

*Unwinnable*  
*Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*  
Theo Farrell  
The Bodley Head, 2017, £25 (h/b)

**John Newsinger**

**T**his is the best account so far of Britain's fourth Afghan War and it is unlikely to be surpassed any time soon. Farrell has written an unsentimental history, for which students of British counterinsurgency campaigns will be grateful and from which they will continue to learn for many years. Noting that hindsight is a fine thing, he suggests that Britain and the United States should not have fought this war at all. In fact, given the earlier Soviet experience in Afghanistan, good sense should have been enough to avoid this entanglement. What we have to deal with in both Afghanistan and Iraq is American hubris, something into which Tony Blair's New Labour government wholly and disastrously bought.

One criticism of the book is Farrell's readiness to sometimes accept official sophistries at face value. So, we are seriously told that Blair's government 'had a track record of committing Britain and its armed forces to saving strangers'. He takes Blair's supposed doctrine of 'humanitarian intervention' at face value, rather than seeing it as part of New Labour's attempted rebranding of the 'Special Relationship', of Britain's readiness to be of service to US Imperialism.

Blair's celebrated Christianity can be misleading in this respect, creating an impression that he actually intended to do good in the world. As early as 1995, the eminent sociologist, A. H. Halsey, a fellow 'Christian Socialist', had a conversation with Blair regarding the New Testament and its significance today. They discussed who they considered to be the most interesting man in the New Testament after Jesus. Halsey chose the Good Samaritan, but Blair opted for Pontius Pilate of all people. Halsey remonstrated with him only for Blair to insist that 'the powerful were also deserving of our political sympathy'. It seems fair to say that while, for purely propaganda reasons, New Labour sometimes tried to dress its interventionism up in the clothes of the Good Samaritan, it was actually playing the part of the governor of a Roman province.

For the British, the underlying reality of the Afghan war was that it was fought entirely at the behest of the United States. The only British interest at stake was the 'Special Relationship'. This was why British troops were killing and being killed. Everything else was propaganda. And in pursuit of the 'Special Relationship', Britain put itself at the service of the Karzai government, a brutal, wholly corrupt regime, dominated by drug traffickers. Farrell certainly brings out the enormity of this, providing more than enough evidence to substantiate his indictment of the regime as 'profoundly corrupt'. Hundreds of millions of dollars were being stolen by officials and ministers and smuggled out of the country. And this corruption seriously undermined the counterinsurgency effort. He describes, for example, units of the Afghan local police as late as 2012-2013 being involved 'in beatings, kidnappings, extortion, extrajudicial killings and illegal taxation of the population'. In Baghlan the police were 'involved in the kidnapping and raping of teenage boys, and in arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances of local leaders'. When you have British soldiers remarking that the best way to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local people would be via the removal of the police chief, it is clear that the war on the ground was very different from the war that was being sold to public opinion back in Britain.

## **The role of Pakistan**

One of the factors making war 'unwinnable' was the character of the regime the United States was sustaining in power. The U.S. has successfully supported many gangster regimes during the Cold War, relentlessly beating off insurgent challenges with torture and massacre. So the corruption is surely not enough, on its own, to account for the US failure in Afghanistan. Farrell identifies another crucial factor: the role of Pakistan in providing a (relatively) safe haven for the Taliban. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan could not be closed and, moreover, elements within the Pakistani state were effectively allied with and providing support for the Taliban. Pakistan not only assisted the Taliban, but also provided sanctuary for Osama bin Laden. Indeed, in retaliation for the US forces killing of bin Laden, the Pakistani secret state, the ISI, sponsored a series of attacks on US and international targets inside Afghanistan by the Haqqani network (a Taliban affiliate known to be close to the ISI). US attempts to whip Pakistan into line failed, partly because public opinion in the country was fiercely anti-American; but also because the Pakistan government was actually in a strong position, capable of making the situation considerably worse for the US. Following the killing of twenty-four Pakistani soldiers in a US air raid in November 2011, Pakistan shut down US

supply routes for seven months, 'plunging ISAF [the International Security Assistance Force] into crisis and costing the United States \$700 million'. It was better to put up with Pakistan protracting but containing the war for its own purposes, rather than bearing the consequences of a complete break. In such circumstances the war was, at least in any conventional sense, unwinnable.

What of British performance in this unwinnable war? The reputation of British Army as counterinsurgency specialists has been permanently diminished by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. What, though, of shortages of equipment and troops? While these were undoubtedly factors, they affected how the unwinnable war unfolded rather than having any direct effect on the inevitable outcome. The Blair and Brown governments deserve censure for getting involved at all, rather than for somehow losing the war. It is worth briefly noticing here the dramatic falling out between Gordon Brown and General Richard Dannatt over the resourcing of the war. Without wishing to be unfair to Dannatt, I suspect that he thought Brown's reluctance to finance the conflict derived from his being some sort of pacifist lefty. What he did not realise was that New Labour and the modern Conservatives were as one in regarding the military with scorn, of little account. In the universe inhabited by the likes of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, George Osborne, Theresa May and Philip Hammond, it is the bankers who call the shots; they are the heroes.

A paperback edition will be available in September.

John Newsinger has a new book,  
*'Hope Lies in the Proles': Orwell and the Left,*  
coming out this year from Pluto Press.