



2015-072

Jack Fairweather, *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan*. New York: Basic Books, 2014. Pp. xx, 396. ISBN 978-0-465-04495-5.

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“Good War Gone Bad” is a familiar historical refrain regarding war in Afghanistan, best accompanied by a *rubab*, the lute-like Afghan musical instrument. Britons and Russians know the tune well. Americans thought they could rewrite it. Other westerners, including the British, sought to provide accompaniment. Thirteen years of combat struck the wrong chord, and nation building proceeded on a sour note. The coda came in December 2014. Though American policy-makers brought an end to the US war in Afghanistan, the chaos it fostered went on. Afghanistan remains broken, as *The Good War* makes clear. The country’s fate resides with Afghans. Neither wishful thinking nor military drones can change that. In the future, policy-makers must listen to “those voices that reveal the internal order” (332) of the countries where the West plans to intervene.

In *The Good War*, veteran British foreign correspondent Jack Fairweather<sup>1</sup> ably follows in a British tradition of reporting from the frontlines that goes back to the Crimean War. William Howard Russell of the *Times*, for example, routinely shocked Victorian England with his frank reportage of bloody mistakes like the Charge of the Light Brigade. Similarly, to cite one instance, Fairweather criticizes military officials for calling one operation a “significant success,” when, as he demonstrates, it “succeeded only in strengthening the insurgency” (170).

Fairweather came late to Afghanistan and built on work by colleagues who arrived earlier<sup>2</sup> to produce the first full narrative history of the Afghan war, from its inception shortly after 9/11 to the US drawdown in 2014. He shows that the American-led intervention fits the paradigm of the “Good War” so “deeply entwined in the western psyche [as a] messianic vision ... rooted in the belief that all societies aspire to achieve western-style democracy and that promoting such democracies makes the world more secure and just.” The damage caused by this “idealistic notion that the developed world can lead less fortunate nations on the road to progress ... has been great” (331, 333).

The author reports the views of such key officials as former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, US National Security Advisor (2001–5) and Secretary of State (2005–9) Condoleezza Rice, and Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, commander of the International Security Assistance Force (2009–10). But he also records the voices of ordinary Afghans like Mohammed Lal, a farmer from outside Bela Karz who, like others in the Noorzai tribe, once fought for the Taliban, and Mohammed Qari Ramazan, a twenty-three-year-old radical jihadist sentenced to life in prison for participating in the 2008 attack on the Serena Hotel that killed six and injured six others. The Serena, Kabul’s only five-star hotel, became a center for the city’s expatriate community, some ten thousand strong at the time. The hotel’s opulence and the elite of Kabul who reveled in it contrasted sharply with the grinding poverty just outside its walls. Seizing the opportunity, Taliban leaders “regaled their young recruit [Ramazan] with lurid tales to stoke his anger” and convinced him that the Serena was a place where Muslims were tortured and abused. Ramazan told Fairweather that it all rang true, because of what he had seen in “videos of Guantánamo” (219).

1. He is currently with Bloomberg News. His previous book, *A War of Choice: The British in Iraq, 2003–9* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), is based on his time in Iraq as an embedded reporter with British forces and, later, as Baghdad correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*.

2. E.g., Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (NY: Penguin, 2004), Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (NY: Knopf, 2008), Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (NY: Penguin, 2008), Sebastian Junger, *War* (NY: Twelve, 2010), and Peter Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al-Qaeda* (NY: Free Pr, 2011).

Mahammed Lal, the Taliban foot soldier turned farmer, had grown disenchanted with the Taliban's repressive authoritarianism in his village and was happy to see their "retreating backs." But the new, western authorities proved "considerably worse": as the presence of foreign troops became oppressive and locally installed officials governed corruptly, "Lal and other Noorzai ... wish[ed] for a return to the old order" (72).

