Afghanistan: What Went Wrong?

Roland Paris

Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History. By Thomas Barfield. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 568p. $26.95 cloth, $16.95 paper.

Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan. By Rajiv Chandrasekaran. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 384p. $27.95 cloth, $16.00 paper.

Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town. By Noah Coburn. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. 272p. $70.00 cloth, $22.95 paper.

When More Is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan. By Astri Suhrke. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 256p. $25.00.

The US-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, which deposed the Taliban regime, was followed by a major international effort to stabilize that country. More than a decade later, this effort has yielded neither security nor political stability in Afghanistan.[1] After having been ousted from power, the Taliban reestablished itself in the borderlands of Pakistan and began fighting an effective guerrilla war against international and Afghan government forces. Despite heavy losses in recent years, the insurgency shows no sign of giving up. Meanwhile, attempts to establish a credible and legitimate Afghan government have been similarly disappointing. President Hamid Karzai, once hailed as the country's democratic savior, came to be seen instead as the leader of one of the most corrupt regimes on the planet, a perception that has damaged his government's legitimacy both at home and abroad.[2] Afghanistan's development and human rights indicators have improved, but it remains to be seen if these gains can be sustained as the international effort is scaled back. Finally, although the United States and its partners succeeded in weakening Al Qaeda in the region, both Afghanistan and nuclear-armed Pakistan appear to have become considerably less stable over the course of the mission, with untold consequences for the future.[3]

At their peak in 2011, there were more than 130,000 foreign troops in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan,[4] and the country had become the single largest recipient of official development assistance in the world.[5] Today, the United States and other Western nations are reducing their military presence in Afghanistan in anticipation of the scheduled cessation of ISAF combat operations at the end of 2014.[6] It seems a natural moment, therefore, to reflect on a question that will undoubtedly preoccupy scholars and analysts for years to come: What went wrong with the international effort to stabilize Afghanistan?

There is much at stake in this question. Decision makers have been shown to use—and *mis*use—the perceived lessons of previous wars to guide their decisions about when and how to employ military force.[7] Such lessons often take the form of simplified narratives, or "causal stories,"[8] that provide rules of thumb for interpreting and responding to new foreign policy challenges.[9] In the case of Afghanistan, some observers have already concluded that the international effort has demonstrated the futility of "nation building," a vague term that often denotes the use of military intervention to achieve nonsecurity goals, such as "education, reconstruction, democracy and governance building."[10] Such views also seem to have contributed to the recent reorientation of US military policy toward a so-called light footprint approach, which emphasizes covert action and precision weapons to achieve national security objectives, while de-emphasizing large-scale deployments of ground forces.[11] Perhaps this is a correct lesson to draw from the Afghanistan experience—but perhaps it is not. Few would want to repeat the mistakes of the Afghan mission, but what exactly were those mistakes?

In what follows, I review four books that offer insights into this question. They are a diverse group. Astri Suhrke examines the internal tensions and contradictions of the overall international effort in Afghanistan. Rajiv Chandrasekaran focuses more narrowly on the US military and civilian "surge" in 2010 and 2011. Noah Coburn conducts

Roland Paris is founding Director of the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies and Associate Professor of Public and International Affairs at the University of Ottawa.

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a micro-level analysis of the politics in one Afghan town during the international mission. Finally, Thomas Barfield presents a macrohistory of Afghan politics and governance from premodern times to the present. As we shall see, viewing the international operation through the prism of these four books reveals fundamental flaws in the mission, but it also highlights the dangers of drawing incomplete or inaccurate lessons from the Afghanistan experience.

The Logic of Escalation

In *When More Is Less,* Suhrke reminds us that the 2001 invasion was initially conceived as a limited exercise in military power to strike Al Qaeda (which had perpetrated the 9/11 attacks on the United States), to depose the Taliban government of Afghanistan (which had sheltered Al Qaeda), and to prevent the country from being used as a base for future attacks on the United States or its allies. The invasion progressed quickly and involved only a few thousand American ground forces—Afghan groups who were opposed to the Taliban did most of the fighting, supported by US air power—and in less than six weeks, the Taliban was driven from the capital, Kabul.

At this stage, Suhrke notes, there was still a "marked reluctance in Washington to take charge of the aftermath of regime change" (p. 19). President George W. Bush had vocally opposed a US role in nation building when he was a candidate for office, and he reiterated this position after 9/11: "We are not into nation-building. We are focused on justice," that is, killing or capturing members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban (p. 24). Rather than tackling the postconflict stabilization task themselves, Bush and his senior advisors expected allies and international organizations to pick up the pieces, the author writes. Furthermore, not long after the invasion had achieved its objective of destroying the Taliban regime, Washington's attention was already shifting toward the next target in the war on terror: Iraq.

