efforts at nation-building in Afghanistan have foundered on the shoals of intra-governmental politics, as Dov Zakheim, a senior Defense official and director of Afghan reconstruction in the Bush administration, has laid bare in his recent memoir.<sup>6</sup> The problem extends beyond American and ISAF operations, however. Different offices within the United Nations have, to use an example from Bird and Marshall, simultaneously taken mutually exclusive positions on poppy eradication. But the underlying issue comes down to the unrealistic yet insistent adherence to universalist notions of good governance in the face of different, even opposing, cultural and historical conceptions on the ground. Beyond forming a “graduate school” for counterinsurgency, Afghanistan has become a laboratory in which to test liberal-democratic theories of state- and nation-building. Bird and Marshall present a particularly acute assessment along these lines in their discussion of the aversion to “ungoverned spaces” in Western policy circles. A homogenously ordered landscape is neither strategically feasible nor a historical precondition to a functional Afghan state. Instead, as the anthropologist Thomas Barfield has written, previous state- and empire-builders in Afghanistan have aimed “to control the best bits themselves, and leave at arm’s length territories deemed unprofitable to rule or of little strategic value.”<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Barfield’s ‘Swiss cheese model’ (to use a clunky, though I think apt, metaphor) tends to be counterintuitive and might attract criticism that this kind of view merely swaps out liberal shibboleths for an ossified orientalism.

---

<sup>4</sup> See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (reprinted Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Dov S. Zakheim, *A Vulcan’s Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 68.

Whatever the case may be, democratic ideals, as Sir Halford Mackinder maintained, must in practice first take account of geographical reality.

Of course, Western strategists and policy-makers are neither impervious nor indifferent to such thinking. Zakheim, for instance, presents a remarkably lucid and informative distillation of the geopolitical predicament in his insider's account of Bush administration policy. More widely speaking, it has become de rigueur among politicians and generals, as well as among pundits and wonks, to acknowledge and then bemoan the complex, interwoven relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. While the shrink-wrapped acronym 'Af-Pak' lacks elegance and nuance, its ubiquity as a strategic term indicates basic awareness in the official mind of Afghanistan's entanglement with the subcontinent. Bird and Marshall helpfully break stride with their otherwise chronological narrative to devote a separate, thematic chapter to Pakistan, not least to the influence of radical Islamism and security in the constitutionally autonomous, and predominantly Pashtun, Tribal Areas of the old North-West Frontier Province. The deep-seated geostrategic logic that has prevailed in the country's politico-military establishment since independence in 1947 represents another significant factor in the problem of Pakistan. Bird and Marshall note Islamabad's long professed worries about Pakistan's lack of 'strategic depth' vis-à-vis India as an essential and continuing motive behind Pakistan's activities west of the Durand Line. They emphasize the degree to which the fissiparous quality of the Pakistani state—in particular the loss of East Bengal in 1971 and secessionist pressure in Baluchistan—exacerbates these anxieties in Islamabad. But Afghanistan has not always been a hapless pawn in Pakistan's game against India.

There is more to the picture, much of which goes missing in the debate over strategy and policy in Afghanistan. Quite apart from any influence on New Delhi's side, Kabul has in the past pushed its own irredentism and other territorial ambitions against Pakistan. Throughout the first two decades of Pakistan's independence, a comparatively strong Afghan state pressed the vision of a greater 'Pashtunistan' in which the Tribal Areas of the North-West Frontier Province would be brought under Kabul's authority. Much of the trouble, as Bird and Marshall suggest, stemmed from the artificiality of the colonial boundary. Sir Mortimer Durand's eponymous line (which controversially still demarcates the frontier between Pakistan and Afghanistan) cut through the territory of individual tribes, placing segments of several on both sides of the border. That said, Kabul's claims to the loyalty of the eastern tribes reflected Durrani conceit as much as 'Durandian' ham-handedness. On the Pakistani side of the border, 'Pashtunistan' meant the idea of an autonomous state, potentially based on Peshawar; the vision did not imply any strong affinity with the great tribal confederacies of Afghanistan. . Kabul also made trouble in Baluchistan, where the Durrani regime backed resistance to Pakistan following the demission of British rule in 1947; and where, as Bird and Marshall take notice, Pakistan's largely overlooked antagonism with Iran has been manifest since the days of the Shah. None of this background will, or should, elicit sympathy for efforts to keep the Afghan state off balance, but it has nevertheless left an indelible mark on Pakistan's geopolitical imagination. Neither roll back of the martial state nor sops from India will likely erase it.

The ultimate problem with 'Af-Pak' is that, like counterinsurgency, the concept reflects a strategic frame of mind informed more by operational outlook than geopolitical vision. The emphasis on the linkage in the Obama administration followed from the hope of brokering a "grand bargain" to end the Great Game. The original suggestion for such a deal in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* opened a much needed panorama on Afghanistan's position in Asia.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the prospect in effect framed Asian power as a problem of Afghan security rather than the other way round. Kashmir, for example, involves far-reaching, bi-lateral security issues, including a major dispute over territory between India and China in addition to the better known boundary issue between India and Pakistan. Whether or not Washington had green-lighted assurances to Pakistan on Kashmir, why would, or should, New Delhi, or Beijing, have been expected, let alone persuaded, to subordinate such potentially larger considerations of their own national interest to Afghanistan? The Asian forest has disappeared in the 'Af-Pak' trees. A similar myopia handicaps the vision of a "Silk Road Strategy" to integrate Afghanistan over the long-term into the economy of a greater Eurasian space, into a "Horizontal Asia."<sup>9</sup> The so called Northern Distribution Network reduces complex desiderata on the post-Soviet landscape to a near-term, albeit pressing, issue of logistics.

Events are usually quick to overtake histories of present crises, not to mention reviews of them. But as an object lesson in the limitation of operational art, and even virtuosity, in a "strategy-free zone," Bird and Marshall's study of Western policy in Afghanistan should last. It must be admitted, of course, that geostrategic realism has its own limits, not least, as Bird and Marshall appreciate, in political reality. Call it what you like, a strategy of 'offshore balancing,' 'counter-terrorism,' or, in Luttwak's word, "raiding" may be eminently suited to the Afghan scene and what capacities the West actually enjoys; the attendant requirements, however, present difficulty.<sup>10</sup> Talking with figurative Barbarians, to stay with Luttwak's Byzantine metaphor, or dealing with Afghanistan as part of a greater "Turko-Persia," as Barfield suggests, seem unlikely to win many adherents on either side of the aisle.<sup>11</sup> Reading more Mackinder and less David Galula will not point the way out. But surely the spirit would help get the West back on track in Afghanistan—and wider Asia. Sir Olaf Caroe, the last colonial governor on India's North-West Frontier, adopted a similar view during the last years of the Raj. In his eyes the failings of British policy reflected not poor implementation—though there was that—but rather inattention to geopolitics in the process of making it.

