

History of fear in a country of dust

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan

By Gregory Feifer

HarperCollins, 326pp, \$49.99 (HB)

The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One

By David Kilcullen

Scribe, 376pp, \$35

The Search for Al Qaeda: Its Leadership, Ideology and Future

By Bruce Riedel

Brookings Institution Press, 224pp, \$49.95 (HB)

When the Howard government announced in 2001 that Australian troops would be heading to Afghanistan, I remember thinking that their contribution would be largely symbolic, that they would play second fiddle to the not especially martial Dutch in a moderately violent part of the country. I discovered a very different reality last July when, in my role as UN justice co-ordinator in southern Afghanistan, I made my first trip to the Dutch-Australian base in Tarin Kowt, the overgrown village capital of Oruzgan province.

The Dutch Dash aeroplane, a luxury in a region where most travel is by helicopter, landed on the dirt airstrip in a valley encircled by arid mountains. We had come to attend a ceremony marking a change of the Dutch command. The several hundred soldiers in desert-coloured fatigues and floppy hats ranked around the aircraft hanger where the handover took place, with the Dutch only slightly outnumbering the Australians, reminded me of Princess Leia's ragged but plucky rebel troops in Star Wars. Like everything in Oruzgan, we were all covered in southern Afghanistan's ubiquitous dust.

On VIP seats in front of me in the corrugated-iron hangar sat Afghan dignitaries in turbans, full beards and long shalwar kameez with blankets (patus) artfully draped around their shoulders like togas. One of them, a Dutch official told me, was Matiullah Khan, head of a semi-official 200-strong force who secured the highway that was the base's lifeline to NATO's regional hub in Kandahar. Secured it for a price: after his subsidy from the Americans was reportedly cut last year, and the Dutch tried to provide security, an attack against a NATO convoy on the road destroyed two tankers. No attacks have occurred since Matiullah has been back in charge at full pay.

After the ceremony UN colleagues briefed me on Oruzgan, one of the most backward provinces in Afghanistan. Perhaps one man in 20 can read and almost all women are illiterate. Months later a Dutch colleague undertook some research for me. He met a senior

judge and explained he was there to ask some questions on behalf of the UN. The judge asked what the UN was. The Dutchman explained that it was a big international organisation. "What's an organisation?" asked the judge. The interpreter cleverly explained that it was like a huge jirga, the ad hoc council that adjudicates disputes among the Pashtuns who predominate in southern Afghanistan and across the border in Pakistan. "Ah," said the judge, "now I understand." Though remote, Oruzgan is the birthplace of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, and befitting a place so dubiously honoured, one of the most dangerous, Taliban-infested provinces. Australian troops have earned a reputation for being bold and formidable fighters.

It is also one of the most dangerous, Taliban-infested provinces and the Australian troops there have earned a reputation for being bold fighters. So, the extra 450 troops that the Rudd Government has committed to Oruzgan, bringing the total to 1550, will be joining a combat force in one of the toughest parts of a legendarily fierce country. This deployment follows the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq, which matches Kevin Rudd's long-held view that Afghanistan is a more legitimate war and more important. The Prime Minister also has warned it is likely that more Australian soldiers will die in Afghanistan. For such sacrifice to be justified, the international effort to which Australia is making this substantial contribution must stand a reasonable chance of being successful. Does it? Can the West beat the Taliban and its motley but battle-hardened jihadi allies?

Many who argue that our efforts in Afghanistan are doomed to failure point out that no foreign power -- and most mightily Britain and the Soviet Union -- has managed to subdue the Afghans for long. In fact, Britain never wanted to rule Afghanistan as it did India; the interest in Afghanistan was solely defensive, that it be a pro-British buffer between the Raj and Russia. The Afghans showed the British not that their land could not be dominated at any cost but that the cost was greater than it was worth.

After 10 years of occupation that did much to contribute to the demise of their empire, the Soviets reached the same conclusion in 1989. The Soviets couldn't control Afghanistan despite having more than 100,000 troops on the ground, suffering perhaps 75,000 dead and killing an estimated 1.25 million Afghans (9 per cent of the population.) Why should the soft, human rights-conscious West, now ramping up towards 100,000 troops, believe it can do any better?

In *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Gregory Feifer, a Russian-speaking American reporter who has been based in Moscow for a decade and has ghostwritten the memoir of a senior KGB general, tells this grim tale with verve and unprecedented intimacy. Through the recollections of combatants on both sides, Feifer tells the stories behind what were remote news reports or dark rumours at the time: the storming of the presidential palace, dehumanising hazing of novice soldiers, Afghans being pushed out of helicopters.

As someone who has worked in Afghanistan recently, the country Feifer describes feels disturbingly familiar. Several of the most prominent mujaheddin commanders during the Soviet occupation are still prominent: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar fought the Soviets but was notorious for viciously fighting rival mujaheddin groups, was twice prime minister and still leads Hezb-i-Islami, an ally of the Taliban and al-Qa'ida. Ismail Khan was an important mujaheddin commander, then governor of Herat province and now Energy Minister. Former president Burhanuddin Rabbani leads the United Front, the main coalition opposing Karzai. Sibghatullah Mojadeddi, leader of Afghanistan's Naqshbandi Sufi sect, is a pro-Karzai elder statesman and leader of the upper house of parliament.

