An extended essay published by the New York Review of Books, Vol. LX, no.6, April 3rd 2012 by Professor Anatol Lieven based on his review of

Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror By Barnett R. Rubin. Oxford University Press, 432 pp., $34.95

Talibanistan: Negotiating the Borders between Terror, Politics and Religion Edited by Peter Bergen with Katherine Tiedemann. Oxford University Press, 496 pp., 24.95

Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012 By Vahid Brown and Don Rassler. Columbia University Press, 320 pp., $35.00

A very strange idea has spread about in the Western media concerning Afghanistan: That the US military are withdrawing from that country next year, and that the present Afghan War has therefore entered into its "endgame". The use of these phrases reflects a degree of unconscious wishful thinking that amounts to collective self-delusion.

In fact, according a treaty signed between the United States and the Karzai administration, US military bases, aircraft, special forces and advisors will remain in Afghanistan at least until the treaty expires in 2024. These US forces will be tasked with targeting remaining elements of Al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan and Pakistan; but equally importantly, they will be there to prop up the existing Afghan state against overthrow by the Taliban. The advisors will continue to train the Afghan security forces. So whatever happens in Afghanistan after next year, the United States military will be in the middle of it – unless of course they are forced to evacuate in a hurry.

As to the use of the word "endgame", the only way that this could be true would be if next year, upon the departure of US ground forces, the entire Afghan population, overcome with sorrow at the loss of their beloved allies, rolls over and dies on the spot. Failing this, Afghanistan will not "end" and neither will the struggle for power there. So it remains of critical importance for US policymakers to study Afghanistan, and not hop away from this swamp to apparently clearer

waters and better career opportunities elsewhere.

Two major new books, together with a number of lesser works, are crucial to an understanding of Afghanistan, the flaws of the Western project there, the enemies that we are facing, and therefore of possible future policies. Barnett Rubin, senior advisor to the US Special Representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan in the first Obama term, has been consistently among the wisest and most sensible of US expert voices on Afghanistan. His book Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror is a compilation of his essays and briefing papers over the years, framed by passages looking back at the sweep of Afghan history and the US involvement there since 1979.

Peter Bergen is a former journalist and longstanding commentator and writer on the region now working at the New America Foundation in Washington DC (1). He has edited and introduces Talibanistan, a frequently brilliant collection of essays by different experts on the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including an analysis of the extent to which their links with Al Qaeda represent an enduring threat to the West, and of how far a peace settlement with them may be possible. Rubin's and Bergen's works should be read in conjunction with a fascinatingly detailed new book on the Haqqani network, Fountainhead of Jihad (the name of a magazine published by the Haqqanis) by Vahid Brown and Don Rassler.

Brown and Rassler bring out the deep rootedness of the Haqqanis in the history and culture of this region, on both sides of a Durand Line which as far as the locals are concerned has always been largely theoretical. In the words of Jalaluddin Haqqani himself, "Our tribes are settled on both sides of the Durand Line since ages. Our houses are divided on both sides of the border. Both sides are my home." (p.129). Brown and Rassler point out that from this point of view, all the US invasion of 2001 managed to do was "force this [Haqqani] nexus a few dozen kilometers east." (p.120)

The authors situate the identity and policies of the Haqqanis in the context of three powerful local traditions: First comes an ancient fight for local tribal autonomy against attempts to impose outside state power. This led the Haqqanis in 1999-2000 to clash with Taliban attempts to impose their own version of centralized Afghan rule. Next is a history of revolt in the name of Islam, orchestrated by local religious figures; and finally, the region's longstanding role as a "shatter zone" (in the phrase of the anthropologist James C. Scott). Shatter zones are remote,

usually mountainous areas which have not been fully penetrated and controlled by states, and which serve as refuges for a variety of fugitives and outlaws from elsewhere, who often create in these regions their own new communities, and place of refuge for a great range of outlaws and rebels. The refuge given to Al Qaeda can be seen as part of this tradition, as well as reflecting ideological affinities and material benefits.