---

<sup>8</sup> Barnett R. Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, "From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008.

<sup>9</sup> S. Frederick Starr, Andrew C. Kuchins, et al. *The Key to Success in Afghanistan: A Modern Silk Road Strategy* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, 2010); and Anthony Bubalo and Malcolm Cook, "Horizontal Asia," *The American Interest*, May/June 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Luttwak, "Errors of Backsight Forethought," p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> See, Barfield, *Afghanistan*, especially chapter 2.

Bird and Marshall open their long critique with a quotation from Caroe, so perhaps it is not unreasonable to say a bit more by way of conclusion. The one time servant of the Raj would, as Bird and Marshall speculate, no doubt have offered forceful advice and urged caution at the outset of Afghan operations in 2001. He might also have reiterated another line, which Bird and Marshall do not quote, from his magisterial history of *The Pathans*. “Unlike other wars,” Caroe wrote, “Afghan wars become serious only when they are over.”<sup>12</sup> He referred in particular to the trouble that followed in the aftermath of King Amanullah’s collision with British India in 1919, but could just as easily have been writing about events over the last decade, if we treat the campaign of late 2001 as the war itself. However precipitous American and ISAF disengagement may or may not prove, the observation remains ominous. Afghanistan lies athwart any number of global and regional fault lines. The country certainly cannot be discounted as a “worthless place” in the Asian balance. Reading Bird and Marshall will not instill optimism about the strategic acuity of the West. Providing for the security of Afghanistan is a role that may well, possibly must, possibly should, fall to others. But as Caroe maintained, “Afghanistan is a place which has to be watched if the peace of Asia is to be preserved.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans, 500 BC-AD 1957* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1958), 397.

<sup>13</sup> Caroe to Lydall, 5 November 1942, Papers of E. F. Lydall, British Library.

'The syndicate makes the profit. And everybody has a share.'<sup>1</sup>

Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, there has been a veritable explosion of writing about the country which, for the most part, had previously been ignored since the musings of Winston Churchill and Rudyard Kipling at the beginning of the last century. Most of the material produced in the past decade has been notable for its lack of originality, intellectual rigor or analytical acuity.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it has by and large simply repeated and thus entrenched tropes about the violent character of Afghan tribesmen, the failure of the Afghan state, and the perils of foreign intervention.<sup>3</sup> Tim Bird and Alex Marshall's recent addition to this corpus stands out as one of the best, if not the best analysis of the American-led involvement in this supposedly timeless beyond. Theirs is a refreshingly original work of incisive analysis and commentary which pulls no punches as it authoritatively spins a well-researched and well-argued tale of hubris, politics and sheer stupidity on the part of the West.

Bird and Marshall's central argument is that the West, by which they mean the U.S.-led coalition which intervened in Afghanistan following the attacks of 11 September 2001, has lacked a clear strategic framework to guide its efforts since the very start. The authors clearly outline their argument in a brief but effective introduction, followed by a chronological narrative of Western efforts from the 9/11 attacks up to the current counterinsurgency (COIN) personified by Generals William McChrystal and David Petraeus. The book ends with a conclusion admirable for its forceful simplicity, arguing that Afghanistan is a debacle that has been playing itself out from day one. There is no redeeming story here, no silver lining, no positive policy prescription to rescue this well-advanced disaster.

Before they detail their substantive argument, the authors offer a background chapter where they introduce some basic history and ethnography of Afghanistan. The narrative chapters which follow chronologically document: the initial success of the American

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Heller. *Catch 22*. Simon & Schuster, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, a number of notable exceptions to this generalization. These include, but are by no means limited to Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi (eds), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Harvard University Press, 2008); Giles Dorransoro, *Revolutions Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (Columbia University Press, 2005); David Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (University of California Press, 2002); Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Hurst & Co., 2007); Alessandro Monsutti, *War and Migration: Social networks and economic strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan* (Routledge, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Andrew M. Roe, *Waging War in Afghanistan: The British Struggle in the Land of Bin Laden, 1849-1947* (University of Kansas Press, 2010); Seth G. Jones, "The rise of Afghanistan's insurgency: state failure and jihad," *International Security* 32:4 (Spring 2008), pp. 7-40; Robert D. Kaplan, "Man vs. Afghanistan," *The Atlantic* (April 2010); Rory Stewart, *The places in between* (Mariner Books, 2006).

invasion in 2001, the attempt to construct a new Afghan political compact in the wake of that success, the distraction of Iraq and its pernicious effects on the mission in Afghanistan, the re-engagement with the Afghan mission and strategy of 'taking the war to the enemy', the problem of Pakistan and finally the rise of COIN as the silver bullet to the Afghan conundrum. In covering this material, the pair's strength lies in their clear and coherent account which is exhaustively sourced. As is understandably the case with such a presentist topic, Bird and Marshall rely by and large on published accounts available in the public domain, combined with a small, but effective collection of personal interviews. This is, in many ways, one of the first relatively complete drafts of the war in Afghanistan. While they do not necessarily break new ground in the story they tell, it is the comprehensive yet accessible way in which they tell the story that makes this work noteworthy. By constructing a whole out of what formerly had only been disparate parts, the authors have created a lucid, and disturbing picture of the Afghan fiasco.

Two of the most forceful critiques the authors forward are: the confusion of tactics with strategy and the way the current efforts reflect an attempt to embed a neo-liberal political and economic order in Afghanistan. On the first point, Bird and Marshall again and again point to how policy makers in the U.S., in European capitals, at NATO, and even the UN have consistently confused means with ends. The point is most clearly made with reference to COIN; counter-insurgency is a tactic, not a strategy. It is about establishing a stable and permissive environment for state construction, rather than constructing the state itself. Yet, in Washington at least, counter-insurgency has become an end in and of itself.

