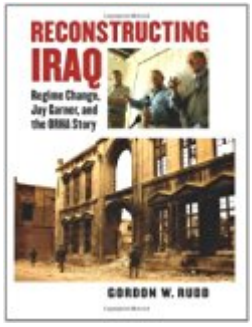
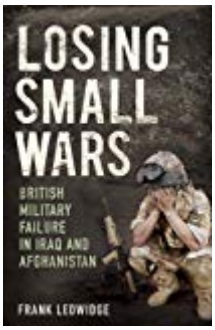
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

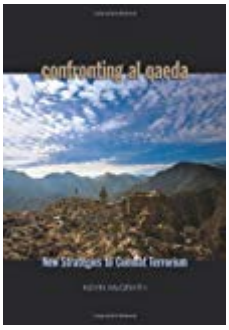
Tim Bird, Alex Marshall. *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 303 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 097-83-00-15457-3.



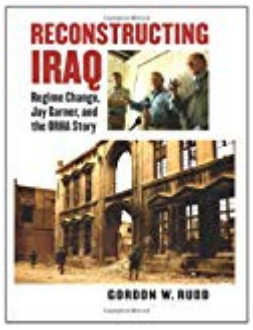
Frank Ledwidge. *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. viii + 308 pp. $27.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-18274-3.



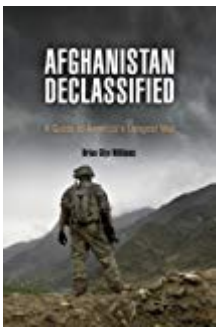
Kevin McGrath. *Confronting Al Qaeda: New Strategies to Combat Terrorism.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011. 336 pp. $42.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59114-503-5.



Gordon W. Rudd. *Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner, and the ORHA Story.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. 488 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1779-1.



Brian Glyn Williams. *Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide to America's Longest War.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. xii + 248 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4403-8.



Reviewed by Jacqueline Hazelton

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

These books, like any selection on the U.S.-led allies' adventures in the Middle East in the first decade or so of the twenty-first century, raise a painful, inescapable question. What happened? What explains the West's failure to attain its strategic political goals in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere since 9/11? These authors provide a range of answers, many familiar and some damning, from ideological blinders to bureaucratic imperatives to sloppy thinking. They contribute to a dismal picture of U.S.-led efforts in the 9/11 period. This is the era when technology, firepower, and a rediscovered belief in the power of cultural understanding failed to attain nearly unlimited Western political goals in Muslim states. More troubling, most of these works assume, at least implicitly, that the West's strategic goals in these cases were or are attainable. Given the failures of strategic thought documented by these authors, one completes these works with a sense of relief that the West has not faced any pressing existential threats recently.

In *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way*, Tim Bird and Alex Marshall provide a crisply written, thoroughly researched examination of the allied effort in Afghanistan. It is damning in its presentation of what the authors term "strategic vacuity." Bird is a lecturer at King's College London in the Defense Studies Department. Marshall lectures in the History Department at Glasgow University. In 262 highly readable pages, Bird and Marshall move from Afghanistan in historical context to the attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. response; the formative Afghan governance period of late September 2001 to June 2002; the Taliban resurgence that followed to 2005 (a period the authors memorably describe as characterized by "the near-lethal combination of blind optimism and neglect," p. 150); the U.S. refocus on "the forgotten war" that began in 2006; the Pakistani elephant in the room; and the search for an off-ramp between 2009 and 2011. The authors wisely chose to tell a chronological story that weaves in themes such as liberal beliefs about governance and development, Afghan insurgency and international terrorism, and the coalition politics of the external actors.

Bird and Marshall argue that the allied intervention in Afghanistan was incoherent in conception and execution and thus had little chance of success. Their aim is "to provide an understanding of why a large swathe of the international community, with the leading members of NATO in the vanguard, has found it so difficult to achieve its goals in this decade-long conflict" (p. 3). There was little sifting of "the vital from the peripheral;

the essential from the desirable; or the threatening from the simply problematic" (p. 253). Flawed assumptions, bad tactical choices, liberal ideals, and a tragic lack of attention to local dynamics all played a role in the Western failure in Afghanistan. The authors identify the shifting goals advanced for Afghanistan (from removal of the Taliban from power and disruption of the core Al Qaeda organization led by Osama bin Laden to state-building, counterinsurgency, democratization, counterterrorism, development, regional stabilization, and more) and they nail the "incoherent strategy" that sprang from wildly varying concerns in capitals from Washington to Brussels, Delhi, Tehran, and Beijing (pp. 3-4). "Strategic clarity," they note mildly, "has been an elusive commodity" (p. 5). National goals, contributions, caveats, interests, and bureaucracies have combined with NATO interests to shatter hopes for clear, coherent, achievable ends mated to realistic ways and means. The complexities of Afghanistan and its geographic location only add to the difficulties created by fuzzy thinking. Perhaps most importantly, the authors identify the ways in which Afghanistan has become a "laboratory for key Western states in the development of 'comprehensive' or 'interagency' approaches to stabilization or 'state-building'" (p. 5).

