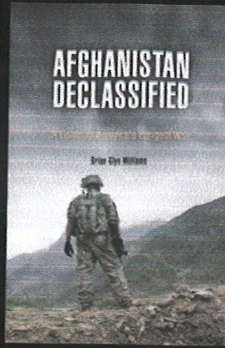


*Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide
to America's Longest War*



By Brian Glyn Williams
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012
Pp. xii, 248. \$34.95

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

PUBLISHED IN MILITARY
HISTORY (NO. 87)

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 Afghan 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 Afghanistan, which make it picturesque,

unique, and one of the toughest terrains in which to fight a war.

The author dismisses drawing any parallels between the Soviet intervention 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 casualties, 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 curtail 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 animosity 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 manage 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 disentangling of rather complex issues like the origins of al-Qaeda. The author believes that the American-Saudi nexus and the preemptive Soviet invasion 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 cumulative 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 society 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.

Dr. Priyanka Singh is an associate fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) in New Delhi, India. She holds a Ph.D. degree in political science from the University of Lucknow.