While this critique is well aimed and well executed, it is less important than their appraisal of the neo-liberal order at the heart of the Western agenda. Bird and Marshall point both to the privatization of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and the institutional structures, encouraging private rather than state-sponsored development, put in place through aid and the constitution-making process, as evidence of this neo-liberal agenda. They remind the reader that this formula has been tried, and has failed before, most notably in sub-Saharan Africa. There, as they predict will be the case in Afghanistan, "political and economic liberalization in practice generated destabilizing side-effects in war-shattered states, which then actually perpetuated instability." (133).<sup>4</sup> This is a particularly cogent comparison as it places Afghanistan in a larger context and as part of a larger story about global power structures. Too often, the Afghan conflict has been discussed in rather narrow terms. Its only global connection has been with the 'global war on terror', a term which fell out of favor with the end of the Bush presidency, but a reality which continues unabated.

There is one rather enigmatic point of presentation – the authors' choice of title. Though the subtitle is *How the West Lost its Way*, it is clear from the pages of the book the West never had its way. The authors identify and trace the multiple, competing, and often-contradictory agendas which have marked the West's policy towards Afghanistan.

---

<sup>4</sup> Other authors have discussed the effect of the neo-liberal agenda on development in sub-Saharan Africa at length. See for example James Ferguson, *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian copper belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Following this dizzying array of doubletalk from policy makers and Western capitals, one cannot help but think of Joseph Heller's classic portrayal of war in *Catch 22*. Despite the language of state construction and development, the centrality of the neo-liberal agenda to Western efforts makes it feel as though somewhere in the background lurks something akin to Milo's syndicate which drove Yossarian nuts. Perhaps it is DynCorp.

The book, of course, is not without its shortcomings, some of which are a product of circumstance, but others of which are problems of analysis. The weakest chapter of the work is by far its first, which provides a general background of Afghanistan's political history, ethnographic make-up and geostrategic significance. This is rather unsurprising given the sheer volume of material covered here. Unfortunately, in order to cover it all, Bird and Marshall too often resort to staid stereotypes and generalizations about Afghanistan's proto-colonial past, its ethnic fragmentation and its essentially 'unmodern' character (14-17). Importantly, some issues raised in this chapter have direct bearing on the subsequent story, but the authors fail to pick up the thread later. For example, referring to the rule of Abdur Rahman Khan, considered by many to be the father of modern Afghanistan, Bird and Marshall write "...the Iron Amir showed a dedication to extreme violence and social engineering that was truly totalitarian, a factor to which his British paymasters turned a blind eye..." (13). This assertion is problematic on a number of fronts, not least of which is the applicability of a twentieth-century political phenomenon, totalitarianism, to describe a nineteenth century Afghan ruler. The general thrust, however, namely that state construction is a violent and bloody business, is undoubtedly true. More importantly, the truth of that statement applies not only to Abdur Rahman Khan, but also to the Western project in Afghanistan today. Too often lost in talk of empowerment, development, and what the authors generally refer to as "liberal peace theory" (112) is the historical reality of state construction as a process defined by its violence, both physical and epistemic. States are, in the words of Charles Tilly, essentially organized protection rackets.<sup>5</sup>

Further, one wonders what, if any, effect the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 would have had on the manuscript had the authors included it. Given their views on the number of so-called 'turning points' which have previously come and gone, my suspicion is little. More profoundly, while Bird and Marshall are critical of Western efforts in Afghanistan, they do not fully flesh out their critique or follow through its implications. This is most pronounced in their discussion of 'nation-building' and state (re)construction in Afghanistan. Throughout the text, they are highly critical of Western efforts at creating state competencies, and the blueprint, or lack thereof, on which such efforts are based. However, they run dangerously close to the simplistic assessment of state failure in Afghanistan, driven almost wholly by Afghan 'corruption' (130-6). Missing in their argument is a recognition that the failure is not so much of the state itself, but rather of the specific type of state which the West is trying to construct, namely a centralized Westphalian state.

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles Tilly, "War making and state making as Organized Crime," *Bringing the State Back In*, Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (eds) (Cambridge University Press, 1985): 169-186.

They come closest to fleshing out this recognition when they debunk the myth of Afghanistan as an “ungoverned” space (160-5). However, their counterargument rests on some rather dubious and static understandings of Pashtun society which are, by and large, colonial constructs.<sup>6</sup> There are most definitely alternative normative orders and governing institutions which have provided Afghan society with some order in the midst of the disintegration of the central state.<sup>7</sup> A more nuanced discussion of how Western efforts at reconstructing the central state interact with these local alternatives would provide a more compelling understanding of what is actually happening in the Afghan countryside. It would also do much to explain the violence provoked by Western efforts which challenge, displace, or in many instances destroy local hierarchies and orders of authority.

The lack of discussion regarding indigenous alternatives reflects a broader omission which is striking about the book, namely the Afghans themselves. Apart from some mention of major political players, such as Hamid Karzai, the Afghans are in the main an undifferentiated collective providing the backdrop to the story, rather than central actors in it. In a way, one can understand the authors’ treatment of the Afghans. In the first instance, the book is self-consciously about the West, rather than Afghanistan. As Bird and Marshall argue with regard to NATO, “...policy was driven more by concerns over what Afghanistan could do for NATO, than what NATO could do for Afghanistan.” (154). In the second instance, the authors do not, in present form, have source material supporting a more thorough treatment of the Afghans. This is indicative of a longer tendency prominent in much of the literature about the country. Since Mountstuart Elphinstone published his encyclopedic tome *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* in 1815, Afghanistan has been defined exogenously rather than indigenously.<sup>8</sup> It is the foreigner’s voice and perspective which is, and in Bird and Marshall’s work remains, authoritative.

In the end, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way* is an excellent addition to the literature on Western efforts in the country. Its critique of those efforts is both timely and scathing. Undoubtedly, it will become more widely shared over time.

---

<sup>6</sup> They share this shortcoming with Thomas H. Johnson and Chris M. Mason, “No sign until the burst of fire: Understanding the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier,” *International Security* 32:4 (Spring 2008): 41-77.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of these ‘alternative social formations’, see B. D. Hopkins, *The making of modern Afghanistan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008/2012): 82-109.

<sup>8</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* (Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1815).

