

**Bruce Reidel, *What We Won, America's Secret War in Afghanistan 1979-89*  
(The Brookings Institution, 2015), 189.**

**Reviewed by Majid Mahmood**

The book titled "*What We Won, America's Secret War in Afghanistan 1979-89*" written by Bruce Reidel is a detailed study of actors involved, conduct and lessons learnt from one of the biggest US covert operations in its history during the Afghanistan war of the 1980's. The book also addresses the reasons of success of covert operations and intelligence struggle against the Soviet 40<sup>th</sup> Red Army in Afghanistan and the role played by key decision makers in Carter and Reagan administrations in the United States and General Zia's regime in Pakistan. The book draws some lessons from that war which can be further studied and explored to understand the dynamics of insurgencies and counter insurgencies.

The book contains nine chapters divided in two parts. The first part explores the major players and combatants in the Afghan conflict such as Afghan Communists, the Soviets, Afghan Mujahideen, Pakistan's then President General Zia ul Haq, and Saudi Arabia. Five chapters are dedicated in this section to evaluate the part played by each of these five players who played a significant role during the Afghan conflict.

On Afghan communists, Reidel briefly explores their origins, disputes within Afghan communist party, the PDPA, and role in Afghanistan's complex tribal politics and goes in detail to explain how the Afghan communists took over power in Afghanistan and alienated the vast conservative tribal society in Afghanistan thereby setting the stage for increase in already ongoing violence and tribal insurgency against the Kabul administration. Reidel also profiles the larger geopolitical factors that have shaped Afghan politics from great game of Anglo-Tsarist struggle to Communist Saur revolution.

On the Soviet role during the Afghan conflict the author describes the success of Soviet deception in executing direct invasion of Afghanistan to support the communist coup. According to Mr. Reidel the American assessment was that Soviets will not intervene directly to support the communist party take over in Kabul. He further explores the decision making in Moscow regarding invasion of Afghanistan and circumstances within Afghanistan that led to the decision of direct Soviet involvement. The author also highlights the reasons for Soviet failure in Afghanistan during its ten years involvement in that country. Some of those reasons are interestingly common with current ISAF mission in Afghanistan such as resource allocation problem, instrument of brutality, availability of Pakistan's tribal areas as strategic depth for anti-communist insurgency, lack of understanding of Afghan psyche and undermining people's will to resist, amongst others.

Chapter three and four detail the resolve of Afghan people and particularly influential Mujahideen leaders against 40<sup>th</sup> Red Army and role of Zia's regime in Pakistan in supporting anti-communist insurgency. Chapter three profiles three mujahedeen commanders and their operations in Afghanistan namely Ahmed Shah Masood, Jalal-ud-deen Haqqani and Gulbadin Hikmatyar. Chapter four discusses the role of Pakistan's President General Zia-ul-haq and ISI in steering the Afghan insurgency to victory by taking great risks and skillfully exploiting opportunities. Reidel describes Zia as skillful with diplomacy, brave and understanding the insurgency phenomenon very well.

Part two of the book is dedicated to the US side of the Afghan conflict. Reidel discusses in detail the role of top decision makers in Carter and Reagan administrations. He describes Carter administration as the father of covert program in Afghanistan and Reagan as the victor who first oversaw the increase in intensity of covert actions and eventually withdrawal of Red Army from Afghanistan in 1988. Reidel also explains how CIA and Saudi intelligence played their part in steadily increasing the supply of arms and money to the Afghan insurgents under the guidance and supervision of Pakistan's ISI. The diplomacy

surrounding the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan is also discussed in these chapters.

Finally, the author highlights important lessons for the success of covert action programs drawn from the case study of 1979-1989 Afghan war. The lessons derived are: management of alliances, synchronized decision making within policy and intelligence community for better management of covert actions, strategic patience, clarity about the end game, monitoring blowback closely and exploiting mistakes of the enemies.

In an overall assessment, the book's has a fresh approach to study Afgan war against the Soviet forces. The author makes, Afghanistan's Mujahideen war, a case study to evaluate the success of any covert military action in another country. While much has been written regarding the Afghanistan war of 1979-1989 from several angles, the approach in this book provides a new perspective on the success of covert action program using information which is old but is largely known only to the academics and policy makers. Moreover, the book might encourage researchers to study covert and intelligence operations and insurgencies from the angle of success.