

No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes¹

Reviewed by Major Scott A. Wilson*

*Akbar Gul knew the situation. By now everyone did. In addition to the news from his district, stories were flooding in from around the country. People were being taken away by helicopters during the night and never seen again, and there was no law on earth to protect them. Tribal elders were being sent to Guantanamo. Guns and money were ruling the land.*²

I. Introduction

It was only seven years ago that Anand Gopal decided to move to Kabul, Afghanistan and become a journalist.³ He had no meaningful writing experience, no contacts within the country, and very little money.⁴ Unable to afford interpreters, he taught himself Dari,⁵ grew a beard, and slowly assimilated himself into the Afghan culture.⁶ Gradually, he established himself as a credible reporter on the conflict in Afghanistan, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Harper's*, and *Foreign Policy*, and other publications.⁷

While traveling throughout Afghanistan from 2007 onward, he conducted extensive research on Afghan citizens who had experienced the hardships of war for decades. This research comes together in *No Good Men Among the Living* and Gopal is able to present a powerful indictment on the American war effort in Afghanistan, through a harrowing chronicle of the lives of everyday Afghans. He introduces us to a Taliban fighter, an American-backed strongman, and a female housewife from the countryside. He contradicts the traditional narrative for what went wrong in Afghanistan,⁸ and instead presents a compelling case that much of the country's stalemate was a product of American missteps. It

is hard for the reader to escape feeling that had the United States made different decisions during the early periods of the conflict, perhaps things could have turned out much differently in Afghanistan.

Gopal is able to make this argument by using the stories of Afghan nationals to highlight a number of mistakes made by the United States. In particular, he focuses on: (1) the United States' decision not to cooperate with surrendering Taliban figures, (2) the misguided system of incentives created by the U.S. military, and (3) the cultural blindness exhibited by the military in their execution of hostilities. The characters he presents in the book bring these mistakes to life, helping the reader appreciate how U.S. policy angered and alienated Afghans and strengthened the insurgency.

While Gopal makes a very persuasive claim regarding mistakes made by the United States, the book is not without its weaknesses. For example, he lets the Taliban off lightly, simply presenting them as a group of religious clerics that saved the people of Afghanistan from the "moral and spiritual decay [that] had dragged the country into civil war."⁹ Moreover, in discussing Taliban efforts to cooperate, Gopal missed an opportunity to explain why Taliban disarmament and reintegration, which has been a failure in recent years,¹⁰ would have worked in 2001 when the United States invaded. In spite of these weaknesses, overall, *No Good Men Among the Living* is a work that can serve as a valuable resource for the United States, especially for the military, as it seeks to avoid making the same mistakes twice.¹¹

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¹ ANAND GOPAL, *NO GOOD MEN AMONG THE LIVING: AMERICA, THE TALIBAN, AND THE WAR THROUGH AFGHAN EYES* (2014).

² *Id.* at 191.

³ Tom A. Peter, *No Good Men Among the Living Chronicles the War in Afghanistan from the Perspective of the Country's Citizens*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR (July 2, 2014), <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/Book-Reviews/2014/0702/No-Good-Men-Among-the-Living-chronicles-the-war-in-Afghanistan-from-the-perspective-of-the-country-s-citizens>.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Dari is one of the two official languages of Afghanistan. *Dari*, UCLA LANGUAGE MATERIALS PROJECT, <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/Profile.aspx?LangID=191&menu=004> (last visited Oct. 15, 2015). It is used by roughly 50% of the Afghanistan population and is spoken by 7.6 million people. *Id.*

⁶ Peter, *supra* note 3.

⁷ *About Anand Gopal*, ANAND GOPAL, www.anandgopal.com/about (last visited Oct. 15, 2015).

⁸ GOPAL, *supra* note 1, at 107 ("The American invasion of Iraq became a crucial distraction from stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, and in the resulting security vacuum the Taliban reasserted themselves.").

⁹ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁰ Deedee Derksen, *Peace Brief 168: Reintegrating Armed Groups in Afghanistan*, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE (March 7, 2014), <http://www.usip.org/publications/reintegrating-armed-groups-in-afghanistan> ("Overall the piecemeal approach targeting different armed groups [for reintegration] in different programs at different times has not worked.").

