



Cables From Kabul: The Inside Story Of The West's Afghanistan Campaign

Sherard Cowper-Coles

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A frank and honest memoir by Britain's former ambassador to Kabul which provides a unique, high-level insight into Western policy in Afghanistan. The West's mission in Afghanistan has never been far from the headlines. For Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former Ambassador, Britain's role in the conflict - the vast amount of money being spent and the huge number of lives being lost - was an everyday reality. In Cables from Kabul, Cowper-Coles takes the reader on a journey through the backstreets of Afghanistan's capital to the corridors of power in London and Washington. He pays tribute to the tactical successes of our soldiers but asks whether these will be enough to secure stability. Nobody is better placed to tell this story of embassy life in one of the most dangerous places on earth. Powerful and astonishingly frank, Cables from Kabul explains how Great Britain got into the quagmire of Afghanistan, and how Great Britain can get out of it.

Cables From Kabul: The Inside Story Of The West's Afghanistan Campaign Details

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From Reader Review Cables From Kabul: The Inside Story Of The West's Afghanistan Campaign for online ebook

Justin says

A worthwhile book to read for understanding the diplomatic and political aspects about Afghanistan, and why there has been so little progress there. It's also an interesting insight into the world of diplomacy.

The main point he makes is that there needs to be a political settlement in Afghanistan alongside the military campaign, and by that he means there needs a negotiated settlement with the Taliban which includes them in government, and also a negotiated settlement with the regional powers around Afghanistan. He doesn't really go into too much detail beyond that though, and I found that a bit of a frustrating trend in his book - he'd frequently say something, such as he met with Karzai to discuss something, without really giving a "so what". I think that's somewhat a consequence of his self-admitted reliance on his appointments diary to provide material, and no journal, correspondence or Foreign Office records, and so the vagueness at times is a consequence of his fallible memory.

Some interesting insights nonetheless, including:

- The close relationship between Karzai and Prince Charles, and the extent of Charles' charitable work in Afghanistan
 - He is very critical of the falsely optimistic briefings given by the military, including the heavy reliance on PowerPoint.
 - The chaotic nature of Richard Holbrooke, including his constant reliance on his mobile phones, his frequent security breaches and his regular lack of tact and etiquette. Hard to believe he was considered a successful diplomat.
 - The circuit of international conferences and action groups that come across as something of a gravy train, achieving little.
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Panos says

Memories from the British ambassador in Afghanistan. A light, even superficial at times, read, though it manages to make a vital point; without a political reconciliation, one involving all regional actors as well, there can be no lasting peace in Afghanistan.

T. Fowler says

In May 2007, Cowper-Coles arrived in Kabul to take over as the Ambassador of an upgraded British Embassy. These are the memoirs of his experiences over the next three and a half years, as he made a great effort to try and steer the British government's effort in Afghanistan. It is not a book of history however but a memoir and, as such, can be a bit of slog. He describes the life of an ambassador, with all the diplomatic

demands, week by week. He gives a clear picture of the daily life he had to lead and gives much credit to his staff in assisting him. He also gives a record the international effort that went on, as he flew out of Kabul back to London or to Washington or to some other capital to brief officials, or to participate in meetings that were organized to try and find a solution to Afghanistan. Buried in his memoirs we get glimpses of his views on Afghanistan and his criticism of the emphasis on a military solution, not enough on the diplomatic or governance level. These views are informative, but you have to dig them out. It's a valuable book for anyone interested in this subject but not one that is an easy read for the average reader.

Vuk Trifkovic says

Interesting read. I've read the review saying that it lends a unique insight into the workings of the international diplomacy in the crisis countries. Now, you might not like what you see but it's particularly insightful. I mean, the prose is kind of high-whig mixed with if not ghostwriting, then at least heavy editing and professional research teams.

Still, the fact that the author is a bit too much old-Oxbridge, regimental ties, deference to aristocracy and orientalism (we keep hearing about magnificent addresses of the Afghan aristocracy) mixed with a very new-Labour feeling of spin, horse-trading and denial of responsibility (it's never really author's fault, it's the others) speaks volume of the actual diplomatic and political apparatus of the UK.

