

## BOOK REVIEW

***88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary.* Robert L. Grenier. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015. Pp. 443.**

Secret meetings at midnight, discreet whisperings in the aircraft cabins, juggling with colleagues, co-opting moles, roof-top encrypted satellite conversations, clandestine reporting from recruits, exciting getaways on motorcycles across perilous ravines – this is certainly not out of Ian Flemings’ novel, but Robert L. Grenier’s *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary*, a captivating ‘cloak and dagger’ account of the events and his personal encounters with Pakistani officials and Taliban commanders leading to the fall of the Taliban regime in Kandahar, and the subsequent installation of “His Excellency”, Hamid Karzai, as the interim head of the government in Kabul. Grenier, as the CIA Station Chief posted in Islamabad from 1999 to 2002, led a clandestine intelligence team responsible for penetrating and “fretting” out the secrets, and through a network of ‘moles’, track the pulse of political, military, and social developments both in Pakistan, and the Taliban-controlled southern and eastern Afghanistan.

The book is divided into five parts. Apart from the chapter in Part One titled “The Subversive” that narrates Grenier induction and rise in the CIA hierarchy, the first four parts are details of CIA efforts to convert pliant Taliban commanders to their point of thinking and the cooperation of Pakistan and its intelligence services. The postscript in Part Five is based on the authors’ observations on the legacy of American policy in Afghanistan in present times.

As an intelligence officer responsible for reporting problems from the region, Grenier was the man who provided the initial “Aardwolf” – CIA’s code name for a station chief field appraisal -to George Tenet, Director of the Central Intelligence, CIA, for his briefing to President George W. Bush, who finally approved it as the conceptual template for the (US) war effort for, what Grenier calls, the “First American-Afghan War”. That template established the key assumptions that governed the early phases of the US military campaign in Afghanistan. This template, as Grenier points

out later in the book, was “recalibrated” by the time the US found itself against the Taliban in the “Second American-Afghan War” with ambitious set of millennial nation-building goals rather than modest objectives of the first war. This post-2014 American military recalibration, according to Grenier, “is merely a cover for what the US government actually intends: the abandonment of Afghanistan.” It would have been welcome had it been in support of a viable and sustainable long-term American engagement in the region. Instead, the American “obsession” with Afghanistan, he asserts, has unleashed forces that have only served to radicalise neighbouring Pakistan, putting America’s more important interests in Pakistan in serious jeopardy.

Beginning with the rise of the Taliban led by Mullah Omar in Kandahar, Grenier points out that they were certainly not a creation of the Pakistani ISI (p-42), but were embraced and supported through them as a means of unifying the fractious Afghans. And, also because they were willing to fight against the Northern Alliance which had close ties to India and Russia. He maintains that the Taliban would not have been of much concern for the US government had it not been for Osama bin Laden and his new organisation al-Qaeda which eventually became the “terrorist nemesis” of America.

Because of Pakistan’s reluctance to deal with growing threat of Osama and his organisation, the job of dealing with the greatest threat to US national security in a “neat, tidy, and untraceable way”, was left to Grenier, who immediately set off, with the assistance of the then US ambassador to Pakistan, William Milam, seeking cooperation from General Pervez Musharraf, “romancing” the Taliban leadership and local commanders including, among others, the deputy foreign minister, Mullah Abdul Jalil Akhund and Jalaluddin Haqqani, in the hope of changing their policy towards bin Laden, as well as fomenting an armed rebellion against the Taliban. Grenier recounts his own role in cultivating an active and dynamic cooperation between the US and Pakistan, particularly the two intelligence services. The test case of this cooperation came with the arrest in Pakistan, of Zayn al-Abidin Muhammad Husayn, better known as Abu Zubayda.

His toughest job, perhaps, was convincing US officials back home that rather than bombing, motivating the Taliban and others to extradite Osama and other wanted Arabs back to US was the right thing to do. The State Department of course did not agree with the notion holding on to the argument that “anything even suggesting leniency towards the Taliban is a political loser.” (p-63)

Some of his elaborate observations like the dissatisfaction of the Taliban with bin Laden and his Arab 555 Brigade are no new revelations. Many of the Taliban commanders were already known to have been only too happy to see the “Afghan Arabs” go. But, as Grenier points out, Mullah Omar was not about to break with bin Laden.

The mechanics of the campaign suggested by Grenier included: the possibility of a continued role for the Taliban, provided its leaders agreed to break with Omar and meet US demands: Osama be rendered to justice in the US; other al-Qaeda fugitives on US indictment list be detained and turned over to the US; and all foreign militants in Arab camps be expelled to their countries of origin (p-83). While President Bush found the plan “fascinating”, the Americans efforts finally vectored towards war following Mullah Omar’s recalcitrance. Much of the authors’ efforts focused on Mullah Osmani, a senior leader of the Taliban and close associate of Mullah Omar, and trying to convince him to take Kandahar and place Mullah Omar under arrest in (p-112-122) order to save his country. Osmani dithered, all attempts at turning him failed, and the logic of war ran its course as the Americans bombed Mullah Omar’s compound in Kandahar on October 7, 2001.

It terms of the wider war against al-Qaeda in the region, Grenier observes that the key to US objectives in Afghanistan, and to its regional interest, lie in a genuine peace between Pakistan and India which rest on a resolution of Kashmir. His message to the policy makers in the US is clear: since both countries are incapable of achieving peace on their own, they must be assisted in this endeavor. (p-353)

The book is meant to “inform” the present and future policy makers on the region of the practical lessons learned in the First American-Afghan War, and the “distractions” that led to the failures of the Second, so that

they may be useful “as and when America and its allies are forced to embark upon a Third”, in pursuit of challenges similar, perhaps stronger under the present circumstances, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In his postscript predictions, Grenier is perhaps at his “subversive” best, pointing out that the American reaction to their failure in Afghanistan is unfortunate. By establishing a timeline for going home, Grenier says, America is set to compound its failure. It is unlikely that the US or its Western allies will follow through on their financial pledges for Afghanistan in the absence of foreign troops. According to Grenier, even if the Taliban were to return in Afghanistan, they would have learned from their post-9/11 misfortunes. The Taliban, he maintains, are not international terrorists, and certainly, did not participate in any terrorism sponsored by al-Qaeda. But, they will not turn their back on pious Muslims resisting the oppression of America and its regional allies. The prognosis, given the possibility of renewed civil war in Afghanistan and radicalisation in Pakistan, he concludes, is not good.

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