¹¹ *Commentary: Possible Worst Case Scenarios if War with Iraq Occurs; Interview with General Mike Turner*, NAT'L PUB. RADIO (March 11, 2003), <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/transcripts/2003/mar/030311.turner.html> [hereinafter *Commentary*] (discussing the U.S. military's struggle to avoid fighting "the last war").

II. Self-inflicted Wounds

One of Gopal's more convincing contentions is that the United States made a mistake in refusing to negotiate with defeated elements of the Taliban, and that these Taliban eventually reconstituted to form part of the insurgency.¹² He argues that after the invasion, the Taliban either laid down their arms or came forward willing to cooperate, to the extent that within a month of the invasion the Taliban movement had essentially ceased to exist.¹³ Taliban fighters returned to their homes, while the Taliban leadership itself was willing to work with the new American-backed regime in Kabul. Gopal's evidence is quite convincing. He quotes Agha Jan Mutassim, confidant of Mullah Omar, as saying "We want to tell all people the Taliban system is no more If a stable Islamic government is established in Afghanistan, we don't intend to launch any action against it."¹⁴ He even states that Mullah Omar himself sought immunity and surrender.¹⁵ Among those on the most-wanted terrorist list established by the United States when the war began, twenty-seven tried to engineer deals with the new regime.¹⁶

In spite of this wave of Taliban efforts to cooperate, Gopal contends that the Americans were in no mood to negotiate with the Taliban regime. United States officials were actually furious when they learned of deals being brokered between the new Afghan government and ex-Taliban.¹⁷ This U.S. policy had far-reaching consequences on both sides. For the United States, the mandate was clear: defeat terrorism. When Taliban fighters dissolved, gave up their arms, returned to their homes, or fled to Pakistan, the United States still needed someone to fight. This drove the military to continue its search for enemies, even though for all intents and purposes, none remained.¹⁸

For the Taliban, it quickly learned that negotiating with the new Karzai regime was futile. In order to avoid being captured or killed, many disappeared or fled across the border into Pakistan, only to later rejoin the insurgency. This very phenomenon is eloquently presented through a character known as Akbar Gul, who during the initial invasion realizes the futility of resisting the overwhelming force of the U.S. military.¹⁹ He escapes to Pakistan and

seeks a life of peace.²⁰ He later returns to Kabul, starts a business of his own, holding on to the hope that life would get better with American support.²¹ As time passes, he finds himself driven back to the insurgency by what he sees as a predatory U.S. military bent on colonizing Afghanistan.²² So in Gopal's mind, not only did the United States miss a golden opportunity to assimilate influential Taliban figures into the new government, but it also fueled an insurgency it would struggle against for years to come.

Another result of the policy decision regarding the Taliban was the creation of an incentive system that produced bad intelligence and benefitted only a few enterprising Afghans.²³ When the United States entered Afghanistan it needed materiel, logistics support, and intelligence. It also brought money, so Afghans were eager to assist in all three areas. Here Gopal introduces us to Jan Muhammad, a friend of Hamid Karzai who became a trusted American ally and supplier of (mostly faulty and politically motivated) intelligence.²⁴ Gopal highlights the perverse incentives created when the United States "brought the business of counterterrorism to the desert."²⁵ Muhammad and others were happy to participate, providing materiel when needed and targets where none existed.²⁶ This only made average Afghans resent the Karzai regime and U.S. forces.²⁷ Gopal thus makes a powerful argument that much of the hardship the U.S. experienced in Afghanistan was self-inflicted.²⁸ After all, the system it set up "did not reward stability, legitimacy, or popularity . . . it rewarded those who could serve up enemies."²⁹

Essentially, Gopal's argument is that the United States was flying blind in its prosecution of the war effort, particularly in its understanding of Afghan culture and history. For example, by refusing to negotiate with Taliban elements at the outset of the conflict, the United States

¹² GOPAL, *supra* note 1, at 9.

¹³ *Id.* at 104.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 104–05.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 47.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at 193.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 109.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 17.

²⁰ *Id.* at 27.

²¹ *Id.* at 191.

²² *Id.* at 198.

²³ *Id.* at 130.

²⁴ See *id.* at 125–31 (providing examples of Jan Muhammad using his U.S. ties to eliminate rivals).

²⁵ *Id.* at 130.

²⁶ *Id.* at 109 (discussing Gul Agha Sherzai, who helped build Kandahar Airfield, created enemies where there were none, and whose "personal feuds and jealousies were repackaged as "counterterrorism."").

²⁷ *Id.* at 190–91.