Meanwhile, the United Nations had appointed a special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, to lead international preparations for postconflict peacebuilding in Afghanistan. Brahimi introduced the concept of a light footprint, which in this context meant a small, unobtrusive international presence in the country. This concept was well aligned with Washington's distaste for nation building, and it quickly became the operating framework for international involvement in Afghanistan. Although some allies—and even some US officials—were calling for a more substantial commitment, including the deployment of a multinational military contingent to secure Afghanistan's major population centers, the White House rejected such appeals. The international security presence would be limited to a small force of 5,000 troops to patrol Kabul only. In addition, several thousand US forces would perform "counterterrorism" tasks—hunting down remaining members of Al Qaeda and the Taliban—but that was all. Washington prohibited these troops from performing any peacekeeping or security functions, or even helping the international contingent in Kabul (p. 34).

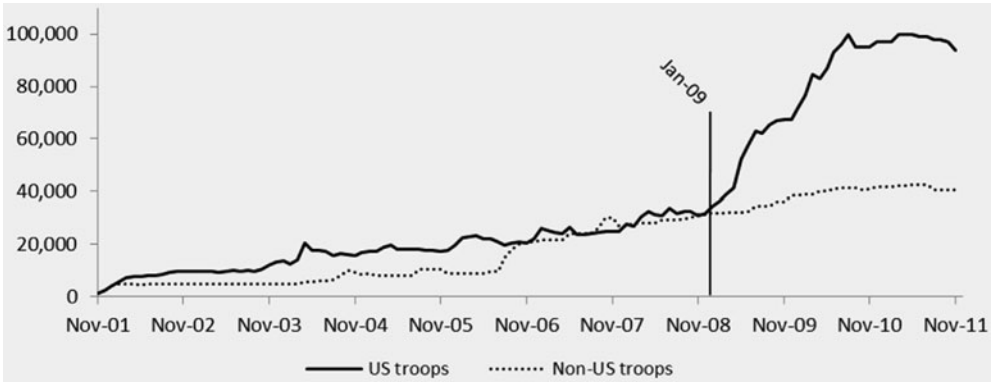
Suhrke sets out to explain how this relatively modest undertaking evolved into a massive military and aid enterprise over the ensuing decade. Drawing a parallel to the American experience in Vietnam, she argues that a combination of factors created self-reinforcing pressures for escalation. The initial decision to eliminate the Taliban regime, rather than to take punitive measures against Al Qaeda alone, "proved to be a critical juncture" because it set the stage for a "wider war" between the United States and a reconstituted Taliban (p. 5). The next decade, she argues, witnessed a "step-by-step interaction of hostile forces" that produced "steadily escalating violence" (p. 51). Meanwhile, the civilian dimensions of the operation were also expanding, driven in part by the "international peacebuilding regime," a sprawling network of governmental and nongovernmental agencies that had developed after the Cold War to assist countries emerging from civil conflicts. This apparatus—which was now engaged to help Afghanistan, largely under the umbrella of the UN—was "harnessed to a strong belief in social engineering," including the conviction that democratization, good governance, the rule of law, and other broadly liberalizing reforms were necessary for peace (p. 7). Bureaucratic and organizational interests, including aid lobbies, also contributed to a "seemingly unstoppable momentum" toward an ever-expanding mission (p. 125).

As the scale of international commitments mounted, so did the rhetoric of political leaders in the intervening countries, who invoked lofty objectives—peace, security, democracy, freedom—to justify the human and financial costs of the operation. This rhetoric "served as a glue to fasten policy to a path of deepening involvement" by making it harder for Western leaders to de-escalate or change course without subjecting themselves to accusations of "hypocrisy, defeat or sell-out" (p. 49).

Why did this mounting effort not succeed? Suhrke argues that the escalating international presence was, itself, largely to blame for the country's worsening problems. Enormous flows of foreign assistance fueled "spectacular" levels of corruption and created a "rentier state," which in practice was more responsible to external donors than to its own people—contrary to the goal of strengthening Afghan democracy. Responding to such problems by further expanding international assistance served to amplify, not remedy, the problems. Similarly, by escalating its military operations, the international coalition elicited even greater resistance from the insurgency, thus intensifying the violence and further alienating Afghan civilians, who were often caught in the middle. As the author writes, "mounting setbacks and greater costs in both money and lives on all sides only led to more determined efforts to succeed, rather than a critical scrutiny of the assumptions, structures

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Figure 1
Number of Foreign Troops in Afghanistan



Data source: Brookings institution, *Afghanistan Index* (December 13, 2012).

and overall realism of the project" (p. 221). The process of escalation was, therefore, both self-reinforcing and self-defeating. As the title of her book suggests, when international actors attempted to do "more," they ended up accomplishing "less."

