

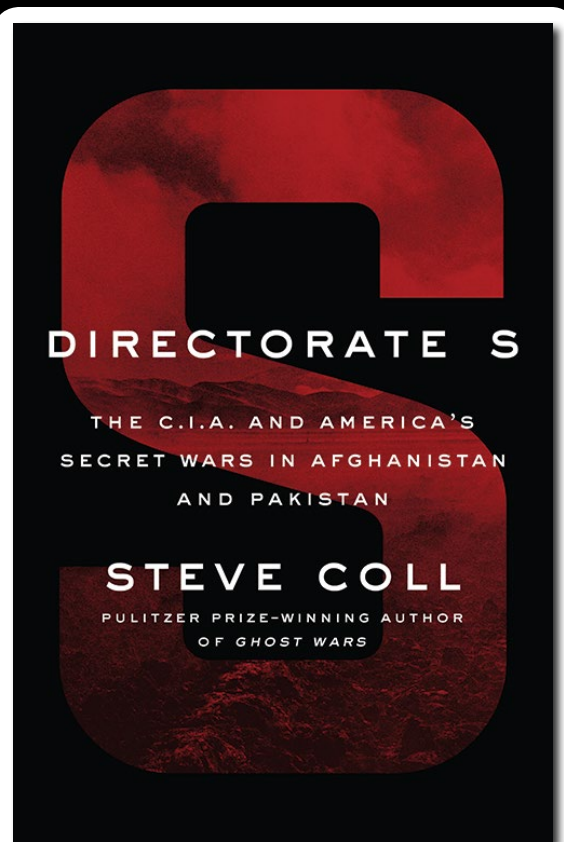
# REVIEW ESSAY

## Directorate S

### The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan

Steve Coll

Penguin Press, New York, 2018, 784 pages



Kevin Rousseau

In writing *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Steve Coll takes on the formidable challenge of adding yet another volume to the growing number of works on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Acknowledging the risk of treading where others have trod, Coll notes that while drafting *Directorate S*, he “had to consider how to absorb, but not regurgitate, the vast body of excellent journalism already produced by other reporters.”<sup>1</sup> He himself is part of that crowd of reporters, having won a Pulitzer Prize for the 2005 book *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the C.I.A., Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. Picking up where *Ghost Wars* left us, on the eve of 9/11, Coll breaks new ground and offers fresh insights into America's involvement in Afghanistan with an absorbing clarity that can be found nowhere else. This is not just another blow-by-blow account of battlefield

exploits or even a mere tell-all of alleged CIA history; it is instead a gripping narrative of America's search for meaning and understanding in Afghanistan.

The book opens at a brisk pace, detailing the U.S. reaction to the attacks of 9/11. Coll artfully describes the crisis atmosphere in Washington, the decisiveness of the U.S. military response, and the CIA's quick and efficient operations during the opening weeks and months of the Afghanistan campaign. There are numerous threads and themes that develop as Coll's story moves forward. The most prominent theme gives the book its title; the role of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—the Pakistani intelligence service—and its Directorate S, a behind-the-scenes force Coll depicts as persistently working at odds with U.S. efforts. His description of ISI's continued support of the Taliban, and the alleged perfidy of Directorate S, is as convincing as it is frustrating.

Another thread that soon develops and weaves its way throughout the narrative is the continuous search by U.S. officials and military leaders for an improved understanding of their strategic operating environment. Coll rolls out a parade of various experts and academics, studies, and think tanks—all demonstrating a sincere determination by American officials to come to intellectual grips with the difficult situation they faced. To list just a few, these include a University of Massachusetts assistant professor of Islamic history contracted to study the motivations of Afghan suicide bombers, a Drug Enforcement Administration study into Afghanistan’s opium production, and a U.S. Air Force officer’s research into the “green-on-blue” killings of U.S. and European soldiers by their Afghan partners. All illustrate facets of the American government’s effort to better understand just what was going on in Afghanistan.

If one jewel shines brightest among all these efforts, that jewel is without a doubt the CIA’s district assessments. In the national intelligence course I teach at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, we analyze the challenges of providing effective strategic intelligence support to policy makers and military commanders. One of the lessons we discuss is that just being right is not good enough. For intelligence to be considered effective, it must actually have made a difference. By the time of the Afghanistan conflicts, the CIA had a long history of analyzing insurgencies.<sup>2</sup> It also had a long history reflecting on how to effectively deliver frank and sometimes unwelcome assessments.