²⁸ *Id.* at 256 (highlighting the fact that the United States indirectly financed the very insurgency it was trying to eliminate, as it paid local Afghans for logistics services and support, and they in turn bought security for their services by paying off Taliban elements).

²⁹ *Id.* at 140.

demonstrated a misunderstanding of the culture, particularly the pragmatic nature of the Afghan people. Whether during the Soviet occupation of the 1980s or the civil war period of the 1990s, Afghans did what they needed to survive in turbulent times.³⁰ Gopal writes that “through decades of war, Afghans had survived by knowing where they stood, by calibrating themselves to power, the only sure bet in the frequent U-turns of Afghan history.”³¹

Ignorance of Afghan pragmatism proved costly. It allowed Afghan strongmen to exploit the American’s thirst for intelligence.³² The United States needed enemies and pragmatic Afghans “eager to survive and prosper” provided just that.³³ Gopal contends that the Americans “carried out raids against a phantom enemy, happily fulfilling their mandate from Washington.”³⁴ The victims of such raids at some point had enough and took up arms.

Gopal then brings the argument full circle, showing how this cultural insensitivity provided a powerful incentive for many to struggle against the new government in Kabul. Gopal used the example of Heela, an Afghan woman whose travails are interwoven throughout the book, to introduce the reader to some of the traditional and rigid cultural practices in Afghanistan.³⁵ Through her character, Gopal presents a vivid image for the reader of marauding American military unwittingly conducting operations in a religiously orthodox landscape. Through her the reader clearly sees how disrespect towards women and elders fomented animosity between Afghans and U.S. forces.³⁶ Raids by U.S. forces into Afghan villages and homes left their mark, creating enemies where ones did not exist before.³⁷ One villager would say, “If they touch our women again, we must ask ourselves why we are alive . . . we will have no choice but to fight.”³⁸

III. Critiques

The above-mentioned scenarios highlight some of the key indictments made by Gopal in his critique of the U.S.

³⁰ *Id.* at 134.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 109.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.* at 110.

³⁵ *Id.* at 76–77.

³⁶ *Id.* at 201.

³⁷ *Id.* at 111 (explaining that the American military forced elders to walk around naked, shaved the beards and eyebrows off of captives, and laid their hands on women and exposed them to an outside world previously off-limits).

³⁸ *Id.*

war effort. They form the framework for his argument that the Taliban resurgence was a byproduct of bad policy and poor tactics on the part of the United States. In spite of his well-supported claims, his book has its shortcomings.

First of all, Gopal really takes it easy on the Taliban. He presents them as a movement trying to govern Afghanistan that was ruthlessly targeted by U.S. forces intent on bringing about punishment for the 9/11 attacks.³⁹ In 2001 when the invasion occurred, the Taliban was widely recognized as one of the most brutal regimes in the world in terms of human rights abuses.⁴⁰ So, it should come as no surprise that the United States was not willing to negotiate with such a regime, especially since it seized the initiative early in the conflict. Moreover, how would it have played out in the United States, shortly after September 11th, for the U.S. government to cooperate with the Taliban government guilty of harboring Osama Bin Laden and condoning widespread human rights atrocities? How would it have appeared to Afghans who had lived under Taliban cruelty for nearly a decade? Downplaying the Taliban’s abysmal track record makes them seem more benign, which makes the United States seem more aggressive and ruthless. While this may strengthen Gopal’s argument, it is a shortcoming of the book that is not only difficult for the reader to ignore, but in all honesty makes the reader cringe.

In a similar vein, Gopal fails to explain why Taliban reintegration would have been successful during the initial phases of the operation, when it has not been so for several years after. Reintegration of Taliban fighters has been a critical part of the coalition effort in Afghanistan for several years now, but the efforts have born little fruit.⁴¹ What favorable circumstances existed in 2001 that did not exist in 2008, or 2010, or 2013? The answer to such a question may be fairly obvious. Perhaps the conduct of U.S. operations in Afghanistan so alienated the population and the Taliban that they preferred to remain with the insurgency. Or perhaps the answer lies across the border in Pakistan, which supported the U.S. mission in public, while at the same time covertly fighting to keep the Taliban insurgency alive.⁴² Either way, Gopal missed an opportunity to clarify a critical element of his argument. Even Akbar Gul, the Taliban fighter whose story is told throughout the book, declined participation in one such U.S. initiative in 2009.⁴³ If the United States’

³⁹ *Id.* at 110–14. Gopal does not completely absolve the Taliban of responsibility, as he does recognize “the mood of retribution should have been expected. After all, the Taliban’s human rights record and their sorry attempt at governance inspired no sympathy.” *Id.* at 195. However, the overall tone of the book is rather favorable to the Taliban. *See id.*

⁴⁰ U.S. DEP’T OF STATE, BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR, AFGHANISTAN: COUNTRY REPORTS ON HUMAN RTS. PRACTICES, (Feb. 23, 2001), <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/sa/721.htm>.