This important argument is the centerpiece of an excellent book. Suhrke dissects the internal contradictions and perverse effects of the operation with the patience and precision of a forensic pathologist. The result is a devastatingly well-documented critique of a mission gone awry. However, there is a tinge of determinism in her analysis that casts some doubt on her conclusions. As she recounts the story, beginning with the initial decision to topple the Taliban regime, the interveners seem to be caught in an almost ineluctable spiral toward deeper and broader involvement in Afghanistan. But was this escalation inevitable? Were there critical junctures or decision points at which the mission might have taken a very different path? Suhrke does not explore these questions in depth, nor does she provide the means to answer them, because her causal framework effectively points only in one direction: toward escalation. This weakness becomes clear near the end of the book, where she discusses President Barack Obama's announcement, in December 2009, that the United States would commit tens of thousands of additional troops and civilians to the mission—the Afghan surge. She rightly characterizes this decision as a "turning point," because Obama simultaneously announced that the United States would begin withdrawing its forces in mid-2011 and complete the process by 2014. The president was thus defying and reversing the logic of escalation (even as he temporarily increased the US troop presence).

Suhrke offers numerous explanations for this policy reversal: the mounting human and financial costs of the war, the tenacity of the insurgents, the "unusually thorough" review of Afghan policy undertaken by the White House, and so on (pp. 221–23). All of these explanations are plausible, but none fits her thesis about the dynamics of escalation in Afghanistan, which holds that the interveners responded to mounting problems by redoubling, not revising, their approaches. Any explanation of escalatory logic that cannot also account for instances of non-escalation or de-escalation should be regarded with caution, since it effectively predicts escalation everywhere and at all times.

Indeed, the facts of this case could support a somewhat different story line than the one Suhrke presents. She describes an operation that escalated incrementally over the course of the decade, but a closer look reveals that the international presence started out small and expanded at a relatively slow pace until 2009 (see Figure 1). From this perspective, the mission could be viewed as a holding operation for most of the decade—or what senior US officials described as an "economy-of-force campaign"—that relied on a limited number of ISAF forces to prevent the Taliban from gaining control of key Afghan population centers. Over the course of these years, however, conditions within Afghanistan were changing. An initial period of public enthusiasm for the new Karzai government and openness to the international presence gave way, instead, to a growing resentment over the failure of the central government to provide public goods, and to declining support for the international mission. Circumstances at the end of the decade, in other words, were considerably less propitious for a large-scale international presence than at the beginning of the decade. Yet paradoxically, this was precisely when the United States decided to scale up its efforts in earnest. If this alternative reading is correct, the lesson of the Afghan experience is not "more is less" but, rather, "too much, too late."

As Suhrke sees it, if the Afghanistan operation had been large and intrusive at the outset, rather than starting

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out small and escalating sharply years later, it probably would have produced the same self-destructive pathologies, only earlier (p. 229). She may be right. On the other hand, some scholars argue that there is a window of opportunity at the beginning of postconflict operations when the intervening parties have maximum influence[12] and that this window may close over time as local populations begin to sour on the foreign presence in their midst—a phenomenon known as the "obsolescing welcome."[13] In addition, there is ample evidence that in places other than Afghanistan, the deployment of international military operations in the immediate aftermath of conflicts has, on balance, significantly reduced the likelihood of renewed violence.[14] Together, these findings suggest that the *timing* of large-scale international operations may be important.

Although Suhrke mentions this literature in her book, she dismisses its findings on the grounds that they are "based on statistical trends and relatively few cases" (p. 13). In doing so, she inadvertently raises an awkward question: If small-n statistics and comparative case studies are unreliable, how much stock should be placed in a single-case study? More to the point, she misses an opportunity to explore the broader implications of the Afghan mission in relation to other interventions, including the temporal question implied in the title of her book: *When* is more less?

Surging to Nowhere

Chandrasekaran, a senior correspondent and associate editor at the *Washington Post,* provides a detailed account of what "too much, too late" looked like on the ground in Helmand and Kandahar, the southern Afghan provinces where most of the US surge forces were sent. He begins *Little America,* however, by pointing out that this area was also the focus of an earlier period of American activity in Afghanistan. In the 1950s, the United States funded a massive development project to transform the desert of the Helmand River valley into productive farmland. The project focused on constructing dams, reservoirs, and irrigation canals, but its goals went beyond agricultural improvement: It envisaged the modernization of rural Afghan society through the building of schools, health clinics, and communities where families from different tribes could live together, rather than in separate villages. There was even a fairy tale-like residential community modeled on a US suburb, known as Little America, which housed foreign contractors and their families. In the end, however, this "grand social experiment," as Chandrasekaran calls it, amounted to a costly failure (p. 20). The soils were not right, Afghan peasants did not cooperate, and when a Soviet-backed coup in 1978 deposed the pro-American regime in Kabul, the United States stopped funding the project. Much of what had been constructed fell into desuetude in subsequent years.

Chandrasekaran uses Little America as a metaphor for the deployment of thousands of American troops and civilians, along with vast sums of money, into the same Helmand River valley a half-century later, this time with the goal of evicting the Taliban presence and replacing it with Afghan government institutions and security forces. In February 2010, just two months after Obama's surge announcement, a force of 15,000 international and Afghan troops descended on Marjah, a farming settlement in central Helmand that "had become the Taliban's own version of a forward operating base" (p. 67). Rather than fighting the heavily armed invasion force, the Taliban melted away. American attention then shifted to establishing Afghan government institutions and services in Marjah and in other parts of Helmand that had been "cleared" of insurgents. This task turned out to be harder than anticipated. In many cases, no Afghan officials showed up, presumably because they feared being killed by the Taliban after the drawdown of international forces, if not earlier. The only person who was willing to serve as the face of the Afghan government in Marjah, for example, was an ex-convict who had spent four years in a German prison for attempting to stab his stepson to death.

