

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Roundtable Review 14-9

Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021 ISBN: 9780197550779,

Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021, ISBN: 9781982159009

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### Contents

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Introduction by William Inboden, the University of Texas at Austin .....	2
Review by Conrad Crane, United States Army War College .....	5
Review by Todd Greentree, the Changing Character of War Centre, Oxford University .	12
Review by Elisabeth Leake, The Fletcher School, Tufts University .....	18
Review by Jeffrey H. Michaels, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals.....	23

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 Introduction by William Inboden, the University of Texas at Austin
 

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Just over 21 years ago, the United States invaded Afghanistan. Just over one year ago, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan. Understanding the two decades in between, which became by almost any measure America's longest war, will continue to occupy and often bedevil scholars and policymakers for years to come. The two books under review here—Carter Malkasian's *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* and Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*—will be essential sources as those efforts at understanding unfold.

Since both books have 'history' in their subtitles, it raises the question of when 'history' begins? There is not an easy answer. At the most basic and human level, history starts the moment the present passes behind us and becomes the past. History begins in our most immediate memories. Yet history goes much beyond our memories, and at the level of scholarship and understanding, more time needs to elapse for historical understanding to begin to emerge. There is no precise marker, but I have a rule of thumb that a generation should pass, or roughly two decades, for the past to become 'history' that can be properly studied as *history*. The intervening years until then are to be filled by journalism, memoirs, and similar accounts that try to capture what happened, and begin to assess why it happened and what it means. I say 'begin to assess' because of course those assessments and reassessments will continue for decades, even centuries, to come.

Why twenty years? There is nothing magisterial about that time window, but I think it provides sufficient interval for events and their consequences to be judged from a more critical distance, for documents to be declassified and archives opened, for passions to cool, and for some measure of dispassionate objectivity to emerge.

The timeframe of the American war in Afghanistan, beginning 2001 and ending in 2021, thus sits uneasily betwixt recent events and 'history'—just as the two books under review here sit athwart journalism, memoir, and history. Carter Malkasian acknowledged this uneasy balance when he wrote in his introduction (composed in summer 2021, before the completion of the US withdrawal) that President Joe Biden's announced withdrawal "is still fresh, too close for reasonable perspective. But the events leading up to it can be understood and reflected upon. In that sense, the book ended up being *a full history of America's Afghan War from 2001 to 2021*." (3, emphasis added). Similarly, reviewer Conrad Crane observes that "journalists are often scouts for the historians who will follow," and that Craig Whitlock's book relies "on the first level of data, initial oral histories of participants." Crane concludes (correctly in my view) that Whitlock would have more accurately titled his book 'The Afghanistan Interviews' rather than 'papers.' In those respect, both Malkasian and Whitlock provide just the beginning—albeit a substantial and important beginning—of history.

Mindful of this complexity, it is more than appropriate that the four reviewers here include the multiple perspectives of practitioners (Crane as Army officer and Greentree as diplomat), historians (Elisabeth Leake and Crane), and interdisciplinary security studies scholar (Jeffrey Michaels). In turn, there are several themes that thread through these four reviews and the two books. I highlight the following:

Morality. Each reviewer in different ways addresses the moral dimensions of the war. Michaels declares "first and foremost, it was a human tragedy." Greentree invokes "the disproportionality of the war's casualties," comparing the over 250,000 Afghans killed in the war with the less than 7,000 combined Americans who died on September 11<sup>th</sup> or in the Afghanistan war. Crane cautions against mere consequentialism, holding rather to a "deontological ethics" that treats assesses actions as intrinsically right or wrong, and thus suggests "the moral question really devolves to analyzing why no offramps were taken." Leake focuses on a different moral concern, the condescension and even implicit dehumanization with which she believes both Whitlock and Malkasian treat the Afghan people. As she writes, Malkasian reinforces "the same dubious message found in Whitlock's book: that Afghans are fundamentally incapable of change or modernity."