But credit where the credit is due, I do believe that the author's principal thesis of political strategy over military tactics in finding Afghanistan settlement is a very good one. He also hits the nail on the head when he dissects the curious tension between the military and civilian leadership. I do think he is right - thorough de-militarisation of the everyday life in the UK mixed with a populist press means that we idealize the armed forces a bit too much which makes it easy to put military tactics before political strategy. Perhaps one good thing of doing compulsory national service is to demonstrate to people how stupid the military really is...

Brian Mcleish says

Early on in the book, Sherard references Thucydides' great work on the Peloponnesian war. This book is, to a certain extent, a similar work for the Afghan war - the parallel continues as the book finishes before the end of the war, much like Thucydides.

Sherard has an easy engaging style in person and this comes through in the book.

K C says

Interesting analysis of situation in Afghanistan written from the perspective of someone who has served the British government at a senior level in or on Afghanistan in various capacities. Well written and readable even for someone who knows very little about the place.

Laura Gordon says

Little bit too much 'I had porridge for breakfast' and not enough political detail, history and analysis. But a good read and a good guide to Afghanistan 2007-11, and plenty of links to more detailed works.

Marcus says

I didn't know British Ambassadors published accounts so soon of their recent posting in hot spots like Kabul. This is a fascinating account of the political events in and about Afghanistan, and the war on the Taliban, 2007-11, when Sherard Cowper-Coles (S.C-C) was Ambassador (twice) and HMG's roving Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP).

Is he really going to tell us like it is – or give us the 'diplomatic' version?

While there is a good deal of 'old boy' references, networking and coincidences (so the diplomatic service really is like that) S.C-C gives a fascinating account of the people politics behind the West's campaign. He pulls no punches in acknowledging overall the advance of the insurgency and the deterioration of security, despite the huge Western military deployment – basically, how we are losing the war. His analysis is as simple as it is profound: there is no coherent political strategy to accompany or secure the military gains, to achieve a peaceful Afghanistan without foreign troops in the field.

S.C-C recommends (and actually proposed) a strategy similar to the 'closed door' policy of Curzon, Viceroy at the turn of the last century; making tribal leaders and elders responsible for security and governance locally, rewarding peace and punishing misbehaviour. Today they would be local 'community defence volunteers' who would neither want nor tolerate more extreme Al-quaeda elements coming in from elsewhere. This S.C-C argues would give stability from which to develop governance, services, etc. bottom up, not top down; a strategy of 'engage, stabilise and develop' as opposed to the military policy of 'clear, hold, build'.

And, incidentally, S.C-C gives away that William Dalrymple is writing a history of an earlier horrendous British defeat in the First Afghan War, a further half century before Curzon.

Frank O'connor says

This is a book about the limits of diplomacy. It's not so much the inside story of the west's campaign as the inside story of the inside of an embassy somewhere on the fringes of the west's (i.e. America's) campaign. And the inside story of an embassy tends to boil down to one thing: parties. There are parties, conferences, dinners, and social gatherings galore here, all underpinned with the constant refrain 'But why is nothing getting done?' At the outset, Coles admits the possibility that keeping the whole social whirl going may indeed be end in itself and one suspects that he might well be having his cake and eating it here - both indulging in the merry-go-round and complaining about its ineffectiveness in actually changing much. Being a good diplomat, Coles tends not to go too far in any direction opinion-wise, and so the whole narrative tends to drag with boredom. It is only in the final chapter that he redeems things somewhat, engaging in a relatively convincing polemic about the need for proper political control in Afghanistan.

Malcolm says

While candid in many of his comments particularly in his assessment of the military leadership that mitigates against a strategic solution I was , perhaps cynically , more interested in what his bosses made him leave out. Also while I have no doubt that he did the work he had to do well I am left wondering how much of it was work that actually needs doing ?

Ben says

I'm not that interested in biographical writing, so please read the following comments in the light of that.

I started this exploration of Afghanistan events filtered through the authors personal career. I might persevere but it combines false modesty with self-importance in a way that's simply off-putting. It also combines significant and trivial personal information in a way that makes you think that the author can't assess the difference between the two. I suppose we're all like that to an extent, but the issues involved with diplomacy and Afghanistan are more important than that. I think there's really useful insights here, but I'm honestly not sure I'll be ploughing through it to find out. I would simply be more interested in a long essay from the author about what he's learned and his thoughts about future direction.