Chandrasekaran presents his analysis in a series of vignettes, many of which feature US military or civilian officials as protagonists. These vignettes tend to be more evocative than expository, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions from the situations he describes. Nevertheless, he is clearly skeptical about the surge's long-term impact. Although he notes that conditions in the Helmand River valley were considerably more secure after the surge troops arrived, he questions whether these gains are sustainable, pointing to countervailing factors, such as the continued sanctuaries for Taliban fighters in neighboring Pakistan, the shortage of competent Afghan army and police, and the failure of the Karzai administration "to help build and sustain local government" (p. 246). Pressed for time, because US forces were scheduled to begin withdrawing in mid-2011, American military commanders came increasingly to rely on local strongmen, including corrupt "thugs" who were "part of an entrenched, kleptocratic system that stretched all the way to the top of the Afghan government," an approach that seemed unlikely to win over ordinary Afghans (p. 262).

While most American military and civilian officials interviewed by the author were pouring themselves into the surge effort, many also seemed to be conscious of the strategy's inherent problems. The US Marine commander in Helmand, for example, was quite realistic about the challenges of winning the support of ordinary Afghans in Taliban-controlled areas when he said: "You can surge troops, but you can't surge trust" (p. 39). Nevertheless, he pressed forward with his part of the plan. Other officials observed billions of dollars being spent with abandon and were galled by the waste: By mid-2010, the US Agency for

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International Development alone was spending $340 million on Afghan reconstruction *per month,* often on questionable projects (p. 198)—but few were willing to register formal objections. The great value of this book is the revealing glimpse it offers into the implementation of the surge strategy on the ground, including concrete examples of the kind of pathologies that Suhrke describes in her book.

Largely missing from Chandrasekaran's account, however, are the voices of the intended beneficiaries of the surge operation: the Helmand villagers themselves. Indeed, this book is written entirely from an American perspective, including the less-than-glowing depictions of other allied forces in ISAF, such as the British and Canadians who were fighting and dying in southern Afghanistan for years before American forces arrived en masse. The dearth of Afghan voices, however, reflects a deeper insularity. As the author points out, few US military or civilian officials knew very much about the Afghans whom they were seeking to help. In January 2010, nearly a decade into the operation, the US general responsible for ISAF intelligence reached a damning conclusion: "[T]he vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which US and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade."[15] The cloistering of civilian officials on relatively safe bases exacerbated this cultural distance, Chandrasekaran notes, as did the short duration of military and civilian deployments to Afghanistan, which worked against the accumulation of individual knowledge and institutional memory.

Even a profound lack of understanding of Afghan society, however, cannot explain the curious strategic logic of the surge operation—in particular, the expectation that the United States, by pouring troops and money into the Helmand River valley, could belatedly and hurriedly convince a wary local population to embrace an Afghan government that had already demonstrated its inability to protect them, while the United States was simultaneously declaring that it would soon begin to withdraw its own troops and the Taliban was signaling its intention to return. As one American official commented to Chandrasekaran: "We set ourselves up for an impossible model in the ninth year of the war" (p. 147).

The Resilience of Local Structures

In *Bazaar Politics,* Coburn offers yet another perspective on the mission—one in which Afghan voices figure prominently. Between 2005 and 2009, he conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Istalif, a small pottery-producing town about 30 kilometers north of Kabul. His goal was to understand the town's political dynamics and to explain its relative peacefulness at a time when many other parts of Afghanistan were experiencing a worsening of violence.

To this end, Coburn went about mapping the social and political organization of the community. Its principal actors included kinship groups and pottery guilds, religious leaders, a new merchant class, former militia groups, the district governor, and the police. These groups drew upon different types of political "capital"—religious, social, cultural, and economic—but most gained influence by mobilizing networks of followers. Tellingly, the representatives of the Afghan state—the district governor and police—were among the *least* influential political actors in Istalif. The district governor had virtually no economic capital (the state had little money to disburse), little social or cultural capital (he was an outsider with few connections in the community), no religious capital (as a noncleric), and minimal capacity to enforce his decisions, which led him to delegate most of his formal governmental functions to local elders. The police, many of whom had secured their jobs through various patronage networks of government officials in Kabul, also displayed little interest in their official duties, spending most of their time in their posts. Local residents, who regarded the police as "little more than meddlesome," tended to turn to informal leaders and customary justice when incidents occurred (p. 136).