Alone among these authors, Bird and Marshall identify the core of the West's failure as not only the strategic error of mismatching ends, ways, and means, but the tragic error of setting impossible goals. In a twist on the liberal view of the United States as the indispensable nation, they argue that only the United States had the capability to form a coherent strategy for Afghanistan and it failed to do so. But they also argue that the United States in fact lacked the capability to make, lead, and execute a successful strategy in Afghanistan because it set such vast goals. It lacked the necessary knowledge of the state and the region, it lacked the humility necessary to question its own assumptions, it lacked intellectual sensitivity to its poor fit of means and ends, and it lacked any vision of a unifying mission that could have united the fractious alliance behind a set of achievable outcomes.

The authors' conclusion is compelling: "Just about every conceivable approach, in a variety of combinations, has ... been attempted. There have only been two consistent themes. The first has been the mismatch between the dominant policy fashions pursued at particular points in time and the cycle of events in Afghanistan itself. The second," they argue, "has been the flawed execution of the policies, suggesting that, even if there had been a closer alignment of approach with conditions on the ground, 'success' would have been elusive" (pp. 249-250). The message resonates: Power does not necessarily bring wisdom, effectiveness or efficiency, or control over events and other actors' choices. "Hubris" usually appears in discussions of the U.S. war on Iraq, but Bird and Marshall make it clear that the U.S. effort in Afghanistan suffered from that critical weakness at least as much as it did in Iraq.[1]

This is an important book for its emphasis on the beliefs driving Western choices in Afghanistan as well as for its attention to the mechanics of alliance politics, the clashes between outsiders' wishes and Afghan reality, and the details of prolonged sloppy strategic thinking. It will be useful in the classroom as well as for the interested layperson.

In *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in Iraq and Afghanistan*, Frank Ledwidge paints a devastating picture of how personal interests, bureaucratic politics, and British military culture distorted strategic planning processes and created the great British military failures of the 2000s in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ledwidge is a retired Royal Navy reservist and lawyer who served in Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo. He also served on a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Helmand, Afghanistan. In the first section of the book, he provides background on the British campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the second, he places the

blame for failure there firmly on British generals and on British military culture, with what he identifies as its critical lack of attention to analytical thinking. Ledwidge also discusses the requirements of hearts-and-minds or population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN), with its focus on serving popular needs to draw popular allegiance away from the insurgents and to the state, and he identifies how the British use of the tactical military tool undermined British strategic political goals.

This book is most damaging to the British Army in its use of snippets of testimony from military leaders to the United Kingdom's Iraq Inquiry to underline the military's lack of strategic thinking and planning. Ledwidge condemns military leaders for not pressing their political masters for clearer direction on the desired political outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan. He shames them for barely nodding to the comprehensive approach of uniting civilian and military action to reduce insurgency and gain popular support. He blames them for a nearly criminal lack of planning. He damns the lack of British military training and preparation for COIN campaigns and attacks the myth of special British COIN powers exercised in Malaya, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere. He also underlines the differences between the Northern Ireland campaign and contemporary campaigns, underlining a recurring and important theme in these books about historical misrepresentation of past success and dangerously inapt comparisons.

To remedy these bureaucratic, training, and planning faults, Ledwidge argues for increasing military cultural awareness, for improving coordination of civil and military efforts, and for increased attention to the importance of influencing multiple audiences to attain wartime political goals. Finally, he also argues for improving the British Army's military educational system to foster analytical thinking and thus improve strategic thinking. All this matters, Ledwidge says, in case Britain does someday face an existential threat that requires COIN skills.

