Review by Priyanka Singh

As witness to an unrelenting crisis, Afghanistan today is reminiscent of a strategic enigma, its history replete with external interventions and persisting internal conflicts. Beginning with the British, then the Soviets, and now the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) presence, Afghanistan
has followed a downward trajectory, fast slipping toward further instability and uncertainty. In the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, as
the war on terrorism was unleashed, a tremendous body of work dealing
with Afghanistan and the adjoining regions has been produced.

Against this profusion, Afghanistan Declassified by Brian Glyn
Williams, an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts at
Dartmouth, stands out as a book with a unique purpose and genesis.
In 2010, Williams was commissioned by the Joint Information Operations
Warfare Command of the U.S. Army to prepare a field manual based on
his extensive travel in and research on Afghanistan. The manual was
designed to educate U.S. soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and provide them
with a comprehensive background on basic and pertinent aspects of the
war-torn country. This book, an expanded version of that manual, is
published primarily for a larger civilian readership. The book is based on
the premise that a strong understanding of the geographical and cultural
terrain gives a tactical advantage over adversaries. A lack of this requisite
background information could be disadvantageous, especially when a
war has to be fought in a region as “alien” as Afghanistan.

The author begins by providing the basics—the ethnic and geographical
profile of Afghanistan. Williams deftly presents a comprehensive overview of
the country’s complex multiple ethnicities and tribal groups. In due course,
he offers details and little-known facts, further acquainting the reader with the
ethnic profile of Afghanistan, which is quite intricate. In Afghanistan, tribal
groups are a predominant force and warlords play a key role in the Af-
ghan system of governance. In view of the possibility that these warlords
are likely to play some kind of role in the ultimate resolution of the Afghan
problem, a rudimentary understanding of the composite ethnicities and
tribal systems is a prerequisite.

The author then proceeds to detail the geographical extremities of Af-
ghanistan, which make it picturesque, unique, and one of the toughest ter-
rains in which to fight a war.

The author dismisses drawing any parallels between the Soviet interven-
tion and the American war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The Soviets,
the author argues, invaded to establish “a more pragmatic” Communist
government in Afghanistan (p. 174). They had a fair advantage, their actions
not constrained by fear of collateral damage in terms of civilian causalities,
which for American forces is a paramount concern. The current coalition
forces aim to win the hearts and minds of the Afghans, whereas the Soviets
embraced the philosophy of collective punishment. This section in the book
juxtaposing the American and Soviet efforts in Afghanistan is engaging and
should be of particular interest to the reader. The comparison could possibly
curtil pessimism regarding the consequences of American involvement in
Afghanistan. That the two wars did not have much in common could help reduce
the prevalent fears among American forces, who dread they are
destined to meet a fate similar to the Soviet’s.

The author believes that, while much has been written on Osama bin Laden
as a terrorist, the days of his earliest involvement with Jihad, or holy war,
remain uncovered (p. 153). The author also believes that it is important to duly
understand bin Laden’s affiliation with fundamentalism, which dates back to
his early years amid an environment charged with the Arab-Israeli animos-
ity and fierce conflict between the two.

The book’s subtitle, America’s Longest War, is meant to reflect the fatigue
and desperation of Americans both at the military and policy-making levels.
The United States has conveyed its intentions to start withdrawing by
2014. Amid the growing realization that the United States needs to begin
removing its forces from combat and finding new ways to successfully man-
age a conclusion to this unceasing conflict, the commissioning of a manual
(leading to this book) can be viewed as a positive measure undertaken by
the U.S. Army. Williams advocates solutions that best serve the “soft
approach,” or rather, to help form an
understanding of the things that lie, conventionally, beyond the realm of
war. If applied in the initial phase of the war on terrorism, these ideas
would have been truly worthwhile. As such, the author’s wisdom could now
be implemented and only hope to incur success in the long term. It would,
nonetheless, be immensely useful if the United States maintained a minimal
presence in Afghanistan after 2014.

The key contribution of the book lies in its simple approach and disentan-
gling of rather complex issues like the origins of al-Qaeda. The author
believes that the American-Saudi nexus and the preemptive Soviet inva-
sion were jointly responsible for the creation of transnational terror groups
such as al-Qaeda.

The author admits the book is not a purely academic work, which is true
considering there are no citations or bibliographic references in the study.
It is, however, an apt source to acquaint American service members
with the war zone in Afghanistan. It brings to the table the author’s rich cumu-
lative experience from his travels to the war-stricken country over the last
ten or so years. The study is best when used to enhance one’s understanding
of the finer nuances of a beautiful land, its people, and how its disparate soci-
eity and systems function. The book looks beyond Afghanistan’s identity as a
battleground, or graveyard of great empires, presenting the country as a
unique mix of diversity, fragility, uncertainty, and deprivation situated in
the middle of an otherwise emergent Asia.

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