



Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan

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Reviewed by Timothy Nunan

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Aaron B. O'Connell, ed., *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

There are American wars that last for decades, and then there are weeks of the American Presidency where it feels like a decade has passed. One week, the Trump administration's mood swings bring it from blackmailing NATO allies to contemplating trade wars against China. The next week might see a turn from launching cruise missiles into Syria one month to agreeing to a summit with Kim Jong-un. Between such dramatic twists and turns, it can be easy to forget Donald Trump's dropping the "mother of all bombs" in Afghanistan in April 2017, his Administration's increase of troop levels in Afghanistan by 25 percent, or simply the fact that the United States is still involved in that country. Afghanistan may be out of the headlines due to Trump's tweetstorms, but as of this writing, it remains, by some measures, the longest war in American history.

What, however, that war has achieved remains murky. U.S. Strategic Partnerships and Bilateral Security Agreements will keep American military bases in Afghanistan until the early 2020s, and recent NATO summits have confirmed funding for the Afghan military until 2020. But given that current annual U.S. spending on Afghanistan represents more than double Afghanistan's GDP, few believe that an Afghan government will be able to finance its self-defense or the destruction of international terrorist groups in Afghanistan's territory (much less to promote the well-being of some 35 million Afghans). More than that, while Kabul has indicated its openness to allowing the Taliban to open a political office in Kabul and to contest future elections in Afghanistan, representatives of the group insist that they will only talk with Washington and demand the end of what they regard as an imperialist occupation before they agree to talks. How did the United States get here? How did it go from a counterterrorism operation against the perpetrators of 9/11 to nation building and, now, an open-ended commitment to prevent the Afghan government from collapsing? And more broadly, of what use might such reflections be in the age of Trump?

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Our Latest Longest War, a collection of essays edited by Aaron O’Connell, a former U.S. Marine and veteran of the campaign in Afghanistan, enters this tumult to explore the failure of American nation building in Afghanistan from 2001-2014. Readers will recall that the United States’ shift from a mere counterterrorism operation against al Qaeda to nation building was not predestined. President George W. Bush explicitly campaigned against nation building during the 2000 Presidential Election, and initial USAID funding for Afghanistan following the invasion concentrated on short-term humanitarian aid rather than state building. Bush’s April 2002 promise of a “Marshall Plan” for Afghanistan notwithstanding, the transfer of top U.S. officials to Iraq limited any efforts to pursue a full-blown reconstruction campaign during the early years of the war. Frustrated military commanders and U.S. diplomats started to demand attention to nonmilitary factors in 2003, but it was not until the security situation deteriorated further circa 2006 that President Bush announced, in early 2007, budget increases that would make good his earlier pledges.

However, by the time that President Barack Obama came to office in early 2009, he commissioned a policy review that distanced the United States from the responsibility to rebuild Afghanistan. Instead, Obama announced the more modest goals of “disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan and preventing their return to either country in the future.” However, accomplishing these goals required a “population-centered counterinsurgency program” designed to protect Afghan civilians from the Taliban and win their loyalties with government services, the rule of law, and economic incentives. Yet talk of “counterinsurgency,” O’Connell and other writers contend, was merely the label for a program of U.S.-led nation building backed by a surge of 30,000 troops. From 2009-2011, annual U.S. spending in Afghanistan surged from \$43 billion to \$118 billion. In short, the United States engaged in a program of militarized nation building that the Bush Administration only reluctantly had considered before the Obama Administration dismissed such efforts as overambitious—only to radically redouble and militarize them.

Our Latest Longest War focuses on U.S. counterinsurgency operations from 2009-2011, with chapters focusing on one aspect of the United States’ framework for counterinsurgency operations—for example, the training of the Afghan Army and police; development and governance; or community defense forces. Beyond this core of the book, its readers obtain an overview of the broader course of America’s war in Afghanistan through contributions from former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ronald E. Neumann (2005-2007) on decision-making in Washington; Army Lieutenant Colonel Colin Jackson with a military overview of the war; and Air Force Lieutenant Benjamin F. Jones on the process of handing over control of the war to Kabul from 2011-2014. These overviews help provide an orientation for the inevitable ocean of acronyms in other, more focused chapters. So, too, does a chapter by Aaron MacLean, a former infantry platoon commander involved in 2010 operations to eliminate the Taliban from Helmand Province, on the very different assumptions about legitimacy and sovereignty that Americans and Afghans brought to the venture of counterinsurgency.

This venture, the book argues, “has either failed or is on the path to failure [...] both because of the nature of Afghan society and because the United States has

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