

***The Afghanistan Conflict: and Australia's Role*, edited by Amin Saikal, Melbourne University Press, 2011, pp. 210, \$30.39.**

This is a timely and critical book, arising from a 2009 conference at the ANU, that takes a close look at the many complexities of the conflict in Afghanistan and, most importantly, at the curiously unexamined role of Australia.

Leaving aside questions about Australia's historical predilection for fighting other people's wars, the relevance of the US alliance and the very morality of the US-led invasion of this wretched and dismal land, the issues raised in this collection by a diverse range of distinguished experts make for disturbing and thought-provoking reading.

Dealt with here, and remarkably so given the concise nature of the collection, are the questions about why the massive international effort with some 130,000 military personnel deployed is in such crisis, why strategic objectives to secure Afghanistan are as remote as ever, and why the much vaunted social justice and reconstruction efforts have achieved so little.

In a perceptive overview, Amin Saikal of the ANU paints a gloomy picture as to why, after a decade of military operations and alleged reconstruction, the US and its allies "are beset by a deep sense of fatigue, which is enforced by a precipitous decline in public support for the Afghan war." The Afghan people, he writes, have been served poorly by the government delivered to them by the invaders which is "very corrupt, dysfunctional and self-serving ...[and] lacking a visionary agenda." Most Afghans continue to live in abject poverty, insecurity and uncertainty.

Professor Saikal is critical of the highly centralised presidential model of government imposed by the US which he observes has little likelihood of working in a war-torn country beset by tribal, ethnic, linguistic and sectarian cleavages. Instead, it has been used by Hamid Karzai as a typical Pashtun Khan or tribal leader to fill key government positions on the basis of family, tribal, ethnic and factional connections, and to engage in building extensive patronage networks, based on a system of favour and disfavour. In all, it is quite the opposite of US claims to be building democracy.

Professor Nazif Shahrani of Indiana University takes up this theme, noting that for all the rhetoric about bringing democracy, no provisions have been made in the various constitutions of Afghanistan for empowering true citizenry through managing their own public affairs. Indeed, he writes that the already flawed political culture, with its absence of trust, has been further magnified by an utterly inappropriate political system.

The always thoughtful Hugh White of the ANU examines the colossal strategic failure through an analysis of the multiple objectives of the intervention: reducing terrorism, stabilising the region and improving civic life. Given that the so-called war on terror serves as the overarching goal of the international effort, Professor White wonders whether some limits might be

appropriate in responding to it, given that while terrorism threatens loss of life it does not threaten society itself nor political systems or the international order.

Beth Eggleston of Oxfam deplores the lack of debate about engagement in Afghanistan, noting that it took the death of 21 Australians before there was even a debate in parliament, a theme thoughtfully developed by journalist Tom Hyland and Professor Kevin Foster of Monash who deplore the tightly controlled and managed media coverage and the system of 'embedding' correspondents with the forces, all of which keeps the Australian people, paying in taxes and lives, in perpetual ignorance of what is really happening and why.

A tightly edited volume that sheds light on a dark and secretive episode and poses critical questions that no supporter of the conflict has seriously tried to answer.

*Norman Abjorensen is a visiting fellow in the policy and governance program of the Crawford School of Economics and Government at the ANU and an associate of the Centre for the Study of Australian Politics.*