With the recent cases of Marines urinating on dead Taliban fighters in Helmand, the accidental incineration of the Koran in Kabul and the massacre of sixteen Afghan civilians in Kandahar Province, International Security Assistance Force ISAF and the U.S.-led International Community now seem to be preparing for the quickest possible military exit from Afghanistan. Something has clearly gone very wrong in Afghanistan with the ISAF campaign. Yet, as Tim Bird and Alex Marshall appositely note at the very beginning of this perceptive and timely study of the Afghan campaign: “It all began so well” (1). From 2001 to 2003, Afghanistan seemed to represent a success for Donald Rumsfeld’s way of war. Even in 2006, when NATO took over the country, the challenge was clear but there was huge optimism that the West would prevail in this theatre. It has not happened and the question is: what went wrong? Or to paraphrase Bird and Marshall: how did the west lose its way in the decade between 2001 and 2011? That is the central issue which animates this work.

In order to answer this question, Bird and Marshall take an impressively broad view of the problem explaining tactical military setbacks in Afghanistan within the wider context of Afghan history and politics, and especially the thirty-year war initiated by the Soviets in 1979, regional politics involving Pakistan, India and the ‘Stans to the north of Afghanistan, global political dynamics between the U.S., the other major powers, Europe, the UN and NATO, the internal institutional rivalries and agendas within the Washington Beltway and, finally, the cultures and interests of the U.S. armed forces and American allies who have done the fighting. No serious account of Afghanistan can ignore the way in which tensions at each level of this multi-polar network influence dynamics at other locations and Bird and Marshall brilliantly illustrate the way in which this bewildering, if not pathological, institutional complex has generated the current situation in Afghanistan. It is an impressive achievement, deftly and economically done. Bird and Marshall’s interest in this work is not theoretical but what they have, in fact, produced is a piece of research which empirically illustrates the actor-network theory approach advocated by Bruno Latour<sup>1</sup> and many others across the social sciences and Mark Duffield and David Keen’s concept of the complex emergency<sup>2</sup>. This book is a superb case study of how international relations actually operate in a globalised era of transnational interconnectedness and multi-polarity with Afghanistan as the ideal example.

With this intellectual framework in place, the authors identify three main causes of the West’s failure in Afghanistan. Firstly and decisively, Bird and Marshall highlight the strategic incoherence of the West’s and especially the U.S.’s approach to Afghanistan. Indeed, although the authors’ illustrate the intricacy of the Afghan complex, they finally identify the United States as being centrally responsible for this strategic incoherence. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour. 2005. *Re-assembling the Social*. Oxford: Clarendon.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Duffield 2001. *Global Governance and the New Wars*. London: Zed; David Keen 2007. *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity.

final sentences of the book are clear: “At key points in the depressing story of the intervention in Afghanistan, only one actor had the capability to bring genuine coherence to the ends, ways and means calculations that should informed the international effort. That actor was the U.S., and it failed to do so” (262). Signally, the United States has never been able to decide whether Afghanistan is primarily a counter-terrorist mission or a stabilization mission (with counter-terrorist effects) and the entire campaign has oscillated between the two requirements since 2001. Indeed, the switch of U.S. attention from Afghanistan to Iraq in the now clearly critical period between 2003 and 2008 was a result of this confusion. In Afghanistan, the ambiguity has been obvious even after Iraq in the period 2009 to the present, when the General Stanley McChrystal surge was predicated on what seemed like a final commitment to stabilization only to be rescinded by the assassination of Osama Bin Laden and the announcement of mission completion and troop draw-down in May 2010 (not inconveniently coinciding with Barack Obama’s up-coming re-election campaign). Bird and Marshall illustrate the way in which this strategic double-think was itself substantially a product of political disputes in Washington.

Compounding this strategic ambiguity, Bird and Marshall explore the way in which the western effort in Afghanistan has been vitiated by an inaccurate and indeed hopelessly idealistic concept of the kind of polity which they have been trying to build. As they show with their very useful accounts of the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in December 2001 and the London Conference in January 2006, which provided the legal basis and strategic direction for the intervention, the West identified a centralized democratic state as the optimal end-state in Afghanistan, even though “the ethnic, tribal, clan and qawm networks that are at the heart of the society are inimical to central government” (250). By contrast, Bird and Marshall recommend that in order for western efforts to be effective in Afghanistan, they “must respond to the needs and grain of Afghan society and be decoupled from grandiose and essentially unachievable dreams of modern-state building and central governance” (251). Although Bird and Marshall primarily blame the U.S. for advocating such utopianism, they also highlight the genuine tragedy of the project of state-building. In order for the international community to engage in Afghanistan at all as a united effort, a common goal had to be identified. Like most would-be co-operative ventures, the representatives of the international community at Bonn and London and their agents in theatre unified themselves on the one most obvious thing they all had in common; they were all citizens of successful and stable democratic states. The necessary basis of international mobilization ensured that the international community and ISAF were committed to a political goal which was ultimately impossible. Prioritizing in-group coherence, in way that the psychologist, Irving Janis<sup>3</sup>, would recognize, they projected their own shared political presumptions onto the environment in which they were to operate quite independently of external realities.

Not only has the campaign been undermined by idealism, but, motivated by an illusion, the West has adopted a quite contradictory position towards the very Afghan polity, it has, in fact, generated. Bird and Marshall record the way in which very quickly after the removal of

---

<sup>3</sup> Irving Janis. 1982. *Groupthink*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

the Taliban, a new class of 'warlords' or powerbrokers came to the fore that was very substantially created by CIA money and support. The CIA identified Afghan notables, who had been marginalized by the Taliban but who possessed powerful tribal ties and often mujaheddin legitimacy, with whom it could work to replace the ousted regime and to assist in the prosecution of the counter-terrorist mission. Hamid Kharzai was the key figure here and Bird and Marshall's discussion of his rise is illuminating, but they also tell the fascinating and illustrative story of Gul Agha Sherzai who governed Kandahar city in the early 1990s before his deposition by the Taliban in 1994. Supported by the CIA, he and his militia drove the Taliban out of the city in late 2001 to install himself as governor, a position later ratified by Karzai. His activities have been so associated with corruption that his award of Radio Afghanistan's 'Person of the Year' in 2008, as Bird and Marshall ruefully note, "probably marked the moment satire died" (87). By 2004, the West had unintentionally developed a new patrimonial regime consisting of an elite group of patrons, each with its own powerful network of clients which ran down to the village level. Of course, in almost every case and especially for any of the new powerbrokers of the south, they were inevitably heavily involved in drug production and trafficking. Yet, while generating this new political elite, the Frankensteinian West, always inspired by visions of state-building, ignored and rejected the creature it had created. It has officially refused to deal with powerbrokers and indeed forced the removal of all the key powerbrokers in the south including Sherzai in 2005, just before NATO took over responsibility for the area. There is little doubt that the powerbrokers remain problematic; indeed, it might be argued that they represent the political problem in Afghanistan, not the Taliban, since it is often their activities which generate the grievances which allow the Taliban to operate. At other moments, their militias have actively been fighting ISAF and Afghan National Security Forces ANSF troops. Yet, while formally refusing to engage with and partner these magnates, the only viable basis of a regime, the West continues to require their assistance and to enrich them. The illusion of the state-centric model has discouraged the West from defiling itself in the grubby reality of Afghan politics. The combination of strategic incoherence and political utopianism is, more or less, mission failure.

