



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

Seth G. Jones

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A definitive account of the American experience in Afghanistan from the rise of the Taliban to the depths of the insurgency.

Longtime Afghanistan expert and RAND analyst Seth G. Jones watched as American optimism evaporated after the Taliban defeat in 2001; by 2005, a new "war of a thousand cuts" had brought Afghanistan to its knees. Harnessing important new historical research on insurgencies and integrating thousands of declassified government documents, Jones shows how the siphoning of resources to Iraq left U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan ineffectual and without support.

Through interviews with prominent figures, including ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and commander Karl Eikenberry, Jones explains how a growing sanctuary for insurgents in Pakistan and a collapsing government in Kabul catalyzed the Taliban resurgence. Examining what has worked thus far—and what hasn't—Jones argues that we must take a radically new approach to the war if the United States is to avoid the disastrous fate that has befallen every world power to enter the region, from Alexander the Great to the Soviet Union.

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

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JDR says

Was the light-footprint approach a wise one? In one of his final reports before leaving Kabul as the European Union's special representative to Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell poignantly remarked in 2008 that the "UN decision to adopt a 'light' footprint deprived the organization of the tools to undertake the kind of reforms that Afghans desired." In addition, he contended that the "US obsession with Iraq diverted energies from Afghanistan, while the decision to limit the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Kabul...limited its effectiveness." The rest of this book argues that while the light footprint may not have been the direct cause of the Afghanistan insurgency, it certainly played an important role.

Seth G. Jones' *In the Graveyard of Empires* popularized the mythical premise that Afghanistan is an inherently unconquerable place due to its problematic history and governmental structure. This is not a detriment to the specific details of the text, which are highly accurate and clear. Instead, it is a critique on the notions that plague the overall work and end up becoming more for an excuse towards the foreign policy of the United States. Because let us face it, as readers, it is incredibly obvious and downright shocking how incompetent the aftermath of the Taliban overthrow seems to have been. The lack of focus and involvement on behalf of the Bush administration, so distracted and fraught with chaos over affairs in Iraq, and many nations of NATO and the UN made the Afghanistan insurgencies, something that could have been completely avoidable and manageable, a problem that continues to be contended with today.

Now, putting aside the details confronted within the text, most of the criticism has to be given to Jones' structure of the book. I have read Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan* and Barfield did such a phenomenal job at describing an entire nation's culture, ethnic groups, and history in the span of only 400 pages. He began with, something in hindsight I now see as necessary, a hundred pages of describing the various cultural practices, ethnic divides, village and city compositions, relationships between rural and urban centers, the political system, etc. I thought that so much of that would be a dry read, but I cannot imagine seeing someone begin *In the Graveyard of Empires* without being slightly confused over the importance of the Pashtun majority and over the historical significance of political leaders such as Zahir Shah, Daoud Khan, or Ahmad Shah Durrani. Most readers would be taken aback if they do not have a previous knowledge of this and seeing as the title of the book suggests the primacy of the material is with the war in Afghanistan, throwing this at them will be disorienting and unattractive.

In addition, an incredibly grating decision besides not properly expanding on all these necessary prerequisites on Afghanistan culture and history, is the choice to not write the book in a strictly linear timeline. For instance, in every chapter, it starts by talking about 2002 or any of the early years and then it skips to 2007 or something and then it switches back for another sidenote before repeating the same in the following chapter. This type of structure is absolutely horrendous, as readers interested will become frustrated in trying to create a mental image on the chronology of Afghanistan and United States involvement. Worst is that Jones did not even divide each chapter by topic, which would have been better; it comes off as incoherent and unorganized.

An Insurgency is a political-military campaign by nonstate actors who seek to overthrow a government or secede from a country through the use of unconventional military strategies.

I would suggest for the interested reader to take a look at Thomas Barfield's *Afghanistan* for a history of the

country that they would like to personally own. *In the Graveyard of Empires* best serves as complimentary reading or something someone checks out from the library.

