

Book Reviews

The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight

By Robert Johnson
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**REVIEWED BY DONALD
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I began the task of reviewing Robert Johnson's *The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight* not expecting to enjoy the book at all. I have deep interests in Afghanistan, but am the type of reader who prefers my military history as told by Bernard Cornwell through the eyes of Richard Sharpe in his successful string of historical novels. But to my surprise, I found the book quite compelling. Johnson has produced a readable account of Afghan conflict over the past couple of centuries that, while not profoundly challenging any of my perceptions or expectations, has certainly enriched them and reinforced them by grounding them in history.

The Afghan Way of War fills a significant gap in our understanding of the context surrounding our current imbroglio in the region, though the author cautions against trying to draw direct policy guidance from his observations. Johnson notes that most of the historical sources on the various Afghan conflicts reflect

a Western perspective. He makes it clear that the lack of thoughtful analyses of how and why Afghans fight *from an Afghan perspective* is a serious impediment to accurate understanding of how and why both our friends and enemies in the region behave as they do. He also notes that even our concept of “friends and enemies” is not necessarily part of the Afghan way of war. The consequences of this gap in knowledge are made clear, as Johnson cites Patrick Porter, who “pointed to a predilection to stereotyping in the Western episteme which is so pervasive as to threaten to prevent accurate judgments being made in the policy sphere” (p. 3). Johnson assesses the Afghan way of war and attempts to use Afghan materials—to the degree possible, given limited non-Western source material—to understand why and how the Afghans fight the way they have. He then challenges some of the assumptions commonly made about how Afghans fight that have emerged from an ethnocentric Western historical perspective.

As an example of how Afghan behaviors, viewed through Western lenses, tend to be misunderstood in ways both profound and significant, he cites various (Western) historians and authors describing the proclivity of Afghans to switch sides and realign their loyalties when necessary as being without honor or loyalty. An Afghan perspective of that same behavior would be based on a more pragmatic understanding of a fully acceptable behavior that has evolved over centuries as a mechanism for survival. Likewise, the brutality of Afghan combat has been described as the “ruthless mass murder and mutilation of their enemies” and “an expression of Afghan backwardness and lack of restraint” (p. 7). Johnson notes that “There

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was no acknowledgment of the need to annihilate those who would otherwise return to seek revenge” (p. 7)—a need that would have been clear to an observer who was informed by an Afghan perspective.

In reviewing the marginalia that I scribbled throughout the book, I found a surprising number of exclamation points that I use to draw attention to particularly good points or well-phrased and clear statements worth remembering. For example:

Afghan Pashtuns were not entirely anarchic, forming alliances through marriage and relations to increase military power and deter rivals. However, once qawm, or descent-locality group, reached a size likely to threaten the available resources, then suspicion and anxiety increased and served to undermine the alliance to which a family or an individual might belong. Pashtuns valued the idealism of gheryatmun (courageous independence), rendering qawm alliances inherently temporary, unstable, and liable to disintegration. . . . [T]he Pashtun needed to engage in alliances that were convenient but avoid military obligations that might incur his or his family's destruction. This helps to explain the fluidity of Afghans on the battle field, rushing to assist another clan in the hope of spoils or an alliance, but equally quick to retreat and disperse if the engagement turned unfavorably against them (p. 17).

This passage describes behavior that anyone spending any amount of time in the region would have experienced first-hand. But Johnson's clear explanation of the how and why of such behavior brings new rigor and resilience to our understanding. Rather than dishonorable

or illogical behavior that we might hope to modify, such fluidity on the part of Pashtuns is a sensible part of their coping mechanisms for the environment in which they live. Later, Johnson describes various attributes of how and why Afghans negotiate in war, citing five stages of their negotiations, four main themes common to Afghan negotiations, and so forth. These insights, while not always new, are useful for practitioners in helping to clarify our expectations of the Afghans in various situations. Viewed through a Western lens, a particular trait might be seen as aberrant. But through Johnson's Afghan-centric historical lens, that same trait can now be understood and, if not predicted, at least anticipated.

In contrast to his clarity, there are also examples of academic rhetoric that I presume are of value to the military historians among his audience, but which made my eyes bleed as I read them: “Ethno-nationalist mobilization and contestation are macrohistorical processes that operate over both short and long timespans. It may take decades until perceived humiliation and unfair ethnic status hierarchies give rise to political mobilization and conflict. . . . [I]n extreme cases of path dependency, actors may find themselves trapped in self-sustaining cycles of violence” (p. 17). Fortunately, such academic prose is used sparingly.

In many ways, the intellectual “heavy lifting” of the book is accomplished in the introduction and early historical anecdotes at the beginning of the second section of the book, where Johnson establishes the Afghan-centric perspectives of behavior. The latter sections then examine those behaviors in various temporal settings. The examination of the Afghan way of war during “Dynastic struggles and Popular Resistance in Afghanistan” was astonishing for its relevance. Consider, for

example, his descriptions of the problems affecting the Afghan military forces of Ahmad Shah Duranni and his son in the late 1700s: First they lacked any secure financial-logistical system. Second, the resistance against their central army learned and stiffened. Third, the loyalty of the army was often in doubt (p. 42). He goes on to suggest that “Duranni Shahs faced the dilemma of staffing governorships with weak men who might be unable to rule effectively, or stronger men who might be tempted to rebel,” and cites a traditional proverb that “An Afghan Amir sleeps upon an ant heap” (p. 42). Hamid Karzai faces many of the same dilemmas as his Duranni ancestors.