Unfortunately, Bird and Marshall identify a second level of problems with the western military intervention. Compounding the strategic ambiguities, they record the diverse political rationale for the engagement of western allies and above all, NATO. Signally, NATO did not become involved in the campaign because it was the optimal political or military alliance for this campaign but rather for a series of expedient and potentially contradictory reasons. The Iraq invasion damaged the Alliance very severely. Many European NATO leaders refused to contribute to the venture because of their own convictions and their fear of domestic opinion but they recognized that they had to contribute in some way to the U.S. war on terror and to making good their promise of post-9/11 support. Political leaders in the 'old and new' Europe were forced into Afghanistan while NATO dignitaries saw it as a critical test of NATO's credibility, not only to the world at large but above all to the Americans. The problem was that NATO's cumbersomeness was inappropriate for a mission of such complexity as Afghanistan.

Moreover, national interests, chains of command and political control further undermined unity of effort – or even any effort. In the north, the Germans exercised excessive caveats

which rendered them very little use as a military force; they were mostly involved in force protection. With force protection still paramount, they have, since 2008 gone over to an over-aggressive use of force. In the south, Bird and Marshall illustrate the completely self-contradictory command structures which were created by the UK even as its own three-star general was supposedly commanding the campaign in Kabul from ISAF. The result was a balkanized campaign. They note that some of these problems have been overcome but not without major damage to the campaign already having been inflicted.

Bird and Marshall also make some important observations of the U.S. Counter-insurgency paradigm which was seen a panacea to all these problems and to Afghanistan itself: “Perhaps the most striking assumption of the new counter-insurgency approach, however, was that the Afghan government, at both central and local level, would suddenly ‘come good’ and be in a position to benefit from the increased troop presence” (238). Here Bird and Marshall point perceptively to the central problem – even arrogance – of the counter-insurgency doctrine. The practices articulated in the US Army’s and US Marines Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* are only a tactical method and without the construction of a regime capable of ruling effectively and legitimately (and that in no way presumes democratically or centrally), no amount of population-centric security will itself guarantee long or even medium term stability. Without credible political leaders in place, insurgents – and the grievances which give rise to them – will at best be displaced not dissipated. Bird and Marshall explore the failings of the Hamkari process (the security dimension of which was Operation Moshtarak III) in and around Kandahar initiated in the summer of 2010. Unfortunately, their book was published before a large hole appeared in this strategy both literally and metaphorically, when five hundred Taliban prisoners walked to freedom through a tunnel out of the Saraposa Prison at the very epicenter of the supposedly secured area. Bird and Marshall at moments are perhaps too condemnatory of General Stanley McChrystal’s surge plan; it had some successes, including notably in Central Helmand where the British effort has gone from embarrassingly amateurish ad hocery into a sustained and coherent effort which is one of the most effective in Afghanistan. But their central point that no a-political technique can work in Afghanistan is surely correct.

Even without all of these self-inflicted wounds, success in Afghanistan would be – and indeed has been – obstructed by Pakistan and its not unreasonable desire to influence events in its immediate neighbour especially since, given the artificiality of the Durand line, the question of the Kabul regime is almost a domestic issue. Nevertheless, Pakistan has played a critical and often nefarious role for western efforts in Afghanistan and Bird and Marshall are excellent in describing the internal political dynamics which explain their Janus-faced politicking of Islamabad, playing the role of western partner while simultaneously sponsoring the very insurgent and terrorists whom it is notably helping the United States to eradicate. Even when the military tried to clear the Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas FATA, they were mainly ineffective in their efforts (210).

In only 262 pages, Bird and Marshall have provided as good a demolition of western efforts in Afghanistan as currently exists. It is a clinical dissection and only a couple of unresolved issues remain. Bird and Marshall imply that the West has failed in Afghanistan. The military campaign seems to be in disarray and prospects are not good. However, it does not

necessarily follow from the failure of the counter-insurgency efforts (especially since 2009) that catastrophic strategic failure in Afghanistan with the return of an extremist Pakistan-backed neo-Taliban to power is inevitable. That scenario is a possible but probably an unlikely scenario in the short or medium term following the withdrawal. It is conceivable that the draw-down of troops would create the space and, indeed, the demand for a radically new, political strategy, repeating the techniques of the Russian and British empires in the nineteenth century, where relations are created with local leaders by political agents who offer support, advice and money in return for a degree of fealty. Whether such a method will be adopted is unclear but it is not impossible. Finally, Bird and Marshall blame the United States for the current situation and there is little doubt that much culpability lays with Washington. Yet, this blame-laying also implies that somehow Afghanistan could have been different; that the West could have done it better. Perhaps, this is a too optimistic reading of history. Given the institutional dynamics, which Bird and Marshall capture so well, the current situation might be seen as unavoidable. It is also noticeable that it was only because the United States was so militarily powerful and so politically decisive that it was able, against general and well-grounded skepticism, to destroy the Taliban regime and inflict a very serious defeat upon Al Qaeda within weeks of 9/11. The heroic strengths of the United States, which there was never any possibility of it not exercising, and which no western power would have opposed it using, may also have been its undoing in Afghanistan. Perhaps in the Hindu Kush, we see the genuine playing out not of western incompetence but rather a new Sophoclean tragedy, all the more pathetic because it was utterly ineluctable.