Bill says

Good insight into the war in Afghanistan and its historical context.

Paul D. Miller says

The best history of post-9/11 Afghanistan and the U.S.-led war there. The afterword is an excellent synopsis of why the war matters and how to finish the job.

Jerome says

A brief, useful, though not essential recap of Afghanistan's military history. He identifies the war's many successes and failures. Mainly, I was looking for some info on the 2001 portion, but there wasn't loads of new info there. It is technical, heavily footnoted, and challenging for the average reader that knows little about the region, or war in general.

Jones also exposes Pakistan's frustrating role in the Afghan wars. A number of political dilemmas create a political situation in which Pakistan receives U.S. aid, calls itself a partner in the war, and simultaneously aids the insurgency. Pakistan's lawless provinces harbor Al Qaeda and serve as the main supply pipeline for the Taliban. Meanwhile, certain branches of Pakistani federal institutions, especially the intelligence service and border guard, aggressively aid insurgents.

He writes about Al Qaeda as a force multiplier, insisting that it is well incorporated into the Taliban and that the Taliban will, should it regain power, return to providing a safe haven for an organization that Jones insists offers a strategic threat to the U.S. It sounds like he is making a case that any acceptance of Taliban control of Afghanistan, partial or whole, would necessarily mean more attacks on the West from that base of operations. The implication is a need for continuing, probably increased Western military presence there.

In critiquing what is wrong in Afghanistan, one of the key problems is corruption. If people feel no trust in their police, judges, military or government, why should they not support someone or some group outside government? Although it was beyond the purview of this book, it does seem that the generic notion of a public loss of confidence in government impartiality, honesty and willingness and ability to deliver services has implications well beyond those in Afghanistan.

It is his take that top-down nation-building in Afghanistan is exactly the wrong approach. It would seem that, so far at least, the evidence bears him out. But if we in the West remain unwilling to invest resources in building up from below, what is left?

Gail Cooke says

While much has surely been written about the war in Afghanistan Seth G. Hughes who serves as an advisor and plans officer for the commanding general of U.S. Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan adds new dimensions to an assessment of our country's longest war since Vietnam.

Based upon interviews with countless military, diplomats, and experts in national security plus information from declassified government documents *IN THE GRAVEYARD OF EMPIRES* delivers a clear, concisely rendered account of our military efforts in Afghanistan. The begins with what first appeared to be a success, and follows with the many crises that ensued including, of course, how Pakistan became "a sanctuary for the Taliban and Al Qaeda." Jones not only offers what might be best described as an accurate reportorial view of these events but also emphasizes where we erred and what we should do in order to bring stability to that area.

William Hughes, a professor of political science at Southern Oregon University provides a succinct, deliberate narration. This is the first time we've heard a reading by Hughes, and we certainly hope it won't be the last.

- Gail Cooke

Milton Soong says

A intro level overview to the mess we have gotten to in Afghanistan. It comes in from a journalist point of view instead that of a historian (imaging a long form writeup in the New York Times and you won't be far off the mark).

The book opens with some historical background on past empires and their travails in Afghanistan (Alexander the Great, British in 19th Century, Soviets in the 20th). It then goes from the initial US invasion in 2001 until about 2009 (therefore it does not cover recent development like the capture of Bin Laden for example).

It is a depressing book to read. The tone of the book is very impartial and matter of fact, but a reader can not help (with hind sight and even some historical foresight), shake their heads on some of the short sighted decisions made and how they eventually fails.

Key Take aways:

1. Afghanistan has a culture since antiquity of local/tribal governance that tends to ignore the central authority. This means a top down approach to pacify the country is hard going to begin with, and does not have any past success scenario to look to.
2. NATO was ineffective due to its fractured command structure and the conflicting interests of its members.
3. Because of 1) above, the central government doesn't have the natural legitimacy and authority it needs. Government soldier/civil servants are often "just a job" and not a calling (like that of the Taliban).