The very close relationship between the Haqqanis and Pakistani military intelligence, dating back to the 1990s, is seen by Brown and Rassler not as the Haqqanis acting as Pakistani agents, but rather as a pragmatic alliance with practical benefits for both sides. The Haqqanis get immunity from Pakistani attack and a measure of indirect technical and expert help. The Pakistanis gain a source of influence within Afghanistan and equally importantly in their struggle to contain their own Pashtun Islamist rebellion. The authors leave open the question of how the Haqqanis would respond to Pakistani pressure to enter into an Afghan peace settlement – though first and foremost no doubt would be the question of their own continued dominance in their own region.

The need to go on studying Afghanistan also stems from what the Afghan experience of the past decade can tell us about the United States and its Western allies when they "go abroad in search of monsters to destroy". These lessons were taught by Vietnam, but then largely forgotten – mainly it seems because they were too offensive to America's self-image. In the US debate – to give it that name – that preceded the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I was appalled by the extent to which the lessons of Vietnam had been forgotten: not so much lessons about guerrilla war and its horrors, as lessons about the United States itself.

These lessons include the dangers of demonizing the enemy of the moment, on the basis of a belief that any enemy of the United States must inevitably be evil. Not only does this tendency make pragmatic compromises with opponents much more difficult (and much more embarrassing should they eventually have to be reached), but consciously or unconsciously, it allows the US government and media to blind the US public, and often themselves, to the evils of America's own allies.

The USA did this again and again during the Cold War. In Afghanistan it has done it twice: first in its blind backing of the Afghan Mujahidin in the 1980s against the Soviet occupiers and their Communist allies; then since 9/11 against the Taliban – most of whose Pashtun footsoldiers are descendants of the same ordinary farmers who filled the ranks of the Mujahidin, and who are

fighting for the same reasons. This is not of course to say that either the Vietnamese Communists or the Taliban were or are desirable forces in themselves – just that they represent strong elements in their own societies, and from the point of view of many Vietnamese and Afghans, they are no worse than the forces that we support. This is a point that emerges very clearly from Rubin and from several of the essays in Bergen's collection.

The catastrophic difficulties that the Western project has faced in Afghanistan have of course been principally due to the realities of Aghanistan itself; but they have been made far worse by a whole series of policy mistakes, and the deeper features of Western government and society which they reflect.

These begin with specific and disastrous decision by the Bush administration, which are mercilessly dissected by Rubin. Of these, the first, from which many of the others stemmed, was also in some ways the most forgivable. This was the decision in the immediate wake of 9/11 to give the Taliban the shortest of ultimata to hand the old Qaeda leadership over to the United States. The haste of the US response was understandable given the mood in the USA following 9/11. The result however was to make the US war effort disastrously dependent on warlords from the surviving anti-Taliban opposition, since they had the only armed forces on the ground. According to Rubin, the hundreds of millions of dollars handed out by US officers to these figures went among other things to finance the restoration of the heroin trade, which the Taliban (for its own reasons) had temporarily suppressed. The results of this have not been much felt in the USA, where heroin is a relatively minor problem – but they are all too apparent in Europe, Russia and Iran.

These warlords were and remain not only dreadfully flawed figures in themselves but were detested by much of the Pashtun population in particular. This applies in the first instance to the warlords from non-Pashtun ethnicities, grouped in the so-called "Northern Alliance", who fought against first the Pashtun Mujahidin of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and then against the mainly Pashtun Taliban in the 1990s. It applies equally however to the Pashtun Mujahidin warlords who dominated the south and east of Afghanistan after the fall of the Communist government in 1992. It was indeed to get rid of both these groups of forces that so many Pashtuns (and some others) had helped the Taliban to power in the first place. Rubin notes that a Western tendency to turn a blind eye to atrocities committed by anti-Taliban warlords against the Taliban predates 9/11, and began with UN indifference to such cases in the 1990s.