Review by Bruce E. Stanley, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College

---

In 2009, an officer on the Joint Staff prepared a briefing that depicted the system dynamics of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. One chart, titled “Afghanistan Counterinsurgency Dynamics”<sup>1</sup> attempted to display the full complexity of Afghanistan systems dynamic model. Although the briefing reached a wide audience, including Jon Stewart’s *The Dailey Show* and *The Colbert Report*, most observers became lost within the ‘spaghetti-like’ diagram. Instead of conveying the dynamic complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan, the audience had to unpack the interdependent variables, determine the causal relationships, and attempt to make meaning of a static chart. Assuming the chart is accurate, the briefing failed to place the operational environment within its historical context and explain the ever-evolving nature of the very complex system that is Afghanistan. Fortunately, Tim Bird and Alex Marshall have written their very important book *Afghanistan How the West Lost Its Way*.

Bird and Marshall tackle the dynamic complexity of the ten-year conflict in Afghanistan and make meaning of the constantly evolving events. This important work does more than explain how the west lost its way in Afghanistan. The authors bring into question the dominant policy fashions of the international community and the flawed execution of those policies. They point out that the most glaring problem is the idea that all peoples universally crave some approximation of Western social, political and economic life and will rise up to create the necessary structures. Bird and Marshall hold all of the actors involved in Afghanistan accountable for the devastating outcome of the past ten years. They point out that there is plenty of blame to go around, but Washington bears the lion’s share.

The authors examine the conflict in Afghanistan through the framework of effective strategy, meaning the balancing of ends, and ways and means. Bird and Marshall argue that the heart of the problem in Afghanistan is that for ten years the United States and NATO had an incoherent strategy. Through four time periods, the authors examine the desired political objectives of the multiple actors involved in Afghanistan, how they were intended to be achieved, and the means allocated to achieve the objectives. This approach brings to light the dynamic complexity of the ten year conflict in Afghanistan.

The authors examine four main themes throughout the book: the divergent international strategic objectives and the incoherent operational approaches implemented by multiple actors, the influence and role played by key strategic leaders in Pakistan, the drug trade and how it plays a key role in the politics and economy of Afghanistan, and the flaws in the counter insurgency approach.

---

1

[http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Components/Photo/new/Afghanistan\\_Dynamic\\_Planning.pdf](http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Components/Photo/new/Afghanistan_Dynamic_Planning.pdf), accessed 27 January 2013.

In 2001, the US strategic objectives for Afghanistan included the destruction of Al Qaeda; the removal of the Taliban regime; and the denial of sanctuary for international jihadists. Over time, additional strategic objectives were added to this list. These include state-building, counterinsurgency, winning hearts and minds, democratization, counterterrorism, development, and regional stabilization. Bird and Alexander point out that each objective has had different international sponsors, and thus different operational approaches and means allocated to addressing the objectives. The results were a disturbing lack of strategic clarity. The authors concede that even if there had been a closer alignment of approach with conditions on the ground, success would have been elusive.

The authors point out that Pakistan played and plays a crucial role in Afghanistan. Any type of stable peace in Afghanistan requires Pakistan's consent and involvement. The authors make it clear that Pakistan's critical strategic objective is the defense of its eastern border with India. However, the restless Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Afghanistan border represent a second critical strategic objective, the internal security of Pakistan. Bird and Alexander point out that Pakistan will never fully control the tribal areas (258). Thus, for a coherent strategy to be successful, a broad regional approach is required that accounts for competing security concerns.

One thing is clear, the systemic drug trade in Afghanistan influences local, regional, and national politics. With opium exports accounting for over half of the country's GDP (\$5.2 billion) the economic significance of the drug trade is staggering. Bird and Alexander point out that the drug economy plays an important role in Afghanistan, with profits being reinvested in consumer goods and small business development. Interestingly, the areas heavily influenced by the Taliban coincide with the traditional drug trade routes in western and southern Afghanistan. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Northern Alliance warlords supplanted the Taliban and extracted transit fees along these traditional drug routes. By 2006, profits from the drug trade reached an historic peak(126-128). At the same time, the Taliban began reasserting itself in Afghanistan.

Bird and Alexander assert that the term counter-insurgency (COIN) can never be a strategy. They accurately point out that COIN is a tactical or operational approach at best, but it can never be a strategy. Thus, COIN is a way to link the strategic objectives to the means available, not the strategy as proposed by many proponents. In contrast to the promises of the COIN supporters, the authors point out that in Afghanistan people behave in accordance with local power realities and threat perceptions – which the Taliban has consistently shown greater capability to influence than the coalition (257).

This important work is fair in that the authors leave no actor unscathed in their criticism. Though the U.S. is justifiably singled out as the nation most responsible for the failures in Afghanistan, a careful read of the book reveals that international, regional, and local actors are just as culpable. Thus, the book should have wide appeal among scholars studying the conflict in Afghanistan, political scientist and historians teaching international relations and diplomatic history, policy makers that espouse new strategies in the twenty-first century, and military planners who are faced with difficult strategic problems.

Author's Response by Tim Bird, King's College London

---

Like Alex Marshall, I was enormously gratified by the comments and observations of the reviewers. We were particularly nervous when the book was published as it is, in many ways, quite an unusual scholarly publication. There was a conscious attempt to appeal to a number of different readerships whose preferences are not necessarily fully compatible. Given the nature of the publisher it had to have academic credibility in the scholarly community. However, there was a desire in both authors and editors for the book to appeal more broadly to a general readership. In addition, teaching so many senior military officers with combat and command experience in Afghanistan at the UK Defence Academy (Alex formerly, me currently) meant that we were very conscious of the need to be convincing to those who have been at the sharp end of the western effort. Despite the book's inevitable flaws we are pleased and, perhaps more than anything, relieved that the reception for the book has been generally positive from all these readerships.

A constant tension in the writing of the book stemmed from the desire to pull together many disparate literatures to present a coherent, yet relatively short overview of a long, multifaceted and deeply complex intervention. The twin and often competing desires for both parsimony and depth generated the most headaches and sleepless nights. There are few topics covered in the book that wouldn't have benefitted from additional whole chapters devoted entirely to them. Compromises, often uncomfortable, had to be made. Benjamin Hopkins notes a number of missed opportunities to deepen our analysis of the social, historical, political and geostrategic context of Afghanistan and the region. In an early draft of the book two chapters, instead of the final one, were devoted to these issues. This produced a degree of publisher discomfort that a book overtly marketed as an overview of events since 2001 was spending 25% of its time thrashing about the Hindu Kush of the late eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. The push to cut this analysis in half created perhaps the most angst in the authors from the whole project. It was particularly difficult for Alex, a meticulous historian, already having to make compromises by being yoked to a co-author from the flightier end of the International Relations discipline.