And it is not only President Karzai: International Security Assistance Force leaders might appreciate Johnson’s description of the British situation in 1841, noting that “The biggest oversight has been the failure to acknowledge that it was the under-resourced nature of the occupation, with small and isolated garrisons, both those of the Shah, and the British, and the consequent under-financing of the project, that led to the crisis of 1841” (p. 62).

The number of times a passage or particular insight generates immediate and blindingly obvious parallels to contemporary issues of today might be one of the most surprising constants of the book. In describing the Pashtun uprising at the end of the 19th century, for example, Johnson notes that “Various explanations [for the uprising] were offered, but it was generally accepted that recent encroachments into tribal territory, with fears that the British meant to occupy the region permanently as a prelude to the destruction of Afghan independence and their way of life, led to the initial fighting” (p. 149). Pages later he quotes Winston Churchill, who served as a lieutenant during the “Pathan revolt,” as stating, “Great

and expensive forces, equipped with all the developments of scientific war, are harried and worried without rest or mercy by an impalpable cloud of active and well-armed skirmishers. To enter the mountains and attack an Afridi is to jump into the water to catch a fish” (p. 154).

In a telling precursor to today’s debates among Western military strategists with respect to counterinsurgency and/or “population-centric engagements,” Johnson cites Secret Dispatches from the India Office in 1898: “The India Office concurred with Lord Curzon’s thoughts on the need for a change of policy in tribal territories: ‘it has always been an axiom that the good will of the tribesmen affords the best guarantee for the success of a frontier policy—the friendly attitude of the frontier tribes would be of much greater moment than the absolute safety of any single pass, however important’” (p. 171).

And, as a last example of relevant precursors, Johnson cites Captain H.L. Nevill, writing in 1912, “To compel the surrender of guerrillas, such as the frontier tribes of India, by the usual process of breaking down the means of defence would entail operations so prolonged and costly as to be out of all proportion to the interest at stake” (p. 172). The book is rife with such parallels, and they are uniquely instructive to those operating in and on Afghanistan policies.

Johnson’s discussion of the Soviet period, ending (more or less) with the Geneva Accords of 1988, clearly and strongly supports his thesis that there is no immutable “Afghan way of war.” When faced with the dramatically different technologies brought to bear by the Soviets, the Afghans again adapted their own tactics, making effective use of the terrain and resources available to them. His subsequent coverage of the civil war, the Taliban, and the present insurgency is comparatively less

detailed, yet still there are revelations: the 1989 battle for Jalalabad, between the Mujahideen and government forces, is compared with respect to brutality to the Battle for Stalingrad. It was a critical moment for the Mujahideen, and yet I had known virtually nothing about its scale or significance before his exposition.

His coverage of the contemporary insurgency, in contrast to the depth and constant delightful discoveries of the earlier sections of the book, is not particularly revealing. He quotes a Special Air Service officer as stating that “Killing was a way of life for [Afghans] and they would pick up a weapon for the slightest of reasons and fight under the flimsiest of flags” (p. 269). But the reader, having the benefit of Johnson’s previous chapters, would have expected no less and could, in fact, provide an Afghan-centric perspective on why such behavior is understandable and culturally acceptable. The Afghan behaviors described in this last section of the book come not as revelations, but as the expected—which is perhaps evidence of the efficacy of Johnson’s thesis.

The final section, entitled “Lessons Learned,” is not particularly insightful or helpful. And in direct contrast to the rest of the book (and particularly the earliest sections), the analyses are somewhat shallow and general in nature. One observation in this section is that “Afghans are not culturally determined in their actions, but are reactive and adaptive. Their operations are shaped and influenced by a cultural ‘lens,’ but they are also pragmatic” (p. 305). While both may be true, the sentences seem almost to contradict each other and, regardless, are not particularly new or useful insights. If there is a particular thesis for the book, it might be that “there is no fixed and unchanging way of war for Afghanistan” (p. 8), but that Afghans have long been a learning, adaptive society that made war (and accommodations related to war) based upon contemporary constraints and relationships.

The true lessons learned in Johnson’s excellent book are buried among the historical recitation of battles fought in centuries past where a particular attribute of Afghans of the past or particular idiosyncrasy of their cultural dynamic is highlighted and resonates clearly with a modern, contemporary attribute or action. Harking Johnson’s admonition not to make too direct a connection between historical antecedents and current policy, it is still possible to mine from this book much in the way of context and depth of understanding and knowledge for those whose job it is today to fight with or—and perhaps even more usefully—negotiate with Afghans.

Now if only he could retell these stories through the eyes of Richard Sharpe and his Irish Sergeant Harper. **PRISM**