

Book Reviews

‘Cables from Kabul: the Inside Story of the West’s Afghanistan Campaign’

By Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles

Reviewed by Wing Commander Greg Hammond

Introduction

Few wars in history have ended without, ultimately, a political solution. It is Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles’ central contention that insufficient effort was placed – particularly during the Bush Administration – on developing an enduring political settlement for Afghanistan and that, therefore, the military campaign was to a large extent fruitless. As HM Ambassador to Kabul from May 2007 to February 2009 and then the Foreign Secretary’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) until September 2010, including another stint in Afghanistan as acting Ambassador, Cowper-Coles was at the centre of debate on Afghanistan during a period covering the changeover from Bush to Obama, the whole of Gordon Brown’s premiership and President Karzai’s controversial re-election.

Much of Cowper-Coles’ critique is valid. For example, to say, as he does with the benefit of hindsight, that the UK “blundered in” to Helmand in 2006 is a less controversial statement in Defence circles now than it would have been at the time. He also rightly identifies the discontinuities resulting from the rotation of the fighting brigade every six months, the pattern of each brigade having to learn much from scratch while preparing for the major kinetic operation with which the brigadier hoped to make his mark, often conducted while only playing lip service to counter-insurgency doctrine and any wider theatre campaign plan from the Headquarters of the International Security and Assistance Force (HQ ISAF) in Kabul. Furthermore, he rightly criticizes his London in-briefing, with its hubristic focus on documents such as the ‘United Kingdom’ strategies for Afghanistan and Helmand, as if action in the isolated

province of Helmand, a world away from the centres of power in Afghanistan, would decide the overall result of the campaign; and, on arrival in Kabul, he is told by a senior staff member that his most important relationship as Ambassador will be, not with President Karzai, but with the US Ambassador. Afghanistan is a US campaign with the UK in a significant supporting role: it is certainly not a campaign run from Whitehall.

Yet despite these valid criticisms, there are some fundamental flaws in Cowper-Coles' analysis. A political settlement, which his evidence suggests did not feature on the Bush Administration's agenda at all, will ultimately involve some kind of accommodation with the groups collectively known as the Taliban. Yet, what incentive would there be for the Taliban to enter negotiations if they thought they were winning and only had to 'stay the course' longer than the West's tolerance for casualties? The point of ISAF's tactical military activity in Helmand and elsewhere, and still more important the efforts to train the Afghan National Security Forces and develop Afghan governance capacity, is to engender a sense of hopelessness amongst the Taliban to make their leadership realise that their campaign is unwinnable and that a negotiated settlement is the way forward. Cowper-Coles does not seem to understand that there is a real job for the military in buying the space necessary for political action. Happily, recent evidence suggests that the results of President Obama's 2010 troop surge, coupled with a more open American approach to negotiations, may be moving the whole effort in the right direction. Cowper-Coles views 2010 as a continuum best illustrated by the tired – and in its first part inaccurate – briefing phrase he had heard so often, "we are making progress, but challenges remain". However, there is a possibility that 2010 may in time be seen as the turning point. Nevertheless, he is undoubtedly right to point out that "Since the British... subsidized the 'Iron Amir', Abdurrahman, in the nineteenth century, no Afghan government [has] survived without external funding": if Afghanistan is to have a stable future, the West's involvement must continue long after political deadlines for troop withdrawals have expired.

Despite not understanding the operational level of war (which is not, of course, his profession), Cowper-Coles does appear to be captivated by the 'glamorous' side of military life. His child-like excitement at the honour given him of taking the salute at the Edinburgh Tattoo, his grinning picture next to all kinds of military personnel and equipment, and the moving tribute he wrote after attending a repatriation ceremony at Camp Bastion, are all testament to his genuine regard for military folk, especially the front-line soldiers. And the RAF, as part of the supporting effort in Afghanistan, comes out of the book well: he regularly illustrates the importance of air mobility, and pays elegant tributes to Chinook and Hercules crews and the often overlooked Movements staff. A particular highlight is his description of the party he held in the Embassy to mark the eightieth anniversary of the first ever mass air evacuation of civilians, from Kabul by No 70 Squadron RAF in 1928 following an Islamist uprising. Yet no-one who writes that, "In general, the casualties seemed to upset the officers rather less than they did me", can ever be said genuinely to understand the military, although – to be fair – he does attempt an explanation for his harsh words. There are also a few blunders such as his assertion that despite the heroic efforts of the counter-IED teams, "somehow the bomber always gets through"; in

fact, because of the efforts of the counter-IED teams, the bombers are successful far less often than they would wish, although – tragically – counter-IED will probably never achieve a 100% success rate.

Cowper-Coles is at his best when he is immersed in his own areas of competence. His chapter on the external influences on Afghanistan is a masterly summary of the often conflicting motivations of the neighbouring states, and the rises and falls in their respective influence over events. He makes sense of the complexities Afghan politics, with elegantly-written character assessments of all the main players and descriptions of interesting places. And, more widely, he records his impressions of many of the leading British and international political and military leaders as they grappled with the seemingly intractable problems posed by Afghanistan.

Overall this book is worth reading on several levels. It is a well-written introduction to the grand strategic view of Afghanistan, a country in which many of us will continue to serve for some years to come. The book also demonstrates that the British contribution to Afghanistan is a cross-HMG effort: the military is but one component of the instruments of national power and Cowper-Coles illustrates the contributions made by departments ranging from the Home Office to the Department for International Development and the Intelligence agencies. Finally, it is worth reading to understand how a senior diplomat works and thinks: there is a great deal more to diplomacy than the 'cocktail party circuit' and, while there may always be differences between the viewpoints of military and diplomatic personnel, the skill sets of both professions are needed to advance our country's interests.

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