This is a passionate, tendentious book. It is also a very personal one. Ledwidge appears to write out of his own understandable frustration and that of his fellows in arms. Ledwidge's sourcing is anecdotal, relying heavily on a handful of journalists and defense analysts as well as identified and unidentified members of the armed forces. The insider perspective is fascinating. Its enthusiasm is compelling. It is a plausible story about bureaucratically driven failure. It is likely to be useful in the classroom and for the interested layperson. But it is not--and in all fairness it is not intended to be--a balanced, detached analysis of the British military's choices regarding Iraq and Afghanistan. On its face, sending action-oriented paratroopers into Helmand for a mission intended to serve the civilian populace seems misguided. Ledwidge's discussion of the bad outcomes that resulted is frustrating and heartbreaking. But he argues that the Paras were sent in because the army felt it faced an imperative to use them or lose them. It is not clear why that imperative trumped all the other interests Ledwidge identifies as distorting smart strategic decision making in the British Army. Similarly, Ledwidge makes a positive, persuasive argument about the need to increase analytical thinking in the British military. But he urges adoption of a military educational system similar to that of the United States. Unfortunately, despite the excellent U.S. professional military educational system and its education of officers in top civilian universities, U.S. military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have also been marked by sloppy strategic thinking and poor planning. Most problematically, Ledwidge shares the allies' flawed assumptions about the achievable nature of their attempts to use the military tool to serve popular interests while creating a state something like the Western, Weberian ideal.

Gordon W. Rudd's ***Reconstructing Iraq: Regime Change, Jay Garner, and The ORHA Story***, tells the distressing tale of the U.S. government's lack of unity of effort on Iraq, with its lack of planning, coordination, and management, its stovepiping, its organizational weaknesses, and its flawed execution of plans. Rudd is a professor at the U.S. Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting who studies interagency and post-conflict operations. His previous book was on the 1991 humanitarian intervention called Provide Comfort, led by then-General Jay Garner. Rudd's story of the first postwar governance effort in Iraq, the short-lived Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), and its leader, Garner, is not new in outline but it is probably the most highly detailed account that will ever appear. Rudd was there in the United States, Kuwait, and Iraq to watch ORHA's birth and death; when Garner invited him to accompany ORHA, Rudd seized the opportunity to conduct a case study in interagency operations. Rudd stayed in Iraq after Garner's return home to watch the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) stand up, a transition that Rudd calls "neither smooth nor thoughtful" (p. viii). Rudd also observed the CPA handover to the U.S. Embassy and then to a new Iraqi government.

Rudd's story is no less gripping for its familiarity. Though it took place only a decade ago, its events feel eerily distant. In his first two chapters, Rudd examines U.S. planning for the Iraq war. An important flaw Rudd identifies is the sloppy thinking that led the United States to take the post-World War II long-term reconstruction of Germany and Japan as models rather than what he considers the more appropriate "liberation" models from the same period, including Italy, Austria, Korea, and the Philippines, and earlier military governance efforts in Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, and the Dominican Republic. The story continues with Garner's attempt to stand up ORHA at the Pentagon, where he was hobbled by political obstructionism, and ORHA's move to Kuwait, where Garner was denied resources and coordination with the military effort. In Iraq, Rudd follows Garner's efforts to form an interim Iraqi government and get the public service ministries moving. Garner's replacement, L. Paul Bremer III, arrives and sinks Garner's nascent efforts by ordering de-Ba'athification, disbanding the army, and dismissing the Iraqi Interim Authority that Garner had intended to restore local rule to Iraq. Finally, with violence and U.S. costs continuing to rise, Rudd closes with an assessment of lessons learned.

Rudd makes it clear where responsibility for failure lies, and it is not with Garner. Rudd describes him as "a figure both heroic and tragic, a charismatic leader of great enthusiasm and drive who, in good faith, took on a task of grand proportions and was poorly served by those who chose him and sent him to Iraq" (p. vii). Rudd's judgments are based on observation and hundreds of interviews with participants. "The planning for regime replacement was haphazard and grossly inadequate," writes Rudd (p. vii). This is not new. What is new is Rudd's scrupulously detailed account of the U.S. failure, down to the background of nearly every identified U.S. actor, along with a discussion of their political and bureaucratic interests and ties. This level of detail, from Garner's daily schedule in Washington to group logistics in Kuwaitmakes ***Reconstructing Iraq*** a long read at 404 pages of text.

