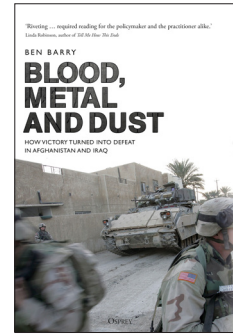


Book Review

Blood, Metal and Dust – How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq



Author: Ben Barry OBE

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Reviewed by Squadron Leader Chloe Bridge

Introduction

The tragic events of 9/11 created a paradigm shift in the international system resulting in two significant conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Capturing both conflicts in a succinct manner whilst analysing what went wrong is the premise of Ben Barry's book, *Blood, Metal and Dust – How Victory Turned into Defeat in Afghanistan and Iraq*. An extensive narrative over 500 pages, Barry, with prior British Army experience and excellent academic credentials, presents the military dimension of both conflicts. Exploring mostly the American and British perspective, Barry scrutinises how the character of conflict impacted the dimensions of both wars which at first succeeded in the swift removal of Al Qaida/Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq but ended in strategic defeat. This is a fascinating and comprehensive, albeit bleak, read for all those interested in what went wrong during the so-called War on Terror post 9/11.

First published in 2020, the book presents readers with 14 chronological chapters intertwined with American and British operations and events that shaped both conflicts. The first chapter sets the scene and context from a historical perspective using the conflicts of the 1990s to illustrate how the Americans and British were set to fight in the 21st century in terms of mindsets, tactics, and equipment. This foreshadowing is followed by the events of 9/11 where

readers seamlessly transition between Afghanistan and Iraq through different incidents and key operations/battles. Although chapters are long, they are broken into concise more easily digestible segments to keep readers engaged. Complimenting key junctions of both conflicts are accounts from senior military leaders, such as General McChrystal on US Special Operations in Iraq, and General Richards on Counter-Insurgency in Afghanistan. These provide readers with strategic level thinking, whilst, in some segments, personal stories of military members on the ground are portrayed giving readers a sense of the human contribution and ultimate sacrifice. Examples include three US military officers and their work during the Anbar Awakening in Iraq 2006, the Camp Bastion attack by insurgents in 2012, which killed two and wounded 16, and the totality of civilian casualties.

Coupled with in-depth analysis, Barry also includes several pages of photos from both conflicts including the UK's Mastiff vehicle, Reaper Uncrewed Aerial Vehicle, and highly regarded political and military leaders. Most readers will be familiar with some of the photos and, whilst not unusual to see in a book like *Blood, Metal and Dust*, they illustrate the sheer amount of resource, advanced technology, and leadership adopted by the Americans and British during both conflicts. Just like one of the book's core themes, despite overwhelming resources and tactical advantages, these were not enough to prevent overall defeat.

Throughout the course of the book, Barry presents reasons for why both conflicts went from initial success to failure. These include the lack of clear strategy, limited understanding of culture, changing priorities from counter-terrorism to nation building, and a failure to adapt quickly to evolving dynamics. Furthermore, Barry details the impact of domestic support, citing incidents that damaged public opinion. These include the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal in 2004, the Al-Jameat incident with the infamous British soldier escaping from a burning Warrior in 2005, and the exponential use of Improvised Explosive Devices and the associated casualties. The last chapter focuses on the consequences, outcomes, and lessons from both conflicts where Barry states that ends, ways, and means must always compliment strategy across all domains not just militarily.

Barry has considerable experience and credibility to deliver an in-depth assessment of both conflicts. He served in the British Army where the foundations for *Blood, Metal and Dust* were created in 2009 when he was asked to analyse land operations in Iraq. Barry currently works for the International Institute for Strategic Studies as a Senior Fellow for Land Warfare and has authored several books so is a highly experienced writer. A significant number of sources, accompanied by extensive endnotes, reassures the reader that the book is well researched. With the first edition released prior to the chaotic evacuation of Kabul in the summer of 2021, Barry released an updated version of his book in 2022. A preface reminds readers of the predication that Barry made which was that the 2001 swift victory in Afghanistan would likely to be overturned with the Taliban returning to power within the country soon after.

Blood, Metal and Dust makes an excellent contribution to the understanding on the War on Terror and whilst both Afghanistan and Iraq were distinct conflicts, they share commonalities in terms of how they were fought and lost. Although the conflicts are complex with multiple dynamics, Barry keeps the reader engaged throughout making this book highly recommended.

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