

Book Reviews

Two Recent Takes on Where We Are in Afghanistan, and How We Got There

A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

By Dov S. Zakheim
Brookings Institution Press, 2011
320 pp., \$32.95
ISBN: 978-0-8157-2122-2

Understanding War in Afghanistan

By Joseph J. Collins
NDU Press, 2011
158 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-78039-924-9

A REVIEW ESSAY
BY JAMES KUNDER

For serious students of Afghanistan specifically, and stabilization operations more generally, two recent books are worth a look. Both Joseph J. Collins's *Understanding War in Afghanistan* and Dov S. Zakheim's *A Vulcan's Tale: How the Bush Administration Mismanaged the Reconstruction of Afghanistan* focus on U.S. policy toward that tortured South Asian country.

Dr. Collins's book, which draws on his broader writing on the topic, is, in his own words, "an intellectual primer on war in Afghanistan." And it strikes its target admirably. As the word *primer* suggests, the work is spare, focusing on the essential facts about Afghanistan and the nature and history of warfare there. Simply put, the book is a gem, summarizing in its short 158 pages an enormous treasure trove of information on everything from the topography of the land to the tribal code of the Pashtun ethnic group to Western policy options to conclude the Afghan war.

Here the reader finds important data on the ethnic makeup of Afghanistan, historical roots of many current rivalries, and insights into topics that otherwise might be invisible to the soldier or reconstruction worker encountering Afghanistan for the first time. An example of the latter is Dr. Collins's short but useful foray into the trilateral dynamics among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, an invisible but potent interplay that affects the actions of all three important nations.

Scattered throughout *Understanding War in Afghanistan* are "mini" analytical syntheses that, without this book, would be distilled only after extensive research by readers. In the chapter on "Land, People, and Culture," for example,

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Dr. Collins notes that Afghanistan history and current politics result from a complex interplay of four factors: the rugged, landlocked topography; the low level of factor endowments that “makes poverty a natural condition”; local and tribal power structures; and the nation’s location among more powerful neighbors contending over its fate. My personal favorite, since I grappled with this set of issues while working at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is the book’s treatment of the counterpoint between “a drastic need for modernization,” on the one hand, and the “entrenched interests” and “very conservative populace in the countryside that jealously guards its autonomy,” on the other. Without an understanding of this dynamic, and the related “center versus periphery” issues that Dr. Collins also covers, it can be extraordinarily difficult to reconcile the seemingly conflicted attitudes of many Afghans toward programs to improve their lives.

Even when Dr. Collins moves beyond the facts of geography and culture, he retains an admirable economy of words and objectivity. His summation of four broad policy options (essentially large-scale counterinsurgency [COIN], counterterrorism, capacity-building, or “reconciliation”) makes the complex political/security situation digestible for newcomers, without insulting more sophisticated readers.

This is the book I wish I had when USAID deployed me to Kabul to reopen its office in January 2002. It is the book that military personnel and civilians deploying to Afghanistan now, even if for the second or third time, should take the time to read. I do not know if anyone at the Pentagon, State Department, or USAID is contemplating buying this important book in quantity for those deploying to Afghanistan, but—while I am not Dr. Collins’s agent—all of those institutions should be doing just that.

The work by Dr. Zakheim, former Department of Defense Comptroller and Chief Financial Officer during the early days of the Bush administration, goes in a different direction. It, too, concludes with a number of policy recommendations related to COIN and effective U.S. Government policy more generally, and it too covers a brief history of Afghanistan policy during the Bush years. But as the word *tale* in the title suggests, this work is a more sequential, personal recounting of the events surrounding the formulation of U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and, especially, how the decision to go to war in Iraq affected that policy.

The author’s self-identification as a “Vulcan” (from the Roman god of fire and war, and implying one who forges products from hot metal) refers to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s characterization of eight foreign policy experts, including Dr. Zakheim, who were early and influential advisors to then-candidate George W. Bush in 1999–2000 in a manner chronicled in James Mann’s 2004 book, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush’s War Cabinet*. As befits someone who was “present at the creation,” Dr. Zakheim’s recollections are full of first-person experiences with the primary architects of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. So for those ready and eager for another insider account of politics, bureaucratic and personal, during this intense period of our nation’s history, then the former Under Secretary of Defense’s work is a must-read.

