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Ben Anderson, *No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2011. Pp. xxiii, 268. ISBN 978-1-85168-977-4.

Review by Jacqueline L. Hazelton, US Naval War College (hazelton@brandeis.edu).

In *No Worse Enemy*, veteran journalist and filmmaker Ben Anderson provides a richly detailed, engagingly written ground-level view of successive allied efforts in one important corner of Afghanistan. He describes British and US troops fighting for hearts and minds in Helmand province, including the area famously known as “a bleeding ulcer.” His you-are-there approach reveals the tragedy of troops fighting a war and an enemy they did not understand. He also studies the Afghans’ experience with foreign troops. His sharp observation of heartbreaking foreign-Afghan interactions helps explain some of the dysfunctional aspects of the relationship.

No Worse Enemy is a non-expert’s eyewitness, anecdotal, fast-moving tale of self-defeating choices, strategic contradictions, and simple human suffering. Anderson is better attuned than many of his journalist colleagues to the conflicting interests of the actors he observes. He is a guide for non-specialist readers seeking to understand a piece of the war being waged in the name of Western interests and values. Though he spent more time in the field with the troops than anywhere else, apparently unable to pull himself away, Anderson wisely keeps himself far from the center of the frame, focusing instead on his individual British, American, and Afghan subjects.

Anderson writes well, even elegantly, as in this description of a snipers’ duel in Marjah: “Its structure was polite, like a conversation between strangers; back and forth, back and forth, sometimes in single words, sometimes in sentences. Often, the participants waited minutes to take their turn. In between, there was an awful silence. It was careful, considered and cerebral. There seemed to be rules, tricks, feints and a mutual respect that suggested an etiquette. Occasionally, of course, someone at either end collapsed into a lifeless heap” (127).

Anderson’s motive in writing grew out of his sense of the disconnect between the war he was seeing in the flesh and

the one being described from podiums in Kabul, Washington and London.... On each visit, I was told that the Taliban were on their last legs, the Afghans were almost ready to provide security for themselves and the government was almost ready to govern. Mistakes were made in the past but now we’re doing it right.... Such an effort, with such high stakes, couldn’t result in so little [he told himself] [Yet,] apart from a few kilometers of land—and it was never more than that—being cleared and secured here and there, the only thing I ever saw happen was an increase in troop numbers and a corresponding increase in casualties, military and civilian. (xvi, xix-xx)

The book chronicles Anderson’s five stints in Afghanistan with British soldiers and US Marines between June 2007 and January 2011. In Part I, Anderson pinpoints the contradictions between the mission the British set themselves and the ill-advised tactics they adopted. Their experiences in Northern Ireland should, so the myth goes, have made them “brilliant at winning hearts and minds, ... [but] more than a year after entering Helmand, the British effort, which was supposed to be about aiding reconstruction and development, had become overwhelmingly military. The soldiers were struggling to protect themselves and the measures they were taking were costing the Afghans dearly” (1, 5). Things did not improve. A local Afghan official speaking at a *shura* (consultation) about casualties caused by air strikes could not hide his shaking hands as he tried to hold back tears. “Local commanders, ex-Mujahadeen, can establish security, not outsiders.” He implored the British soldiers to prevent further civilian casualties. “What can I do? I have lost four of my brothers. How can I look after their families now?” (7). Anderson notes that “the only two people in the room with any connection to air strikes were fast asleep” (8).

Deeply sympathetic to the troops he accompanied, Anderson recognizes that the Taliban's trenches, tunnels, booby traps, and weapons caches cost the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) dearly (10). His second-by-second accounts of being under fire make clear why a soldier near him on one patrol called the sound of an approaching F-16 fighter jet "the sweetest sound in the world" (11). In another passage, Anderson describes a Grenadier Guardsman's pain as he gazed at the burnt-out vehicle where one of his friends had been killed and four others wounded by a suicide bomber: "I wish everyone could form a line," said the Guardsman, "and march through the Green Zone annihilating everything in sight and burning down entire sympathizer villages, Vietnam style" (24).

