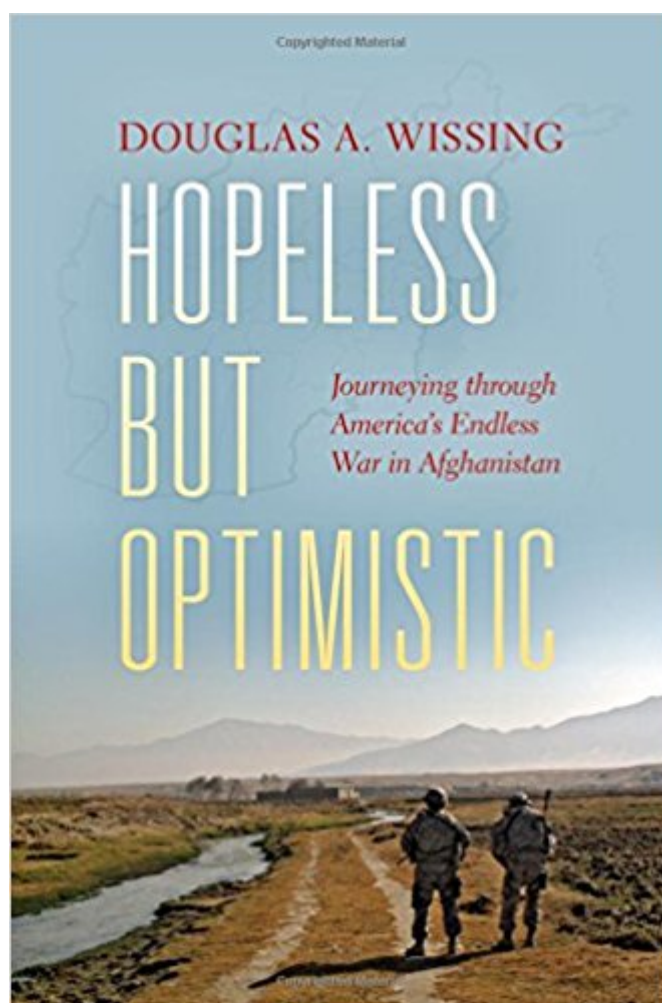


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# Hopeless But Optimistic: Journeying Through America's Endless War In Afghanistan



## Synopsis

Award-winning journalist Douglas A. Wissing's poignant and eye-opening journey across insurgency-wracked Afghanistan casts an unyielding spotlight on greed, dysfunction, and predictable disaster while celebrating the everyday courage and wisdom of frontline soldiers, idealistic humanitarians, and resilient Afghans. As Wissing hauls a hundred pounds of body armor and pack across the Afghan warzone in search of the ground truth, US officials frantically spin a spurious victory narrative, American soldiers try to keep their body parts together, and Afghans try to stay positive and strain to figure out their next move after the US eventually leaves. As one technocrat confided to Wissing, "I am hopeless but optimistic." Wissing is everywhere in Afghanistan, sharing an impressionistic view from little white taxis coursing across one of the world's most mine-ridden places; a perilous view from outside the great walls surrounding America's largest base, sequestered Bagram Air Field; and compelling inside views from within embattled frontline combat outposts, lumbering armored gun trucks and flitting helicopters, brain trauma clinics, and Kabul's Oz-like American embassy. It's Afghan life on the streets; the culture and institutions that anneal them; the poetry that enriches them. It includes the perspectives of cynical military lifers and frightened short-timers; true believers and amoral grabbers; Americans and Afghans trying to make sense of two countries surreally contorted by war-birthing extractive commerce. Along with a deep inquiry into the 21st-century American way of war and an unforgettable glimpse of the enduring culture and legacy of Afghanistan, *Hopeless but Optimistic* includes the real stuff of life: the austere grandeur of Afghanistan and its remarkable people; warzone dining, defecation, and sex; as well as the remarkable shopping opportunities for men whose job is to kill.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"It's that kind of book. It reminds us of Peter Van Buren's *We Meant Well* book on Iraq." *Diplomat*"Hopeless but Optimistic provides a fascinating ground level account of the effect of absurd and inappropriate Washington strategies on Afghans and on American soldiers. Its short hard-hitting chapters illustrate with pithy anecdotes how 'hearts and minds' and other senseless silver-bullet approaches to the war only benefitted well-connected Beltway contractors and Afghan drug traffickers and warlords, and failed to help Afghan farmers and American soldiers. Americans prefer to forget Afghanistan, but that would be a shame because this lost trillion dollar war illustrates the hubris of policies sold by both the Bush and Obama administrations. This book vividly illustrates the cost of this hubris beyond the trillion dollars wasted and the official casualties numbers." *Abdulkader Sinno*, author of *Organizations at War in Afghanistan & Beyond* and editor of *Muslims in Western Politics*"On page after page, as Wissing travels around the country, we are told how U.S. operatives continue to repeat the same mistakes over and over, leaving a trail of unfinished/sabotaged projects that have no value to the people of Afghanistan." *OpEd News*"A seasoned, award-winning journalist systematically and methodically unpacks with brutal honesty the wasting of a trillion US-taxpayers' dollars by America's Deep State in withdrawal through its longest, privatized, 21st-century-war in Afghanistan. This is Wissing's most insightful and heartfelt account of his embeds with America's best and most dedicated warriors, male and female, in the most insurgency-ridden corners of Afghanistan. Hopeless but Optimistic is a well-crafted, often humorous, and candid narration of Wissing's most intimate encounters with America's worst US State Department careerists burning money, army officers spinning self-delusional victory spiels, and the highly paid development consultants re-doing the same projects over again. It is a story of America's military industrial complex-driven wars filled with moral outrage. A must-read for anyone interested in learning why America's longest war and reconstruction efforts in collaboration with its corrupt partners in Afghanistan have produced hopelessness, though they remain optimistic." *Nazif Shahrani*, author of *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers and War*"This is a fine and troubling book about America's plunge into the nightmare otherwise known as Afghanistan. Wissing's concise thirty-odd chapters are like graphic flash-cards conveying the confusing mix of violence and corruption, along

