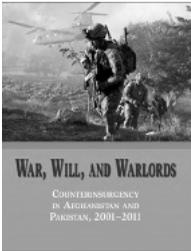


THE UNITED STATES IN CENTRAL ASIA



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War, Will, and Warlords: Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2011

By Robert M. Cassidy

Reviewed by John A. Nagl, Minerva Research Professor at the US Naval Academy and author of *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*

Although the war in Afghanistan has lasted appreciably longer than America's war in Iraq, the shorter conflict has generated both more and better literature and analysis. There are a stack of books on Iraq that will bear the test of time, from George Packer's *The Assassins' Gate* and Tom Ricks's *Fiasco* to Michael Gordon and Mick Trainor's comprehensive trilogy on the war. The longer Afghan campaign can claim no such body of work is likely to last. Carter Malkasian's *War Comes to Garmser* is a sparkling depiction of the conflict in a province, but there is as yet no overview of the war as a whole that will endure.

Army Colonel Bob Cassidy has attempted to fill the gap with *War, Will, and Warlords: Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2011*, published by the Marine Corps University Press and freely available on the internet. Bob is well placed to do so, having written two previous books on counterinsurgency and spending a year working at the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command, which coordinates the campaign at the operational level of war. The book meets some of the need for a comprehensive analysis of the Afghan conflict, but is hobbled by two shortcomings—one unavoidable, one not—that leave the field at least partially open for a great campaign history.

The unavoidable shortcoming of *War, Will, and Warlords* comes in its subtitle; the book only carries the reader through 2011, concentrating most heavily on fighting since the Obama administration prioritized Afghanistan over Iraq in 2009. While Cassidy is correct in noting that before late 2009, “the war in Afghanistan lacked both a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign plan and an operational-level headquarters to orchestrate the campaign,” the Afghan campaign has become more interesting, not less, since he completed his analysis in 2011, and the trend is likely to continue. Although the Afghan endgame cannot yet be written, the president decided to draw down the American troop commitment and turn over responsibility for the continuing counterinsurgency campaign to the Afghan security forces by the end of 2014. This is high adventure; while the Anbar Awakening and the Surge broke the back of the insurgency in Iraq before the American drawdown there, the Pashtun insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan is likely to remain a significant threat to Afghan governance when the American combat role ends. Cassidy deserves credit for attempting to capture the history of the war up until 2011, but the climactic acts of this play have not yet happened.

The avoidable shortcoming is Dr. Cassidy's writing style. Bob is an old friend and former partner in crime at the US Military Academy, where we taught international relations together at the Department of Social Sciences; from that time through today, Bob has never been able to

resist inserting the most complicated possible word in his writing. Thus, on the second page of his Preface, Bob explains that his book “posits that explanations for the catalysts of these two insurgencies relate to a paucity of analysis and resources that exacerbated or created grievances among the local populations, excessive or inappropriate applications of lethal force, and ill-prepared approaches to information operations that failed to integrate information narratives with the use of military force.” This rather convoluted sentence is in fact a road map to the major lenses through which Bob analyzes the counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan: legitimacy; use of force; and information operations, both during the enemy-focused period from 2001 through 2009, labeled “The Pursuit of Evil,” and during the population-security focused “Pursuit of Peace” from 2009 through 2011. The lenses work well and provide significant insight, as does the bifurcation of the campaigns into two phases.

There is much more goodness in the book, and it fully meets its self-described purpose of exploring “the U.S.-led Coalition and the U.S.-supported Pakistani efforts in countering the Taliban/al-Qaeda insurgencies in both of these countries to date.” Bob does a real service by pointing out not just how under-resourced the AfPak campaign was until President Obama’s arrival, but also to what extent the Durand Line fails to demarcate a conflict that America and her allies have to conduct in very different ways on different sides of the Afghan/Pakistan border. Here his eloquence is both appropriate and enjoyable: “If Afghanistan is a challenging conundrum, Pakistan is the puzzle nested within the enigma that relates directly and inexorably to security and stability in Afghanistan.” After asking whether Pakistan is “With Us or Against Us?” in Chapter 3, he concludes that the Pashtun Belt in Pakistan is “Hard and Not Hopeful” in Chapter 5. The more one learns of Pakistan, here and from other sources, the more discouraging—and more correct—this conclusion appears.

Cassidy is on firm ground when he notes that “Very few counterinsurgencies throughout history have met with success when the insurgents have benefited from unimpeded sanctuary and external support.” Given that fact and Pakistan’s long track record of perfidy, it is hard to echo Cassidy’s cautious optimism about “being more sanguine, albeit in a qualified way” about Pakistan’s willingness to stop supporting, much less begin fighting against, the Taliban who pass freely from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas into Afghanistan and back.

The last chapter of *War, Will, and Warlords* is a history of the ISAF Joint Command (IJC) titled “Operational Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan until 2011.” While Bob is somewhat more impressed with the significance of the IJC’s contributions than am I, his first-person and on-the-ground perspective make this chapter—like the book as a whole—a significant contribution to the analysis of America’s longest war, regardless of the fact that it remains too soon for even the most perspicacious interlocutor to conclusively determine the ultimate trajectory of the conflict.