

## PKSOI Book Review

Review of The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan After the Taliban  
by Sarah Chayes

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For anyone interested in an educated and experienced view on the reasons why Afghanistan is the way it is, and why Afghans act – maddeningly – the way they act, Sarah Chayes' The Punishment of Virtue is a must-read. I commend it to any military professional; moreover, to any civilian interested in the background to many of the current crises currently underway in that restive and troubled country.

It is recent history entwined with an autobiographical account of her relationship with key players in Kandahar City, and her observations, growing awareness and understanding of the truly deep-running nuances of Afghan behavior, motivations, and needs. Her knowledge base comes from her four years in country, the majority spent living in a mud-walled compound in Kandahar first as an NPR reporter, then working with an NGO. Her relationship with the Kandahar Chief of Police, one of the very few men of altruism she meets there, is the connecting thread for the entire story. This unique opportunity for a Westerner allowed her to listen, think, and watch Afghans and Americans try to sort out post-Taliban Kandahar, and by extension, post-Taliban Afghanistan.

The book describes – uncomfortably, but accurately - the first fumbling efforts by the U.S. government to support various warlords/ power brokers in the vacuum left by the evacuating Taliban. In the months and years that follow, her growing awareness of the U.S. government's (military and civilian) clear lack of coherent policy, short personnel rotation cycles, and repeated

examples of military units and civilian organizations working at cross purposes with each other - even within their own organizations; e.g., U.S. Special Forces and Department of State/ USAID - further motivated her to write this book.

Make no mistake, she is blunt, and to a military reader, even naïve – but she admits her naiveté early on, and by book's end, she writes from a background well-informed by military friends she's picked up along the way. Despite her earlier experiences in the Balkans as an NPR reporter, she views the military's actions and roles in Afghanistan with civilian eyes, and wonders dismayingly at how 'we' could fail to coordinate our efforts better in the void left by the Taliban collapse. For the military reader though, check your ego at the door - she offers fresh perspective and insights to military readers (especially those who have been around the block for awhile) which are invaluable. I personally made several mental notes during the course of my reading on future interactive endeavors with civilians – they simply see things differently.

While a bit over the top on Central Asian metaphors which are liberally distributed throughout; e.g., "like almonds sprinkled on a gossamer pastry", she is an unabashed Karzai worshipper at the outset. However, there comes a growing undercurrent of unease with the Karzai government – unwritten, but it is nonetheless palpable – a sense of frustration and a downward change of opinion towards the Afghan President. I wonder now what her opinion is of President Karzai now – three years post-publishing.

As a recent veteran of Afghanistan's Western Provinces, deeply involved in security sector reform and dealing daily with local and regional power brokers, I found her observations are incredibly enlightening, and buttressing my own observations:

- 1) with respect to tribute, plunder, and subsidy; that these are both accepted and respected norms of gaining prestige (and by extension, tacit power) among one's peers and buttresses his esteem, struck me like a bolt of lightning as one of the cultural nuances nearly always missed by NGOs and USG workers alike who 'just want to help.'

- 2) Her highlighting the Afghan propensity of showing loyalty to individuals, not institutions (and why), is absolutely spot on.
- 3) Her description of ‘yaghestan’ – an Afghan word for the ungoverned/chaotic state of lawlessness and local warlordism/ tribal vying for control that has occurred in the years between authoritarian control throughout the years, and that it occurs even today in districts where there is little governmental influence, is accurate and undeniable.

I was at first skeptical about the ‘freshness’ of the story, as it takes place in the years 2002 -2006, but, as with many things in Afghanistan, change happens slowly, and her message and insights remains valid – even more so now with the tremendous surge in the insurgency – today more than ever. It is for this reason, I suspect, that COMISAF brought her onto his special staff as an advisor in 2008.

Sarah writes as bluntly, simply, and with as much passion as she exhibits in her work habits and engagements day to day. I met Sarah in Badghis Province in April 2009 as she was travelling as a Special Assistant to COMISAF (at the time, GEN McKiernan.) At that time she struck me as articulate, passionate, extremely savvy to tribal dynamics, corruptive practices, and power-dynamics. At the time I didn’t know she’d written a book, but as I read this, it was as if I were sitting in a room with Sarah while she recounted the story of her years in Kandahar.

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## Authors Biography

John Bessler became the Division Chief, Security, Reconstruction, and Transitions (SRT) for PKSOI in August 2009 after 14 months in Herat, Afghanistan, where he commanded the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command, Western Provinces (ARSIC-West). In that position, he worked and fought side-by-side with Afghan and NATO forces while training Afghan Army and Afghan Police forces during 2008 and 2009. He worked intimately and regularly with NATO forces both in a mentoring as well as in a combat capacity, and even more routinely with United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Department of State representatives, four Provincial Reconstruction Teams from as many countries, as well as routine

contacts with DIA, CIA, the Joint Interagency Task Force (Counter Narcotics), and Special Operations Forces (USA and USMC.) He previously served as the Operations Officer for the US contingent of the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) team in the Sinai, Egypt. He has a Masters Degree of Science in Administration from Central Michigan University and a Bachelors Degree of Science in Biology from the College of William and Mary in Virginia. He earned a Masters Degree in Strategic Studies from the US Army Ware College at Carlisle, and graduated in 1998 from Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He is an infantry officer, and has experience in mechanized, light, and airborne assignments. He graduated as a Distinguished Military Graduate from Reserve Officers' Training Corps at William and Mary in 1985. He has commanded thru battalion command, is joint qualified and commanded Combined Forces in Afghanistan throughout an area of operations roughly the size of Mississippi.