Troops recognized the contradictions inherent in their mission and yet still sometimes resented second-guessing by commanders concerned about the political ramifications of their tactical choices (e.g., 32, 131). Many recognized the tragic ironies of their deployment. "These people," one Marine told Anderson, "they're not like Americans. There's no way you can trust them. They let the Taliban beat them but if it comes to one of us saying the wrong phrase or anything they lose their lid because we're Americans but 'that Taliban was from the same tribe as me.' It's ridiculous, it's a mindfuck, it's frustrating and ... that's a losing ball game" (186). Anderson notes the troops' convoluted rationalizations of the role they were playing in Afghan lives. He asked a captain how destroying a mosque was supposed to win popular support. He responded "I know that most people in the world probably wouldn't understand. You're trying to build a country up by destroying it and it seems like a paradox but those are people who have not been to Afghanistan. They don't understand that the nature of conflict inevitably includes destruction before you can start to build it the way it should be, in a way that's secure and provides a better economy for the people in the future" (245).

Anderson gets to the heart of the problem in highlighting the absurdity of the so-called comprehensive approach, which meant nation-building and reconstruction to win over popular support to the state and away from the Taliban: "[it] looked perfectly feasible in a PowerPoint presentation, when the beneficiaries, who weren't consulted, were viewed as automata. When applied to an actual society, especially one as fragmented, traumatized and complicated as Helmand's, it rarely lasted longer than the first 10 minutes of a *shura*. An anthropologist would struggle to understand the competing interests of local power-brokers, often motivated by long-running tribal, political and drug-trafficking rivalries" (13).

In Part II Anderson returns to Helmand with US Marines in summer 2009, in the wake of President Barack Obama's decision to send another seventeen thousand troops into "the good war." The Marines, like the British, aimed to win over the population. Yet—inevitably—they were distrustful of and hostile to the Afghans. Anderson's account of the search of a residential compound from which the Marines had been attacked several times reveals the fear and crucial asymmetry at the heart of the military-Afghan relationship. The boy acting as the man of the house was afraid, the other children and the women were afraid, and the Marines were afraid, confused, uncertain, and aggressive (65–67). This toxic mix sometimes caused outbursts, as when a Marine patrol vehicle knocked over a parked motorbike: "What? What? What the fuck are you looking at?" the top gunner screamed at the stunned faces below him" (186).

Yet Anderson also recognizes the sensitivity of the men he patrolled with. In Marjah, he saw another company of Marines struggle with civilians' pain. An Afghan whose family had been struck by a rocket desperately wanted to join his relatives in the military hospital in Lashkar Gah. But, despite all the good will in the world, the Marines could not get him there. "When they couldn't get him on a helicopter, they'd stolen a car, hot-wired it and presented it to him. But he couldn't drive" (144). However, such empathy was less common than the stubborn misunderstanding and suspicion inevitable in a guerrilla war. The Marines' foreign status only exacerbated the situation. Typically, discussions with locals were about "catching them out or spotting the tiniest of contradictions, even if they only arose from translation, [instead of] actually finding anything out, [let alone] offering help or reassurance" (229).

Anderson shows a deep affection for the men he accompanied. Recounting a conversation during a fire-fight, he writes, "Marines had a habit of suddenly becoming exquisitely polite and eloquent in the worst of situations, as if it made them feel more at home in a situation that would make most people cry for their

mothers” (104). He presents delightful—and painful—moments of extraordinary insight: “A Marine stroked a small bush with his gloved hand. ‘Look at this fucking thing, it’s nothing but thorns. It’s just angry. It literally has no function except to cause pain. Everything in this country is just so fucking angry” (72).

In Part III, Anderson accompanies yet more Marines as part of the Afghan surge. Operation Mushtaraq was intended to clear Marjah, hold it, and transform it into a pro-government, anti-Taliban area by delivering what ISAF commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal called “government in a box.” The plan was for waves of helicopters to drop Bravo Company into central Marjah at 4 a.m. on Day One.

My mind started racing: IEDs, anti-aircraft guns, trenches, bunkers, a thousand Taliban fighters, perhaps two. I wanted to ask Captain Sparks how he intended to deal with all of this when he landed, in the dark, on day one, without support. Instead I just made a crappy joke about the mission being insane and suicidal. ‘Yes. We were surprised too,’ said Captain Sparks, without laughing.... Jesus, I thought, you could tell this guy to walk into Marjah alone with nothing but a Stanley knife and he’d do it without blinking. (84)

After a day of intense combat, the company held only two buildings. “The Marines were completely cut off from the other invading forces.... And the surrounding Taliban still had the freedom of movement” (109). The situation did not improve significantly thereafter.

