

High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, by Christopher L. Elliott, London, Hurst & Company, 2017 [paperback], pp. 303, £12.99

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Defeats are orphans and very educative. Most defeats are, in fact, manifestation of erroneous judgments or equipment failure, or a combinations of the two. In case the defeats are of military force application then the costs are very high. The United Kingdom's (UK) military missions and the losses in Iraq and Afghanistan can be classified as failures, if not outright defeats, and have thrown up significant lessons about its higher defence management. In his book *High Command*, Christopher Elliott analyses the UK's erroneous decision to participate in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the previous decade without a clear strategy and with limited resources.

Elliott has focussed on the process that led individually capable and competent operators to collectively take rather ordinary decisions. The result was that the process subjugated both the institutions and the individuals. The estimated cost of the UK's military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decade of this century—around £30-40 billion—in addition to the lives of a large number of British soldiers resulted in no tangible gains. The triad of political masters, the bureaucracy, and the higher military leadership, along with coalition compulsions, have been very objectively analysed for their roles. Having served in the British Army and later in the UK Ministry of Defence

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(MoD), Elliott has first-hand knowledge of the process he analyses in the book.

In the UK, the MoD is the nodal agency for higher defence management. Elliott calls the decision-making apparatus 'The Tribal System' with detailed elucidations. The Ministry is castigated in his analyses. Explaining the decision-making process regarding war in the UK's parliamentary system of government, the author comprehensively discusses the human nature and training aspects of the various elements therein. The views of all players are examined in depth, not just about their version of events but about their perspectives, aspirations and the constraints they faced. The influence of individuals goals on a collegiate vetting system to reach a consensus through back channel manipulation, and the strategic gaps between perceptions of the various stakeholders, have been highlighted well.

What comes out clearly in this book is that while, individually, a number of players performed well, they failed to achieve the collective goal as it was not defined clearly and the goal posts kept shifting. The strategy was not well stitched together and, apparently, there is no one to be blamed for that. The overall mission definition was noble—to protect the local civil population and assist them in resurrecting failed states in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, eight strategic failures (p. 249) in the UK's approach towards these conflicts contributed to sub-optimal mission execution. The end result was chaos and contributed to a further degradation of state of local civil population in Basra (Iraq) and Helmand (Afghanistan), the two provinces that UK forces were trying to plough back into the mainstream.

A fact that emerges time and again in *High Command* is that all decision makers are human and have a complex task of managing their individual constituencies while being a part of the overall game plan. The turf war between the bureaucracy and military along with inter-service competition to garner a fair share of a finite defence budget, and individual aspirations influenced the process that decided the fate of thousands of military personnel deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Elliott's psychological analysis of officers of the UK armed forces based on the service that they belong to is quite interesting. Categorising officers as logical and reasonable or emotional just based on their parent service is an obviously flawed approach. Having said that, such a comparison throws up interesting facets while the author examines the decisions made by various stakeholders.

Institutions are created to aid individuals in garnering the requisite information about decision-making in a systematic manner. However, it is the individuals with available information and their own capabilities and goals who are ultimately responsible for their decisions. Inter-personnel relations, 'socialising' and biases played a major role in shaping the UK strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan. Can such factors be eliminated from any multi-disciplinary decision-making body for a national event like war? The answer is no. However, keeping a record of all factors considered while arriving at a decision will minimise their salience. This did not happen in London. About force application in Iraq and Afghanistan, at times, it was not even clear as to who took the decision leave aside the reason for taking it. Elliott has been critical of the entire system of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) and analyses four occupants of this post during the period from 2000 to 2010. Not doubting the integrity or individual capability of the office bearers, he makes an issue of the unsuitability of prevailing training to groom commanders for such an appointment.

It is the same story in the case of the bureaucracy and politicians who also occupy critical decision-making positions without formal training. Then why castigate the men and women in uniform for being inappropriately trained. The issues Elliot's book highlights about the process of selection of the CDS and the attributes that make a person suitable for such an appointment echo across the globe—professionalism is overshadowed by the requirement of adapting and fitting into the system and defending the decisions taken by the government. While the CDS remained as the focal point for advice to the government and the chief strategist to implement policy, his interaction with the individual services chiefs defined the quality of decision-making and its implementation. Four different CDS during the period had operated in starkly different manners as far as taking along three services was concerned. Neglecting the role of individual service commanders, the UK probably lost out on good professional advice.

The smell of cordite and the sound of blasts forces a set of decisions that cannot be taken by remote operators. The absence of an operational overview from close quarters in Basra and Helmand led to a disjointed approach. This was further accentuated by the location of the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) one hour away from the MoD (a point repeatedly emphasised by the author). The distance between the decision-maker and the decision implementers was, both literally and figuratively, too large and was made worse by multiple changes over communication

nodes. The same caused a disrupted feedback loop. Whitehall was not quite clear about the ground situation. So the decisions were being taken on limited information available. The gap between the intent and resources was too large to be filled by the courage and capability of deployed troops alone. As the war was far away from UK's borders, it faded from political radars and, consequently, in the bureaucracy's mind. This led to financial aspects leading the operational imperatives. The military mission was thus destined to fail.

The UK was a major partner of US-led coalition force in Iraq and Afghanistan. A rift between the two at the operational level was subtle and resulted in lack of tactical synergy and tactical support. The dynamics of conflict in areas under US troops and UK troops were different in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Lessons learnt from one sector were rarely implemented in the other. In both cases, in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was US military that aided the distressed UK mission. Bifurcation of command for the soldiers on ground between PJHQ in Britain and the NATO operational headquarters in Iraq added confusion to an already thick fog of war. This was further compounded by frequent changeover of commanders and decision-makers. No continuity in terms of the strategic vision and operational implementation left the field troops wondering about their mission.

The book is very well organised, almost like a military mission and the author makes numerous observations that are amply supported by documents and interviews. The first part of the book is descriptive and explains what happened. This is followed by the analytical part where it goes into why it happened. Finally, the penultimate part summarises a way forward based on the lessons that emerged from the author's analysis. The lessons elucidated by Elliott are relevant and were even echoed in the report of the UK's Iraq Inquiry team led by Sir John Chilcot, which was published in June 2016. To anyone who is even remotely familiar with the way democracies function, this book would give a sense of *déjà vu*. It should be a recommended reading for those grappling with issues of higher defence management in India as well.