4. Key to control the country is controlling its rural areas, and the government is losing (Government troops can not be counted on to be there when needed, and the Taliban reps are RIGHT THERE).

5. Pakistan is a key partner to the Taliban (this is not a typo), and unless they are taken out of the equation situation will never improve.

6. This is a nation building exercise coupled with a counter insurgency operation. Unless we lower the goal post, the goals can not be met with the limited resources we committed to it.

Given that the conflict is still ongoing with no sign of being settled anytime soon, anyone with an opinion can not help to play arm chair quarterback on what should've been done if we were to go in. So here's mine:

a) light foot print+long duration: Smaller number of troops, be prepared to be there for 10 years. staying in place in major cities like Kabual.

b) Forget about chasing Taliban in the provinces. Limit our operations to hunting down specific Al Qaeda types in the NW Frontier provinces.

c) More effective dealing with Pakistan (not sure about details here, maybe play the India card?)

d) More money channeled into civilian nation building instead of military ops (i.e. cheaper in the long run). Build up Afghan police, civil servant system, justice system, etc.

e) THrough hook and crook gradually improve the corrupt Afghan government (Many US allies of old who were corrupt despots eventually transformed into semi democratic societies, so there is hope).

More Radical:

f) Partition the country into ethnic lines? (The countries border was an artificial construct anyway) Does not solve the fundamental problem but simplifies it by taking the Afghan central government out of the picture.

Greg says

Seth Jones, and the Rand Institute, in The Graveyard Of Empires, have a grim prediction for the United State in Afghanistan, and how little the U.S. has learned from previous British and Russian campaigns in the country, but also some enlightening points like empowering elders. An excellent read!

Jack says

This was a good one but I was hoping for more. The book is titled Graveyard of Empire's but I should have paid closer attention to the second portion of the title more. America's War. I was hoping for a bit more of the background of the Empires which was so prominently displayed in the title. I was hoping more of Alexander's campaigns. The unruly subjects of Great Britain. I also wanted to hear about the Soviet disasters. Discussion of all the aforementioned wishes occurred but only so slightly.

Discussion centered around the takedown of the Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. Later discussion focused on our assumption that the Taliban was finished and how the focus (along with all our military resources) shifted to Iraq. It is surprising to me we would assume the Taliban would not resuscitate itself. How our victory was guaranteed and all we had to do was round up the last of Al Qaeda. We were thinking terrorism...not insurgency. We were thinking anti-terrorism instead of nation building.

Successful insurgencies require a sanctuary. The Viet Cong and NVA had Laos and Cambodia. The Al Qaeda, Taliban, Haqqani Network, and others had Pakistan. Pakistan is now the Taliban heartland. Pakistan, once our ally, nourished the Taliban as a way to destabilize Afghanistan, to keep their neighbor weak. Before the Taliban, we used Pakistan to funnel our weapons into Afghan hands for use against the Soviets. How did we not expect the Taliban to Pakistan?

Since our sights were set on Iraq, NATO came to source troop needs. Yet not enough NATO and US troops were available to successfully fight an insurgency. Conquer, hold, build in that order is how you fight an insurgency. The population are the Center Of Gravity. Only with the people can you win. We are still trying in Iraq and Afghanistan to this day.

Overall a good book, but I was hoping for more discussion on the Empires. Enjoy.

Jon says

Really fascinating book about the various empires throughout history which have tried to conquer Afghanistan, only to be repelled. The basis of this historical lesson is to give context to America's current quagmire. Book is relatively short in relation to the substance. It does not spend much time regarding Alexander the Great 3rd century BC, the British Empire of the 19th Century, and the Soviets failure in the 1980's, the author simply gives you a quick summary. The book's intentions is to spend most of the time relating to America's current situation.