Anderson is painfully aware of the low regard American troops had for the Afghan military comrades they were supposed to mentor. As Afghan Army forces raised an Afghan flag at daylight after their entry into Marjah, “The Marines watched ... with patronizing but benevolent pride.... As soon as anything important happened, the Marines’ feelings toward the Afghans would go straight back to frustration and contempt” (111). An Afghan soldier attempting to load his weapon got impatient help from a Marine: “‘It’s the same shit you were doing last night,’ he said, clicking the magazine into place. The Afghan soldier held his rifle horizontally. The Marine grabbed it again, violently pushing it down. ‘You’re POINTING it at people. Leave it, you’re good.’ He walked away, shaking his head: ‘Fucking guy, man” (131). Another heartbreaking snapshot reveals the Marines’ frustration at an Afghan soldier’s inability to maneuver himself, his backpack, and the rolled-up mattress trussed to it through a doorway while on patrol. After he tried to force himself through the too narrow opening several times, the squad leader told him to stop.

“Sit. Sit the fuck down. Sit,” said Sanders, usually placid to the point of aloofness. He pointed to the ground, as if he were house-training a dog. “Sit, sit, sit,” said Sanders and another Marine in concert. The ANA [Afghan National Army] soldier took off his backpack and attempted to go through the door. “No sit down. You ...,” they pointed to him and then to the floor. “SIT DOWN. SIT DOWN.” He sat on his bag, smiling, but hurt and embarrassed. “Sid dow,” he said, trying to repeat his orders. (166)

The man’s humiliation was complete. It is not difficult to see how such treatment could contribute to Afghan soldiers’ attacks on their Western allies.

In Part IV, Anderson rejoins the Marines in Marjah in June 2010, after General McChrystal called the city “a bleeding ulcer.” The Marines were irritated by the lack of Afghan civilian cooperation and appreciation (186–87), while the people of Marjah were heartily sick of the Marines. “We don’t want them to be slapping this man or that man,” said one man, addressing a crowd that showed no disapproval. “The Americans were driving their tanks, someone’s stall was knocked over and dragged along the road. His money and his phone cards went everywhere. The Marines drove on and didn’t care. When the Taliban was here it was fully secure” (187).

Part V takes Anderson back to the bloody district of Sangin. The local bazaar, supposedly rebuilt by the British and then the Americans, consisted of crumbling buildings and a few piles of basic foodstuffs and old shoes for sale—“it was if the outside world didn’t exist. I could expect that in a remote village in the middle of the Helmand desert but it was shocking to see it here, in a town that had been the focus of a multi-billion-dollar security, development, and governance effort.” Worse, “the eyes that followed us through the bazaar were hostile, just as they had been three and a half years earlier” (194). When an Afghan dared to express his dissatisfaction, “[2nd Lt. Martin] Lindig was incredulous. Only someone insane, or brainwashed, could suggest that he’d come to Helmand with anything but the noblest of intentions. He was a modern-

day Paladin. And yet here was an intelligent, articulate man, living in the shadow of an American base, expressing ingratitude. It pained him that anyone, especially one of the people being helped, could hold that view" (213).

The book reaches no culmination, no satisfying conclusion, only a heartrending, extended account of the Marines' destruction of a residential neighborhood in Sangin. Anderson notes the residents' fear and powerlessness, the shocked faces of the children, and the broad smiles that Afghans adopted in an attempt to look non-threatening when they approached "anyone strong and potentially violent." He closes with Marines' memories of their own losses and their determination to achieve America's goals, however diffuse and ill-defined (229-46).

In his afterword, the author admits that the continued violence, corruption, and civilian deaths in Afghanistan after his departure, compared to rosy American claims about meeting goals, "sometimes make me wonder if I ever saw the Afghan war at all" (253). Therein lies the value of the book. Ben Anderson's experiences and those of the troops and Afghans he followed contradict optimistic official pronouncements. For anyone seeking to piece together an understanding of the realities of the Afghan war, *No Worse Enemy* is well worth reading.