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Afghanistan: The Logic of Failing, Fast and Slow

George Shatzer

Review of

The Forty-year War in Afghanistan: A Chronicle Foretold

By Tariq Ali

The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan

By Elliot Ackerman

Keywords: Afghanistan, NATO, policy, strategy, logic

Why did the US-led war and reconstruction campaign in Afghanistan fail in 2021? After nearly 20 years of effort, over \$2 trillion in direct costs, and over 73,000 US and allied deaths (including NATO and Afghan security forces as well as contractors), for the uninitiated it must have seemed impossible that Afghanistan would once again fall under Taliban rule. For those familiar with the war, and with Afghanistan, the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and its security forces in August 2021 was indeed shocking but certainly no surprise.

To cite just one well-known and long-running example, attrition (in all forms) in the Afghan National Army typically ran at 24 percent annually. The issue of force retention alone is complicated and multifaceted. Factors related to pay, training, leadership, operational tempo, corruption, culture, organizational systems, US and allied advise-and-assist policies and practices, and many others, all conspired to create a hollow and brittle Afghan Army unable and unwilling to fight for its country and itself. Force retention among Afghan security forces was arguably a symptom of the many complex issues that bedeviled the campaign in Afghanistan.

Coherency. The United States' strategic aims in Afghanistan were ill-defined, disparate, and haphazardly implemented depending on the year, the presidential administration, the province, or the headquarters in charge. Was the central strategy focused on counterinsurgency? Combat? Reconstruction? Advise and assist? Counterterrorism? Counterdrug? Institution building? Democratization? Yes, or, more accurately, it depended. This issue was compounded by the array of allies, partners, and other actors (for example, nongovernmental organizations) who brought their own agendas and approaches to operating in Afghanistan.

Corruption. How much of the trillions of dollars spent on Afghanistan was siphoned off to line pockets or ended up supporting the insurgency? The answer is likely lost to history. As others have said, the system in Afghanistan is not corrupt; corruption is the system in Afghanistan. There seemed to be little practical consideration of the country's inability to absorb the sudden deluge of assistance money and programs.

Pakistan. We know Pakistan created, supported, and then harbored the Taliban (to say nothing of Osama bin Laden and other malign actors) for the duration of the war. Some allege Pakistan also evacuated large numbers of Taliban senior leaders and fighters from Afghanistan even before the start of and following US military operations in October 2001. Those escorted out of Afghanistan were likely the human capital needed to create and sustain the insurgency that followed.

Factionalism. The deadly rivalries of Afghan society are legendary. Some have suggested that a Pashtun civil war has been the primary conflict driver in Afghanistan for at least the last 40 years. The pseudo-country is home to at least 14 major ethnicities with many long-running and ongoing conflicts between them. A resort to warlordism has cemented a toxic mix of tribalism and violence, resulting in a badly fractured society.

Nationalism. Considering the previous point, as well as the United States' own history, it seems foolish that the United States and its EU and NATO partners would seek to create a strong Afghan central government and national army. Mortimer Durand and nineteenth-century Britain get most of the blame for creating this problem, but the United States did not have to double down on it.

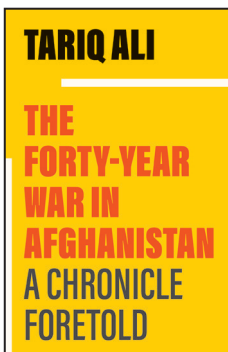
Iraq. Starting a simultaneous war in Mesopotamia is another US choice that many view as senseless. While operations in Iraq certainly consumed vast quantities of critical resources and attention that could have gone to Afghanistan, it is not clear that the United States would have chosen to commit any more to Afghanistan than what it did.

Rigidity. It has been widely reported that Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar was willing to surrender and accept a peace deal with the United States and the new Hamid Karzai government in Kabul both in late 2001 following the US invasion and again in 2003. The United States allegedly rejected both deals because it would not permit any role for the Taliban in the new government.

Narcotics. Afghanistan produces more opium poppy than any other country and struggles with domestic addiction. The illicit drug economy in Afghanistan tears away at the country in myriad ways, critically undermining security and reconstruction efforts—however, poppy cultivation and the drug trade are also vital

sources of revenue for many Afghans and the Taliban. US-led counter-narcotics efforts arguably failed to deliver any lasting, positive impacts.

