

AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

Where is thy victory?

Derek Parker

An Unwinnable War: Australia in Afghanistan

By Karen Middleton

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With a title like this, plus the fact that the author has a longstanding association with SBS, one might expect *An Unwinnable War* to be a standard reiteration of the anti-Howard, anti-US conspiracy theories about Afghanistan. So it is pleasing, as well as surprising, that Middleton plays it pretty well down the middle, drawing on a wide range of first-hand sources and doing her best to show the historical context of unfolding events.

The book was published to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center, and appropriately Middleton starts her account on 11 September 2001. She was, in fact, travelling with then-PM John Howard at the time, and they were worryingly close to the flight path of the plane that crashed into the Pentagon.

Perhaps it is the personal experience that allows Middleton a better understanding of the depth of American feeling over the attacks, compared with armchair commentators speaking a decade later and a continent away. Certainly, she understands why Howard immediately offered Australia's help in pursuing the attackers, a decision which looks precipitous in isolated hindsight but made good sense at the time. Putting it at its most basic, friends help each other in times of crisis.

In some ways, the ease of kicking the Taliban and their al-Qa'eda allies out of government in Afghanistan, via a convincing invasion with crucial local assistance, was a portent of trouble to come. True, there was little thought about what to do after the Taliban were driven out, but with the WTC still smoking this is perhaps understandable. It might even be surprising, given the American mood at the time, that George W. Bush refrained from nuking the whole country, border to border.

Middleton sees the failure to

capture bin Laden at Tora Bora as symptomatic of larger issues, especially a dramatic under-estimation of the resilience of the Taliban/al-Qa'eda. The decision to recommit forces in 2002 was not taken lightly in either the US or Australia, and there was no shortage of worries over where it might lead. Nevertheless, there were few alternatives: everyone agreed that leaving the fledgling Afghan government to fend for itself would see the Taliban back in power within a year, with all that that implied for both the Afghan people and world security.

Even so, there were continuing disagreements over ends and means. Some people envisaged a Western-style democracy, while others believed that the key was to build developmental infrastructure. The Americans always saw security as the primary issue, while Australia sought to combine the roles of protecting engineering projects (and undertaking its own) and pursuing insurgents on the ground as well. There might not be anything wrong with this double-headed strategy in practical terms, but from a political perspective it tended to rob the venture of clarity. As the memory of 9/11 began to fade, the argument that propping up the Afghan government was essential to Western security began to look shaky. The lack of a comprehensive government statement — remarkably, there was no parliamentary debate on the war until after the 2010 election — added to the sense that the original purpose had been lost in the fog of war.

In Australia, the conservative parties generally felt that there was public support for being in Afghanistan. It was a bigger problem for the ALP, with successive leaders having to placate their anti-American left wing while trying to explain the difference between the good war in Afghanistan and the bad one in Iraq. It is reasonable to suggest, as Middleton does, that Mark Latham's 'troops out by Christmas' policy undermined his claim to be a serious leader, but it seems equally clear that broad views on the war were shifting by around 2005.

Gillard, to her credit, has largely stayed with the course charted by Howard and Rudd, although the focus has shifted from nation-building to socio-economic development. This was confirmed at the NATO Lisbon conference, which Middleton sees as an important event in giving Western countries a viable strategy of 'Afghanisation' and a plausible exit timetable.

Middleton accepts that a premature withdrawal would see the country again plunge into disaster, with nothing to show for all the blood and treasure so far spent — except the knowledge that we would probably have to do it all again one day.

She does make the point that there probably should be more willingness to debate both the goals and the conduct of the war. Successive governments have managed to stifle discussion by equating concerns over the war with criticism of Australia's soldiers — an effective ploy but one that has tended, over time, to cut the public out of the picture. She believes that Australians are mature

enough to debate the issue without resorting to personal recriminations. One would hope so.

And is the war, in the end, 'winnable'? Actually, it probably is, in the sense of the objectives being achieved. When US General Petraeus suggested that it might not be (hence the title of the book), he meant that it could not be won by force of arms alone, and that there would be no day of clear and final triumph. Instead, it will be a matter of steady progress across several fronts, with the result of the world being a better and safer place. No parades, true, but the quiet knowledge that the right thing had been done.

Derek Parker is a freelance writer based in Melbourne.



'I've emailed him a few sexually explicit photos of myself but I thought it might seem a bit forward to suggest meeting up just yet.'