

Afghanistan-Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland2

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Afghanistan-Graveyard of Empires: A New History of the Borderland by David **Isby** New York: Pegasus Books, 2010 440 pages \$28.95

Although the market for books on Afghanistan has not witnessed any dearth in quantity or in variegation of quality in the last ten years, this history by David **Isby** offers excellent value to this growing corpus of works. The author spent considerable time in Pakistan and Afghanistan since the Soviet-Afghan War. **Isby** has also testified before Congress as an independent expert, and he has appeared on a host of news media, including CNN and C-Span. He has authored three books and hundreds of articles on Afghanistan and national security topics. This book offers a comprehensive, candid, and timely insight on the prospects and costs of success or failure in South Asia. The author understands what is at stake in Afghanistan and he is sanguine about the effort succeeding. He does not, however, relent in his clear and cogent candor regarding the impediments and risks that jeopardize the prospects for success in the region. This reviewer would be remiss if he did not pillory the staleness and inaptness of the title. The graveyard of empires metaphor indeed belongs in the graveyard of clichés. The Coalition in Afghanistan is not some imperial conquest, is not the Soviets, and is not the Victorian British. Nor do the Afghans perceive it as such.

Isby postulates that the war in Afghanistan is still winnable if the Afghans and their Coalition partners can implement a strategy to undermine the Taliban insurgency and prevent it from again taking over the Afghan state before time for the West runs out. In other words, before the international community loses patience and the will to see the war through to a successful conclusion. The book is comprised of three major parts that offer comprehensive analyses on the history of what the author describes as the "vortex" in South Asia; the source of conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan; and the author's prescriptive recommendations for winning the wars against insurgents and terrorists operating in and from this vortex. The author frames his analysis in terms of five interrelated conflicts in South Asia: the conflict against al Qaeda's international terrorist movement; the war against the Afghan Taliban insurgency; the fight against narcotics production and trafficking; the internal multifaceted conflicts inside Afghanistan; and, finally, the insurgency inside Pakistan linked to the insurgency in Afghanistan. The transborder insurgencies threaten stability and security in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region.

For the purposes of brevity, however, and given the grave risks and strategic impediments engendered by the insurgent and terrorist sanctuaries in Pakistan's border areas, the rest of this review focuses on the author's insight related to Pakistan. Pakistan's willingness and capacity to provide support and sanctuary to the Taliban is one of the gravest risks to Coalition success in Afghanistan, to stability in Pakistan, and to the security of the US homeland. The insurgents benefiting from sanctuary in Pakistan's tribal areas cooperate and collude with all manner of fanatical Islamist groups that have the intent and the capacity to kill those who do not subscribe to their distorted takfir view of the world. Many experts would tell you that Pakistan is a most lamentable excuse for an ally. They base these beliefs on its pretense of support to the United States while at the same time elements in its security organizations perfidiously promote proxy insurgents and terrorism against Afghan and Coalition civilians and soldiers in an effort to protract the war and exhaust their will. To be sure, the Pakistani army and its Inter Services Intelligence Directorate call the shots on all security-related issues. For 33 years of its 64-year existence, Pakistan has seen military dictators in charge, and for 38 years of its existence, Pakistan supported proxy insurgents fighting in Afghanistan. Sustaining both tyrants in Pakistan and guerrillas in Afghanistan are in that polity's DNA. What's more, if the Taliban were to revive the Islamist emirate in Afghanistan, there is every reason to predict a future that will see an increase in attacks against the West, planned and orchestrated from Afghanistan's and Pakistan's tribal region.

In the end, A New History of the Border Lands does a commendable job of detailing the complexities and impediments for a successful outcome of the war in Afghanistan. The book sees success as possible, as an

imperative in fact, since the consequences of an unsuccessful disengagement would serve to embolden al Qaeda, allow Taliban organizations to continue to undermine Afghanistan and Pakistan, increase the threat of attacks against the United States, and increase instability in the region. Quitting the fight would likely encourage the terrorist agenda toward more heinous acts of armed propaganda. The good news is the current strategy, resources, and leadership in Afghanistan is the soundest since the war began in 2001. The combined operations of Coalition and Afghan forces have reversed the Taliban's momentum and achieved operational momentum, driving the Taliban out of key areas and safe havens in places like Helmand and Kandahar. The bad news is the stark reality that the United States and the international community have not developed a viable approach that can compel Pakistan to change its strategic calculus. The latter drives Islamabad to continue its support for insurgent and terrorist proxies operating safely from sanctuaries inside Pakistan. It is exceedingly difficult to win in counterinsurgency when the insurgents benefit from relatively unimpeded sanctuary. The crux is that Pakistan poses as a partner in the war while at the same time it duplicitously provides succor and support to the likes of the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network.

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