

**Noah Coburn, *Losing Afghanistan*  
(Stanford University Press, California, 2016), 246.**

Amina Khan\*

*Losing Afghanistan* is a candid and comprehensive account of the US' intervention in Afghanistan. The author, Noah Coburn has a firsthand experience of living and working in Afghanistan since 2005. Coburn provides a 'nuanced' history of the US' intervention in Afghanistan and the social and economic impact it has had on the lives of individuals as a result of the enormous resources that have been injected into Afghanistan since 2001. By focusing on the lives and experiences of four individuals — an American wind energy engineer, an American ambassador, a Navy SEAL and an Afghan businessman — the author highlights what the intervention was, its impact as well as the repercussions it had on Afghans and the international community at large.

The book which is divided into 11 chapters begins with the experience of William Locke, an American wind energy engineer who helped establish the Alliance Wind Power (AWP) to provide cheap, clean and sustainable energy, chiefly wind energy. Primarily owned by three young Afghans, Will had a 23 per cent share in the business. Initially, the AWP did well in the beginning and received both support and funding from the international community and had the potential to grow into a large enterprise which could have provided Afghans with the much needed energy. However, AWP ultimately met its fate as Will and his colleagues were unable to get funding and the opportunity to operate in an environment where competition increased from large contractors who were more focused on short term profits and Afghan officials who diverted internal funds. In contrast, for Ronald Neumann, the intervention was more political. Serving as the US' Ambassador to Afghanistan, he not only focused on policy issues but had an affiliation with Afghanistan as his father, too, served as the US' Ambassador to Afghanistan during the late 60s and early 70s. Hence, despite having an understanding of the country, the Ambassador struggled to implement the policies of his government.

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\* *The reviewer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

For Navy SEAL Captain Owen Berger, the intervention was a war and a direct consequence of the attacks of September 11. The US' intervention for Berger was marked by the complex layers of development, state building and counterinsurgency. Yet for Omar Rassoul, an Afghan businessman working with the international community, the intervention was an ideal opportunity to earn money and help his family.

Despite the differences, through the stories of these four individuals, the author highlights the challenges and opportunities the intervention offered as well as patterns and lessons that can be drawn from how these men lived through the intervention.

The book revolves around the author's personal experience in Afghanistan initially visiting the country in 2005 for 20 months in the capacity of an anthropologist where he focused on the lives of a local community of potters in Istalif — a small town in north of Kabul. He then talks about his return to Afghanistan in 2009 where he was working for a series of research organisations and think tanks. He was tasked for studying the Afghan elections which were sponsored by the international community as well as working with the Ministry of Justice by evaluating several projects aimed at providing better justice to ordinary Afghans. The author refers to the fact that there was a huge disconnect between what the international community was willing to provide and what the locals essentially needed and wanted. The author confesses that he felt that he was hired to look at how life in Afghanistan should be from an international perspective rather than how the situation at the local level actually was. While the international community often talked about giving the Afghans public health, education, or even democracy, they seldom sought the opinion of the Afghan people as to what they needed, how they felt about these projects and whether they even wanted them at all. While author cites numerous examples throughout the book to illustrate the disconnect between the international community and Afghans, he highlights that millions of dollars were spent on the judicial system, by building courthouses and training prosecutors. The international community did not bother to seek the opinion of the locals as to whether they wanted local courts or whether the prosecutors would be useful to them. Hence, the result was that the newly constructed courtrooms were hardly used and remained mostly empty while local

civil affairs offices were overcrowded yet received no international assistance or support. Funds pledged by the West, according to the author, distorted Afghanistan's politics and economy in a number of ways.

According to the author, initially the US intervention was welcomed by the Afghan people 'as life during the intervention was a great improvement over life before it.' The Taliban were ousted from power, schools and mosques were being built and businesses were growing. Although there was 'resentment towards the Afghan government for its rampant corruption and frustration with the uneven distribution of international aid' in the larger spectrum of things, these issues were relatively minor as life was getting better for the ordinary Afghan who was now thinking about the future. Since 2001, Afghanistan has made significant progress in certain sectors such as public health and education as the author points out that one in every four children in Afghanistan died before reaching the age of five. By 2010 that number was one in ten. School enrolment increased from 1 million to 8 million, with 2.5 million girls going to school.

However, according to the author, these achievements have been limited and short-lived. With time, the relative stability witnessed after 2001 along with hopes for a better future was replaced by insecurity and violence, a growing Taliban insurgency, weak and ineffective governance, corruption and uneven distribution of foreign aid. Failure to bring the services and stability most Afghans had envisioned, many questioned the US intervention and even debated that the intervention seemed to have gone astray. Most of the funds pledged by the international community for Afghanistan were spent on military operations and very little focus was laid on developmental assistance and improving the life of the ordinary Afghan citizen.

The author sheds light on the huge disparity in the distribution of international assistance and the element of corruption amongst the Afghan population. The uneven distribution of funds distorted Afghanistan's politics and economy in a number of ways. There has been a sharp increase in inequality as well as a stark disparity between the new class of rich who manage to win lucrative contracts from the

international community due to close political affiliations and the poor who as always continue to lack basic services.

According to the author, there were too many players, and too many divisions and differences. Military officials would always suggest a military solution, whereas diplomats suggested an aggressive diplomatic approach, and those within the development sector called for more funds and projects. The author is of the view that it is these divides that have caused major hurdles in bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan.

The author further laments that the primary beneficiaries of international funds coming into Afghanistan throughout the intervention have been Afghan politicians, commanders, bureaucrats, and international contractors, neither of whom had much incentive to help build a stable Afghanistan. He says the common man has yet to benefit from the intervention and that, despite 15 years of international presence, the future of Afghanistan is more uncertain than before.

He points out that the government of National Unity like its predecessor, Karzai government, struggles to establish its writ, build legitimacy as well as make progress with the Taliban in peace talks. Those individuals or groups who have benefitted financially from international funding, according to the author, will continue to use and justify violence to maintain their positions.

Throughout the course of the book, the author raises some very pertinent questions about the relevance and benefit if at all of the US intervention. From his personal experience in Afghanistan he opines that there is very little development to justify the millions of dollars spent by the international community on Afghanistan. He questions whether the intervention was even necessary as both the international community and the Afghans have very little to show from the intervention. He also questions the role of the military and is of the opinion that the presence of the military has further worsened the situation, making it more unstable and dangerous.

He concludes the book by saying that while the US government's agenda in Afghanistan remains unclear, continued support from the

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international community must come with a thorough reassessment about how to spend money in Afghanistan. This would help protect the limited gains that have been made by the US and its allies during the past 15 years in Afghanistan.