It touches on the fact that we had a golden opportunity in Afghanistan squandered when valuable resources were re-allocated to Iraq in 2003 neglecting painfully crucial rebuilding and winning the hearts of the people of Afghanistan. Another lesson learned in this book was why insurgents exist, what their intentions are and simply put the insurgency in Afghanistan is growing. Talks about the sanctuary of Pakistan for Al - Qaida and what to do there. Another lesson is the failure of multi-national efforts that are left to manage their own affairs without a unified central body to control all efforts. So much wasted efforts because the overall strategy in Afghanistan is uniformly flawed. Too few troops, not enough resources, very little cohesion, too many chiefs, not enough indians and too much meddling from regional interests.

It paints a grim picture but what I really like is that it provides solutions at the end of the book to consider for success. All is not lost yet, but time is of the essence.

Siria says

This is a useful survey of American involvement in Afghanistan since 2001, if one which didn't surprise me with any of its analyses. The main reasons for the insurgency in Afghanistan were the Bush administration largely ignoring it once the Iraq invasion began, the historically low troop levels, and the wariness of various

NATO members to commit forces outside of urban areas like Kabul. The thing which Jones covered that was most interesting to me was his analysis of the wider regional politics and Pakistan's involvement in the insurgency. Obviously, this has become much better known since *In the Graveyard of Empires* was published, with Osama bin Laden's killing making the ISI's involvement self-evident, but the behind-the-scenes stuff was fascinating.

I do wish that Jones had brought a little more of his own personal experiences in Afghanistan to play in this book. He states that he sat down to write it because of his various trips there and because of the unique access that he had to key players, but there were few moments where I really got a sense of that. Most of the book felt like a synthesis that could have been written from anywhere in the US. More moments from Jones' personal perspective would have helped to ground his analysis and give it more immediacy for the reader. As is, there are times when this reads a little too much like a briefing packet.

Ed says

Jones is good on the structure of the Afghan opposition to first the USSR and now the US. This is a useful although not essential addition to the literature. Based on good access to a number of important sources including ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Jones examines what went wrong in Afghanistan and what might have gone right if the effort there hadn't been sidetracked to invade and try to occupy Iraq.

The U.S. mission to the inhospitable mountains and plains of this Central Asian redoubt shows how little we learn from past wars: counterinsurgency is once again the strategic initiative of the day. It has never really worked when applied by the US since true counterinsurgency, like that practiced by the government of Sri Lanka against the Tamil insurgency and civil war, involves concentration camps, selective large scale slaughter and generally brutalizing those who, through ethnic or political ties, support the rebels. It is vicious, bloody and violates the laws of war and is a crime against humanity by its very definition.

Jones has an excellent grasp of the players on both (or rather all) sides of the war in Afghanistan and comes to the inevitable if unlikely to happen conclusion that nothing will be accomplished without the agreement of Pakistan and India.

Andrew B. says

The grim title and the KOD Soviet tank on the cover are misleading cliches to begin with. I imagine that the publisher went with the title/cover so Jones' work might find a place in the political nonfiction genre. But Jones is a Rand scholar, and he writes like one. The work is technical, heavily footnoted, and not exactly a breeze to read. The text is basically a very long Foreign Affairs article and will only be read for professional development.

The tank and the "Graveyard" epithet also misrepresent Jones' analysis of the direction and possible outcomes of the war. Jones doesn't look too much to the Soviet adventure to predict American success or failure. And well he shouldn't. The American war is about as far removed from the Soviet experience as the Soviets were from the British. Instead, Jones asks why an insurgency developed in Afghanistan at all, given the lightning success of the invasion and the remarkable popular support for the coalition. If the Soviets made a fatal error in committing massive conventional forces, why did the light footprint fail as well?

For Jones, the gravest error was the failure to press the advantage after the success of the CIA/JSOC invasion. All key players in the Bush Administration succumbed to a pathological fixation on Saddam Hussein, and left the job in Afghanistan undone. The Iraq project consumed the funds, expert diplomats, intelligence personnel, and supersoldiers that destroyed the Taliban overnight. As a consequence, training programs for the police and army foundered. No agency ever committed to the difficult tasks of rural development that would establish the government's presence in the countryside. In any case, top-down development efforts are doomed to failure in Afghanistan's culture of casual corruption. Meanwhile the Taliban had plenty of room to operate in the vacuum of local governance. Al Qaeda, too, benefited from the extraordinary convenience of American targets in its backyard. The "job unfinished" narrative is intuitive and by now very familiar- this take on the Afghan war was a common theme of Obama's 2008 candidacy. It is also hard to doubt with the crushing weight of evidence that Jones leverages here.