The straightforward premise of the book—which, while it would have been stunning if Dr. Zakheim had articulated it during early Iraq policy deliberations, now seems a bit pedestrian—is that the decision to invade Iraq, and the subsequent unanticipated insurgency there, distracted senior Bush administration policy-makers from Afghanistan. This distractedness

contributed, the author convincingly argues, to an underresourcing of the Afghan conflict at a time when modest additional assets might have been decisive. As a USAID participant in many of the National Security Council (NSC) and other interagency deliberations at the time, I find myself concurring wholeheartedly with Dr. Zakheim's hypothesis and conclusion. The policy and operational burdens of managing the Iraq conflict, especially as the insurgency heated up, nudged the Afghanistan conflict into the background, not as a matter of policy but as a matter of practicality. This downgrading of the Afghan effort was magnified by the reality that virtually the same cast of senior U.S. Government officials from Defense, State, Treasury, and other key departments were attending recurring, high intensity NSC sessions on both conflicts.

Structurally, *A Vulcan's Tale* is a bit of a ramble, equal parts personal reflection, a primer of its own on Federal budget procedures, a travelogue on Dr. Zakheim's globe-trotting efforts to dun donors from the Gulf to East Asia, and collection of policy recommendations on improving U.S. Government decisionmaking. The ramble can sometimes be distracting. In the middle of the book, a chapter titled "Engaging Syria" pops up, recounting the author's diligent efforts to ensure Damascus would repatriate frozen Iraqi financial assets. Although interesting enough in its own right as an example of how diplomacy is conducted between contending countries, five pages into the chapter, I found myself asking what this Syrian foray had to do with the book's central premise about a distracted U.S. Government ignoring Afghanistan.

Beyond the interplay between Iraq and Afghanistan, Dr. Zakheim's work has a second unifying theme: senior policymakers within the U.S. Government often undervalue operational

and institutional concerns when deciding among courses of action. Stating his diagnosis in his own words, while recalling the obstacles to progress in Afghanistan, he writes, "No one in a position high enough to matter appreciated the institutional design function of leadership. So absorbed were policymakers with the 'why' and 'what' questions of policy direction, no one bothered with the 'how' questions of policy implementation." The author also summarizes this argument more pungently by reporting that "details are not for heroes and visionaries." This is an important and complex hypothesis about how the U.S. Government works. Since the author served as the Chief Financial Officer at the Defense Department (as well as the department's coordinator for Afghan reconstruction), he was well placed to support his thesis with personal experience. He had, during his tenure, direct access to the most senior policymakers in Defense, the White House, and elsewhere, while his day-to-day responsibilities were squarely in the realm of the arguably undervalued "details" of implementation.

As he argues his thesis, the battles to mobilize sufficient financial resources for both Afghanistan and Iraq figure prominently in Dr. Zakheim's recounting of events. This is the book for those who will relish the details of congressional appropriations confrontations, struggle to induce allies to make good on their financial pledges, and iniquities of senior Office of Management and Budget (OMB) officials (named by name).

Dr. Zakheim wraps up his final chapter with a series of recommendations on how the U.S. Government can better structure itself both "to make policy and to implement it." Several of these observations are well worn, as when he calls for "reining in" a "micromanaging" OMB. Others, including proposals for an enhanced

role for the Treasury Department, a reconfiguration of the deputy secretary slot at Defense, and a bit of restructuring at the NSC, merit consideration. I must admit, however, to being a bit disconcerted when the author's list of recommendations, despite ample critiques throughout the book of State Department and USAID inadequacies, failed to address two of the major institutional innovations now under way: the rebuilding of technical staff capability at USAID and the creation of a State Department Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations.

These quibbles aside, for all those who cannot put down the latest insider revelation on the inner workings of the Bush administration, and all those who relish a personal recounting from an author who was in a position to know, I highly recommend *A Vulcan's Tale*. Also, for those concerned about how U.S. Government policy formulation, institutional capacity, and operational details interact, especially as to the linkage between resource mobilization and effects on the ground, this book is a useful addition to the reading list. **PRISM**