As described by Rubin and several of the authors in Bergen's collection, the return of the Taliban in southern and eastern Afghanistan can be largely explained by the way in which the United States restored these warlords to local power, and then not merely allowed but in many cases actively helped them to eliminate local rivals. In a great many cases, this involved the persecution or even assassination of Taliban figures who had already expressed their desire to reconcile with the Karzai administration.

One such former Taliban commander in Zabul province was Hajji Pay Mohammed, who was killed by the new local authorities after he had already agreed to lay down his arms. His body and those of his men were then publicly displayed for several days rather than being given to their families to be buried - an appalling breach of the Pashtun code. (Bergen, p.105)

In his chapter in Talibanistan, Anand Gopal writes that, "many Taliban did not take up arms simply as an exercise of the principle of jihad or expulsion of foreigners...but rather because it was the only viable alternative for individuals and groups left without a place in the new state of affairs." Gopal describes the case of Hajji Burget Khan in the Kandahari district of Maiwand, an elderly and respected local figure who had no personal Taliban links. US forced raided his home in 2002, killing him and leaving his son a paraplegic – an incident that was crucial in persuading local people to rejoin the Taliban. "The most likely explanation is that the commanders with whom US forces had allied had seen Burget Khan as a rival." (2)

I had a taste of this during a visit of my own to Afghanistan in early 2002, soon after the fall of the Taliban. During my trip, I met a lesser warlord known to the population of south Kabul as the "wolf man", because he supposedly interrogated prisoners with the help of a pet wolf, to whom he then fed their remains. The truth more likely is that the wolf was a large dog and that he was anticipating the tactics of US interrogators at Abu Ghraib. But whatever the truth, he was not loved by local people, and the fact that the new authorities had made him a local police chief did not increase public love for them or for their US backers.

In the course of the same trip, I met another warlord in Ghazni province who named for me a list of local former Taliban figures who he said had only pretended to accept the rule of Karzai. Mistaking me for a CIA officer, he offered to bring me their heads "packed in salt" in return for $100,000. I declined the offer. A number of real US officials, it seems, did not decline similar offers, if perhaps without the seasoning. Unfortunately, as I found again and again in

Washington during those years, any attempt to urge reconciliation with parts of the Taliban was liable to be brushed away with some variant of the phrase "we don't negotiate with evil" and "we don't talk to terrorists".

This reliance on hideously flawed local allies also however reflected two other disastrous features of the Bush administration: Donald Rumsfeld's belief that wars could be won, and their gains secured, with very limited US forces which thereafter would maintain a "light footprint" in the countries conquered; and the decision – made it would seem immediately after the Taliban were overthrown – to attack Iraq. This meant that in the spring of 2002, before the US had even succeeded in driving many Al Qaeda elements from Afghanistan, US troops were already being withdrawn from there to retrain for the invasion of Iraq. At almost every stage thereafter, US ground troops were inadequate to the tasks facing them, and every subsequent increase in US and allied troops was an inadequate reaction to gains made by the Taliban.

Even these errors would not have been so bad had they not been combined with a project that was utterly incompatible with the "light footprint" strategy. This was the plan to develop Afghanistan as an effective, centralized, modern, liberal and democratic state. Given the nature of Afghan society and the almost complete collapse of Afghan state institutions, such a project could only have had the remotest chance of success if the West had been prepared to deploy large forces and massive amounts of money and attention over a period of generations.

The decision to try to create a modern Afghan democracy revealed in part the fundamental flaw in Rumsfeld's thinking which should be remembered before the USA again launches a war to overthrow a regime: namely that, in Colin Powell's words, "if you break it, you own it". Having overthrown the Taliban, some form of government had to be put in their place. The vast extent of the Western project in Afghanistan was also however a result of the Bush administration's adoption of the "Freedom Agenda" in the Middle East, largely to help justify the Iraq War. As in Afghanistan, the non-military resources that the US was prepared to expend on this agenda were almost fantastically out of step with its immense ambitions.

