

BRIAN GLYN WILLIAMS, *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Pp. 400. \$26.50 cloth. ISBN: 9780812224207

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According to Brian Glyn Williams, the current fight against ISIS is yet another stop along the way in the journey of US interventionism that spans back half a century. *Counter Jihad* connects the dots—some real, some fabricated by various US agencies and politicians—to demonstrate how the US became mired in Afghanistan, the longest running yet often forgotten war in its history; used questionable rationale to invade Iraq; and found itself in Syria and on the precipice of a third protracted conflict in less than twenty years.

It becomes clear from the outset Williams's treatment takes more of a descriptive framework than a theory-building, hypothesis-testing mode of scholarship. The author first attends to what he fittingly deems "Planting the Seeds for a Global Conflict" and the lead-up to the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan (p. 1). He traces US involvement there back to the Gulf War (1990–1991), and argues Osama bin Laden's paranoia and subsequent hatred for America was prompted by the US military presence in Saudi Arabia—stationed there to both combat Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and as a bulwark against a possible invasion.

With this backdrop in place, the middle of the book concentrates on the "hype" that led to the US involvement in Iraq (p. 97). Williams meticulously chronicles the Iraq War, bolstered by extensive research and his own personal experiences in the region, and introduces the reader to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the infamous helmsmen of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and the Jordanian jihadist who planted the "seeds of sectarian hatred" that ultimately led to the rise of ISIS (p. 202). The latter half of the book primarily focuses on the rise and reign of the Islamic State and the continued decline of the US global reputation, especially during its actions (and inaction) during the Syrian civil war.

The most compelling feature of *Counter Jihad* is Williams's ability to seamlessly transition between the narratives, rhetoric, and thought-processes that unfolded on both sides of the US–terrorist divide during these episodes of conflict. Whether detailing the relationships between bin Laden and the Afghan Taliban, or the CIA, FBI, and Vice President Dick Cheney, Williams paints various pictures of disunity. This strategy is especially useful in showing how the United States undertook various foreign interventions that cost far more lives and destroyed far more livelihoods than ever projected. The author is determined as well to demonstrate how individual elites behind the political curtain in Washington mattered immensely for such outcomes—for instance, how David Wurmser, Middle East advisor to the erstwhile vice president, willfully intended to mislead both the State Department and the American public by cherry-picking "WMD intelligence that would build the case for convincing American people about the necessity of invading Iraq" (p. 103). Moreover, *Counter Jihad* is replete with interesting geopolitical details, like how the tactical relationship between bin Laden and his Taliban hosts in Afghanistan before 9/11 was not always "smooth" (p. 51), thanks to bin Laden's fatwa-issuing penchant.

On the other hand, however, this book does not excavate new sources of data or present much new information to seasoned readers. While the author's own personal experiences are interesting, a large share of his sources come courtesy of the US National Security Archive and various news media outlets. Thus, many of the central arguments appear stale, however passionately argued. For instance, the author stakes the claim that the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was indeed planned and executed under circumspect auspices. Yet this has been described in explicit (and better) detail elsewhere, such as *A Pretext for War: 9/11, Iraq, and the Abuse of America's Intelligence Agencies* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) by James Bamford or *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006) by Thomas E. Ricks—both of which Williams cites repeatedly.

Still, Williams's writing does shine in a final regard: it is accessible, and so the reader needs little prior knowledge of the Middle East in order to understand the overall argument. In this regard, *Counter Jihad* is a decent primer on US foreign policy against the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISIS, but it is not groundbreaking work.