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Author(s): Samina Ansari

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BOOK REVIEW

‘An Essential Primer on the Afghan War Post 11 September 2001’

SAMINA ANSARI¹

Title: Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001-2016

Author: Steve Coll

Publisher: Penguin Press

Year: 2018

Steve Coll’s *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001–2016* attempts to cover every national, regional, and international actor and their role in systematic and unsystematic events in Afghanistan and its neighborhood, leading up to the peace process currently underway with Taliban. This book is a follow up to Coll’s *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (2004) which won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction.

Directorate S begins with the death of Afghanistan’s national hero, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and the events that followed in the aftermath of his assassination. The title of this book, *Directorate S*, refers to the bureaucracy of Pakistan’s apex spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). As the book progresses, the author guides the reader through Afghanistan, Pakistan,

1. Samina Ansari is the Head of the Silk Road Cultural Initiative at Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Afghanistan.

and regional countries' missions in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as those of the U.S. and European states, deftly ensuring that the reader does not lose track of the actors and events.

In Afghanistan, the CIA did not act in a one-sided manner in intelligence collection. Actors from Pakistan and Afghanistan were partly encouraged, and some volunteered, to collaborate on intelligence gathering and network contribution from Afghan and Pakistani soil post the 9/11 attacks in the U.S.; and a majority of these actors had little or no background in the trade they became involved in.

The author has been generous and meticulous with details, and the reader can easily become engrossed in conversations between CIA agents, American, Afghan and Pakistani government officials as well as local actors in Kabul. In fact, the extent of details Coll puts forth could cause an uninitiated reader to wonder whether Coll himself had been part of the CIA. For instance, his descriptions of top-secret conversations at the Pentagon in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks among national security agency officials deciding between prioritizing human security and national security – in which the officials leaned towards the latter – are vivid and engaging. Other instances, among the many, which stand out, include U.S. President, George Bush's, phone conversation as he discusses Pakistan's role in the Afghan conflict with the U.S.'s ambassador to Pakistan, Wendy Chamberlin.

It is highly impressive how every 'person of interest' in the Afghan war has a dedicated character sketch in the book, and in every such chapter, the main characters are presented with the charisma and voice of their own as the author takes us from the 2001 to 2016. Today, some of those very persons are present at roundtable discussions on the current peace process with the Taliban as well as in the upcoming Afghan presidential election. It prompts one surmise that actors of war do not change, and that power has and will always have the same name, how much ever longer the hair or greyer the beard.

One such character sketch is that of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad's or 'Mr. Big'. Coll's description of 'Mr. Big', his background, reason and role are both contradictory and complementary to the man leading the ongoing U.S. negotiations with the Taliban. If one should ever get confused about his

intentions, this book will remind them, the U.S., and the Afghan people of ‘Mr. Big’s’ motivation to remain in awe of himself and his personal interests.

Afghanistan’s first President in the post-2001 period, Hamid Karzai, is another figure on whom Coll has elaborated. His character sketch presents the now former president’s humility and charm as well as traces his mood shifts and paranoia as they kicked in over the course of his presidency.

Certainly a piece of work with heaps of testosterone in its contents, a smaller section of the book is dedicated to the female actors. Pakistan’s former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, is one of them, but her conduct reflects stereotyped masculinity and bravery. Even the moments leading up to her assassination is described, leaving room for speculation regarding her assassin and his motivation.

It is important to mention, however, that at the time of writing *Directorate S*, Coll was potentially unaware of the potential political situation in Afghanistan post the 2018-2019 period. However, the book will guide the reader through the series of events and their contexts up until the current peace talks began, and the presidential election. Despite the length of the book, any reader, irrespective of their background, will gain a deeper understanding of the conflict in Afghanistan as well as of the roles of the actors involved. Through his narrative and detail, Coll manages to bring the reader into the room and provides them a seat at the table, to listen, observe, feel the tension, and even laugh. The latter will mostly rest in the description of the characters, and their habits. Overall, one will learn that this war involved little sophisticated planning, random candidate selection, and a crash course on war games. Meanwhile, Pakistan as usual was at the top the game, while the rest were occupied with crisis management—a state-of-affairs which continues till date.