Fairweather astutely observes that western leaders "have fallen in and out of love" with the idea of a Good War since "at least the Cold War" (331), but he might have cited recent studies that date the love affair, particularly among Americans, to long before the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> The British dreamt of building a Cape-to-Cairo highway and governed an empire on which the sun never set. The twenty-first-century British military possessed an inflated sense of "what could be achieved in Afghanistan, both in terms of defeating the Taliban and asserting its renewed sense of global mission" (117). The head of strategic planning at the British Ministry of Defense, Lt. Gen. Robert Fry, in particular, "believed that Afghanistan presented a critical strategic opportunity to secure the British military standing in the world" (115). Fry took advantage of the inertia of the British defense chiefs with his "rhetorical flair" and "particularly transformative" ideas (119). Great Britain secured "an equal role in shaping the war's trajectory" (117), but at the heavy cost of escalating casualties all around, especially in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan where UK forces were concentrated.

After the Canadians beat them to Kandahar, the British, unwilling to "lose the potential kudos that came with an individual effort" (120), turned to Helmand, one of the biggest opium-producing regions in the world and an area where even the American presence remained small. Helmand seemed to present a "challenge that would bolster [Britain's] reputation as a war-fighting nation" (117). But British military planners "knew little about Helmand" (120) and evinced no interest in learning more. The allure of the Good War rendered all else, including the Afghans themselves, inconsequential. Asharaf Ghani, head of Kabul University and former Afghan finance minister, warned:

"If there's one country that should not be involved in southern Afghanistan, it is the United Kingdom...." The British might have forgotten their own colonial history, he explained, but the Afghans had not.... In fact, the defeat of a British army outside the village of Maiwand in 1880, a stone's throw from Helmand, was still celebrated nationally. In one well-known poem the battle inspired, an Afghan woman named Malalai, seeing Afghan forces falter, used her veil as a banner and stirred the courage of her compatriots by shouting, "Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand/ by God someone is saving you as a token of shame." If the British deployed to Helmand ... the locals were likely to see it as just the latest colonial intrusion by their old foes. Nothing was more likely to stir up a rebellion than the sight of the Union Jack fluttering over a desert outpost in Helmand. "There will be a bloodbath," Ghani warned. (123)

This emphatically "was not what London wanted to hear" (124), yet the deployment proceeded. Resistance commenced and the Good War broke bad. In December 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron ordered British forces to return home. His declaration of "mission accomplished," Fairweather writes, amounted to "an instruction to the British public to forget about Afghanistan" (329).

The United States moved on as well. Even as the war wound down to its official conclusion in late 2014, American policy-makers, avowing that they had "dispensed with the notion of good wars" (329), reverted to a Cold War-style doctrine of containment, adding drone strikes into the traditional mix of covert operations and the funding of proxies—"[a] far more politically viable strategy of engagement than the kind of robust diplomacy and enduring military commitment necessary to achieve a negotiated peace." The strategy might contain the Afghan war, but, Fairweather contends, it is unlikely to end it. Covert wars quell public debate and allow leaders to "abnegate [their] responsibility to bring together the different sides of the Afghan war, and with it the hope for an enduring peace" (331).

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3. See, e.g., Joan Hoff, *A Faustian Foreign Policy from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush: Dreams of Perfectibility* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2007), Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2012), Dominic Tierney, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (NY: Little, Brown, 2010).

Though he discounts neither the West's successes in the Afghan war nor calls for an end to its involvement in struggling states, Fairweather indicts those who naïvely assume "military force can readily transform societies for the good." Afghanistan has taught us that "order persists in even the most war-damaged societies ... [and the] most sustainable solutions emerge when the inherent self-interest of those communities is engaged" (332).

In Afghanistan, a place with no history of centralized government, a grassroots approach holds the most promise. Western leaders must relearn the lessons of past mistakes. Fairweather aptly cites the observation of (then) US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara after the Vietnam War: "We viewed the people and leaders of South Vietnam in terms of our own experience. We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose" (333). This book teaches us to resist the siren song of a Good War winnable solely by military means.