Agency. Who were—or are—the most important actors in the Afghanistan War? The two books under review focus on the United States, and there are very good reasons to treat American policy as a central, even paramount, concern. Yet the reviewers remind us of other important actors who are an essential part of the story. Greentree references “the impact of coalition partners,” especially the British. Similarly Crane points out that neither book addresses “whether the involvement of NATO in Afghanistan actually helped or hurt the American effort there.” Michaels notes pointedly that “both of these books are very much written in the style of ‘Afghanistan on the Potomac’ narratives. The war physically took place in Afghanistan, and Afghans should be the key actors.” Leake puts the “question of Afghan representation” at the center of her critique of both books, and scores Whitlock for parroting “stereotypes about Afghans as ignorant and incapable of modernization” while finding Malkasian’s analysis of the Afghan people “similarly blinkered.”

Intention. It is a truism that good intentions can still produce bad outcomes, but what exactly were American intentions in Afghanistan, and were they good? Or even plausible, or discernible? Whitlock predicates his book on an argument that US leaders did not have good intentions, but rather willfully and persistently acted to deceive the American people. Some of these reviewers question this indictment. Greentree says rather “that there is a simpler and more compelling explanation”: US leaders were guilty of “self-deception.” Crane also cavils at this conclusion, writing that “I know many of the senior leaders who are included as part of this alleged deception, and consider them honorable people. We need to be able to understand why they made the decisions they did. What was their intent?”

History. History looms large over the Afghanistan War, and over these reviews. But which history matters most, and why? Leake focuses on Afghanistan’s own rich and complex history before the war. In contrast to the “narrow reading of Afghan history” proffered by Malkasian and Whitlock, she reminds us of “the myriad ways in which Afghanistan has been embedded in global social, political, economic, cultural, and religious networks, and the ways in which Afghans have sought to engage with peoples and countries across the world and have welcomed foreign influences at home.” Focusing more on historical antecedents for American policy, Crane, Michaels, and Greentree all invoke the Vietnam War. Michaels draws parallels between these books and previous critiques of American political leadership on Vietnam by Hannah Arendt, and Les Gelb and Richard Betts.<sup>1</sup> Crane also cites the latter two, in addition to highlighting parallels in Greg Daddis’s scholarship on America’s flawed military strategy in Vietnam. Greentree notes how Malkasian and Whitlock both self-consciously located Vietnam echoes in their own work.<sup>2</sup> In historiographical terms, there is a similar timing between the publication of these two books in 2021 as America withdrew from Afghanistan, and the publication in 1972 of David Halberstam’s classic account of American leaders’ flawed decision-making in the Vietnam War, *The Best and the Brightest*, just a few months before the last American combat troops departed the country.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, all reviewers seem to agree that, while the two books being reviewed do advance our understanding of the Afghanistan war, such assessments remain woefully incomplete. “Whether we admit it or not, most of us are blind to some extent when it comes to grasping the Afghan elephant” writes Greentree. This is hard to disagree with, but at the same time one hopes that taken together, these two books and four stimulating reviews render our vision just a little less obscured.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers”, *New York Review of Books* 17/8 (18 November 1971): 30-39; Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 122

<sup>3</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972).

## Participants:

**William Inboden** is Executive Director and William Powers, Jr. Chair at the Clements Center for National Security, and Associate Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, both at the University of Texas-Austin. He previously served at the State Department and the National Security Council staff. He holds an A.B. from Stanford and a Ph.D. in History from Yale. He is the author of *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, The Cold War, and the World on the Brink* (Dutton, a Penguin Random House imprint, 2022).

**Dr. Conrad Crane** is currently the senior research historian for the Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College. He has a B.S. from the US Military Academy and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Stanford. He is also a graduate of the Command and General Staff College and the War College. He published his most recent books in 2016, one for Naval Institute Press about the creation and application of American counterinsurgency doctrine, entitled *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War*, and another for University Press of Kansas on strategic bombing, entitled *American Airpower Strategy in World War II*. In that same year he was awarded the Society for Military History's Samuel Eliot Morison Prize for lifetime contributions to the field of military history. He was the lead author for the groundbreaking USMC/Army counterinsurgency manual FM 3-24 in 2006."

