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# Taliban: the Unknown Enemy by James Ferguson

Johnson, Thomas H.

Wiley Online

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Thomas H. Johnson, Taliban: the Unknown Enemy by James Ferguson, Historian,  
v.74, Issue 4, Winter 2012, pp. 815-816.

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“people without history.” The eighty pages of endnotes and thirty-five-page bibliography are gold mines of references to ancient literary sources and modern scholarship, and there are only a few (mostly German) omissions. Dossey advances our understanding of the agricultural society of Christian North Africa and has made a major contribution to the study of this important facet of the later Roman Empire and the Vandals.

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Jesper Carlsen

*Taliban: The Unknown Enemy.* By James Fergusson. (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010. Pp. 416. \$27.95.)

As the war in Afghanistan enters its eleventh year, the most optimistic description of the conflict is probably calling it a stalemate, which actually represents a defeat for the counterinsurgent forces (i.e., the United States and NATO). A more realistic description of the war in Afghanistan is that it has become a \$440 billion quagmire. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the most recent National Intelligence Estimate on the war produced by the United States intelligence community, which often represents the least negative interpretation and the one on which all participating agencies can agree, paints a “gloomy picture” and suggests the war has become a “grim situation.”

James Fergusson, a British journalist who has covered Afghanistan, suggests in his book *Taliban: The Unknown Enemy* that the war has become a mess primarily because the West has a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the Taliban. Although the West still looks at the Taliban as a bunch of black-turbaned, bearded, draconian fanatics toting Kalashnikovs and the Qur’an, according to Fergusson the Taliban are not really that bad, just misunderstood. The Taliban, according to Fergusson, basically represent a Pashtun “tribal” movement that reflects dominant ideas that are firmly rooted in Afghanistan’s cultural, religious, and historical experience. He writes that the Taliban’s “conservatism [differs] from the rest of the country not in kind, but in degree” (89). But the most central thesis that Fergusson presents is that the key to peace in Afghanistan must be negotiations (peace talks, reconciliation, reintegration) with the Taliban to affect a negotiated (political) settlement that incorporates the Taliban into the Afghan government.

The Taliban “insurgency” is actually a *jihad* or at least an *insurgency wrapped in the narrative of jihad*. *Jihads* have been a mainstay of Afghanistan’s history and represent a religious obligation that Afghans take extremely

seriously. Importantly, no *jihad* in the history of mankind has *ever* ended with a negotiated settlement. There is not going to be anything resembling meaningful negotiations until all foreign soldiers have left Afghanistan. Mullah Omar, the Amir ul' Momineen (Leader of the Faithful), has made that perfectly clear, which Fergusson acknowledges (367). Mullah Omar has stated unequivocally that anyone engaging in talks with the infidel government in Kabul will be liquidated. The 2010 purge of so-called "moderates" by the Quetta Shura and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Department (ISI) makes enforcement of this iron-clad—as Stalin's purge did in the 1930s. The Taliban leadership that matter—the Quetta Shura—are not going to negotiate with the orders of Allah any more than a Catholic priest can negotiate getting married with the pope. Meaningful peace talks with the *real* leaders of the Taliban are not going to happen. And the corollary myth that significant numbers of the enemy are going to switch from a perceived winning side to a perceived losing side via "reconciliation"—so they can either be shot now or hung from lampposts in a few years—is too silly to take seriously. Hence, though there is much to admire about Fergusson's book, its major fault is his misinterpretation of what the real and important Taliban leadership represent—the very charge that he makes against Western politicians and diplomats.

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*Imagining the Middle East: The Building of an American Foreign Policy, 1918–1967.*  
By Matthew F. Jacobs. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.  
Pp. xiii, 318. \$39.95.)

In the aftermath of September 11, the quest to understand the Middle East has become an American "national obsession," in which experts and pundits alike are trying to make sense of a region and its people, whose history, character, and religion have long been viewed as the mysterious other. Matthew F. Jacobs argues that the discursive "contours" of our debate today evolved between the end of World War I and the late 1960s, when an "informal transnational network of professional specialists" from academia, the business world, government, and the media tried to "imagine" and interpret the complexities of the Middle East to American audiences (239, 6). Drawing heavily on the language of postmodernism, Jacobs attempts to "understand the intellectual environment within which debates about the nature and direction of U.S.-Middle East relations took place" (10).