

Review - Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan 2001-14

Written by Paul Dixon

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PAUL DIXON, DEC 20 2018

Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-14
Theo Farrell
London: Vintage, 2018

Debating the Afghan War?

The enthusiastic reviews of Theo Farrell's *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001-14* might suggest that there is general agreement on his interpretation of the Afghan war. The cover of the new paperback edition of *Unwinnable* (2018) carries endorsements from both an enthusiastic supporter of the war and a strong critic of its futility. The Neoconservative historian, Andrew Roberts, a supporter of the war, describes the book as 'Definitive and riveting'. While Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles, the former British ambassador to Kabul (2007-09) and a strong critic, describes it as 'A must-read... magnificent'. The reviewer for *The Sunday Times* called it a '... masterful, irrefutable study'. There has been almost universal acclaim for *Unwinnable* and it has an impressive range of endorsements.

This apparent consensus is all the more remarkable when it is considered that Farrell was chosen to write the army's 'classified' history of the Afghan war. He has been given privileged or 'unprecedented' (blurb) access to the army and its archives. The US counterinsurgency expert, Carter Malkasian, described *Unwinnable* as '... akin to an official history in the finest of British historical tradition'. Professor Farrell, a former head of the Department of War Studies at Kings College London, played an active role in supporting Britain and NATO's war in Afghanistan. He worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the British army and NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. This included serving on strategic assessment teams for two commanders of ISAF, General McChrystal in 2010 and General Dunford in 2013.

The key question is whether Professor Farrell believes that his and the British army's efforts in Afghanistan were futile because the war was 'unwinnable' from 2001? Or whether the war was winnable until 2010, when politicians announced the end of ISAF (p. 3)?

This review will argue that:

- First, reviewers have interpreted Farrell's book as suggesting that the Afghan war was 'unwinnable' since 2001/2.
- Second, Andrew Roberts, a Neoconservative, by contrast, endorsed the book even though he argues that the war was winnable.
- Third, Roberts' interpretation is more accurate and *Unwinnable* contends that the war was winnable but for the failure of the politicians.
- Fourth, *Unwinnable* underplays the military's power and responsibility for the extent of Britain's involvement in both the Iraq and Afghan wars. The concern is that the military's power will lead Britain to fight further unwinnable wars.

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Unwinnable since 2001

Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles' became one of the most vocal critics of Britain's conduct of the war. In his book, *Cables from Kabul* (2011),

he criticised the British military's 'happy talk' by astutely drawing comparisons between the conduct of the war in Afghanistan with Vietnam. Cowper-Coles interprets *Unwinnable's* 'central theme' as endorsing Blackadder's General Melchett: "That's the spirit, George. If nothing else works, then a total pig-headed unwillingness to look facts in the face will see us through." Farrell also 'describes the delusion that if only we had had a proper counter-insurgency strategy then everything would have been all right'. According to the former ambassador, the war was 'unwinnable' from 2001 and, he argues, many policy-makers, including in the military, privately knew this. 'Vanity, ambition, unwillingness to rock the boat or upset the Americans or the army kept us quietly acquiescent in a venture that we knew would fail' (Cowper-Coles 2017).

The defence editor of the *Evening Standard*, Robert Fox, appears to agree that from the start the campaign had 'little chance of success'. Fox, like Cowper-Coles, is much more sceptical than Farrell of the military's success, 'The British and Americans made huge play about reinventing "counterinsurgency" and the "population centric" policies of defending the people first and attacking the enemy second. Farrell seems to go with this — though of course the opposite happened' (Fox 2017).

John Newsinger is a Marxist, anti-imperialist, counterinsurgency expert and author of a stimulating and incisive analysis, *British Counterinsurgency* (2002, 2015). He also endorses *Unwinnable*, 'This is the best account so far of Britain's fourth Afghan War and it is unlikely to be surpassed any time soon'. He interprets the book as suggesting 'that Britain and the United States should not have fought this war at all' (Newsinger 2018). Blair and Brown are criticised for having got involved in the war and for sharing with the Conservatives a 'scorn' for the military.

A Winnable War

The historian Andrew Roberts, by contrast, is a follower of the British Neoconservative 'Henry Jackson Society' and a strong supporter of the British Empire. Roberts, an outspoken supporter of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is quoted on the cover of *Unwinnable* stating that it is 'Definitive and Riveting'. He argues that Tony Blair, 'With his announcement that Britain would stand "shoulder to shoulder" with the United States, and backing that up with sending large numbers of British troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq, he carved a place for himself in the first rank of British premiers since 1900' (BBC 2007).

Roberts sees Britain as having been 'one of the world's foremost moral policemen', and should be taking an active role in 'defending democracy' (Roberts 2013). In 2010, Roberts attacked 'the left' for assuming that Afghanistan has always been the 'graveyard of empires', 'thereby more or less openly encouraging us to draw the inevitable conclusion that the present struggle against the Taliban is unwinnable' (Roberts 2010). The war was winnable, and the US and Britain should fight on to victory. In 2009 he had pointed out that '... in Britain we have lost fewer soldiers [in Afghanistan] than on a normal weekend on the Western Front' (Roberts 2009).