**Todd Greentree**, a former Foreign Service Officer, served in five wars, including three tours as a political advisor to ISAF combat units in Afghanistan. He is a member of the Changing Character of War Centre at Oxford University, where his doctoral thesis in history was titled "The Origins of the Reagan Doctrine Wars in Angola, Central America, and Afghanistan." His most recent publication is "What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?" in the Winter 2021-22 issue of the US Army War College Journal *Parameters*.

**Elisabeth Leake** trained as a historian at Yale University and the University of Cambridge, where she completed her Ph.D. in 2013. Leake taught international history at the University of Leeds UK from 2016-2022. She currently holds the Lee E. Dirks Professorship in Diplomatic History at the Fletcher School, Tufts University. Leake has published two monographs *The Defiant Border: The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands in the Era of Decolonization, 1936-65* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), and *Afghan Crucible: The Soviet Invasion and the Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Her articles have appeared in such journals as *Modern Asian Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *International History Review*, and *Historical Journal*.

**Dr. Jeffrey H. Michaels** is the IEN Senior Fellow in American Foreign Policy and International Security at the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI). He also holds Visiting Fellowships with the Department of War Studies, King's College London and the Changing Character of War Centre, Pembroke College, Oxford. Earlier experience included working as a Senior Lecturer in Defence Studies at King's, as well as serving as an official with NATO and the US Defense Department. He is the co-author, with Sir Lawrence Freedman, of *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, (4th edition)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) and is the author of *The Discourse Trap and the US Military: From the War on Terror to the Surge* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). His current research focuses on concepts of war and war initiation decision-making.

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Review by Conrad Crane, United States Army War College

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Carter Malkasian's book is as magisterial as I had expected. No American knows the inner workings of Afghanistan as well as "Carter Sahib," a sobriquet he earned from his extensive immersion in the culture during his service as an advisor to many senior leaders there. In fact, I think the book is misnamed, as he spends more time describing Afghan combat and operations, on both sides, than those of the United States. His work is really about the continuation of the Afghan civil war (or wars, from the complex conflicts he describes) with the involvement of a new outside power, joining the failed interventions of the British and Russians. This is one of those rare cases where all the hype in the quotations on the book jacket is well deserved.

His basic argument is that while the United States made many mistakes, in the end the Taliban won primarily because of their superior will and motivation that the U.S.-supported government and its security forces just could not match. For Malkasian, despite Taliban excesses, Afghanistan would have been better off without an American intervention that extended the civil war and magnified its destruction.

Along with his unique insights about Afghans, Malkasian also does a masterful job of describing the attitudes and actions of senior American politicians and generals, often from first-hand experience as an advisor. In his opening chapter, he describes some of the best books that preceded his about the war, but none are as comprehensive or include so many different perspectives. The closest to matching this book is Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan*, but it covers only 2009-2011.<sup>1</sup> Malkasian's volume covers the whole war right up through the Taliban peace agreement and President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all forces. While it was completed before the final victory of the Taliban, the author fully expected that outcome. Except for some coverage on the final collapse of the Afghan government and the debacle of the U.S. withdrawal, it is hard to envision how any future account will be able to offer a better assessment of the war. There is much here to ponder for military and political decisionmakers as well as for general readers who are trying to understand this a complex and frustrating conflict.

But Malkasian himself admits that his work has some flaws, and he correctly identifies the biggest gap in his scholarship, which involves the book's coverage of U.S. allies and the coalition. In 2019, I attended a conference on Afghanistan held at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. It was attended by representatives of most of the European countries that had contributed contingents to assist the U.S. in Afghanistan, including the Scandinavian nations. Each of those officials spoke with great candor about their motivations and experiences. What struck me most about their presentations was that none of them cared at all about Afghanistan. They did not perceive any real threat to them that merited fixing the country. Their main motivation and purpose was to show the world's sole superpower that they were a dependable ally. Another common theme was very weak public support at home that severely restricted their military options. I remember hearing stories from disgusted American troops about the German "sitzkrieg" Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) that needed more than a year to get a helicopter to be able to travel around their zone to finally be able to carry out their important stabilization missions. I attended a meeting with representatives of the German government in 2008 where they were looking for ways to be more effective in Afghanistan without spending any more money or getting anyone hurt. The Scandinavian countries had basically no public tolerance for any casualties at all.