Both Peter Brobst and Benjamin Hopkins note correctly that much of our criticism was levelled at the tendency to elevate tactical and operational military frameworks (particularly COIN) to do the strategic and political heavy lifting. Bruce Stanley picks up the point with a telling anecdote about the 2009 Joint Staff Officer's presentation with the revealingly titled chart 'Afghanistan Counterinsurgency Dynamics'. The title itself implies a mindset that 'Afghan dynamics' gain salience and attract attention in direct proportion to their impact on the effective application of COIN doctrine: as an example of analysing a geostrategic crisis through the wrong end of a telescope this takes some beating. Consequently, it is now *de rigueur* to bemoan the difficulties of successfully conducting COIN in a state and region with 'corrupt' networks of powerbrokers; ineffective and venal state representatives and institutions; and regional powers (particularly Pakistan) pursuing their own strategic interests with accompanying duplicity.

However, too many of the apologies for the failure of the COIN approach to deliver convincingly fundamental political change implicitly treat these factors almost as strategic surprises: a *force majeure* that unexpectedly shifted the goalposts thus denying the success that was tantalisingly close. Yet nexuses of transnational criminal networks; regional political elites; local tribal leaders; and religious militants have, despite massive periodic upheaval, been embedded since at least the 1980s. Pakistan's strategic outlook has remained virtually unchanged since at least the time of General Muhammed Zia-ul-Haq in the 1970s; and Afghanistan has never had the sort of central government-periphery relationships, or institutional structures even remotely characteristic of Westphalian states. These are not exogenous factors to the business of fighting a war in Afghanistan, but the fundamental contours of the geopolitical ecosystem of the region. The pressing question for the West, therefore, was never about how these factors could be made to conform to whatever fashionable military, political and developmental nostrums were in vogue, but rather how the West could craft coherent policy and strategy that worked with the grain of regional geopolitics.

Tony King, quite fairly, suggests that we may have been a little harsh with regard to General Stanley McChrystal's 'surge' plan. There was certainly scope to make clearer the nature of our criticism of the COIN narrative. It was never a condemnation of Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency per se*. The manual is a mostly sensible, albeit not particularly original, distillation of tactical COIN wisdom from previous decades, with a bit of Iraq experience thrown in. It, therefore, came as no surprise to us at all that once doctrinally sensible force ratios had been established in Helmand Province, with the presence of some of the most militarily effective forces in the world, that local security would significantly improve. The broader question, as King notes, is the dilemma attached to expecting an essentially a-political tactical framework to deliver strategic and political success in Afghanistan.

Part of the problem may well lie in the very strength of U.S. military power itself. When tactical success becomes an institutionalised expectation it is much harder to take a step back and see the strategic wood for the tactical trees. The adaptation from a force that found COIN both unfamiliar and uncongenial in 2003 to one that figuratively and literally rewrote the manual in 2006-2007 was truly impressive. The inherent danger that can arise from such tactical and operational prowess, though, is of learning to fight the wrong war well.

Senior military leaders are often, occasionally justifiably, cynical about academic pontificating made from the security of 20:20 hindsight. Yet much that has gone wrong in Afghanistan was not just predictable, but predicted. Hopkins makes the point that our gloomy analysis essentially draws on published accounts with some additional carefully selected interviews. We found no 'eureka' moment from a previously hidden document buried in the archives; and no 'killer interview' in which the participant let slip some top secret information that fundamentally changed the picture. Rather, the book is a distillation of readily available analyses over the previous decade and back. The interviews we conducted mostly confirmed our analysis (while adding some occasionally jaw-dropping anecdotes) rather than pointing us in a new analytical direction. This all adds to why the

intervention in Afghanistan is such an intriguing case study in policy and strategy. Decision makers regularly, if not always, had ready access to critical analyses and alternative policy suggestions as they were making decisions. It suggests a deeply ingrained world view that privileges certain narratives and marginalises others *a priori*. Here, King's observation that the book fits well with both the actor-network and complex emergency conceptual approaches is well-taken. It is also one of a number of observations from the reviewers here that are particularly annoying for the authors, in that they suggest potentially highly productive lines of analysis we didn't think about enough when writing the book.

All four reviewers put their finger on perhaps the most important claim in the book; namely that policy has been driven more than anything by a powerful western liberal discourse on the appropriate way to approach fragile and failed states. Hopkins uses the term 'neo-liberal' to describe this; a term that needs some reflection. Neo-liberal has a number of contested meanings within academia and even more in broader political discourse. One of the more common definitions relates to a particular type of policy agenda most often associated with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher but also, more loosely, the rise of the 'neo-cons', many of whom became powerful within the George W. Bush administration. Depending on your political viewpoint, these strands of political thinking comprise either radical correctives to a woolly western liberal consensus, or an aberrant and unwelcome departure from that consensus.

The preoccupations of the Bush White House are a necessary but insufficient part of the explanation for how events have unfolded in Afghanistan. The intervention in Iraq can convincingly be attributed to the obsessions of some in the Bush administration (although the thinking had resonance elsewhere, perhaps most notably in 10 Downing Street). However, it was always highly controversial across large swathes of various western policy communities. Afghanistan was different. Certainly, the initial intervention and policy approach reflected some of the George Bush-Dick Cheney-Donald Rumsfeld preoccupations – military transformation and an aversion to state-building; but for large periods of the intervention Afghanistan was the 'good war'. In size of presence, if not necessarily in effective approach, this was the West at the top of its game. Everyone who was anyone in the western liberal policy consensus seemed to pitch up at some point in Kabul. The development community, both governmental and NGO established permanent residence; the UN and its myriad agencies; the World Bank; IMF; NATO; EU; and a bewildering array of private commercial concerns flooded in. Afghanistan became, in effect, one vast experiment in the efficacy of western approaches to dystopian lands of 'state' failure. The overwhelming mindset, as Tony King perceptively notes, was one of projection. The more 'we' could make the people and polity like 'us,' the greater would be western security. The shattering of many of the shibboleths of western liberal consensus on the appropriate way to deal with such crises would, we surely could expect, be the driver of a period of deep introspection. The signs, however, are not particularly promising.