with bursts of decency and courage, that define this endless war. And alas! No exit is yet in sight. I particularly appreciated its account of day-to-day frustrations of US personnel who have scant contact with the ordinary Afghans they are pledged to protect. They remain locked in a bottle filled with venomous scorpions." — Karl E. Meyer, former New York Times and Washington Post editorial board member, and co-author of *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* and *Kingmakers: The Invention of the Modern Middle East* "As with an album of closeup photographs, Douglas Wissing's concise essays cast a sharp and revealing light on their subject. Here we confront in granular detail the waste and folly that is America's war in Afghanistan. An empire in decline does not make for a pretty picture." — Andrew J. Bacevich, author of *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* "Afghanistan is one huge enigma for most Americans. Wissing's book helps us sort it out. He has repeatedly been in Afghanistan, observed everything, and reports it all in this remarkable volume. This book is the place for most of us to learn about this woebegone, but resilient land, and America's endless war." — Lee H. Hamilton, former US Representative; former vice chairman of the 9/11 Commission and co-chairman of the Iraq Study Group "This is not a book that directly engages the theories and conceptions of twenty-first-century US military intervention, in its full-spectrum approach from counterinsurgency to development, in numerous working papers, articles, and monographs. It does not invoke 'hard power,' 'soft power,' or 'smart power.' But in this case, that is an asset. Sometimes the most effective response to all the proposals of what could or should be is the observation of what is." — H-Diplo "If I could recommend one book about Afghanistan to the next president, it'd be this one. If s/he can't learn the lessons of the failed war in Iraq from the ground truth, maybe s/he can learn them from Wissing's brilliant, funny, sad, irreverent, serious, deeply reported, hopeless—but always optimistic book. Required reading." — Peter Van Buren, former US State Department foreign service officer and author of *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the War for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People* "One of the state's most intrepid combat reporters, Wissing went to Afghanistan for a third time in 2013, expecting to watch the war wind down. Instead, he found a place still rife with conflict.... [Wissing] gives readers a view of both the perils and the many examples of money being wasted in a country where even something as seemingly benign as digging wells has devastating consequences." — Indianapolis Monthly "Wissing's moving and exceptionally well-written account makes sad reading... The book becomes a heart-breaking travelogue, accompanied by Wissing's own photos.... [but] however corrupt and misguided the war, however much damage it has done, Wissing says, 'I met American after American

determined to make the world a better place." [Bloom Magazine](#)"When historians of the future try to explain how the United States could have accomplished so little in Afghanistan despite spending so much blood and treasure, this trenchant and honest book will be a crucial source. An important read for anyone who cares about American foreign policy in the 21st century."