An important study needs to be written about whether the involvement of NATO in Afghanistan actually helped or hurt the American effort there. Obviously the additional troops from the various coalition contingents assisted with important combat actions, and they provided some international legitimacy. However, the reintroduction of British soldiers into a country with a long memory like Afghanistan was

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<sup>1</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

bound to spawn increased resistance. In addition, the NATO presence further complicated any chance to develop an effective military campaign. As a member of the team that developed the new U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine in 2006, and then got involved in trying to transfer that knowledge to NATO, I can testify that there was much resistance in Europe. In fact, there was not even agreement about what counterinsurgency was, let alone what it required. In 2008, then-Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Kolenda was managing a textbook counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign in his sector of Afghanistan, including crossing into Pakistan to talk to his counterpart there. A reporter from the *Toronto Globe and Mail* concluded a very encouraging visit with Kolenda, and then traveled to interview the senior French commander in a neighboring sector. When asked about the course of COIN operations there, the officer replied, “We do not believe in counterinsurgency. If you find yourself needing to use counterinsurgency, it means the entire population has become the subject of your war, and you either have to stay there forever or you will be lost.”<sup>2</sup> Besides providing a possible alternative explanation for why Kolenda’s area was so peaceful, the vignette also shows a potential drawback of any coalition campaign. Interoperability includes doctrine as well as equipment, and common objectives. The British finally published counterinsurgency doctrine congruent with that of the United States in 2009, and NATO followed. Eventually General Stanley McChrystal developed a coherent counterinsurgency campaign by 2010. But that was too late to make up for a lost decade in Afghanistan.

Foreign involvement also had negative impacts on essential aid programs. Attendees at the Tokyo donor conference in January 2002 could not agree on a comprehensive development plan. Instead, they adopted a “lead nation” approach that assigned specific responsibilities by country – United States (Afghan Army), United Kingdom (counternarcotics), Japan (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration), Italy (judicial system), and Germany (police). The Afghans never trusted this underfunded and incomplete program, and it was eventually scrapped, but not before establishing the pattern for future assistance, which was always inadequate to achieve real reform, but very effective in fueling rampant corruption.

The author can be excused for the extra pride he seems to have in the actions of his Marines, but I would have liked to have seen him address the common criticism that the Marines sucked too many surge forces into Helmand province when they would have been better utilized elsewhere. Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, who had advised President Bush and then Obama on Afghanistan, wondered why so much of the surge effort was being applied in a province with less than 4% of the population. Chandrasekaran writes that a reluctant McChrystal wanted to apply most surge forces to more pressing problems and was frustrated by inflated Marine requirements and their slow pace of progress in Helmand.<sup>3</sup> At least McChrystal finally had a comprehensive counterinsurgency plan, which Malkasian describes very well. It is a bit ironic that operations in Iraq in 2003 receive so much criticism for lacking a full plan for “Phase IV” after major combat operations were concluded, while there was no such plan at all for the initial campaign in Afghanistan. One of the lead CENTCOM planners in 2001 told me that they were lucky to be able to project 72 hours ahead, let alone a few months. Another officer, a key advisor to Lieutenant General Dan McNeil in 2002, told me that the staff continually tried to get their commander to focus on rebuilding the “ring road” that was such an important part of the country’s infrastructure, but McNeil remained totally focused on killing and capturing insurgents. Malkasian also does well describing the strategic backlash from sloppy special operations raids during that period. I witnessed the same thing myself in Iraq in 2007.