International groups, including ISAF and aid organizations, also played a political role in Istalif. However, in spite of the large amounts of money they spent on the town and the coercive power of the foreign forces, Coburn finds that neither the international military nor nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had much influence on local politics. This was only partly due to the locals' distrust of foreigners. Mostly, it stemmed from the way the organizations worked. For example, ISAF convoys occasionally transited Istalif but rarely stopped, and on the infrequent occasions when foreign troops dismounted, it was usually to meet with the police chief or the district governor. By communicating with interlocutors who, notwithstanding their formal titles, were tangential players in town politics, the international military remained disconnected from the real currents of political influence in the community. Other factors reinforced this disconnection, including rapid rotations of military and civilian personnel, which "prevented any of these individuals from establishing the type of personal relationships that created trust in Istalif" (p. 139). Even when contact was made, cultural differences could distort communication. For instance, ISAF's young translators—many of whom were of Afghan descent, but raised abroad—apparently spoke to Istalif's elders in a manner that some town residents found condescending and insulting. Coburn does not tell us whether foreign forces knew that their translators were having this effect, but it seems unlikely. Layer upon layer of mutual misunderstanding divided international officials from the inhabitants of Istalif.

A similar disconnection was visible in development programming. Coburn tells the story of a European women's NGO that wished to provide a state-of-the-art kiln for

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female potters in Istalif. This posed a problem: By local custom, the job of firing pottery was reserved exclusively to men. Nevertheless, through either mistranslation or deliberate misunderstanding, an expensive kiln was delivered and installed in the women's center below the town, where it sat unused. When Coburn discussed this project with the head of the NGO in Kabul, "she seemed pleased that the program was functioning at all and was undisturbed by its ineffectiveness" (p. 49). This episode, he writes, was emblematic of international development spending in Istalif: "Most of the projects had been conceived abroad, and the goal of the development workers was to ensure that the programs ran as described in their funding documents, not in a way that created real change" (p. 140).

More generally, international aid and military organizations failed to use their enormous resources to cultivate social relationships in Istalif based on reciprocity and trust—the currency of local politics. As a result, these organizations were singularly ineffective at translating their coercive and economic "capital" into political influence.

On the basis of this analysis, Coburn returns to the question of why Istalif remained peaceful during a period of mounting unrest in Afghanistan. Stability, he argues, was not a consequence of either the Afghan state or the international mission, both of which had limited influence in the town. Rather, peace resulted from the configuration of political and economic interests within the town at that time. All of the major groups in Istalif had calculated that they stood to lose more than they would gain by allowing a dispute to escalate into open conflict. Consequently, even though competition among these groups was intense and many disputes remained unresolved, there was a "tacit agreement to avoid public confrontation" (p. 216). This agreement was not upheld by a central enforcement mechanism, since there was no such mechanism. Nor was it rooted in a belief that violence was inherently illegitimate as a tool of politics—residents of Istalif had a more instrumental view of violence. Instead, this agreement existed for the simple reason that "it was generally in everyone's best interest to suppress competition that could have led to violence" (p. 217).

The implications of this argument are interesting. Among other things, Coburn challenges the Hobbesian and Weberian notions that political violence stems from an absence of central authority, or that the maintenance of civil peace requires such an authority. To explain the stability of Istalif, in other words, one must first understand "the local political landscape and the way cultural contexts shape the nature of violence" (p. 221). This is undoubtedly true, and it echoes a criticism that other scholars have leveled against international peacebuilding efforts in different contexts.[16] Nonetheless, Coburn may overstate his contention that stability was the endogenous product of internal town politics.

Consider this: Istalif is located close to the capital, where both the Afghan state and the international operation had a stronger presence than virtually anywhere else in the country. In fact, the town is within sight of Bagram Airfield, the largest US military base in Afghanistan. Having established the surrounding area as a zone of relative security, the Afghan government and international mission probably had a calming effect on Istalif's internal politics, even if they did not play a visible role in the day-to-day affairs of the town. More fundamentally, the community is not situated in the Pashtun portion of Afghanistan, where most of the unrest and insurgent activity has been concentrated. Finally, economic conditions may also make Istalif an exceptional case. As a center for pottery production, the town has a stream of self-generated income that many other Afghan communities lack. To determine if some or all of these conditions contributed to Istalif's relative peace, one would need to compare Istalif to other Afghan towns, which Coburn does not do. His research design simply does not support strong findings about the causes of stability in the town.

On the other hand, his single-case ethnographic approach has a distinct advantage: It allows him to paint a fascinating and finely detailed portrait of a local political system that defies many Western categories and concepts of governance. Decisions emerged from an ongoing process of negotiation and posturing among a heterogeneous array of actors and groups, who drew political authority from an equally diverse range of sources. There was, in effect, no "center" in this system—no central authority, and no single vocabulary of power—which made it even harder for foreigners, with their own preconceptions about governance, to operate within this system. Coburn's book thus offers an invaluable perspective on the international operation. Viewed through the optic of local politics in Istalif, foreign military and aid organizations seemed strikingly detached from the political environment that they sought to influence.

