

## Book Reviews

# No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War Through Afghan Eyes

By Anand Gopal

Reviewed by Flight Lieutenant Alexander McKenzie

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**Biography:** Flight Lieutenant Alexander McKenzie completed 9 years' service as an Intelligence Officer serving in various appointments with multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is now a reservist on 602 Squadron and intelligence manager in Royal Bank of Scotland.

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### Introduction

**N***o Good Men Among the Living* is Anand Gopal's first book. In it he combines his considerable investigative journalism skills with unrivalled access to virtually every stakeholder in the Afghanistan conflict. This provides a compelling insight into the effects and complexity of modern military campaigns from the perspective of ordinary Afghans. If Emile Simpson's *War from the Ground Up* is the most nuanced account of modern warfare from a practitioner's perspective, *No Good Men Amongst the Living* should be essential complementary reading to understand the impact and effect of contemporary military operations through the eyes of the primary target audience, the people. Readers of prominent 'embeds' such as Ben Anderson (*No Worse Enemy*) and Toby Harnden (*Dead Men Risen*) will be familiar with Gopal's expose of the chasm between strategic aspiration and tactical reality in post-Taliban Afghanistan. However Gopal provides an insight that goes beyond the now familiar description of subversive local political machinations, endemic corruption and incompetent indigenous security forces. He illuminates the myriad

of consequences of so-called precise military operations on a landscape so complex that the Byzantines would struggle to make sense of it.

The title derives from a Pashtun proverb; 'There are no good men among the living, no bad amongst the dead' capturing both the normality of conflict to contemporary Afghans and the de facto perception amongst ordinary Afghans of virtue and vice amongst all combatants. Access to the source material in this book is not unique; the various works of Alex Strick van Linschoten and Sarah Chayes rival Gopal in this respect, but *No Good Men Among the Living* was published as ISAF combat operations ended and will appeal to those seeking an immediate assessment of the efficacy of them. This is also a constraint of the book as it seeks to draw conclusions from dynamics that are still underway and the wider polity in Afghanistan may well prove to be more resilient than Gopal's grim predictions suggest. Nonetheless the book provides endless case studies that will be integral to future debate on the relative merit of counter insurgency as a strategy of choice.

Those who were immersed in operations in Afghanistan will immediately recognise Gopal's illumination of a kaleidoscopic landscape of patronage networks and complex loyalties at all levels of Afghan society. Gopal's skill lies in revealing contrasting Afghan perspectives on decisions made by western governments to support protagonists who inevitably carried considerable baggage from earlier years of conflict. The civil war years chime in their brutality with similar conflict waged across the Middle East today; revelations of atrocities committed by all sides, including the legendary and often venerated Ahmed Shah Masoud, reminds us that in civil war there are always consequences when deciding to support one faction over others. Indeed a lack of meaningful reconciliation in the years immediately following the Taliban's rout now seems a lamentable oversight and a consequence of thinking in terms of 'victory' and 'defeat'.

Although the strength of this book lies in its insight to layers of Afghan society rarely seen from inside the walls of a remote operating base, there is some direct relevance to those seeking to draw lessons relevant to the air component. Most striking is the devastating psychological effect of air power upon the Taliban in the days and weeks immediately following the US decision to support the Northern Alliance in late 2001. However the book also reveals the indirect consequence of a prolonged decapitation strategy with the emergence of younger, more radical leaders amongst the Taliban. This is one of the most noteworthy topics to emerge from the book and should lead readers to Wing Commander Keith Dear's contribution on the matter ('Beheading the Hydra') in the Defence Studies Journal. Concurrent to this dynamic was emergence of quasi-autonomous, highly effective, US-backed opponents of the Taliban such as Matiullah Khan in Uruzgan. Gopal succeeds in demonstrating their effectiveness but also raises questions about their long-term contribution towards the internal stability of Afghanistan. Both these issues matter to the Royal Air Force, within the contemporary political context, as air power is delivered at range in support of indigenous proxies to degrade amorphous militant groups.

Of interest too is Gopal's description of Gul Agha Sherzai's nefarious undertakings as he enriched himself by acting as the negotiator and contractor-in-chief with US forces establishing Kandahar Airfield as an operating base. Given considerable later efforts to expose and eliminate corruption amongst Afghan officials, via the CJTF Shafafyat, this serves as a reminder of the pitfalls in undertaking expeditionary operations without the background intelligence or luxury of time to perform due diligence. Related to this, the author's greatest critique is an issue that a generation of intelligence officers will be acutely aware of. Aside from profiteering, power-brokers like Sherzai who threw their lot in with US forces also exploited the opportunity to settle old scores, a risk that the US failed to mitigate because of piecemeal intelligence and over reliance on HUMINT whilst under considerable pressure to find and arrest/eliminate AQ and Taliban fighters. Further examples of botched raids and counter-productive kill/capture missions will make uneasy reading for proponents of high-tempo strike operations, as part of the wider counterinsurgency strategy, relentlessly pursued in Afghanistan. As a separate reviewer has remarked Gopal reveals how 'the Americans defeated the Taliban only to revive them'.

Overall this book will rank alongside some of the better insights into the Afghanistan campaign; journalistic style makes it a little long winded in places, but the narrative jumps geographically and topically across the country and is a compelling read. Another limitation, from a UK perspective, is the exclusive focus on American operations and the lack of balance in allowing any rebuttal from the US military. Despite this, in the final analysis it serves as a stark reminder of the complexity of intervention in a country as diverse as Afghanistan with such a long and deep conflict history. Most of all it reinforces the need for western militaries to understand the nature of conflict rather than being perpetually fixated by its character.



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