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# After We Kill You, We Will Welcome You Back As Honored Guests: Unembedded In Afghanistan



## Synopsis

An unflinching account in words and pictures of America's longest war by our most outspoken graphic journalist Ted Rall traveled deep into Afghanistan without embedding himself with U.S. soldiers, without insulating himself with flak jackets and armored SUVs where no one else would go (except, of course, Afghans). He made two long trips: the first in the wake of 9/11, and the next ten years later to see what a decade of U.S. occupation had wrought. On the first trip, he shouted his dispatches into a satellite phone provided by a Los Angeles radio station, attempting to explain that the booming in the background and sometimes the foreground were the sounds of an all-out war that no one at home would entirely own up to. Ten years later, the alternative newspapers and radio station that had financed his first trip could no longer afford to send him into harm's way, so he turned to Kickstarter to fund a groundbreaking effort to publish online a real-time blog of graphic journalism (essentially, a nonfiction comic) documenting what was really happening on the ground, filed daily by satellite. The result of this intrepid reporting is *After We Kill You, We Will Welcome You Back as Honored Guests* a singular account of one determined journalist's effort to bring the realities of life in twenty-first-century Afghanistan to the world in the best way he knows how: a mix of travelogue, photography, and award-winning comics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Rall has filed some of the best reporting from Afghanistan by an American journalist." • The Nation

Ted Rall is the author and illustrator of many graphic novels and books of political criticism and travel writing, including *The Year of Loving Dangerously*, *Silk Road to Ruin: Is Central Asia the New Middle East?*, and *The Book of Obama: How We Went from Hope and Change to the Age of Revolt*. He lives in East Hampton, New York.

One thing that could be as ugly as war is telling the truth about it, at least to people who don't want to know. Reading journalist Ted Rall's 2014 book *AFTER WE KILL YOU, WE WILL WELCOME YOU BACK AS HONORED GUESTS: UNEMBEDDED IN AFGHANISTAN*, you may realize why too many Americans do not appreciate reporters such as Rall, who dare to tell the public of the futility of invasion and occupation. As this book recounts, it takes twelve years for reality to move support for the United States war against Afghanistan from 88 to 17 percent. Shouldn't Rall and the too few others who reported the facts all those years be among the honored at a homecoming parade? They were out front with the correct information, waiting for everyone else to catch up. Yet, I don't hear journalists who were embedded with the troops in Afghanistan saying, "We should not have let our reports be censored by the military and U.S. government. The independent reporters got it right long before we did." How many American citizens who fell for the "winning hearts and minds" baloney now know the only hearts and minds that mattered to those bombing innocent Afghans were American, thanks to the dogged pursuit of the truth by the likes of Rall? When you finally get people to accept the ugly truth, they ought to thank you.

I bought Ted Rall's latest book on Afghanistan after greatly enjoying his previous work *Silk Road to Ruin*. I have an easier time recommending the latter book, but *Unembedded in Afghanistan* is a frustrating read. If you're looking for a progressive writer's take on the invasion of Afghanistan complete with some anecdotes from the ground blended into a travel log then this is as good as you're likely to get. If you're hoping for deep analysis and thoughtful journalism you might have to look elsewhere. Rall's style is effectively unsourced, and much of what he asserts in the book is stated as if it were fact, when it's in fact his personal opinion of the situation. A selected bibliography in the back helps with any specific quotes he makes or references, but the lack of notes in text makes it difficult to tell where fact stops and some of his stronger opinions (e.g, the role the Trans-Afghan Pipeline played in driving the invasion of Afghanistan, claims about the 'success' of occupations in the 20th Century) start appearing. Just as aggravating is that while Rall states in the first segment of the book that this was intended to focus on the Afghani population, as opposed to

his first which was more about covering his own thoughts and feelings of the war, that's not what Rall delivers. Once again whether he intended it or not the book is primarily about Rall, his two buddies, and their own experiences. Anecdotes abound, especially older ones talking about satellite phones and past trips. Interviews are secondary to Rall's travel log in a way most other journalists would avoid, which is especially ironic given the number of times Rall goes out of his way to slag off mainstream reporters for their coverage of the war. It's not that I don't agree and worry that most reporters have struggled to get away from NATO's version of the war's progression, but if Rall wants to claim he's delivering some undiluted truth he should try harder to get out of his own way. The final sticking point is that Rall's cartoons in this book are nowhere near as funny or useful to the book as he tries to make them. Even compared to Silk Road Rall's work here feels subpar and clumsy. Rall cites Joe Sacco as an influence, and there is no comparing the level of care in research and detail between the two. Sacco is just as strongly progressive as Rall, but he is better at letting his work and his subjects speak for themselves. All that being said, the perspective Ted Rall brings to the table and his willingness to actually go travel across Afghanistan is sadly close to unique. What pieces he does see fit to describe pick a sad and frustrating picture. It's wrong to say as one other reviewer does that Rall is calling for some return to the Taliban, but the book offers a more realistic take of a country that was never given the focus or attention it needed. Billions were thrown at the country, but without a thought for how they were spent. Easily the standout chapters cover the changes in city living, and the creation of roads. Worth picking up, though probably not at full price.