Another prominent character in Feifer's book is the Mi-8 helicopter, the Soviets' workhorse combat transport craft, and what I regularly flew in for three hours at a time, with Russians at the controls, between Kandahar and Kabul.

Under Hafizullah Amin, the ruthless Columbia University-educated prime minister overthrown by the Soviets, Afghanistan was a collection of largely self-governing fiefdoms; the Karzai Government has also mostly ruled through local strongmen. Even before the 1979 invasion, some Soviet officials were arguing that the efforts required in Afghanistan were more political

than military; in the current foreign intervention, only now are Western strategists beginning to give due weight to non-military measures. Then, as now, the presence of foreign forces spurred the spread of armed opposition and united groups who previously had been at one another's throats. Then, as now, military effectiveness was compromised by fear of ambush and most troops remained at their bases or guarded fixed points rather than providing security to the civilian population. In the communist era and today foreign soldiers eat only imported produce rather than buying it from the farmers of the poor agrarian country they are meant to be helping. The parallels go on.

But there are important differences too. Under the Soviets, many mujaheddin groups set up parallel institutions to provide public services in areas under their control. The Taliban, by contrast, provides no services beyond enforcing its harsh form of justice. Today foreign armies and their aid agencies build roads; the Soviets built no new roads but did send thousands of Afghan officials to the Soviet Union to study, something almost unheard of today.

From early in their occupation, most Soviet soldiers engaged in rapacious looting and every other form of abuse of vulnerable Afghan civilians. Discipline among foreign troops in Afghanistan today is good, by and large, as is motivation. On the other hand, former Soviet officials who served in Afghanistan and work there with international organisations have told me that back then many Afghan officials and mujaheddin were idealistic. Today, after 30 years of conflict, cynicism and corruption reign. As one high-ranking Afghan official put it: "Back then people were patriots, they really loved their country. Now they'd sell it."

Another difference: Soviets pretended the rebels were all bandits; today there's a tendency to treat all bandits as rebels. This question of who the enemy is and why is at the heart of counter-insurgency warfare. The *Accidental Guerrilla*, a brilliant study by former Australian army colonel David Kilcullen, turns on the notion encapsulated in the title: that most of the insurgents opposing Western troops are never looking for a fight. They are, Kilcullen writes,

people who fight us not because they hate the West and seek our overthrow but because we have invaded their space to deal with a small extremist element that has manipulated and exploited local grievances to gain power in their societies. They fight us not because they seek our destruction but because they believe that we seek theirs, a belief in which they are encouraged by a cynical, manipulative clique of takfiri [radical Islamist] terrorists who, though tiny in number, have been catapulted to great political influence and prestige because of our reaction to 9/11.

An author who has reached a senior position in government or the military is often like a restaurant with a great view: he doesn't have to work all that hard to keep the customers coming. Not so Kilcullen, despite having served as a counterinsurgency adviser to former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and US commander in Iraq David Petraeus. The book testifies to a great deal of hard work. Not only has Kilcullen had a privileged vantage point on the most important conflicts of our era, he has been thinking intently, reading widely but purposefully and taking notes the whole time. The result is probably the best book available on contemporary conflicts and how to fight them.

After an engaging prologue recounting his early thoughts on counterinsurgency while doing fieldwork for a PhD in West Java in the mid-'90s, Kilcullen outlines his conceptual framework and presents detailed studies of what has and has not worked in Afghanistan, where he led field assessment teams in 2006 and 2008, and in Iraq. Another chapter examines, more briefly but instructively, the conflict in East Timor, the Islamist militant movement in southern Thailand, the gathering insurgency in Pakistan's tribal areas and the danger of Muslim immigrant communities in Europe becoming sucked into violent conflict with the West.

From this wealth of thoroughly digested experience he derives not a simple blueprint for victory but sets of principles and suggestions about how Western governments should incorporate them in their planning and operations.

Kilcullen uses an extended medical metaphor to explain the "accidental guerilla syndrome" in which a tiny group of Islamist militants with a global agenda creates conditions that ensnare people whose priorities are local and non-ideological. The cycle begins with infection when "AQ [al-Qa'ida] establishes a presence in a remote, ungoverned or conflict-affected area". This progresses to contagion when "AQ uses the safe haven to spread violence and takfiri ideology to other regions". This, at least since 9/11, prompts intervention by Western forces, which in turn provokes rejection by local people who oppose outside interference and feel driven to side with al-Qa'ida.

Kilcullen estimates that in mid-2008 there were 32,000 to 40,000 members of the Taliban in Afghanistan, of whom one-quarter were hardcore and the rest fighting or helping on an ad hoc basis for pay or to pursue local agendas. Often the motivation is revenge. Pashtuns from Waziristan, in Pakistan's tribal areas, told me their neighbours had begun supporting the Taliban only after Pakistan army helicopters, pushed by the Bush administration, began firing rockets at their villages. Many Afghans in Kandahar told me that people in the area were thrilled about the fall of the Taliban and the presence of foreign troops until those troops started killing people.