Brutality. The Afghan people have experienced sustained conflict since at least the early 1970s with the start of the communist movement there and the eventual Soviet invasion in 1979. By the time of the US invasion in 2001, civil strife and conflict had already gripped Afghanistan for 30 years. Many assert that indiscriminate US combat operations (especially air strikes) and US support to violent militia groups caused thousands of civilian deaths nationwide and drove a population already desperate for security to support the Taliban.



New York: Verso Books
2021
272 pages
\$19.95

Tariq Ali, a Pakistani-British political activist and author, discusses these and other issues in his book, *The Forty-year War in Afghanistan: A Chronicle Foretold*. The book, published quickly following the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, is a compilation of Ali's writings about Afghanistan since 1980 and the very early days of the Soviet invasion. The writings, mostly a collection of book chapter and article excerpts, seek to establish the point that his predications about the security situation in Afghanistan have mostly been correct over the decades. His commentaries deliver stinging criticisms of Pakistan, Soviet Russia, and US, EU, and NATO actions that he alleges have

fundamentally been designed to preserve these actors' interests while victimizing Afghanistan. His assessment suffers for ignoring the wholesale brutality that the Soviets visited on Afghans during their war, while he focuses intense scrutiny on US combat operations that caused civilian deaths and casualties. Setting aside this bias, readers will find the book is an uncomfortable read, as it recounts the many recurring failings and problems throughout four decades of futility. Considering these issues, the real surprise is that the United States and NATO were willing and able to sustain operations in Afghanistan as long as they did.

Ali recounts the long-forgotten and failed effort in 1993 by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan to broker a peace deal among the warring Afghan factions fighting over the post-Soviet wreckage in Afghanistan. The proposed deal included provisions for an Afghan national army, elections, and a new constitution. Despite signing the deal in the Holy City of Mecca and being warned of Allah's wrath over breaking a promise made there, the Afghan warlords resumed fighting promptly upon their return to Afghanistan (54). Noting that foreign interference and sectarianism contributed to the quick end

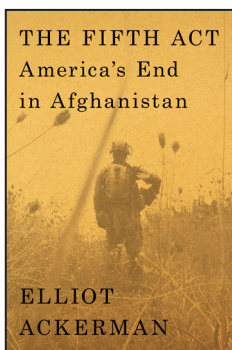
of the peace deal, Ali primarily blames greed and a desire to control the lucrative illicit drug economy as the key drivers of renewed conflict. He contends that the promise of Western money in 2001 is what briefly compelled these factions to promise solidarity once again. Writing in 2002, in a chapter aptly titled “The Dam Will Burst Sooner or Later,” he notes wryly, “Once the Marines depart, with or without the head of Bin Laden, the Alliance will discover there is no money for anything these days except waging war” (56). Of course, the United States and NATO knew the basic history of Afghanistan’s wars. Indeed, this knowledge helped drive the nation-building instinct and a desire to bring the Afghan people some peace finally. Neither the United States nor NATO, however, seemed truly to understand the degree to which warlord greed and bloodlust had displaced any prospect for renewed leadership and peace, the way calcareous material replaces organic matter and petrifies into a fossil.

This lack of real understanding is apparent in the book’s true gem: a reprinted series of letters from 2003 between the author and Mike O’Brien, the then UK minister for trade, investment, and foreign affairs. In the letters, Ali offers a harsh assessment of failed US and NATO objectives in the efforts to defeat the Taliban, destroy al-Qaeda, and rebuild Afghan society and the country. O’Brien accuses Ali of cynicism and just being plain wrong, asserting that programs are taking hold and positive progress is being made. Ali counters that the minister sounds like a Soviet propagandist ignorant of how bad things really are. The minister sums up their exchange by writing, “I still believe government driven by idealism can do good things, you don’t” (65).

