



**Tim Martin, *Unwinnable Peace: Untold Stories of Canada's Mission in Afghanistan*. Tidewater Press, 2024.**

Ricardo Arredondo

Canada's longest war, marked by its mission in Afghanistan, pushed the nation's military and civilian institutions to the brink, testing not only logistical capacity but also the resolve of its leaders and citizens. For those on the ground, it was a daily reality of immense pressure, moral complexity, and profound sacrifice, navigating an unforgiving environment and an elusive mission goal.

Tim Martin, a distinguished career diplomat, led in some of the world's most complex geopolitical crises, from Somalia to Kandahar. He opened Canada's Representative Office in Ramallah during the Palestinian peace process, in Nairobi, he chaired the Kimberley Process to combat blood diamonds, and served as ambassador to Colombia and Argentina.

Ambassador Martin was the last RoCK (Representative of Canada) in Kandahar, where he directed a joint civilian-military mission, advancing governance, development, and peacebuilding alongside NATO forces. This book, his second (the first was a political thriller titled *Moral Hazards*), is a sort of cathartic experience to exorcise the demons from Afghanistan.

Martin draws on his personal experiences and those of his Afghan and Canadian colleagues to explore Canada's mission in Afghanistan on a deeply human level. Through interviews with key decision-makers and participants—many sharing their perspectives publicly for the first time—*Unwinnable Peace* recounts the immense personal and professional challenges faced by those committed to stabilizing and rebuilding Kandahar province.

Generals, diplomats, aid workers, politicians, police officers, corrections experts, and interpreters are among the individuals whose stories reveal the struggles of reconciling their sacrifices with the objectives and purpose of the mission.

Tim Martin's compelling work moves beyond the headlines, shedding light on the untold stories of the conflict. As journalist Hannah Thibedeau noted, it is a candid exploration of vulnerability, emotional toll, and the lasting impacts of sacrifice, as those involved—especially Martin—strive to make sense of their efforts in the face of a difficult reality.

The costs of the author and his family started well before he was assigned to this mission. He recalls enjoying his Ambassadorship to Argentina and wanting to extend his term for a further year to no avail (pp 6-10). Global Affairs Canada told him "We want you to go to Afghanistan" and so they did, but previously he and his wife Fatima went to a series of training exercises in what he calls *Fakeghghanistan*, in campus in the US and Canada, to fulfill mandatory rehearsals aimed to test themselves and their equipment for the jobs they would do at Kandahar (Chapter 2).

Canada's longest war (2001–2014) stretched the limits of military, diplomatic, development, and humanitarian organizations. The book is a testimony to the losses that most (if not all) the civilian and military components of the task force experienced during the last year of Canada's mission in Kandahar and illuminates why it ultimately failed.

The author offers a deeply engaging and profoundly human account of his experiences. Through his own reflections and the voices of his colleagues, Martin paints a vivid picture of the

immense challenges they faced in pursuing government objectives within an unforgiving and dangerous environment.

From working closely with local Afghan authorities to launching development projects that built schools and critical infrastructure, and from advocating for educational and training opportunities for women and girls to navigating the daily dangers of a war zone, Martin and his team embodied an extraordinary blend of professionalism, compassion, and dedication. Their work was not just about fulfilling mandates; it was about creating real and lasting change in the lives of the Afghan people, despite the constant threats and unimaginable hardships.

Perhaps due to my background, one of the things I most enjoyed from the book was the lessons learned by a seasoned diplomat who takes the time to give *advice* to the readers on some axioms or undeniable truths of the diplomatic life, just like this one: “When you are a diplomat, you never really know where you will end up. There is, of course, a form. The Posting Preference Form has five spaces for postings you would like, but, in the final instance, assignments involve positioning, contacts and negotiation” (p. 5). Or this other: “For some ambassadors, the occupational hazard is arrogant self-importance” (p. 5).

The narrative pulls no punches, shedding light on the vulnerabilities and emotional toll borne by those on the frontlines. It captures the raw humanity of their experiences—moments of hope, despair, and resilience—as they strove to make a difference in a context where success was often fleeting and sacrifice was a constant companion.

Martin and his colleagues grapple with the complex legacy of their mission, striving to reconcile their tireless efforts and personal sacrifices with the ultimate outcome of a Taliban resurgence. Even years after living through that period, both the author and the individuals he interviewed continue to grapple with contradictory feelings about whether they were truly able to *make a difference* in Kandahar. While their efforts were marked by extraordinary dedication, compassion, and sacrifice, the ultimate resurgence of the Taliban and the region’s continued instability cast a shadow over their achievements. Their reflections reveal a profound struggle to reconcile the impact of their work with the broader outcomes of the mission, highlighting the complexity and ambiguity inherent in such a fraught and challenging endeavour.

The author also honours the courageous and committed Afghans who supported his mission in Kandahar, intertwining their fate with Canada’s. These individuals bear the heavy grief of leaving behind their homes and families. He extends his heartfelt wishes for their success as they navigate the challenging and often bittersweet process of building a new life, expressing his gratitude that they are now proud “fellow Canadians”.

This unvarnished account is both a tribute to their courage and a sobering reminder of the human cost of war. It invites readers to reflect on the enduring impact of those who dared to serve in the most challenging of circumstances, with unwavering commitment and a profound sense of purpose.

*Dr. Ricardo Arredondo serves as the Consul General of the Argentine Republic in Vancouver, Canada, since his arrival in 2021, where he established the new Consulate. Dr. Arredondo is a respected educator, holding positions as a Professor of International Studies at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia and other universities. He is a recognized member of the Argentina Foreign Service, with service experience in the United Kingdom, Spain, and United States.*