Human Rights Watch estimates that 40 per cent of civilian casualties are caused by foreign military forces and the rest by insurgents. In insecure environments where the enemy is all but impossible to distinguish from civilians, some such incidents are inevitable. But every death creates new enemies, just as al-Qa'ida intends. Morally and strategically, the inevitable killing and maiming of noncombatants argues for avoiding military intervention wherever possible, as Kilcullen emphasises.

In *The Search for Al Qaeda* Bruce Riedel, a veteran CIA officer and adviser to presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, begins each chapter by recounting a story about himself in action. But whereas Kilcullen's autobiographical vignettes give us a clear sense of the experience and observations that inform his theories, Riedel's are accounts of staff work, albeit at a high level, from which he and we learn little.

Riedel's book focuses on the architects of al-Qa'ida. He profiles Osama bin Laden, "the knight"; Ayman al-Zawahiri, "the thinker"; Mullah Omar, "the host"; and "the stranger", Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq killed by coalition forces in 2006. Riedel offers intriguing facts about the history of what he describes as "the first truly global terrorist organisation in history", but this book is vulnerable to three main criticisms that, like the West's counterinsurgency strategy, derives from how he conceptualised his task as much as how he executed it.

First, his focus on the life stories and personalities of al-Qa'ida's founders obviously implies that the character of the group's leadership is still important. Many observers argue that al-Qa'ida is more a virus than a movement and that groups replicate themselves through emulation, facilitated by globalised communications, without any need for central direction. If this is true, al-Qa'ida's leaders are largely irrelevant. But, worse, focusing on al-Qa'ida may risk turning a mouse into an elephant, to paraphrase, as Kilcullen does, a Vietcong commander quoted in Jeffrey Race's 1972 classic, *The War Comes to Long An*.

Kilcullen describes al-Qa'ida as "inciter-in-chief" of a worldwide, virtually connected jihadi community. It plays this role through its "ability to aggregate and point all the players in one direction (via propaganda, technical assistance, broad strategic direction, and occasional direct guidance)". The 9/11 attacks were history's most spectacular and effective publicity stunt and gave al-Qa'ida unparalleled appeal in the eyes of thousands (perhaps millions) of young men who blame the West for making them feel impotent. But it was the West's public attribution of the attacks to the group and to its pantheon of heroes that turned al-Qa'ida into a global brand.

Focusing on al-Qa'ida also implies that the focus of the West's confrontation with deviant, heretical Islamist militants should continue to be the war on terror. Kilcullen's argument builds persuasively to the opposite conclusion:

Against an enemy whose strategy relies on provoking us into an exhausting series of overcommitments, in an environment where trust in our good intentions is essential for the smooth functioning of the world system, and where other countries regard with unease the already overwhelming military superiority of the West, such a maximalist approach is precisely the most harmful strategy we could possibly adopt, a strategic "own goal" of enormous extent.

Riedel's analysis of al-Qa'ida's strategy closely corresponds to Kilcullen's: it baits the West into "bleeding wars", consolidates "safe havens" in South Asia, establishes branches elsewhere in the Muslim world and cultivates a fifth column in Europe, potentially for use in raids to bait the West into further self-defeating overreactions. To defeat al-Qa'ida, Riedel argues, we should attack its narrative, primarily by making more robust efforts to help resolve the Palestinian issue. Riedel accords Palestine great importance because al-Qa'ida's leaders do. From my experience talking to people in the half-dozen Muslim countries in which I've lived, I think Riedel overstates the matter. Palestine is more a cause to rally around than a genuine motivation in itself; most Muslims are too poor and oppressed by their own governments to be primarily concerned about the plight of co-religionists in the Levant.

Other elements of Riedel's prescribed approach have become tenets of the Obama administration's new "AfPak" strategy, which is unsurprising given that Riedel chaired the most recent of three US government panels reviewing operations in Afghanistan. The US strategy aims to accelerate the training of Afghan security forces, army and police, as Riedel recommends. This is what Rudd says most of the new Australian troops will be doing in Oruzgan and few doubt that this is the most useful contribution foreign forces can make. Only when Afghanistan's soldiers and police officers can best the insurgents in battle will foreign forces be able to confine themselves to supporting roles and stop provoking the rejection response that al-Qa'ida intended to elicit all along.

The new US strategy also calls for a highly expanded program of economic development for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and for the support of democratic government in the latter. The US is recruiting hundreds of civilians for new roles doing governance and economic development work in parallel with military operations, and not just at provincial reconstruction teams such as the one at the Dutch-Australian base in Tarin Kowt but at the district level as well. Until now, the only civilian Australian on the base has been a lone AusAid representative with hardly any development work to oversee. To fully contribute to bringing peace to Afghanistan through the rediscovered principles of effective counterinsurgency, Australia should match its increased military commitment with a much greater civilian one. Afghanistan is worth the effort, not least because an Australian has written the book on how to do it as effectively as we know how.