A Missed Opportunity

Given this complexity, was the international stabilization mission doomed from the start? No, says Barfield, whose *Afghanistan* traces the history of Afghan politics and society from premodern times to the present. He maintains that a flawed international strategy "heedlessly squandered" the goodwill of the Afghan people in the years immediately following the 2001 intervention (p. 277). At that time, the Taliban was in disarray and there was considerable optimism about the country's future, as well as a surprising acceptance of the international presence. By making critical mistakes in this early period, however, the international community set the mission—and the country—on the wrong path.

Before explaining these mistakes, Barfield investigates why some kinds of governance have worked, but others have not,

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in Afghanistan's past. These historical chapters comprise the bulk of the book and are superb, weaving together parallel strands of political, sociological, anthropological and economic analysis with deftness and erudition. Among other things, the author refutes the conventional wisdom that Afghanistan is an ungovernable land of timeless intractability, pointing to several stretches of stable rule, including the long reign of King Zahir Shah from 1933 to 1973. His main finding is that Afghan governance has been most successful when a balance has existed between central authorities and informal solidarity structures at the regional and local level—that is, the ethnic, religious, village, tribal, clan, and professional networks that have long been the primary affiliation of most Afghans. Attempts to use the power of the state to suppress these solidarity structures have almost always "come to grief" by provoking resistance (p. 173). On the other hand, most Afghans do not want their country to fragment, and they expect the central state to perform at least the minimal task of providing basic security as well as economic opportunity. The country has achieved its "most stable political and economic equilibrium" when the central government has focused on performing these limited functions and has not sought "to displace or transform the deep-rooted social organizations in which most people lived out their lives" (pp. 293 and 220). In practice, this has entailed decentralizing and delegating much of the state's governing authority to regional and local levels.

On the basis of this historical survey, Barfield then diagnoses the problems with the international strategy in Afghanistan after 2001. He maintains that international decision makers, who "had little familiarity with Afghanistan's culture or history" (p. 317), promoted a system of government that was simultaneously overcentralized and underresourced. The outlines of this system emerged at a UN-run conference in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, which set out a plan for Afghanistan's political transition that would culminate in democratic elections in 2004. Karzai and the "Kabul elite" favored a highly centralized government, with powers concentrated in the office of the president (p. 303). The UN and United States offered "uncritical support" for this model and "adamantly opposed devolving power to the regional or provincial level" (pp. 337 and 298). However, this was exactly the kind of highly centralized government that had "failed repeatedly" in the past (p. 302), and it was even more likely to fail this time, because demands for regional autonomy and wider political participation "were now much stronger than in the past" (p. 293).

Overcentralization was the first error. The international community's second mistake was its failure to provide the new Afghan government with the resources it needed to perform even the minimal functions of the central state: security for major populated areas and economic opportunity. As Barfield points out, the amount of foreign economic aid delivered to Afghanistan in the early years of the mission was modest relative to other postconflict countries. Most of this aid, moreover, bypassed the Afghan government and was "distributed directly by foreign donors for projects that they planned and implemented," which prevented Kabul from gaining political credit for this spending (p. 315). The new government also lacked the capacity to provide security to major areas outside the capital. Even by 2004, the national army could deploy only 4,500 troops, which in practice meant that the state could not extend its power into the provinces. This weakness, combined with the decision to restrict ISAF to Kabul only, resulted in a power vacuum in many parts of the country. The light footprint, Barfield dryly remarks, was "so light as to be invisible" (p. 313). By the time ISAF was deployed outside the capital, the Taliban had been able to "regroup unimpeded" for years in parts of southern Afghanistan that it knew well (p. 327).

This governance formula—overcentralized and underresourced—was almost certain to produce problems. It meant that the national government, and specifically the president's office, would intrude deeply into local affairs, but would still lack the ability to perform the basic functions that Afghans expected of their state. For example, Kabul gained full responsibility for the nation's schools but was unable to pay teachers' salaries. The United States and its international partners had assumed that a political transition, including democratic elections, would be sufficient to produce a legitimate, stable government for the country, but they failed to understand, writes Barfield, that Afghans "judged the legitimacy of a state by its actions rather than the process that created it" (p. 302). When Afghans perceived that Kabul was unable to deliver basic public goods—that is, when the government "failed to bring security to many regions and did little to improve people's dire economic condition"—public opinion began to turn against both the Karzai regime and its international backers (p. 277). The corruption of the regime reinforced this alienation.

Barfield maintains, however, that this outcome was far from inevitable. Establishing governmental order and services by region, rather than centrally from Kabul, would have been more effective and given Afghans more of a stake in their government. Deploying international troops to major regions could have filled the security vacuum before other actors did. Large-scale investment in the agricultural economy and rapid restoration of the country's infrastructure could have harnessed the early optimism and enthusiasm of the Afghan people. The moment for doing all this, however, was in the period immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime, when public support for both the Karzai government and the international presence was highest. Instead, the author writes, the United States and its allies offered "nothing more than stopgap measures—just enough to keep immediate problems at bay with the hope that the situation would improve on its own" (p. 313). It never did.

