

Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: Inside Story of West Afghanistan's Campaign* (London: Harper Press, 2012), 299.

Book Review by Sajid Aziz

The book 'Cables from Kabul' is a memoir-cum-diplomatic account by Sherard Cowper-Coles, Britain's former ambassador to Afghanistan. Slyly titled, this book sheds fleeting light on a whole range of issues-drugs, COIN, the ever-elusive peace process, policy discussion within ISAF and NATO forces and the humdrum of life in Afghanistan, turned occasionally into a squib courtesy to his immaculate prose, et al; that afflict the troubled land of Afghanistan. This three hundred page work is divided into 5 parts; though published in 2011, its relevance as an account, a relatively and coyly honest one at that, from an insider helps readers to broaden, substantiate and at times to rebut the prevalent perceptions about the situation in Afghanistan. Cables from Kabul helps us understand how West descended into the abyss and quagmire of Afghanistan and how can this situation be ameliorated, paving the way out for the foreign forces.

Plethora of themes, corresponding with the experience and the subsequent impressions of the author, dot the canvas of this account. The spectrum ranges from the contemporary logic of COIN and its insufficiency to the failure of efforts to eradicate drugs from Afghanistan, from the motives of invasion to historical innuendos and allusions to the invaders of Afghanistan of yesteryears. Sherard's first-hand information is, more often than not, interspersed with insightful analysis emanating from a profound interest in history, evidenced by his references to Peloponnesian War, Thucydides, and the putsch of Shinwari tribe against King Amanuallah, Livy and his book 'History of Rome.' Though his dilation on the given themes falls short of the so-called academic standard, but they are no less useful for understanding the war in Afghanistan.

The dialectic of 'tribute to the fallen ones' and the element of skepticism not only for the means or tactics deployed to achieve war ends but of the overall logic of invading

Afghanistan, courses intermittently throughout this book. The book begins with an illustrious tribute to a soldier felled while fighting, and in the preface author sets the tone by calling the Bonn conference as a 'victor's peace' which would not last after the foreign forces would have left Afghanistan. In the penultimate chapter "Three Lessons Learned," Sherard discusses the inadequacy of Counterinsurgency Field Manual, written at Fort Leavenworth by David Petraeus, and considers it as a document that predominantly consumes itself on tactics, reflecting the overall strategy of military aims bereft of any overarching rubric of political ends.

Sherard Cowper-Coles' tenure as British ambassador to UK and later as Foreign Secretary's Special Representative coincided with the military surge of international forces to combat and halt 'the spread of virus' (read the resurgence of Taliban). The internal policy debates regarding the viability of a parallel diplomatic thrust to engage Taliban which would complement the revitalized military approach or to pursue a political solution to the Afghan quagmire only after Taliban have been routed; give a certain peep into the contemporary negotiations to end the decades-old conflict.

As peace negotiations continue between Afghanistan government led by Ghani and Taliban to bring to a halt the conflict in Afghanistan, it is important to revisit the genesis of the war and how past actions shaped the present. This book is honest about what went wrong in the first place and how the mess and chaos that is the present day Afghanistan could have been avoided. Sherard had this to say about the invasion of Afghanistan in the preface of the book, "Taliban had never been defeated in 2001-2; that the Bonn settlement that had followed had been a victors' peace, from which the vanquished had been excluded; and the constitution resulting from that settlement could last only as long as the West was prepared to stay in Afghanistan to prop up the present disposition."