Reconstructing Iraq, like most work to date on Iraq, is U.S.-centric. Rudd's topic is not Iraqi interests, personalities, or reactions to U.S. choices, but the relative lack of non-U.S.-actors is disconcerting. But Rudd does identify and detail U.S. organizational and personnel problems in spades. He finds enough blame to go around: for National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice's lack of support; for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's meddling in personnel matters; for Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith's desire to control hiring; for the lack of value in the State Department and USAID's planning; for multiple examples of personal pique; for detachment at

the top levels of the U.S. military; for Garner's exclusion from the top policy circles at the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council; for dissimulation at the highest political levels of the U.S. government; for civilian-military tensions, e.g., USAID's disinclination to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; for the lack of managerial skills at State; for the lack of U.S. military investment in post-invasion operations; for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Richard Myers, CENTCOM commander Gen. Tommy Franks, and down the chain of command; and for President George W. Bush, who did not ask the military if it was ready for what would come after invasion.

Rudd's lessons learned are notable for their optimism--if everyone had done their job, if everyone had put national interests first, if everyone was competent and suited to their task ... --and for their practicality: States must provide a large ground force presence at the beginning of a liberation or occupation; unity of effort is critical in planning for postwar operations and the NSC must supply it; and post-conflict efforts require qualified personnel with country and issue expertise. These are indeed important. Yet the weakness of these lessons lies in the same can-do attitude that permeates Ledwidge's book and that Bird and Marshall underline as unrealistic; the belief that getting international post-conflict reconstruction right is a matter of hard work, competence, will, and the right organizational flow charts.

In *Afghanistan Declassified: A Guide to America's Longest War*, Brian Glyn Williams provides background on Afghanistan and the long allied campaign there. Williams is a professor of Islamic history at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth who has worked for the CIA's Counterterorrism Center and on information operations for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. He wrote the book as a primer for U.S. soldiers, then fleshed it out for broader distribution with accounts of his own travels in Afghanistan. His goal, Williams writes, is to "bring Afghanistan's diversity to life for the average reader who might have a family member serving in that theater of operations, or for those who simply have an interest in knowing more about a land where American troops are fighting and dying" (p. xi).

Williams opens with a discussion of Afghanistan's ethnicities and geography, and then focuses two chapters on history. He describes Afghanistan's development as a state and addresses the recent past of the Afghan-Soviet war, the civil war, and the rise of the Taliban. In his final chapter, Williams describes the current allied effort in Afghanistan and adds details about his personal experiences with and perspective from mostly anonymous Afghans during wartime visits. Williams also works in colorful anecdotes from his meetings with Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum. To his credit, Williams includes cameos of a number of other Afghan political players as well. Too often, Western discussions of the campaign include few or no local actors.

Williams's narrative is primarily about ethnicity rather than interests, with little discussion of how different allied interests and differing Afghan political, economic, and social interests have played out and changed since the U.S. intervention of 2002. Beyond ethnicity as a static value, Williams says the United States lost its way in Afghanistan and provides a familiar account of why. He blames the U.S. military's lack of contact with Afghans, its empowerment of warlords, and its lack of troops from 2001-2005. Williams also blames Afghan President Hamid Karzai for trying to create a centralized state instead of a looser ethnic federation, but does not mention the U.S. role in designing the Afghan Constitution, with its centralized state structure. He blames the failure to attain U.S. goals on local corruption and the slow delivery of promised international aid, though aid goes a long way toward fueling corruption within Afghanistan. Finally, Williams blames the U.S. failure to date on its failure to pro-

tect the Afghan people. While elsewhere in his narrative he brings in valuable perspective from Afghans on their healthy fear of U.S. troops and weaponry, Williams does not address the ways in which the U.S. presence and efforts to protect the populace can lead to civilian harm. Overall, Williams' analysis elides the problems the United States and its allies face in Afghanistan and, like most of the other works reviewed here, smoothes over the complications inherent in an external intervention to create a modern, liberal, capitalist state. Its greatest value lies in the author's obvious love for the people and the country and the glimpses Williams provides of Afghanistan beyond war and U.S.-centric politics.

Kevin McGrath's *Confronting Al Qaeda: New Strategies to Combat Terrorism* provides a detailed look at the global war on terror. Unlike the other books discussed here, it is focused well beyond Iraq and Afghanistan and even Al Qaeda to include U.S. interests such as relations with Pakistan and Iran. It reinforces established beliefs about how the war on terror went wrong by taking a primarily military bent. Relatively long at 250 pages, McGrath focuses on policy prescriptions intended to remedy the force-based failures of the past decade. He briskly notes numerous problems in each of the cases he examines, e.g., in Afghanistan, U.S. choices about aid delivery are made with little input from local officials, but he is more interested in the plotting the future than in explaining the past. The author works in risk management and holds a PhD from the University of Maryland. The book is sourced primarily on journalistic reports and includes plenty of narrative background and detail, making it potentially of interest to nonspecialists interested in prescriptions flowing from a worldview based on the power of ideas and international cooperation.