This tug-of-war between perceptions of harsh reality and aspirations for lofty goals hamstrung the campaign in Afghanistan, probably for its duration. The realists never fully committed to the effort and kept plugging away out of a sense of duty. The idealists downplayed problems and failed to acknowledge the severity of the fundamental issues. The result was that true problems were never adequately or consistently addressed. During my tour in Afghanistan from 2014 to 2015, the Taliban, at various times, briefly seized key provincial government or Afghan military facilities. Normally, in just a few days’ time or less, Afghan forces (with substantial US support) would reclaim possession of the facilities. Within the NATO headquarters where I served, both the realists and the idealists saw the Taliban incursions as no real cause for concern or need to change how we were operating to improve conditions. The realists would chalk up these episodes to “business as usual,” while the idealists would dismiss the incidents as anomalies readily corrected by the Afghans. Neither group seemed mindful of the much larger point that the security dynamics were fundamentally broken—that a few Taliban fighters could quickly scatter Afghan forces that were unwilling to fight for themselves, let alone the people living in that area. Yet, more

than a decade in, we continued to assess that the Afghan government and security forces were making progress.

Ali's book also falls short when it comes to recommendations. Beyond the expected judgments that the US and NATO presence only increased popular support for the Taliban, that US and EU financial assistance supercharged already rampant corruption, and that the solution had to be political and not military, he offers only that true stability in Afghanistan would have to come from below and slowly (that is, not imposed by a foreign army operating on a timetable). He does briefly contend that a Marshall Plan-style assistance and reconstruction program implemented after the Soviet withdrawal might have turned the country around and prevented the situation today, but this is highly speculative (77).



New York: Penguin Press
2022
288 pages
\$22.00

In *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan*, Elliot Ackerman leads the reader through an emotional gauntlet winding between his own past experiences in Afghanistan and his recent efforts to arrange the evacuation of Afghan allies from the country once again under Taliban control. Like Ali's book, *The Fifth Act* was published soon after the collapse of the Afghan government and offers a decades-long retrospective on American failures in Afghanistan. Ackerman, well-known for his novels and other memoirs, was a Marine special operator and later a CIA operative in multiple tours in Afghanistan. He offers firsthand tactical observations but draws insightful strategic, and even epochal, conclusions.

His most striking judgment, alluded to in the double meaning of the book's title, is that the collapse in Afghanistan is a harbinger of the potential failure of the United States itself. Ackerman cites the unprecedented confluence of several factors posing a grave threat to the integrity of the nation: an all-volunteer military force consistently shrinking in size, the increasing development of a military caste taking up the burden to fill this force's ranks, use of debt financing to fund perpetual wars, the resulting distancing of the American population from service in the military or being affected by these wars, dysfunction in the US government, and increasing partisanship among the electorate. He astutely notes that these factors speak to a growing political and societal incoherence in the country—a sort of nihilism (on display at the January 6 US Capitol attack) that is “ubiquitous in war” (189). In short, two decades of war, and detachment from it, in Afghanistan (and Iraq) have infected American society. Perhaps most unsettling is his conclusion that the American people now “lack the resolve to look in the mirror and ask ourselves how we got here and whether we're willing to change” (184).

With respect to the failed war in Afghanistan, Ackerman covers nearly every issue mentioned earlier and many of the same points Ali discusses. But he centers squarely on the duality of blunders first perpetrated in Iraq and repeated in Afghanistan: the commitment of troops to a war without a clear aim and then the withdrawal of troops to end the war for domestic political reasons, not the reality of the situation in the war zone. He heaps the most blame on President Barack Obama for simultaneously announcing the troop surge in Afghanistan with its end date. But he also takes Presidents Donald J. Trump and Joseph R. Biden to task for essentially wanting to end the war at any cost, despite the security situation having been a stalemate for many years in which the Taliban had no real hope for winning so long as the United States and NATO continued to back the Afghan government and security forces. Ackerman implies that a solution would have been to commit to a very long-term US military presence to prop up Afghanistan and hold the Taliban at bay. Alternatively, he argues that invading Afghanistan and Iraq were both unnecessary wars of choice. He suggests the United States should have instead narrowed the scope of its aims in Afghanistan to counterterrorism and conducted a much more focused campaign based on that. He does little to support the idea that either approach would have been more successful in the long run. To his credit, Ackerman acknowledges that the “ultimate disaster that unfolds in Afghanistan is the accumulation of hundreds of bad decisions over two decades” (42).