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Conclusion: Tactics without Strategy

There are points of disagreement among these books—most notably, between Barfield's argument that there was a window of opportunity at the start of the operation for a better-resourced and shrewder stabilization strategy and Suhrke's suggestion that a large-scale international presence in Afghanistan would have been counterproductive at any time—but, overall, the four volumes are quite complementary. Each approaches the mission from a different perspective, yet they all point to similar underlying dysfunctions in the operation.

The first dysfunction was the interveners' inadequate understanding and knowledge of Afghan society—a central theme in all four books. Again and again, the authors point to cases of international action rendered ineffectual or counterproductive due to a lack of familiarity with the political and social environment. From the highest levels of decision making to the microdynamics of military patrols and aid projects, foreign organizations and officials seemed to be almost handicapped by their own ignorance of the country. This was a systemic and sustained problem for the operation.

The second dysfunction was the persistent short-termism of international policymaking. At each major juncture, decision makers seemed to reach for the most expedient fixes without fully considering the context or consequences of their actions. This pattern was already visible during the 2001 invasion, when the United States paid Afghan militias to intercept fleeing Al Qaeda fighters in the mountains of Tora Bora, rather than sending American forces—a costly decision, since the militias turned out to be "less than fully committed" to the task.[17] Then there was the Bush administration's lack of interest in devising plans for Afghanistan's post-Taliban transition, and its eagerness to delegate this task to others, based in part on the assumption that the "problem" of Afghanistan had been largely resolved by the defeat of the Taliban regime. Next came the UN-sponsored conference at Bonn, which produced an agreement for a political transition process. This agreement, however, was reached "hastily, by people who did not adequately represent all key constituencies in Afghanistan," as Brahimi, who chaired the meeting, wrote in a contrite essay seven years later.[18] With US and UN backing, moreover, the Bonn plan yielded a highly centralized system of government that was ill-adapted to the country's needs. Meanwhile, Washington had rejected the idea of deploying ISAF outside Kabul and refused to allow US counterterrorist forces to be used for "nation-building" purposes. All of these actions reflected wishful thinking—or, more precisely, a dearth of serious thinking—about the viability and long-term implications of these decisions. Short-term expediency prevailed.

This mind-set continued in subsequent years. As conditions worsened and the scale and scope of the operation slowly expanded, there was little reflection on the underlying assumptions of the mission. When the US government, long distracted by the situation in Iraq, shifted its attention back to Afghanistan in 2008, decision making became more urgent, but was no less shortsighted. "Again and again," writes Suhrke, "it was hoped that the latest change in strategy and personnel or increase in aid would be the silver bullet" (*When More Is Less,* p. 221). I saw this for myself during visits to Kandahar and Kabul in December 2008 and January 2010. Activity was intense, almost frantic, and driven by a sense that little time remained to "turn the situation around." But exactly how this would be achieved, and to what end, were never clear. Even after President Obama entered office and conducted a lengthy policy review that resulted in a sharp escalation of US forces, these questions remained largely unanswered: How would the United States convince the insurgency to capitulate or negotiate? How would it persuade Afghan villagers to side publicly with ISAF and the Kabul government? What, in short, was the purpose of the surge? More broadly, why did the international operation, with its minimalist start and late escalation, seem so strangely out of sync with conditions on the ground?

If "strategy" is a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim, there appeared to be little strategy guiding the international operation in Afghanistan. Instead, reliance on a series of quick fixes seemed to substitute for strategic thinking. From time to time, frameworks such as the "light footprint" and "counterinsurgency" provided an organizing basis for policy, but these frameworks were appealing precisely because they seemed to offer a ready solution for Afghan stability.[19] All four books under review, however, highlight the disconnection between these policy frameworks and the political realities of Afghanistan. Indeed, the two underlying dysfunctions of the mission—lack of understanding of Afghan society and short-termism in international policymaking—seemed to reinforce each other. Together, they produced tactics without strategy.

None of this should lead to the conclusion that nation building is impossible or always ill-advised, however. To extract this lesson from the Afghanistan episode would be to repeat the practice of substituting slogans for careful analysis. What does "nation building" really mean? In 2000, when President Bush entered office arguing that the United States had no military role in nation building, he was referring to places like Bosnia. Yet American and allied ground forces deployed to Bosnia at the end of 1995 were instrumental in preventing a recurrence of fighting in that country. Today, nearly 20 years later, Bosnia is still at peace, and the original stabilization force of nearly 60,000 foreign troops has shrunk to approximately 600.

