

Book Review

In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan

By Seth Jones

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On the western edge of Peshawar, Pakistan, a sign at a military checkpoint prohibits the movement of foreigners into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) where the Pakistani government essentially claims no control. On the edge of the FATA, women who once showed their faces now walk fully covered, and images of women on billboards are obliterated with paint—two eerie reminders of Taliban reemergence.

The sanctuary afforded to the Taliban and al Qaeda in the FATA is something that RAND analyst and Georgetown University adjunct professor Seth Jones argues the United States must eliminate to have any chance of winning the war in Afghanistan. He contends that history—and not just the commonly misunderstood Soviet experience—provides some valuable lessons on Afghanistan. Past empires from Macedonia, to Great Britain, to the Soviet Union have entered Afghanistan, only to find themselves caught up in local resistance. To understand the motivation of key actors and

assess what factors contributed to the current insurgency, Jones analyzed recently declassified material from the Soviet Politburo and the Central Intelligence Agency and interviewed numerous prominent Afghan, Pakistani, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, nongovernmental organization, and U.S. officials.

Jones offers insight into the rise of the Taliban and al Qaeda's ideological origins through an examination of the impressions Islamic fundamentalists Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam had on al Qaeda leaders as they struggled over issues such as Takfir and the targeting of the near versus far enemy. Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden generated a shift in radical Islamic thought acknowledging the far enemy (that is, the United States) was the true target, rather than apostate regimes such as Egypt that were viewed as that enemy's puppets. This point resonated among the population as al Qaeda sought sanctuary among remote Afghan tribes and civilian casualties mounted in the face of U.S. pursuit of al Qaeda and the Taliban. Slowly, villagers accepted radical thought labeling the United States as the enemy while taking up arms themselves to become what David Kilcullen calls "accidental guerrillas." Jones' analysis of Afghan history and radical Islamic thought progression significantly contributes to the understanding of the complexities involved in Afghanistan. Had policymakers better understood the dynamics of the Afghan situation, recognition of the budding insurgency may have focused efforts toward counterinsurgency sooner rather than just terrorist capture/kill missions.

At the war's onset, U.S. officials kept the lessons of the Soviet experience in mind. The

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Soviets deployed a large force, which U.S. officials believed created a quagmire that resulted in large-scale popular resistance. However, Jones contends that the U.S. decision to deploy a “light footprint” was misreading the Soviet experience. The lesson was not in the number of forces deployed; it was in *how* the forces were deployed. Much like the Cold War-era U.S. military, the Soviet military of the 1970s and 1980s was trained to fight a conventional battle with a modern enemy along the Fulda Gap. The Soviets used conventional tactics to fight an unconventional enemy. Alexander the Great encountered the same problem in his Afghanistan campaign. His army of mounted cavalry and foot soldiers armed with 20-foot pikes and javelins was barbarously fought by the tribesmen and horse warriors of the region’s steppes and mountains. The results of the Macedonian and Soviet invasions are analogous. The adoption of the light footprint strategy by U.S. officials actually served as an incubator for the looming insurgency.

In summer 2006, the United States learned through over 100 interrogations that Taliban support had little to do with religious ideology; rather, it had to do with poor governance and economics. The Afghan government was unable to extend control beyond Kabul and actually fostered the formation of peripheral power players. Afghanistan’s weak governance was a major component of what Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry phrased “the perfect storm”: the Taliban and al Qaeda had sanctuary in Pakistan, local governance was not taking hold, narcotrafficking and associated criminality were emerging as significant security threats, and the planning and implementation of critical infrastructure projects were lagging. In addition, Afghanistan efforts were severely underfunded. Ambassador Ronald Neumann asked for a much-needed \$600

million for fiscal year 2006 and received only \$43 million. A U.S. Civil Affairs officer told Jones, “We’re like the Pacific theater in World War II; we will get more resources when we defeat Berlin,” alluding to the U.S. focus in Iraq.

Jones concludes there is hope that Afghanistan will eventually stabilize and prosper, but America must completely rethink its involvement in the region. The rise of the insurgency after victory over the Taliban was unfortunate but not inevitable. To avoid the disastrous fate of previous world powers that entered the region, America must take three critical steps: confront corruption, partner with local (not just national) entities, and undermine sanctuary in Pakistan.

First, Jones stresses that corruption needs to be addressed at the local and national levels, with emphasis on drug trafficking, bribery, and the pervasive extortion of police and judges. Anticorruption efforts should follow the pattern of successful cases in Singapore, Liberia, and Botswana, beginning with the immediate firing of corrupt officials, the bolstering of the justice system, new staff professionalization, and the implementation of incentive/performance assessment programs. Jones addresses the second step through the balancing of top-down and bottom-up efforts, both critical for security and the provision of public services. The historical weakness of the Afghan state, the local nature of politics, and a population deeply intolerant of external forces require a strong local government to support national level efforts. Accordingly, bottom-up strategies require supporting and empowering legitimate tribal leaders and providing them with security and aid, since they are bound to be targets of insurgents. The predominantly top-down approach employed thus far is inappropriate for a weak central government in a tribal society.

Finally, enforcement of the denial of Pakistani must be through measures designed to close the structural gap that exists in many of Pakistan's border regions—specifically the FATA, where weak government institutions are coupled with incredibly poor social and economic conditions. It is imperative that the United States persuade Pakistani officials to conduct a sustained campaign against militants who threaten the local and international community. The United States can identify pressure points that raise the cost of stalling for the Pakistani government—such as the \$1 billion annual military and economic aid package provided to Pakistan. In addition, Jones argues that the United States needs to make a concerted effort in engaging both Pakistan and India, which have competing interests in Afghanistan.

The goal of Jones' proposed strategy in Afghanistan is to improve the competence and legitimacy of national and local Afghan institutions to provide security and services to the local population. Comparable books, such as Ahmed Rashid's *Descent into Chaos* (Viking, 2008), provide similar perspective but stop short of clearly identifying the way ahead. Jones' policy recommendations and implications are applicable to the policymaker as well as the soldier. Given the complexities and dynamics of Afghanistan, decisionmakers would be hard pressed to find a more comprehensive study. [PRISM](#)