Unwinnable argues that the Afghan War was winnable

So does *Unwinnable* actually argue that the war in Afghanistan was unwinnable? And if it was unwinnable, at what point was it unwinnable, 2001, 2002, 2006 or 2009-11?

Professor Farrell does not suggest that the British army's efforts in Afghanistan after 2006 were futile because they were fighting in an unwinnable war. In 2009 Farrell did not argue that the war was unwinnable and seemed optimistic because he identified 'major improvements' during 2006-09 as the British 'relearned old tricks' and improved the application of counterinsurgency (Farrell and Gordon 2009: 672, 675, see also 677). The bulk of *Unwinnable* is taken up with a detailed description of the army's operations and their apparent success. It argues that the British army learnt and adapted (p. 5) over time and got 'ever better at waging counterinsurgency warfare' (p. 419). The chapter

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titles suggest that there was a 'Bad Beginning' that this was 'Mission Impossible' and 'The Campaign Flounders'. But then there is an 'American Surge' and it is suggested that NATO wins the 'Showdown' with the Taliban and the military are 'Undefeated'. The politicians announce the withdrawal of troops so 'Times Runs Out' just as the military had implemented a proper counterinsurgency campaign (2009-11) that was winning the war. Tactical military gains were not turned into political or strategic success (Farrell 2017: 3, 5).

The military, therefore, played their part. The war was winnable but failed due to factors beyond the military's control: Afghan government corruption; Pakistan's support for the Taliban; and Western publics that tired of the war and the response to this of NATO politicians who set a deadline to withdraw and end ISAF (p. 3). The war, it seems, was 'winnable' as late as 2009-11 only the military were let down by the politicians.

The reason that *Unwinnable* is so open to interpretation is that the book is ambiguous. In 510 pages of text and footnotes there are only 6 pages at the beginning (pp. 1-6) that attempt to describe the argument of the book. There is no conclusion and only a section of the final chapter tries to summarise the argument. Here again it is not clear what is being argued (pp. 417-424). The blurb on the dust jacket suggests that the British might have withdrawn successfully in 2002. Yet it also appears to suggest that victory was possible. The book 'reveals', '... how the military's efforts to create a strategy for success were continually undermined by political realities in Kabul and back home'.

A 'winnable' war in Helmand 2006

There is ambiguity too over the key issue of who was responsible for the escalation of Britain's role in Afghanistan through its deployment to Helmand in 2006. The concluding section of *Unwinnable* argues that the 'Ministry of Defence', 'grossly underestimated how fast British forces could draw down from Iraq and how difficult it would be to bring security to Helmand' (p. 418). Yet earlier it was stated that it was the Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, who was 'increasingly concerned about the prospects of the army having to wage two enduring campaigns at the same time'. The Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Michael Walker, favoured the deployment. He told Hoon to raise his concerns with the Prime Minister or shut up (p. 149). Army leaders, Farrell reports, were 'desperately keen for the Helmand mission to go ahead' and putting 'immense pressure' on the Secretary of State to approve the deployment in 2006 (p. 150). This was because the British military believed that Helmand would be a 'winnable' war (Dixon 2012: 29; Seldon and Lodge 2010: 207).

Unwinnable concludes, 'Ultimately, the British campaign in Helmand was characterised by political absenteeism and military hubris' (p. 421). The Labour government, however, was not absent but followed military advice and their assurances that they could simultaneously handle both wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *The Chilcot Report* (2016), a key source which *Unwinnable* largely ignores, lays the blame for military overstretch caused by deployment in both Iraq and Afghanistan at the door of the military itself (Chilcot 2016: paras 720-32).

More winnable wars?

Unwinnable does present important new evidence on Britain's war in Afghanistan. The ambiguity of the book, however, means that it has been interpreted as arguing that the Afghan war was unwinnable from 2001 (Cowper-Coles 2017; Newsinger 2018 and perhaps Fox 2017), from 2002 (blurb, p. 1) or that it was only unwinnable once the politicians had decided to leave in 2010 (p. 3). Cowper-Coles thinks Farrell is sceptical of the counterinsurgency delusion whereas Fox thinks he succumbed.

The ambiguity of *Unwinnable* creates the illusion of consensus among opposed perspectives and stifles legitimate and much needed debate about the 'lessons' that should be drawn from the Afghan war. Paradoxically, it would seem, *Unwinnable* argues, along with the army leadership and the Neoconservatives, that the Afghan war was 'winnable' after 2006 and during 2009-11, but for the failure of politicians. This narrative encourages the empowerment of the military over policy in order to achieve effective military interventions in Libya, Syria, Iran and Russia.

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The Chilcot Report (2016), by contrast, provided important evidence that it was the excessive influence of the military elite that led to strong military commitments to the invasion of Iraq and the deployment to Helmand 2006. The resulting military overstretch and crisis was then blamed on the politicians. Sceptics are concerned that Britain's participation in the Afghan war has further increased the power of the military. This includes its power to shape the narrative around the lessons of the war and to pressurise governments into undertaking more unwinnable wars (Dixon 2018).

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