Europe bears its own share of the blame for this mismatch. On the one hand, the European Union and America's NATO allies were pathetically anxious to demonstrate their importance to Washington by "nation building" in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Europeans' real commitment was even weaker than that of Americans. I remember in 2002 listening to a

German official talking about how by 2006 Afghanistan would have had presidential and parliamentary elections, established a stable democracy, "and we can leave". When I objected that nothing serious could possibly be achieved in such a time, the response was "Yes, but we have to tell the German voters that we are out of there quickly or they will reject the whole mission."

Having inherited this mess, and having so far failed to resolve it either through victory or negotiation, how should the Obama administration proceed as it enters on its second term? The first work that US officials should read in this regard is the last chapter in Talibanistan, Thomas Ruttig's essay on "Negotiating with the Taliban" – a model of lucid analysis. As Ruttig writes, central to the problem is the number of actors involved. A short and by no means exhaustive list of these actors includes, on the anti-Taliban side: the US government and military (which of course have their own serious differences); the Karzai presidency and clan, and their immediate allies; non-Pashtun warlords and other leaders opposed to the Taliban; and westernized Afghan officials and NGO figures in Kabul. Among the armed opposition, the list includes the Taliban under Mullah Omar (which also has potentially serious internal divisions); the Haqqani network; the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar; the remnants of Al Qaeda in the region; the Pakistani Taliban; and anti-Indian terrorist groups based in Pakistan, some now in rebellion against the Pakistani state, others still allied to it. Then there are the international actors: Pakistan, and above all the Pakistani military and military intelligence service; India; Iran; China; and Russia.

Each of them distrusts all the others, and their own ostensible allies not least. By the same token, all fear any peace negotiations in which they are not included. Thus Karzai wishes to pursue talks with some Taliban leaders (though, as seems likely, to try to split the Taliban rather than to make a deal with the organization as a whole), but detests talks between the US administration and the Taliban. Most of these actors are themselves internally divided. All have the capacity to damage a peace process, and most can destroy hopes for peace altogether if they choose.

I strongly support Thomas Ruttig's argument that the first essential step for a US administration is to commit itself fully to a political solution, and not – as has too often been the case up to now – try to use talks to split and weaken the Taliban rather than reach agreement with the organization as a whole. Only a genuine commitment along these lines will allow Washington to play the part of an honest broker between all the forces outlined above. In Ruttig's words:

"Instead of the current double strategy of "shooting and talking" at the same time, it [the United States] should concentrate on "talking instead of shooting". This means turning the tanker round, not steering it a bit more to the east or west. It would redefine the current understanding of "position of strength" away from strictly military terms to political and moral terms. In this framework, military means would be used only for self defense (which includes defending Afghan institutions and their officials)...Such a shift in the military approach would also significantly remove a major recruitment factor for the insurgents: civilian casualties." (3)

The commitment then should be first and foremost to Afghan peace. This also serves the vital interests of the United States and its western allies. For as long as the conflict continues, Al Qaeda will continue to have opportunities to make itself useful to the Taliban and the Haqqani network; and all the different armed actors involved will need to go on taxing the heroin trade in order to support their armed forces.

A peace settlement would also be a considerable boost to America's image in the Muslim world; and perhaps most important of all, would allow for a reduction of the dangerous level of tension between the United States and Pakistan, which is a major source of radicalization in Pakistan and therefore of terrorist threat to the USA and its allies – especially those like Britain which contain large Pakistani minorities.

Certain indications from the Taliban side are encouraging. In July 2012, I was part of an academic groups which held conversations in the Gulf with leading figures close to the Taliban. (4) They told us that there is a widespread recognition within the Taliban that while they can maintain a struggle in the south and east of Afghanistan indefinitely, they will not be able to conquer the whole country in the face of the Afghan and international forces arrayed against them.