McGrath's goal is to present a post-George W. Bush strategy for the war on terror, "pitting U.S. strengths against Al Qaeda's weakness to stymie Al Qaeda's success" (p. 5). He argues that the U.S.-led post-9/11 effort against Al Qaeda failed to play up the fundamentally different political agendas of the two sides. McGrath calls for more attention to soft power tools, "engaging it [Al Qaeda] in a manner consistent with traditional U.S. political values and foreign policy emphases." McGrath does not disavow the need for hard power, but says the hard-power approach has "only partially weakened Al Qaeda's organizational capacity while fanning Al Qaeda's political appeal at unbounded and ever-increasing military, economic, and political cost to the United States" (p. 2).

Under President Bush, soft power efforts "failed horribly" because they failed to address the political grievances mobilizing Al Qaeda members (pp. 63, 81). McGrath argues that it is critical for the United States to recognize that it and Muslim publics worldwide share political values, and it is Al Qaeda that "is the political and economic ideological outlier" (p. 86). Placing U.S. actions closer in line with U.S. values will increase support for the United States and increase opposition to Al Qaeda, McGrath says, making the critical point that global audiences are not so much pro-Al Qaeda as they are anti-United States (p. 93).

Looking ahead, McGrath makes the welcome points that the United States must recognize that the Al Qaeda challenge is primarily political, not existential. The threat is that Al Qaeda provides a rallying point for anti-U.S. feeling. He prescribes adherence to the rule of law, respect for human rights, and support for participatory politics. More specifically, McGrath advises that the United States should settle the Israel-Palestinian conflict, get out of Iraq, and continue leading the international system through deep engagement while living its values in order to assure continued primacy. He includes specific prescriptions for a host of problems, from nuclear proliferation to the poor U.S. relationship with Pakistan. McGrath's is a streamlined, no-nonsense approach that includes many reasonable suggestions while overstating

the degree of control that the United States can exercise over international outcomes.

One theme that unites these works is the belief that the use of force has limited utility in attaining political goals. What matters more than the military tool is getting close to the people the United States and its allies want to sway, and helping them. All the authors but Bird and Marshall appear to assume that the West's goals in Iraq and Afghanistan are, or were, achievable. All but Bird and Marshall assume that the United States and its allies can identify and understand popular interests within other states, that those interests are uniform, and that outside actors can meet them. Each identifies a different weakness that has prevented success. McGrath emphasizes the need for the United States to live its foundational liberal values. Williams focuses on the importance of living with the people of the client state and bringing them enlightened governance. Ledwidge underlines the need for military reform and education in the intervening state in order to meet popular interests within the client state. Rudd focuses on the administrative capabilities of intervener and client. But these authors miss the forest for the trees.

They tell a familiar story. Belief in the power of modernization and the possibility of social engineering, or what James C. Scott calls "high modernism"; belief in the need for improved administrative abilities; and belief in the use of U.S. military forces to spread liberal values and thus increase U.S. security all influenced U.S. foreign policy and military thinking during the Vietnam era and the Latin American wars of the 1980s.[2] But the good intentions underlying this set of beliefs about the ends, ways, and means of international intervention do not compensate for the key point that emerges from Bird and Marshall's work: Ideological assumptions hobble strategic thinking. These authors identify a set of tools critical for international state-building efforts such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and several identify the critically important need to identify appropriate historical models for lessons learned, but they largely ignore politics and they deny agency to the locals. If local interests do not align with intervener goals, efforts to bring progress and development become points of contention and reason for further violence, rather than a salve for internal conflict and a bolster of liberal state development.[3]

Notes

[1]. See the H-Net Roundtable on this work for a far more comprehensive discussion and the authors' response: https://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-18.pdf.

[2]. For example, James C. Scott, ***Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*** (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Robert A. Packenham, ***Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); D. Michael Shafer, ***Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Douglas J. Macdonald, ***Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention For Reform in the Third World*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Benjamin C. Schwarz, ***American Counterinsurgency Doctrine and El Salvador: The Frustrations of Reform and the Illusions of Nation Building*** (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991).

[3]. For example, Andrew Radin, "The Limits of State Building: The Politics of War and the Ideology of Peace" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012), and Colin Jackson, "Government in a Box? Counter-insurgency, State-building, and the Technocratic Conceit," in ***The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective***, ed. Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones, and M. L. R. Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

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