Ackerman makes another rare point about the US campaign. He asserts—and I agree—that the effort lacked true commitment and hence any sort of permanence. As he puts it, “At any given point in our twenty-year Afghan odyssey, we were always—in our minds, at least—only a year or two from a drawdown followed by an eventual withdrawal” (38). This pattern was certainly the dynamic at play in mid-2014 when I arrived at NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul. Within the plans section of ISAF, where I would serve the next year, the outgoing planners had begun the preparations for the next round of US and NATO force drawdown. During my tour, ISAF would stand down its combat-focused Joint command headquarters in NATO’s transition to an advise-and-assist-only mission. To reflect this change in mission, NATO would rename ISAF to “Resolute Support” (a horrible irony that bothers me to this day). Our central focus in the plans section would remain gauging US and NATO intent for the next round of drawdowns and attempting to plan for that. We routinely fielded queries from US Central Command, the Pentagon, higher NATO headquarters, and even the US National Security Council about how we could reduce boots on the ground and whether the Afghans

were ready to take on additional responsibilities. Foreshadowing the events of August 2021, there was keen interest in closing Bagram Air Base even in 2014.

Ackerman illustrates this collective short-timer mindset with an anecdote about the US Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force headquarters in Afghanistan still being built with plywood after nearly a decade in the country—a point he says Afghans noticed with the observation that “wars . . . are not won with plywood” (38). For me, this transient approach to operating in Afghanistan was evident in the way both the United States and NATO staffed their headquarters. The vast majority of personnel assigned were on six-month tours. A small minority of us were on one-year tours. A select few would serve beyond a year (such as the commander, other general officers, and a few civilians and military who volunteered for multiple tours). In my 12 months, I saw the ISAF/Resolute Support headquarters staff effectively turn over three times. At the beginning of my tour, the new crop of personnel was abuzz, constantly meeting and trying to grasp the situation, batting around all sorts of “new” ideas, and bemoaning how the last crew had not accomplished much. This pattern repeated six months later at my mid-tour point. Yet another six months later, at the end of my tour, the same dynamic happened again as I heard much the same set of “new” ideas (for a third time) offered by the personnel who had just arrived in country. This tour-length system, meant to preserve morale and spread deployment time across the force, simply does not work. It also partly reflects, I think, a lesson overlearned from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. The tenor of discussion within the Army immediately after 9/11 was one of caution and not overcommitting to Afghanistan because it was a backward country beyond fixing—a realist view that hampered effectiveness and clashed with the idealist aims that exerted growing influence over the campaign.

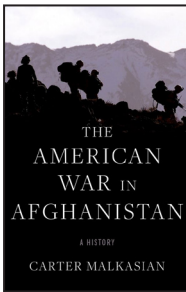
The title of this article is a play on the titles of two other books very relevant to the lost war in Afghanistan, though neither treats the topic directly. The first is *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situations* (Basic Books, 1997) by Dietrich Dörner. Better known is Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). Both books are about examining our thinking and the actions that our thinking leads us to, particularly when dealing with difficult problems. Dörner's central point is that failure is not just accidental but that there is also a real (though faulty) logic to our mistakes. Kahneman asserts that human thought is basically of two types—instinctive and deliberative—and that humans are overly confident in their judgment. Read together, Ali, Ackerman, Dörner,

and Kahneman provide a vivid and powerful picture of why the United States failed in Afghanistan and why it might well do so again in the next war.

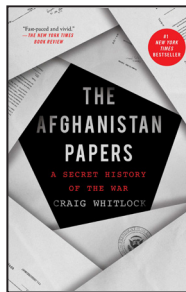
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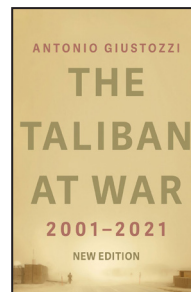
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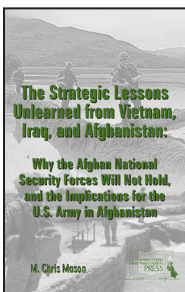
New York: Oxford University Press
2021
576 pages
\$34.95



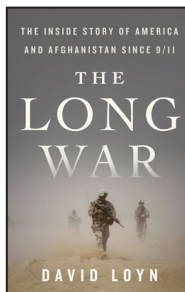
New York: Simon & Schuster
2022
384 pages
\$18.99



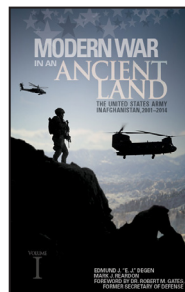
New York: Oxford University Press
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\$24.99



Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press
2015
224 pages



New York: St. Martin's Press
2021
464 pages
\$29.99



Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History
2021
965 pages