⁴¹ *See Commentary, supra* note 11.

⁴² GOPAL, *supra* note 1, at 232.

⁴³ *Id.*, at 235–66.

missteps contributed to the repeated failure of attempted Taliban reintegration programs, such a fact would only serve to strengthen Gopal's argument.

IV. Lessons and Conclusion

Whatever shortcomings may plague the book, *No Good Men Among the Living* is still an immensely valuable book for the U.S. military, especially as it constantly strives to avoid fighting the last war.⁴⁴ The threats that the United States faces in the realm of terrorism are unique in history. Threats like the Taliban, Al Qaeda, or the recent Islamic State movement in Syria are "devilishly difficult to eradicate. Because they are transnational, if the insurgents are beaten down in one place, they may pop up somewhere else with new recruits and a new web of allies."⁴⁵ As the United States is certain to be fighting terrorism and insurgencies in the future, there are lessons to be gleaned from Gopal's book. The importance of cultural awareness and language skills in the military, or the viability of using (and paying) local nationals for logistics and materials support are two quick examples.

One particularly noteworthy lesson is in determining what to do with vanquished regime members during the initial phases of the conflict. This is an area ripe for examination, as the United States has found itself in this position twice in the last ten years. On both occasions, the decision to marginalize remnants of the old regime has proven to have severe consequences. In 2003, Order Number 1 of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was the de-Baathification order designed to rid the new Iraqi political system of Saddam Hussein's Baath party influence.⁴⁶ CPA Order Number 2 was promulgated to disband the Iraqi military.⁴⁷ It is widely accepted that the promulgation of these two orders directly contributed to the violent insurgency that would embroil Iraq for years.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ GOPAL, *supra* note 1, at 9.

⁴⁵ Steven Metz, *U.S. Counterinsurgency Still Fighting the Last War*, *WORLD POL. REV.* May 8, 2013, at 1.

⁴⁶ The Coalition Provisional Authority, *Order No. 1, De-Baathification of Iraqi Society*, IRAQ COALITION (16 May 2003), http://www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20030516_CPAORD_1_De-Ba_athification_of_Iraqi_Society_.pdf.

⁴⁷ The Coalition Provisional Authority, *Order Number 2, Dissolution of Entities*, IRAQ COALITION (Aug. 23, 2003), http://www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/200308_23_CPAORD_2_Dissolution_of_Entities_with_Annex_A.pdf.

⁴⁸ Miranda Sissons & Abdulrazzaq Al-Saiedi, Int'l Center for Transitional Justice, *Iraq: A Bitter Legacy*, Mar. 2013, <http://ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Iraq-De-Baathification-2013-ENG.pdf>. "From its inception in 2003, de-Baathification was a deeply flawed process. Ineffective and incoherent, it polarized Iraqi politics and contributed to severe instability in the Iraqi military and government—not just in the first flush of regime change, but extending as far as the parliamentary elections of 2010, some seven years later." *Id.*

Gopal made a similar argument regarding the U.S. reluctance to negotiate with the Taliban in late 2001, and how that policy decision may have contributed to the Taliban's resurgence years later.

The policy decisions made by the United States in Afghanistan in late 2001 and Iraq in 2003 were well-intentioned. Unfortunately, those decisions arguably cost the United States billions of dollars and hundreds of lives. Going forward, works like *No Good Men Among the Living* can assist the U.S. government in formulating methods to integrate members of vanquished regimes in the formation of transitional governing authorities. To be sure, such policies would entail both political and security risks. Nevertheless, the decade spent fighting insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates that a new approach is warranted. The U.S. military would be remiss to ignore first-hand source material in adapting policies and devising new strategies for future conflicts. Wherever and whenever that happens, Anand Gopal's *No Good Men Among the Living* is a valuable resource.