[Alex Berenson, author of The Wolves \(A John Wells Novel\)](#)"A scathing dispatch from an embedded journalist in Afghanistan.... Pungent, embittered, eye-opening observations of a conflict involving lessons still unlearned." [Kirkus Reviews](#)

Douglas A. Wissing is an award-winning journalist and author of eight books, including *Funding the Enemy: How US Taxpayers Bankroll the Taliban* and *Pioneer in Tibet: The Life and Perils of Dr. Albert Shelton*. He has written for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *CNN.com*, *Fox.com*, *Salon.com*, and *Time.com*, among other publications.

An easy and engaging and thought-provoking read. Profound and discouraging observations about an unarguably failed development strategy which wasted billions of U.S. dollars and, more disturbingly, over 2,000 U.S. military and civilian lives. This is an evidence-based indictment of the agencies and individuals who knowingly pursued, championed, and defended unjustified, indefensible, and frequently nonsensical projects knowing that the Contractors, Afghans, and [almost always] the Taliban would benefit financially while the local Afghans suffered. Perhaps there will be future lessons not just "learned" but APPLIED if [when] the United States find itself in a similar circumstance. A cautionary tale for the current and next generation of elected leaders, Washington policy-makers, and military decision-makers. A superb account of Doug Wissing's first-hand experiences in Afghanistan and a proper follow-on to his previous work - *Funding the Enemy*.

Disclosure: I was interviewed by Mr. Wissing for his previous book *"Funding the Enemy"*. Mr. Wissing's reportage is reminiscent of the great war correspondents of World War II: Ernie Pyle, Richard Tregaskis, George Weller, Cecil Brown and Margaret Bourke-White. He goes everywhere, talks to everyone, sees everything and presents it with gripping descriptive passages. If he has grown weary of the war, he comes by it honestly. You don't need to agree with him to find this book essential reading. As the subtitle implies, this is a report of a trip through the country, talking to soldiers, reporting on development projects, observing the people. He is genuinely proud of the people who are doing their work right, condemnatory of those who are just in it for the money, and

honest enough to make it clear that there is a lot of grey area between the best and the worst. This is not a partisan attack. He does not look to see if there is an "R" or a "D" after someone's name before he passes judgement. The title sums up what many people feel about Afghanistan. Douglas Wissing has reached that conclusion honestly.

"Hopeless But Optimistic" is Doug Wissing's second book regarding America's involvement in Afghanistan. The first, "Funding the Enemy" was a heavily footnoted "following the money" that documented how many American dollars either end up in enemy hands or are wasted on projects, that while they sound good on paper, either don't accomplish their intentions, or quickly fall apart. Hopeless but Optimistic is a different kind of book, a series of vignettes regarding his most recent (2013) return to the war-torn nation to see what, if any, progress had been made. What he finds, in the words of a "suave Afghan official" he interviews, leaves him "hopeless, but optimistic." Little has changed. As an intelligence officer had told him years before, "It's the perfect war. Everyone is making money." And thus it drags on, and on, and on. There are two main themes running thru the vignettes. One, the war itself is hopeless. I have heard the author in a talk say that the best path for the United States now is to leave as quickly as possible, and in the long run, that is probably the best path for Afghanistan too. The second theme, the optimism, what little there is, comes mostly from the resiliency of the Afghan people, who have already survived centuries of war. In the words of one: "As an Afghan, I have to be optimistic. I have no other choice." But there are also other examples of basic humanity that Wissing finds in the aid workers and soldiers that have come to the country, as well as in the Afghans themselves. All in all, this is a good book by which an outsider can get a glimpse into what it was like to be in Afghanistan at a certain point in time. It is reporting, but reporting whose aim is to give impressions and not details. It's almost like a collection of short stories, lyrically written. I highly recommend it.

1. This is a breezy, readable account of a horrible war. Wissing doesn't dwell on the gore, but the military and diplomatic mismanagement recounted are pretty horrible themselves. He is sardonic and humane. He courts hardship and danger on the front lines, in helicopter flights, and in insecure, though nominally super secure, military and diplomatic locales. He miraculously lives to write about it. 2. This book should have been obsolete, but ends up fresh as the headlines. Why read about a war that's over? To learn the lessons from it. But it didn't end. In fact, according to today's news cycle, it's re-escalating. We can be sure that the strategic and cultural blunders Wissing

chronicles will be blundered again. Expect even more ferocity against the innocent, for which Defense Secretary "Mad Dog" Mattis became famous as the Marine Commander in Iraq. When will we ever learn?3. I note that the euphemism Secretary of Defense was adopted after World War II. Before that we had a Secretary of War, a far more honest name.

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