

Why Don't Afghans Love Us: Elliot Ackerman's *Green on Blue*

There aren't many "literary" fiction books out about Afghanistan, and almost none authored by veterans. Brian Castner, a veteran of Iraq, [published an essay in *Los Angeles Review of Books*](#) that examines the phenomenon in more depth. Roy Scranton, another veteran of Iraq and a philosopher, [claims in a different *LARB* essay](#) that there are plenty of war stories by American veterans already available, and that Western audiences should be looking for stories by or about the host nation. This claim has been made by writers like Joydeep-Roy Battacharya and Helen Benedict, as well.

Enter *Green on Blue*, a savagely honest, realistic novel about Afghanistan by Elliot Ackerman. Imminently readable and deeply subversive, *Green on Blue* draws on its author's extensive experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan to paint a stunning and accurate description of why the West is losing and will lose in Afghanistan. The problem and solution both exist within the book's title.



"Green on Blue" is a military term that derives from the color of units on NATO battle maps – blue colored units are friendlies (America, Great Britain, *West Germany*), green are allies (France), and red are enemy (Soviet-aligned countries). Green on blue describes what happens when allies deliberately

or accidentally attack friendly soldiers / units. The incidents, therefore, are incredibly troubling – they represent the failure of alliance, the prospect of new enemies arising from botched friendships. They hint at betrayal, in the context of existential struggle.

In *Green on Blue*, Americans are “blue” and Afghans are “Green,” the allies. Crucially to the plot, there are no “red” – there are enemies, but this term, in the context of Afghanistan, is fungible. The plot revolves around an Afghan militiaman named Aziz, who navigates generations of human relationships between Afghans, while attempting not to be crushed by the war. At its heart, the war is described as a competition between groups for social standing – respect from young men, and money from the Americans.

According to the capitalist west, money is supposed to buy respect and loyalty. This forms the basis of an important miscommunication between Americans and Afghans in the novel – a strategic cultural miscalculation of extraordinary significance. Money, in the context of the story, represents a sort of catastrophic idealism, which merely compels individuals to compete in a zero-sum game for resources. Ultimately, American dependence on the coercive power of tangible resources predicts the type of incident hinted at in the book’s title.

On a local level, in Afghanistan, the most important thing is respect – the honor of a group (“*nang*”), which is under constant threat of insult. Once “*nang*” has been challenged, the group is required to respond to the insulter with revenge – “*badal*,” which consists of appropriately violent action. The protagonist learns this essential lesson as a child: “*Once, in Sperkai, an older child had split my lip in a fight. When my father saw this, he took me to the boy’s home. Standing at their front gate, he demanded that the father take a lash to his son. The man refused and my father didn’t ask twice. He struck the man in the face, splitting his lip just as his son*

had split mine..." On this plane, *Green on Blue* operates as a sort of slowly-unfolding national tragedy, wherein the Afghans become their own heroes and villains, and the Americans – representative of "The West" – are simply agents of catastrophe and destruction, casually and unthinkingly paying money to keep the feuds going, hoping to find "High Value Targets" in the war on terror.

Aziz is both nuanced and archetypal – a quintessentially Afghan product of the West's involvement in Afghanistan. At the story's beginning, his father (a fighter for hire), dies at some point between the Civil War period after Soviet rule and NATO's intervention in 2001: *First there was the dust of people running. Behind the dust was a large flatbed truck and many smaller ones. They pushed the villagers as a broom cleans the streets... Amid the dust and the heat, I saw men with guns. The men looked like my father but they began to shoot the villagers who ran.* The gunmen are never identified – they destroy Aziz's village and move on, leaving Aziz and his older brother orphaned. After a difficult childhood where he and his brother struggle against the odds to improve their tenuous life at society's margins, another, similar tragedy involving a Taliban suicide bomber leads Aziz to join the "Special Lashkar," a CIA-funded militia on the border of Pakistan.

In the "Special Lashkar," Aziz learns to fight and kill. The group's leader is an Afghan named Commander Sabir, paid by the CIA to fight against the Taliban. Readers quickly learn that Sabir is enmeshed in his own struggle over "badal" and "nang" – Sabir is hunted by the brother of a Taliban fighter that Sabir killed, a Taliban named Gazan, in revenge for that now-dead brother having killed Sabir's brother, the former leader of the Special Lashkar. If that seems complicated, it should – alliances and enmities proliferate in the book, ensnaring all and forcing everyone to take sides in the conflict. Nothing is sacred, not love, not honor, not brotherhood – nothing. And behind it all stands the enigmatic, fascinating character of

"Mr. Jack," the CIA officer who runs the Special Lashkar, and who seeks targets for America's war on terror.

Mr. Jack is my favorite character in post-9/11 fiction. There isn't much of him in the book, but his influence is seen everywhere – he resonates through the book's pages, exceptionally powerful, moving in and out of autochthonic settings like he belongs, while making obscene and absurd mistakes that lead only to more preventable strife. Mr. Jack is so unaware of the consequences of his actions, that he becomes an incidental antagonist. His hunt for professional success turns Mr. Jack into a caricature of a man, a careerist who seeks professional success without any understanding of its human cost.

There are no heroes in this book, which could make it a World War II story similar to *Catch-22* or *Slaughterhouse Five* – save that there are no antiheroes, either. There are believable human characters that find themselves at war in spite of themselves, forced to fight for meanings that shift and collapse until the only thing left is friendship, then friendship collapses as well. This resembles the standard Vietnam narrative, like *Matterhorn* or *The Things They Carried*, but the characters in Ackerman's book are not motivated by ambition or by ideology – rather they seek simply to survive, not to be killed. The characters in *Green on Blue* do not have space for the type of indulgent self-reflection imagined by the typical Vietnam-era author, such as Tim O'Brien or Tobias Wolff – this is a book where there is little room or space for interiors. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new type of fiction – a story that balances deliberately earnest *almost modernist* narrative plotlines, while acknowledging the infinitely expansive potentials of post-modern perspective and awareness of self- and other-ness, only to reject that literary and intellectual dead-end as (paradoxically) reductive. Or, as Aziz says in the opening sentence: "*Many would call me a dishonest man, but I've always kept faith with*

myself. There's an honesty in that, I think." Rather than opening a meditation on postmodernity, Aziz goes on to show us precisely, meticulously, how that opening statement could possibly be true, in the context of Afghanistan.

Green on Blue makes a series of bold philosophical, political, and literary claims, which are plausibly balanced and supported throughout. It is a powerfully realistic and exciting adventure; it is also a eulogy for the failed post-colonial ambitions of a capitalist society that believes it can demand service for money, as though the developing world is a whore or a dependent. It is among the best, most accessible and accurate descriptions of Afghanistan available – and the single greatest critique of the West's policy yet written.

Incidentally, the most successful militia commander in Paktika Province for the last ten years – a wealthy man who has successfully played the role of insurgent, bandit, contractor, and militiaman on both sides of the fence? That would be Commander Aziz.