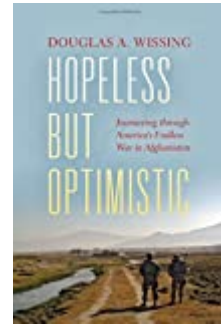


H-Net Reviews

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Douglas A. Wissing. *Hopeless but Optimistic: Journeying through America's Endless War in Afghanistan.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xv + 172 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-02285-1.



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When reading Douglas Wissing's account of his embedded reporting from Afghanistan in 2013, I was reminded of Rajiv Chandresakaran's 2007 book, *Imperial Life in The Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, which was about life inside the Green Zone, the fortified area of Baghdad as the United States tried to bring democracy to a "liberated" Iraq. The surreal juxtaposition of the ideal with the reality of a mission mired in a lack of comprehension, fear and suspicion, the tangle of bureaucracy, and ultimately, the collapse of hope. The Green Zone of American power—or, rather, the limits of power—had become a fantasyland, an Emerald City.

Wissing's account is not as sweeping as Chandresakaran's, either in the style of writing or in the survey of the situation. This is much more a personal story of a correspondent—"a Midwestern grandfather with a bad back"—on a "quest to see if American officials and officers had learned any lessons from their failures" (p. 1). The value of the book, whether or not Wissing realizes it, is not in an answer: it's the journey, a combination of the mundane and quixotic that matters. There is not even an Emerald City of illusion here, merely the jaded grind towards withdrawal, leaving the Afghan Army to its fate.

Wissing embarked on his quest soon after publish-

ing his 2012 book, *Funding the Enemy*, which is about the combination of the US government, the military, and the "privatized" war. But, as he notes, this is not a sequel: there is little here about policymaking, military calculation, or even the grand sweep of tactics and operations.

Instead, this is a series of vignettes making a whole of despondency and resignation. Once Wissing finally makes it into Bagram Air Base after a scene worthy of *Catch-22*, the individual testimonies begin, all pointing in the same direction. A sergeant says, driving around Bagram, "This is a fucked place. What the fuck are we doing here?" (p. 17). An airborne commander pulls the veil from the announcement of "retrograde in contact": "Withdrawal. Withdrawal under pressure" (p. 38). A systems operator explains: "The PRTs [provincial reconstruction teams], they are just packing up to go.... Special forces, they're the rear guard. Keeping the lid on while the rest get out" (p. 33).

Moving outside Bagram, Wissing juxtaposes more illusions with recognitions. An agribusiness development team knows that "winning hearts and minds" is jargon for politicians and the public. A soldier shows a photograph: "There is no place like home.... I need to be home with my baby" (p. 52). An officer scoffs at the Agency for

International Development's promotion of a new road as part of "development yields security": "The insurgency doesn't end at the road. That's where it begins" (p. 62). An Afghan worker on a well-digging project uses an old wooden windlass: he does not envisage progress, only the bit of money to support a family of twelve. Tin roofs are put on sheds just to be ripped off and sold for scrap.

Wissing's narrative is engaging, although it is unlikely to be elevated like the war journalism of a Tim O'Brien or Michael Herr. There is nothing profound here, but there is nothing profound about America's Afghanistan conflict. There is only duty, weariness, and the wise-cracking cynicism to cover the resignation.

In conveying that version of American intervention, more than fifteen years after 9/11, Wissing has more than done justice to his task. Indeed, the jarring note is when—possibly to grasp at something, anything, beyond his portrayal—he closes with a monologue about the "noble" accompanying the venal: "the remarkable strength and resilience of the Afghan people" and "American after American determined to make the world a better place" (p. 167). In the context of the other 166 pages, that paragraph is escapist. Far more apropos as a measure of the US success in Afghanistan are the nine words from a captain: "It's a successful day if we all come home" (p. 48).

This is not a book that directly engages the theories and conceptions of twenty-first-century US military intervention, in its full-spectrum approach from counterinsurgency to development, in numerous working papers, articles, and monographs. It does not invoke "hard power," "soft power," or "smart power." But in this case,

that is an asset. Sometimes the most effective response to all the proposals of what could or should be is the observation of what is.

In a 2014 book entitled *Cultural Awareness in the Military*, Steve Coll—one of the foremost journalists in coverage of Afghanistan—gives way to the academic overlay that can obscure understanding and, indeed, even push it aside: "Let us not suggest that the humanitarian activity that takes place underneath this strategy of control is going to be received by the local population as anything other than that, or that it is going to be durable outside of the mechanisms of control that brought it into being in the first place. So the purpose of COIN [counterinsurgency] is to win." [1]

Wissing makes no grand statement. He only offers the clarity of the firsthand: no one "wins" in the US military's interaction with Afghanistan's people. There is only the remark of a government minister, an expatriate who has returned after the American occupation, as a coda to the quixotic of the narrative: "As an Afghan, I have to be optimistic. I have no other choice" (p. 164).

Note

[1]. Steve Coll, "A Journalist's Reflections on the Military Cultural Turn," in *Cultural Awareness in the Military: Developments and Implications for Future Humanitarian Cooperation*, ed. R. Albro and B. Ivey (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 116.

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