Jones also exposes Pakistan's frustrating role in the Afghan wars. A number of political dilemmas create a political situation in which Pakistan receives U.S. aid, calls itself a partner in the war, and simultaneously aides the insurgency. Pakistan's lawless provinces harbor Al Qaeda and serve as the main supply pipeline for the Taliban. Meanwhile, certain branches of Pakistani federal institutions, especially the intelligence service and border guard, aggressively aid insurgents.

The book let me down in the end, because its prescriptions for success are not very compelling. You can scroll through any economists blog and learn why top-down development will always fail, especially in a country with flimsy institutions. You can pick up any recent issue of Foreign Affairs and read a hopeful appeal to the weak-center tribal confederacy of the old Afghan Kingdom. What is not addressed in the forward-looking part of the analysis is the future role of Pakistan. Pakistan is the policy piece that must be reconfigured to change the dynamics in Afghanistan. Jones should have been more aggressive in insisting on that point.

Will Byrnes says

Seth G. Jones is a "senior political scientist" at the RAND corporation (as in Research AND Development, not that other Rand). He worked in the Defense Department for a couple of years, and has taught classes on counter-terrorism issues since 2002 at Georgetown and since 2005 at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. He has also written on nation building. His stated goal in this book is "to understand the motivations of the key actors and to assess what factors contributed to the rise of Afghanistan's insurgency."

If policy analysis is your cup of chai, this will serve you nicely. Jones has met with a host of relevant parties to the unpleasantness, both historical and ongoing, in Afghanistan and that region. He offers an academic analysis of what underlies problems with nation-building there, citing a list of the usual suspects, and arrives at a place that might strike some as unexpected. Why do so many people support the Taliban? Is it inherent religious extremism, or are there other reasons? What is Pakistan's role in the persistent problems of its neighbor? What are Pakistan's goals and how do their actions reflect them? How might the West promote stability, and freedom from tyranny in Afghanistan?

If you are new to the subject, this is not a bad introduction, although I would recommend Ahmed Rashid's "Descent into Chaos" as a better intro to the area. If you have read a fair bit about Afghanistan and that region, there is little here that is new in his overview. Jones cites many, many sources, and a lot of them are familiar. Yes, we know that Pakistan is interested in maintaining Afghanistan as a buffer against India. We know that they have supported and continue to support the Taliban. We know that the central government in

Afghanistan is corrupt

But aside from the broader strokes, Jones drills down to some revelatory information. For example he offers profiles of some of the significant warlords in Afghanistan. He presents telling details in other areas, such as the structure of how Al Qaeda communicates. He goes into specifics about the ISI, which is associated with the military, and the Pakistani Frontier Corps, which reports to an entirely other ministry, and their roles not only in supporting the Taliban, but in attacking western forces. He talks about the “light footprint” notion espoused by Donald Rumsfeld, and shows how that affected the ability of the military to pacify the nation and begin rebuilding. A particularly interesting bit of data was a comparison of the number of personnel used in other post-war scenarios to pacify the entire country and provide security. The role of the U.S. vis a vis other Western nations regarding developing an Afghani police force is illuminating. His view of insurgency as a parallel attempt at nation-building and not merely as a negative force, is fascinating. He also looks at how some post-colonial governments had not been properly prepared for independence, thus leading to structural weakness and susceptibility to internal disruption. And Jones points out many instances in which American penny-wise-pound-foolish policies allowed the continuation and expansion of significant national problems. Jones’ wonkish appreciation for policy details is most welcome.

