

Kim Barker. *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*.
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Reviewed by Richard Phelps

Unfortunately, it is often the case that those who are dispatched to report from war zones are the least qualified to do so. So too – by her own admission – in the case of Kim Barker, who was sent to Afghanistan and Pakistan as the *Chicago Tribune*'s South Asia bureau chief. As she recounts her experiences in *The Taliban Shuffle*, Barker offers some insight into the bizarre world of the war correspondent in the 21st century. Yet deeper insights regarding either country remain elusive in this light-hearted account.

Amid a long-standing culture in which area studies are dominated by punditry and the cult of self-proclaimed “experts”, Barker’s self-deprecation is remarkably refreshing. Happily, she highlights her unfamiliarity with the terrain prior to visiting. In 2004, in place of one of the legions of young American politics wonks – writers academically familiar with Afghanistan’s history, politics, or languages, who were infinitely more qualified to report back from the country – the *Tribune* decided to send Barker to report back instead. In a media culture that often appears to celebrate ignorance, such a decision is itself a revealing one. Tragically, it is not uncommon.

The Taliban Shuffle represents the outcome of Barker’s years spent on the ground. Until 2009 she remained in the region, reporting back as it wafted in and out of newsworthiness, yet despite her wealth of on the ground experience there is scant convincing evidence to show that she is any more informed now. The book does not claim as its goal to inform readers much about politics in the area, and nor does it. Indeed, few readers will come away from this book knowing much more about the Taliban, Pakistan, or Afghanistan than they already did before. Instead, it offers triviality and anecdote.

Still, what the book does promise is an amusing account of life inside the bubble of war correspondents, and in this it does deliver – at least in part. Entertainingly, Barker, for example, tells of a journalist friend in Pakistan kidnapped by the Taliban. At one point he overheard a BBC radio report about the presence of militant training camps in Pakistan meeting with vehement denial from Pakistani officials, only for the listener to hear the radio report drowned out by the sound of gunfire coming from the militant camp outside. Barker’s anecdotes are amusing, but not as side-splitting as they are built up by the praise on the book’s cover.

Despite the cover’s gushing endorsement (“witty, brilliant, and impossible to put down”) from Rajiv Chanrasekaran, the author of *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, Barker does not do for Afghanistan what he had done earlier in his book about Iraq. Descriptions of Kabul’s ex-pat parties, such as the ‘Invader’ themed party hosted by Department of International Development

(DfID) employees, or a similar ‘tarts & Talibs’ themed event do come close, but elsewhere the book remains an awkward mix between memoir and political narrative.

Describing one exchange, Barker writes “‘Yeah, I talk to the Taliban,’ I said. ‘I’ve hung out with them before’”. And if only she had – rather than writing later of “my seventh embed” with the American military occupying the county – for her book surely would have benefitted from it. “Four years into this gig”, she writes at one point, and “my whole identity was wrapped up in it”; but sadly the reader never gains the sense that Barker actually ‘gets it’. With admissions like “I planned to spend as much time as possible following the Americans in Afghanistan”, one can appreciate why she did not ‘get it’.

Barker provides an entertaining enough account of one journalist’s experience, but this is far from what the book had the potential to be after such a sustained period spent living on location in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ten years on, the Afghan impasse and the insecurity of Pakistan continue with few signs of abating.

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