The framework for such possible introspection will be determined by the linked questions of how we reflect on the past and what is likely to happen to Afghanistan in the future. Peter Brobst's pithy quoting of Caroe that "Afghan wars become serious only when they are over" is relevant not just to the Afghan future but also the developing narrative on past

western policy. There are many who made ambitious claims about the likelihood of their particular policy preferences delivering success that have a significant vested interest in how this narrative shapes up. For the COIN lobby that saw Afghanistan as a future model for how U.S. forces, in particular, should be configured going forward there are significant battles still to be fought in an era of declining defense (and think tank) budgets. The western aid community, likewise, has a vested interest in forestalling a narrative of 'failure' that could equally impact on its future roles. The whole panoply of western liberal consensus big beasts can, and undoubtedly will, point to individual metrics of 'success' to protect positions and influence.

This is compounded by the fact that, as Tony King points out, it is by no means certain, or even overwhelmingly likely, that chaos and disaster will mark the western drawdown. Few actors in the region, even many of the disparate groups that we collectively label the Taliban, have much of a vested interest in the return of a powerful Al Qaeda or AQ-lite presence. The Pakistanis are facing the increased complexity of attempting to manage the fallout from the activities of militant groups they have variously sponsored or encouraged; increasingly self-confident regional powers such as Russia, China and India are flexing muscles and chequebooks ready to shape the security landscape; and the Afghans themselves, the unluckiest of people in the most unfortunate of countries, will doubtless do what they have always done – develop survival strategies to get through whatever the next days, weeks, months and years bring about. The complex interplay of these powers and interests may well result in a security landscape that, while troubled, could be something the West can live with.

There may well be just enough for those in the West, with a vested interest, to point to as indicating 'success' while keeping a straight face. Declaring victory and leaving is a time-honoured position. However, we believe fervently that this must be challenged. The West has few cards left to play in the region and what transpires will largely be as a result of forces beyond the effective control of the U.S. or the West more widely. Even if the 'endstate', to use a military term, is relatively benign from a western perspective, this is not indicative of effective strategy. Putting aside the previous point that much of what happens will be shaped by others, strategy is about more than ends. It is also about using proportionate ways and means to achieve those ends. Intervention, particularly when conducted by superpowers, is about opportunity cost. Thirteen years (by 2014); billions of dollars; and thousands of lives should prompt forensic examination of the causal relationships and balance of ends, ways, and means. In this, Afghanistan is an infinitely more important long-term case study than Iraq because, as noted above, it goes to the heart of western approaches to international relations and crises management rather than simply the policy approach of one U.S. administration.

It is to be hoped that the reviewers here play a role in what hopefully will be a broad debate; for just as our book would have been significantly better if we had somehow managed to glean their insights before writing it, so would the debate that is desperately needed benefit from their participation.

All the reviewers of our work make an admirably fair series of observations. It is particularly pleasing to see that many of the main points we wished to convey have found resonance within the wider scholarly community. Our points of criticism include the absence of a coherent Western strategy; the lack of appreciation for regional geopolitics; the imposition of abstract Westernized notions of effective governance on uncooperative local political realities; and the persistent tendency to view complex security dilemmas like Afghanistan from simplified military perspectives such as Counter-Insurgency (COIN). We likewise fully appreciate the inevitable shortcomings that must come with our attempting to document such recent history; first amongst these must be, of course, the present classified nature of many vital policy documents, and second, the kind of publishing deadlines that entailed our being unable to respond or comment upon the successful American targeting and assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011. Benjamin Hopkins is in fact entirely right, however, to surmise that bin Laden's death has not changed the general thrust of our analysis one iota; if anything, the assassination of Al Qaeda's key figurehead has merely provided the sanction needed to accelerate the planned exit from Afghanistan that was already visible as our book went to press. In wider strategic terms, the United States has publicly committed to orientating further east towards the Asian-Pacific, raising the prospect of a power vacuum temporarily looming in Central Asia as American forces draw down from Afghanistan, and as her European allies hasten their own departure from the scene with as much seamliness as they can muster. Few of these trends bode well for the future stability of Afghanistan, whatever the formal texts of recently-signed American military agreements with that state, to come into effect in the wake of their military withdrawal, might seem to imply. In fact, the recently signed U.S.-Afghan accord does not commit the United States to any major troop presence or spending in Afghanistan after 2014, and leaves funding for Afghan security support within the control of the American Congress.

The need to compress great detail into few pages in our book also inevitably led to parallels being drawn that may seem to some as inappropriate, such as the description of the Iron Amir Abdur Rahman as 'totalitarian'. If totalitarianism is unquestionably a twentieth-century concept, and a deeply flawed one at that, it nonetheless goes some way to describing the types of highly personalized, centralized forms of rule, combining modernization and repression, which was already emerging in the late nineteenth century. Authoritarian modernization was in fact a rather commonplace phenomenon in much of Europe and Asia during the twentieth century, from Reza Shah's Iran to Stalinist Russia or Maoist China; the unique feature of Afghanistan, as Thomas Barfield has so eloquently documented, is that for cultural and geographical reasons it proved so powerfully resistant to just such modernization efforts, whether by Abdur Rahman in the nineteenth century, or Afghanistan's own indigenous communists after 1978.<sup>1</sup> Authoritarian modernization,

---

<sup>1</sup> Thoams Barfield, *Afghanistan. A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press: 2010.

however. at least had a record of some success in other countries. The alternative now being imposed by the Western aid community on Afghanistan is ,by contrast, a radically decentralized, privatized form of modernization, one which has, in fact, almost no concrete record of success anywhere, under any circumstances. The reason for the imposition of such a peculiar paradigm, as the economist Ha-Joon Chang has documented, stems from the fact that the West has an exceptionally poor understanding, verging on strategic amnesia, of the real circumstances behind its own earlier rise to economic dominance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The rise of economically-powerfully communities in the West had as much to do with high tariffs, customs barriers, and ruthless protectionism regarding 'infant industries' as it had with the magic worked by Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', yet it is precisely the denial of such policies to countries like Afghanistan today which makes the Western community such 'bad samaritans' (to use Chang's phrase). If COIN therefore seems to be back in fashion, and to have gained a level of popularity and intellectual credibility which it has not enjoyed since the 1960s, the missing and arguably far more important factor in regard to the fate of Afghanistan and other countries of the global south is that other once-fashionable 1960s intellectual trope: the curse of underdevelopment.

---

**Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---

---

<sup>2</sup> Ha-Joon Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder. Development Strategy in Historical Perspective*. London: Anthem Press, 2003.