I had to read it, just because I loved the title. But I stayed for the story. If you're tired of the "official" version of the Afghanistan occupation as regurgitated by cooperative media types, this book is for you. It's a little depressing to realize, from Rall's conversations with ordinary Afghans, how much more of a difference we could have made in this undeveloped countries, and didn't. Good read, recommended.

The author Ted Rall notes the war against Afghanistan has led to tens if not hundreds of thousands of Afghan deaths. The book observes that the more the U.S. attacks and kills civilians, the stronger recruitment is for anti-American fighters. In 2001, the Islamic State of Afghanistan, aka United Front or Northern Alliance, was the government recognized by the United Nations. It held about 10% of Afghanistan. Most of the country was controlled by the Taliban. The Taliban was funded by Pakistani Intelligence which itself was financed and trained by the CIA. Union Oil of California (Unicol) sought to construct a pipeline through Afghanistan that would deliver an estimated 9 to 16

billion barrels of oil. In 1997, the Taliban and Unicol could not agree on what the transit fee should be. In 2001, the Bush Administration provided \$43 million to the Taliban to destroy poppy fields. The Taliban and Unicol continued their disagreement on what pipeline transit fees should be. After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the U.S. began attacking the Taliban. 14,00 tons of bombs were dropped on Afghanistan by 2009. U.S. Special Forces and Northern Alliance forces captured 7,500 prisoners and massacred them. The U.S. helped install Hamid Karzai as Afghan President. His authority is mostly limited to the city of Kabul. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) of the United Nations, half of whose soldiers are from the U.S., entered Afghanistan in 2002. ISAF was supposed to rebuild Afghanistan. Yet little has been built despite several billions of U.S. funds being spent. Whatever the money was spent on is not publicly known. President Obama sent 33,000 extra troops to Afghanistan in hopes of turning the government over to Karzai. General Stanley McChrystal stated the Taliban was winning. Wikileaks showed Karzai's army was ineffective. Wikileaks also showed Pakistan was supporting the neo-Taliban even though the U.S. supported Pakistan. NATO in 2001 to 2005 paved some highways and built some schools. Afghans may generally have not been satisfied with these efforts as they expected much more. Rall writes of reporting in Afghanistan in 2001 as "you can't get the truth, But you can get an impression." Local Afghans lose every fight with U.S. troops. Yet they are winning because of civilian deaths which creates more people who join the neo-Taliban for revenge. They fight guerrilla style and they choose when they wish to fight. Rall observes that neo-Taliban "understand the simple truth: they live there, and we don't." Time is on their side. Rall notes since World War II "when the United States invades, it often fails to occupy, much less annex. When it occupied it does so with fewer soldiers than necessary to control its newly occupied territory." Afghan roads deteriorate rapidly due to heavy military vehicles. The U.S. Agency for International Development estimates it costs about \$200 million per year to maintain these roads. The Afghan annual federal budget is \$7 billion. Rall visited Afghan cities where foreigners never visit. He found all women wear burqas, in contrast to U.S. news reports. Bribes are common and expected. There is a city with no mail delivery and no street addresses. U.S. carpet bombing has caused much destruction in many cities. The Taliban usually attack at night. There are Taliban biker gangs. The biker gangs could easily be destroyed but they are not. U.S. and NATO efforts are not designed to provide security for the Afghan people. The Afghan central government governs Kabul and to some degree Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and to an even less extent Kandahar. The Taliban controls the rest of the country. The National Police are corrupt and ineffective. Afghanistan

is the longest lasting U.S. war. It costs a million dollars annually for one soldier to be there. Rall concludes “invading other countries, whether to steal their land or poach their natural resources or pressure their neighbors or exert regional influence is an enterprise with a cost-to-benefit ratio that simply doesn’t work.”

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