Nor is Bosnia an isolated success story. While some peace implementation missions have clearly failed, including the conspicuous cases of Somalia and Rwanda in the 1990s, the overall record of such operations since 1989

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has been reasonably good, particularly if the standard of success is the absence of renewed fighting.[20] Many of these missions—in countries including El Salvador, Angola, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Cambodia, and East Timor—have helped to prevent fragile societies from becoming chronic battlegrounds, with all the humanitarian and international security risks that such conditions entail. To lump all of these cases together with Afghanistan under the vague term "nation building," and to imply that the lamentable results of the Afghan mission are somehow representative of this type of international intervention, is not just sloppy thinking. It is profoundly misleading—and dangerously so, if it provides a rationale or pretext for not acting in the face of strategic interest or humanitarian need.[21]

There is another reason to be cautious about extrapolating from the Afghan case. In spite of impressive advances in comparative research on political violence,[22] including the growing use of micro-level data in conflict countries,[23] as well as a burgeoning literature on third-party intervention in civil wars,[24] counterinsurgency,[25] and "foreign-imposed regime change,"[26] there is still no definitive answer to the question of which specific conditions caused the failure of the international stabilization effort in Afghanistan. The problem is not a lack of credible explanations but a surfeit of them: the porousness of the country's borders and the role of Pakistan in harboring and supporting insurgents; the failure to disarm Afghan militias or to challenge the power of local warlords; the prevalence of poppy cultivation and the enormous size of the illegal drug economy; the absence of a transitional justice process; the decision not to include the Taliban in the Bonn negotiations and the shortcomings of subsequent attempts to negotiate peace; tensions between civilian and military components of the operation and the "militarization" of aid; difficulties of coordination among the national contingents within ISAF; the constraining effect of the "caveats" that some troop-contributing nations placed on their own forces—and the list goes on.

The four books under review do not resolve this problem: The precise explanation for the mission's failure remains overdetermined. Nevertheless, as I have suggested, these books make a more fundamental point: From the fall of the Taliban regime to the height of the surge a decade later, the international stabilization mission lacked a coherent strategy. Worse, it lacked strategic thought.

Notes

1 For a recent assessment of the operation's progress to date, see Cordesman 2013.

2 Transparency International ranked Afghanistan's public sector as the second-most corrupt in the world (tied with North Korea) in 2012. See http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2012/results (accessed March 6, 2013).

3 The World Bank's political stability index, for example, which "measures perceptions of the likelihood that the government will be destabilized or overthrown by unconstitutional or violent means, including politically-motivated violence and terrorism," indicates a decline in political stability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2002 and 2010 (the last year for which data are available). See World Bank Governance Indicators, http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp (accessed March 6, 2013).

4 ISAF, "Key Facts and Figures," June 26, 2011, http://www.isaf.nato.int/isaf-placemat-archives.html (accessed March 6, 2013).

5 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, database of aid statistics for 2011 (DAC3a), http://stats.oecd.org/qwids (accessed March 6, 2013).

6 President Barack Obama stated on January 11, 2013, that if any American military forces remain in Afghanistan beyond 2014, they will have a "very limited mission" comprised of two tasks: first, "to train, assist, and advise Afghan forces so that they can maintain their own security," and second, "making sure that we can continue to go after remnants of al Qaeda or other affiliates that might threaten our [the US] homeland." *Wall Street Journal,* "Transcript: Obama-Karzai Press Conference," http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/01/11/transcript-obama-karzai-press-conference (accessed March 6, 2013).

7 See, for example, Breuning 2003; Khong 1992; Neustadt and May 1986; Paris 2002.

8 Croft and Moore 2010; Stone 1989.

9 Rose 1998; Stein 2012; Vertzberger 1986.

10 Etzioni 2012, 61.

11 David E. Sanger, "Even With a 'Light Footprint,' It's Hard to Sidestep the Middle East," *New York Times,* 17 November 2012.

12 Doyle and Sambanis 2006, 132.

13 Edelstein 2009, 83.

14 For example, Call 2012; Doyle and Sambanis 2006; Gilligan and Sergenti 2008; Hegre, Hultman, and Nygård 2011; Mason et al. 2011; Quinn, Mason, and Gurses 2007; Sambanis 2008; Zuercher 2006.

15 Flynn, Pottinger, and Batchelor 2010, 7.

16 For example, see Autesserre 2010; Cubitt 2013.

17 O'Hanlon 2002, 57. See also Krause 2008.

18 Lakhdar Brahimi, "A New Path for Afghanistan," *Washington Post,* 7 December 2008.

19 Counterinsurgency doctrine did incorporate some of the lessons of earlier US experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the importance of winning the trust of local communities, and of understanding and working with local governance structures in their own context. In this respect, counterinsurgency

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doctrine reflected real learning. In Afghanistan, however, these lessons seemed to come too late—after attitudes toward ISAF and the Afghan government had already hardened, and when there was little remaining appetite, either in Afghanistan or in the troop-contributing countries, for a large-scale international military presence in the country. In any event, there was little prospect of accomplishing the goals of counterinsurgency under the tight time pressures of the surge operation.

20 On the record of peace implementation missions, see n. 14. On standards for evaluating the success of these operations, see Call 2008.

21 See Paris 2010.

22 For an overview of recent developments in the study of political violence, see Boyle 2012.

23 For a survey of literature using micro-level data to analyze civil war, see Kalyvas 2012.

24 For a review of scholarship on third-party intervention, see Regan 2010.

25 See, for example, Enterline, Stull, and Magagnoli 2012; Lyall and Wilson 2009; Staniland 2012.

26 See, for example, Downes and Monten n.d.; Peic and Reiter 2010.

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