The key reason for this belief is that in their estimate the Taliban only have the support of around 30 per cent of the Afghan population. This is in accordance with a recent opinion survey by the Asia Foundation , (5) and seems plausible, since it would represent around two thirds of the Pashtuns. They said that the Taliban therefore recognize the need for compromise with other groups in Afghanistan (which I took to mean groups representing other nationalities).

However, they categorically ruled out any deal with the Karzai government, and insisted that there would have to be a national debate including the Taliban on a new constitution – though interestingly enough, they also said that the constitution that emerged would probably not be very different from the existing one. They said that there can be no return to a pure "government of mullahs" as before 9/11, and that any Afghan government would have to include technocrats, and allow modern education (albeit with women and men strictly separated). It is possible that this reflects a growing awareness of Afghanistan's mineral and energy wealth, and the need for a technocratic elite capable of exploiting it.

Finally, and most strikingly, they said that the Taliban might be prepared to agree to US bases remaining until 2024. This it seems reflects the greatest fear of the Taliban, and many other Afghans, that the country will fragment into different ethnic warlord fiefdoms backed by different regional actors like Russia and India, as occurred in the early and mid-1990s. Even a prolonged US presence, it seems, may possibly be acceptable if it helps prevent the Afghan National Army disintegrating along these lines.
All of the figures with who we spoke said that breaking with Al Qaeda would not be a problem for the Taliban – as long as this was part of a settlement, and not a precondition for talks. They reminded us that the Taliban leadership has repeatedly distanced itself from international terrorism, and said that ordinary Taliban fighters also see Al Qaeda as non-Afghans who brought disaster on Afghanistan.

They became highly evasive however when asked whether the Haqqanis would be willing to accept this. Brown and Rassler's book also gives no definitive answer to this question. However, reading the evidence they present, and drawing upon the historical record of the tribes from whom the Haqqani forces are drawn, my own highly provisional conclusion would be the following: that the Haqqanis will support any settlement that is acceptable to Mullah Omar and to the Pakistani military, and that leaves the Haqqanis in de facto control of their own region; that as part of this they would be prepared to exclude any significant presence of Al Qaeda from that region; but on the other hand that nothing on earth will prevent this region from remaining a haven for smaller groups of assorted outlaws, since this has been the case for many hundreds of years.

The first thing that the Obama administration needs to decide therefore is whether it really wants Afghan presidential elections under the existing constitution to go ahead next year, given the immense twofold risk involved: that they will make a peace agreement with the Taliban impossible, and that a repetition of the massive rigging of 2009 will render the result illegitimate as far as most Afghans are concerned, plunging the country into a deep political crisis just as US ground troops withdraw. The alternative would be for the US to acknowledge the deep flaws

in the existing constitution (which in truth was imposed on Afghanistan from outside), and to declare its support for the idea of a new constitutional assembly – thereby also helping open the way to genuine peace talks with the Taliban. If it cannot nerve itself to such a step, the US administration will have to decide who it thinks would be the best candidate to be next Afghan president.

The one thing the Obama administration cannot honorably and realistically do is to walk away from all this with the declaration that it is "a matter for the Afghans themselves". This might sound nice and democratic, but it would in fact be an abdication of responsibility: responsibility for an Afghan mess which is to a considerable extent of America's own making; and responsibility to those American soldiers and officials who will be left in the middle of this mess after US ground troops withdraw next year.

(1) Of which I am a non-resident senior fellow myself.

(2) Talibanistan, pages 26-27.

(3) Talibanistan, page 469.

(4) The report of our group was published last year by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London. See Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation, by Michael Semple, Theo Farrell, Anatol Lieven and Rudra Chaudhuri, at http://www.rusi.org/publications/other/ref:O504A22C99538B/ .

(5) Afghanistan in 2012: A Survey of the Afghan People, published by the Asia Foundation at http://asiafoundation.org/publications/pdf/1163
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