Coll delivers in chapter 17’s “Hard Data” what is probably the best account to date of how the CIA’s district assessments provided policy makers and military commanders a unique and powerful analysis of the war’s progress. Coll explains that “In the closed world of secret intelligence, most analytical products wound up in locked cabinets, having had little impact. But

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every now and then a bestseller broke through. The CIA’s district assessment maps of Afghanistan proved to be such a blockbuster, some of the most popular top secret products the agency had ever distributed.”<sup>3</sup> The CIA had managed to deliver an unpopular message—that the war in Afghanistan was not going well—in an effective manner. This chapter alone is worth reading the book for, as it underscores the value of what the intelligence community (not just the CIA) can bring to the table: useful judgments that go beyond the obvious, using methodologies that instill confidence in those judgments, presented in formats that help raise the quality of policy and strategy discussions.

The pace of the narrative changes as Coll’s chapters march on. In the latter half of the book, he periodically lingers on the letters home of a soldier deployed to Afghanistan. This may strike some as contrived, or even a weakness in the narrative. However, this dalliance with a somewhat *The Things They Carried*-style approach also seems to reflect the pace of the war itself. The certainty and focus of the initial campaigns slowly gives way to a gnawing dissatisfaction, and the soldier’s ponderings are another aspect of the ongoing search for meaning. These letters are at some level akin to the district assessments, human terrain teams, think tank studies, and regional experts ... all exemplify Americans striving to better understand what they are faced with in Afghanistan and what our strategy should be.

Another theme in Coll’s book of interest to a military reader is the relationship between the CIA and the Department of Defense. Out of shared experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, the CIA–Department of Defense relationship evolved toward closer cooperation and better synchronization.<sup>4</sup> Coll describes how CIA leaders and senior military commanders, such as Gen. Stanley McChrystal, worked to develop the relationship—“a project that turned out to be measured in years.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Coll describes how “fraying trust and communication between the CIA and Special Forces in Afghanistan” led to some missed opportunities. It is a relationship that must be continuously cultivated to remain collaborative and not competitive. He gives us a glimpse of that ongoing story, one that could probably be a book in itself.<sup>6</sup>

*Directorate S* is a brilliant and highly readable account of America’s decision-making regarding Afghanistan over many years. It is a complicated tale

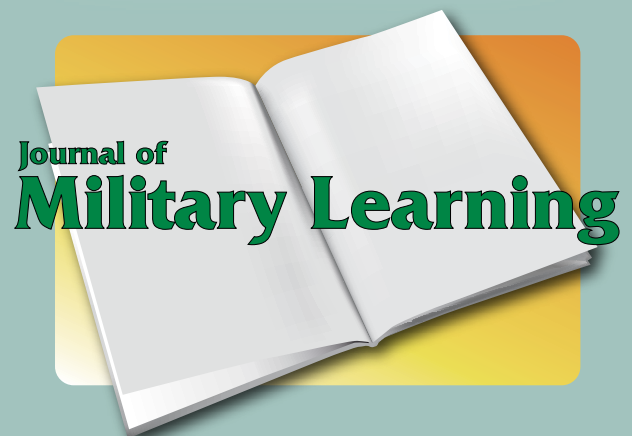
told clearly and thoroughly, shedding light on the often unhelpful role of Directorate S and the Pakistani government. Military officers and policy makers who read this book will be rewarded with a better understanding of how we got where we are in Afghanistan. It is a story as only Coll has yet managed to tell it. ■

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## Notes

1. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 6.
2. Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policymakers: Three Episodes 1962–1968* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998). The CIA analysis during the Vietnam War is a well-documented example of where getting it right is not good enough. Despite its consistent accuracy, the CIA's analysis of the insurgency had an arguably negligible effect on U.S. policy and strategy.
3. Coll, *Directorate S*, 297.
4. *Ibid.*, 57.
5. *Ibid.*, 158.
6. David P. Oakley, *Partners or Competitors?: The Evolution of the Department of Defense/Central Intelligence Agency Relationship Since Desert Storm and Its Prospects for the Future* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2014). This source provides an unclassified primer on the history of the CIA and Department of Defense relationship since 1990, to include the role of the CIA's associate director for military affairs.

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