

Book Review
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Seth G. Jones, In the Graveyard of Empires: America's war in Afghanistan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 464

The book *In the Graveyard of Empires* by Seth G. Jones is a politico-historical account of foreign invasions on Afghanistan. It includes invasion of Alexander the Great; Afghanistan's conquest by Tamerlane; British-Afghan wars; Soviet invasion and defeat in Afghanistan and then American military intervention in this troubled land. The title of the book encompasses the theme of the political narrative that Afghanistan has been a quagmire for the invading powers from earlier times to the modern days. America, despite all its technological advancement and military might seems to be bound to meet the same fate. The book is an indepth account of reasons for resurgence of insurgency in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2009, and American policy dilemmas in that context.

Seth G Jones has conducted research in Afghanistan and stayed in that country from 2001 to 2008. During this period he interacted with US marines, NATO soldiers, Afghan and Pakistani government officials and Afghan leaders. While researching for the book he also interviewed influential policy makers and military personnel in Afghanistan and Pakistan, such as ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and Gen.Karl Eikenberry who held senior ambassadorial positions during the conflict days in Afghanistan. The author also consulted thousands of declassified government documents pertaining to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The author has drawn parallels between the American failure to prevent a re-emergence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and its policy failure to prevent the sprouting of insurgency in Iraq. In both cases the use of a smaller military deployment termed as 'light footprint' and the attempt for reconstruction of these countries with insufficient troops and resources led to American policy failure. American government failed to maintain law and order in these states. It also miserably failed to provide the local population with basic facilities like health care, electricity and education. In both cases, these policy failures led to

resentment against the American backed governments and tilted support in favour of Taliban or insurgents, who rushed to fill the power vacuum. American policy makers, sitting in Washington, wanted to maintain control over Afghanistan and Iraq by use of minimum resources; deployment of insufficient troops, and banking mainly on its advanced military technology.

Failure of US policy in Afghanistan has been associated, by the people of that country, with inherent limitation of ability of the system that the west wanted to impose on their country. To support this view Jones quotes General Eikenberry “the Afghan people may lose confidence in the nature of their political system and the goal of establishing a democratic, moderate, self-sustaining state could be lost forever.”

In the author’s opinion, Iraq became an experimentation lab for terror tactics that were transferred to Afghanistan. These included beheadings by the Taliban, the use of armor-penetrating ammunition, and the improvised explosive devices known as TV bombs.

The author blames Pakistan for the troubles faced by US led ISAF forces in Afghanistan. In his view, which was also the view of US establishment then, that the country that contributed directly to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan was its close neighbor Pakistan, which offered a safe haven to many Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters due to its semi-permeable border and Al-Qaeda affiliates presence in Pakistan. He also describes in some detail how members of Pakistan’s military intelligence agency sent money and extended logistical support to insurgents and kept in regular contact with militant leaders. He criticizes the American government of not exerting enough pressure on Pakistani government to curb militancy emanating from Pakistani tribal areas. He goes on to say that the vast majority of US planning was on paper, not in practice. The United States refused to take concerted actions against the Taliban and other insurgents in Pakistan or to put serious pressure on Pakistan to do it. Seth is also critical of the American government for not placing serious conditions on its assistance to Pakistan. It did not demand a quid pro quo in which the United States provided money and equipment to Pakistan aimed at capturing or killing key Taliban leaders and other militants residing in Pakistan.

This book was widely acclaimed for its details on Afghanistan. However it is not without blemishes. In case of Pakistan the book fails to recognize the efforts made by Pakistan to curb militancy. It also does not mention Pakistan's concerns regarding threats to its security or even lack of support by US for meeting its military needs, especially military reconnaissance equipments which is imperative for operations in Pak-Afghan border areas.

This book seems to be repeating American establishments "do more" mantra to Pakistan in terms of countering insurgents, ignoring the ground realities.

Seth concludes by saying that the failure of Donald Rumsfeld's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan can be attributed to lack of resources and turning a blind eye to the counsels of the scholars and military commanders. He reminds US to learn from annals of history as past empires that dared to enter Afghanistan from Alexander the Great to Great Britain and the Soviet Union have found initial entry possible, even easy but only to find themselves fatally mired in the deadly combination of local resistance, harsh weather and mountainous terrain, which confronted and destroyed the invading armies.

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