



## *Blood, Metal and Dust: How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq* by Ben Barry.

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In 1939, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill began back-channel communications that grew into a “special relationship” between their two countries over the next eight decades. As British power declined relative to the United States, the United Kingdom often invested more in this relationship than it gained in return in the post-Cold War conflicts of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. Still, despite a lingering air of condescension towards their American counterparts, British military professionals offer a valuable perspective on recent conflicts that they shared with the United States.

Ben Barry’s effort to chronicle and analyze the Iraq and Afghan wars is a notable contribution to this perspective. A retired general officer, Barry (International Institute for Strategic Studies) commanded a multinational brigade in Bosnia before heading the British Army’s study of the stabilization efforts in Iraq after 2003. Beginning with Afghanistan, transitioning to the Iraq conflict, and finally returning to Afghanistan, his study includes valuable insights into the problems of the two allied governments and their armed forces.

Barry’s conclusions are unflinching: “the wars must be considered strategic failures” (15) for both combatants, the 2003 invasion of Iraq being “the worst military decision of the 21st Century” (464). By contrast, “Iran is the only nation that can be judged to have succeeded in achieving its strategic goals in Iraq” (463). Barry faults both Pres. George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair for poor strategic leadership in the initial stages of the war. The Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s shortsighted quest for partisan political control made him “the midwife of ISIS” (358).

Barry’s analysis includes familiar assessments. Faith in the technological “Revolution of Military Affairs” meant that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Central Command’s Gen. Tommy Franks undertook the 2003 campaign with sufficient forces to overthrow Saddam Hussein’s regime but not enough to prevent looting and the growth of an insurgency, let alone repair the destruction inflicted on the country and create a stable Iraqi state. American decisions at every level too often lacked sensitivity to the cultural and political complexities in both Afghanistan and Iraq. While the military eventually developed the human intelligence capability to understand these issues, the relentless determination in Whitehall and Washington to reduce troop commitments drove strategy and policy. These reductions meant that, in the later phases of each conflict, coalition forces often lost their situational awareness as advisors withdrew from tactical units and local leaders undermined their own intelligence agencies.

Though he recounts the events of both conflicts in detail, Barry too often reaches the same conclusions. Even the United States and certainly its coalition partners consistently under-resourced the wars in terms of troops on the ground. Population-centered counterinsurgency requires high troop levels, but that was the case only during the US surge in Iraq, a decision the author credits to President Bush overruling his advisors. By contrast, Pres. Barack Obama used the national security institutions of Washington more effectively than his predecessor. Yet, he author-

ized such a brief window of reinforcements in Afghanistan that “the campaign would be a race against the clock” (411). It meant trying to correct all of the military and governmental weaknesses of the Kabul regime in a scant eighteen months (2010–11) while the Taliban could stand back and await the inevitable drawdown.

As for allocating strategic resources, Barry excoriates the successive UK governments that provided too few soldiers, helicopters, and mine-resistant vehicles for the job at hand; this resulted in unnecessary British casualties and near failures in both Basra and Helmand. In the latter province, each successive rotation of a British brigade headquarters brought with it more combat troops, but never enough to control and protect the populace. Barry sounds almost envious of the relative wealth of equipment and weaponry that Americans brought with them when they supported the British.

In the absence of boots on the ground, massive firepower forestalled tactical defeats and blunted enemy offensives. But the resulting civilian casualties alienated the local populace and provided ample opportunity for both enemy and local friendly criticism of the Coalition. Raids by special operations forces (SOF) yielded better results at a lower price in civilian blood, but SOF and conventional units often worked at cross purposes; their humiliating invasions of civilian homes incurred heavy costs in terms of local dissatisfaction.

In managing these twin conflicts, the American and British governments often failed to ensure that all agencies involved cooperated fully. In Iraq, the friction between the Coalition Provisional Authority and both American and British generals was only the most extreme case of such inefficiency. The author rightly stresses the supportive relationship between Ambassador Ryan Crocker and his military counterparts, Generals Petraeus and Odierno. By contrast, Crocker’s successor in 2009 appeared “unwilling to engage” with the US military (353). Similarly, a British cabinet minister thwarted her government’s policies by refusing to fund development projects.

In writing about such complex issues, Barry sometimes approaches self-contradiction. He correctly deplores the loss of expertise incurred by troops rotating into and out of a combat zone. Yet, he also lauds the training on cultural awareness and Arabic language conducted by 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment before it deployed in 2005 (239–240). In the same vein, the author criticizes the brief (six-month) deployments of British troops to Afghanistan, yet praises the performance of US Marine Corps units whose deployments were similarly limited. (By contrast, US Army deployments varied between twelve and seventeen months.) In at least one instance, the Taliban simply outwaited the marines and counterattacked after their departure.<sup>1</sup>

Another recurring theme for Barry is that conventional American units were “in a state of self-inflicted institutional ignorance” (255) about counterinsurgency; but he later observes that “in both wars US forces often learned and adapted faster than the British did” (323). He faults UK mentoring of Iraqi units as inferior to that provided by the United States. If anything, his detailed study of UK operations around Basra may have made him excessively critical of his peers.

Readers may not agree with all of this author’s strongly expressed opinions. Much of the book relies on the equally opinionated memoirs of individual commanders, while institutional accounts of the American participation have only recently been released to the public.<sup>2</sup> Even with these

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1. Paul Westermeyer and Mark Balboni, “Mountain Storm: Counterinsurgency and the Air-Ground Task Force as a Microcosm of Marine Landpower Projection,” in Jason W. Warren, ed., *Landpower in the Long War: Projecting Force after 9/11* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2019) 139–51.

2. See, e.g., Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, eds, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, 2 vols. (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2019).

newer studies, we may never fully grasp how local insurgents conducted their side of the struggle. With those caveats, however, *Blood, Metal and Dust* will long remain a perceptive assessment of military operations in the “Long War.”