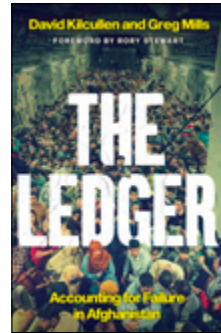


Book Review

The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan



Author: David Kilcullen and Greg Mills

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Reviewed by Squadron Leader Chloé Bridge

Introduction

Operation Pitting was a success story for the RAF with nineteen aircraft evacuating 15,000 eligible people from Afghanistan's capital Kabul in August 2021. Unfortunately, tactical military successes sometimes do not translate into strategic victory, which is one of the core themes of Kilcullen and Mills' book titled, *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan*. Based on years of experience advising senior leaders and academic research, the authors provide a detailed analysis of what went wrong during the twenty-year Western intervention. This book is logical, balanced and, although frustrating at times, will appeal to all readers of geopolitical studies and especially for the thousands who served in Afghanistan.

The authors present their credibility from the beginning by detailing their military, academic, and literary credentials. A former Australian infantry officer turned Professor, Kilcullen is an expert on counter-insurgency, who has advised General Petraeus and authored several books on warfare. Mills, originally from South Africa, has advised the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and is an accomplished author specialising in African international relations. There is no doubt that both authors have extensive experience, serving not only in Afghanistan but also advising on and researching into the multifaceted nature of the wider geopolitical environment. Their aim for the book was to attempt to make sense of the chaos that erupted with the hasty withdrawal from Kabul. *The Ledger* does this by providing a good

introduction to the complexity and issues surrounding history, culture, and politics in and around Afghanistan, all strengthened by twenty pages of endnotes.

The Ledger is also well structured with its subtitle setting the tone from the start. Arranged over five chapters and nearly 300 pages, the authors use a combination of historical precedents and personal experiences to clinically analyse what went wrong before providing a ledger of dos and don'ts for future international missions.

The first two chapters detail the stories of two significant interventions, Vietnam by the United States and Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, with which the authors draw significant comparisons albeit with some differences. The inference is clear that lessons from previous interventions should have been learnt and implemented post-9/11. The authors argue that the West's failure to recognise that Afghanistan was different in terms of culture, politics, and economics was its biggest blind spot. In the third chapter, the authors provide detailed analysis of key reasons for the failures of the intervention. The themes of diplomacy, governance and development, and their respective failures continue through the fourth chapter where events leading to the evacuation in August 2021 are explained. From the inevitable finger-pointing of US politics to the collapse of the Afghan Military, there is plenty of criticism which may disappoint readers that opportunities were missed. The last chapter offers a more strategic picture of the impact of Afghanistan. Examples such as in Africa, specifically Mali and Somalia, are used as comparators to the challenges experienced in Afghanistan. With the notion of 'African solutions for African problems', the authors also provide strategic lessons for governments experiencing similar security instabilities. The conclusion then details ten key factors for the failed intervention and translates these onto a slightly oversimplified ledger of dos and don'ts for the future. The authors argue that the most important need for interventions is that of a long-term political strategy, which was absent during the entire twenty years in Afghanistan. The book ends bleakly with a question of whether it was worth it, with the authors perhaps disappointingly concluding that it's too early to tell.

Throughout there are familiar references relatable for readers who have served within Afghanistan. These include TGI Fridays on the boardwalk at Kandahar Airfield and Camp Bastion as the largest British overseas base built since the Second World War. However, familiarity is likely to be replaced with frustration as the book repeatedly informs readers of failures on all sides amidst countless lives lost. The authors argue that nothing was inevitable with Afghanistan which makes for difficult reading. Nonetheless, *The Ledger* does attempt to rationalise the complex twenty-year intervention to ensure the West can better understand itself for the future.

Published in December 2021, the ink was barely dry on *The Ledger* before the next geopolitical crisis occurred namely Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As a result, some predictions within the narrative may have evolved including the authors' opinion that NATO

would be weakened by the intervention in Afghanistan. NATO's resolve and support to Ukraine may have just reversed that outlook but this is reflective of how quickly geopolitical situations can transform international relations and lessons from the past can be easily forgotten. Therefore, *The Ledger* is an important book for all military leaders and policy makers and with twenty years' worth of subject matter and many lessons to be understood, this book is highly recommended.

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