He writes about Al Qaeda as a force multiplier, insisting that it is well incorporated into the Taliban and that the Taliban will, should it regain power, return to providing a safe haven for an organization that Jones insists offers a strategic threat to the U.S. It sounds like he is making a case that any acceptance of Taliban control of Afghanistan, partial or whole, would necessarily mean more attacks on the West from that base of operations. The implication is a need for continuing, probably increased Western military presence there.

In critiquing what is wrong in Afghanistan, one of the key problems is corruption. If people feel no trust in their police, judges, military or government, why should they not support someone or some group outside government? Although it was beyond the purview of this book, it does seem that the generic notion of a public loss of confidence in government impartiality, honesty and willingness and ability to deliver services has implications well beyond those in Afghanistan.

It is his take that top-down nation-building in Afghanistan is exactly the wrong approach. It would seem that, so far at least, the evidence bears him out. But if we in the West remain unwilling to invest resources in building up from below, what is left?

One pet peeve I had with the book was that Jones introduces two voices, Zalmay Khalilzad and Ronald Neumann, into his narrative intermittently. While their involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan as diplomats was significant, telling us about their early careers seemed thrown in. It struck me as a bit of in-house politicking by Jones, who has connections to both men. Another gripe is that he seems to be trying as best he can to place outside the White House responsibility for a lack of investment in Afghanistan after the removal from power of the Taliban, citing, specifically, resistance from the department of OMB. Under an increasingly imperial Bush presidency, it defies reason that a program the White House wanted could be hindered by OMB. The president could simply inform the OMB director of his wishes and make it clear that remaining in his post was contingent on satisfying the person who put him there. It is the occasional item like this one that instilled in me a feeling of caution while reading the book. If a purely political motive informed the writing of this piece, how many other, less obvious, examples might there be tucked away in the crevices. Thankfully, I did not find enough of these ticking devices to fully counter the overall value of the book. Jones has added thoughtful analysis to a broad view of Afghanistan history and current (2009) goings-on to hone a pointed set of recommendations for securing progress in this battered nation that are worth considering.

Christopher Bennett says

It's a little frightening.....the circumstances and conditions in Afghanistan from late 2001 through 2007 mirror quite closely what I read in the papers about the circumstances and conditions in Afghanistan in 2017. Corruption in the central government, an inept and corrupt ANA, Taliban and other insurgents capturing provincial centers and capitals. And Pakistan is still a safe haven for many. Time marches on but nothing substantive has changed.

Sean Sharp says

Published in 2009 and missing the Obama years entirely, *In the Graveyard of Empires* would have been more aptly subtitled “Bush’s War in Afghanistan”. Such is the difficulty of writing history as events unfold even into the present day. As it is, the book misses important post-2009 events like the subsequent “surge” in troop levels through 2010, substantial increases in drone strikes, the raid and killing of Osama bin Laden, the 2014 Afghan presidential elections, the Peshawar massacre in December 2014, and the end of direct Western combat actions in 2015.

All of the above aside, the 2001-2009 narrative presented by Seth Jones is articulate, comprehensively footnoted, and on point in many of its assessments. A RAND fellow and professor of counterinsurgency, Jones writes like an academic and *Graveyard* certainly reads as such. This is not a thriller, nor is it an opinion piece, but nor is it meant to be. This is a facts and points approach of the light-footprint turned counterterrorism turned counterinsurgency operation. Jones does a fine job of reserving judgment until the final chapter. The book is littered with direct quotes from interviews of high-ranking officials of all parties involved. These interviews bring to life the facts and figures and further emphasize the human component of warfighting.

As noted, the book misses out on a further six years of combat operations from 2009-2014 that have significantly altered the course of action in Afghanistan. Considering this limitation, it is hard to recommend *Graveyard* as the complete history of America’s war in Afghanistan, as the subtitle suggests. A sequel to the book summarizing the Obama years, or at the very least a 2nd Edition with an additional chapter or two, would be well deserved.