Because of the author’s rare insight into the hearts and minds of the Afghans, I am inclined to agree with him about the power of Islam and resistance to outside occupation that motivated the Taliban. The American experience in Vietnam and Iraq, among others, should have prepared the U.S. for the collapse of poorly led

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<sup>2</sup> Michael M. Phillips, “World News: Soldier’s Tea Date Aids Ties along Afghan Border; U.S. Colonel’s Visit to Pakistan Officer Aims to Cut Tension,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 July 2008, A10; Doug Sanders, “Counterinsurgency – the Good Kind,” *Sunday Patriot News*, 8 June 2008, A21.

<sup>3</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 126, 144-154.

indigenous allied militaries that served corrupt governments and were too dependent on American firepower and logistics. However, history also tells us that long-term American presence can prevent that.<sup>4</sup> The author cites many American leaders, military and civilian, who recognized the necessity for staying the course with some level of military commitment. The ugly truth about any American military intervention is that the accomplishment of national objectives almost always requires long-term presence. President Bush was prepared to stay as long we did in Korea (page 199). It took 30 years for real democracy to appear after that war ended in 1953 and the U.S is still there. It did not enter Afghanistan, or Iraq or Bosnia, with the intention of staying for many years, but ended up doing that because political leaders changed their calculations and interests. If presidents were more honest in admitting to the American people about the typical length and cost of military interventions, there would be fewer of them. Hubris generally overrules history, but that does not always make such interventions immoral or wrong.

Malkasian criticizes decision makers not only for not adequately considering the high costs incurred in American blood and treasure, but also for exposing Afghans to much unnecessary harm. As he writes, “peace would have come a lot sooner without foreign intervention” (461). He also condemns the destruction modern war wreaked on an undeveloped society. In his view, the evaluation of the moral question about justifying the lengthy intervention weighs heavily against the United States. Such consequentialist ethical determination is common among historians. Back in my much younger years, in the 1990s, I was privileged to represent the US Military Academy at a prestigious gathering at Columbia University to discuss Moral Judgment in Cold War History. Attendees included noted historians like John Gaddis, Gaddis Smith, Akira Iriye, and Barton Bernstein. Among the ethicists were Michael Walzer and Father Theodore Hesburgh from Notre Dame. Among the topics discussed was how to evaluate the justness of American military interventions. The consensus of the gathering was that judgments of right or wrong depended upon the outcome of the action. The two strongest dissenters to that view were myself and Father Hesburgh, the soldier and the priest. We argued for deontological ethics, that there has to be a standard of right and wrong that can be applied beforehand. Outcomes were not as important as intentions in moral judgments, in our opinion.

It is difficult to question America’s justification to respond to the 9/11 attacks, so the moral question really devolves to analyzing why no offramps were taken, and the author does very well discussing what he sees as lost opportunities. But once America was engaged, as he notes, leaving was “more politically dangerous than staying” (459). His comment reminds me of the Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts’s classic *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, which describes how successive administrations that made hard-headed rational decisions were able to pass resolution of that conflict onto their successors.<sup>5</sup> I must admit that I am skeptical, however, of Malkasian’s assertion that Osama bin Laden purposefully intended the 9/11 attacks to embroil the United States in Afghanistan. There is disagreement on this topic. Experts like Peter Bergen discount such motivation, others like Lawrence Wright differ.<sup>6</sup> For myself, I would be more likely to believe that was bin Laden’s intent if Malkasian presented evidence that the al-Qaeda leader had revealed that objective before the attacks occurred rather than when it was apparent that retaliation was on the way.

Carter Malkasian has provided much grist for the mill for the ongoing discussion generated after the debacle of the final American withdrawal from Afghanistan. Was this another case of misplaced American idealism? Would more resources and attention between 2001 and 2005 have muted the return of the Taliban? Would

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most eloquent argument for the benefit of extensive postwar commitment is Nadia Schadlow, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory* (Washington, DC; Georgetown Press, 2017). See also Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War: US Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and al-Qaeda*, (New York: Free Press, 2011); Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

involving its leaders in early discussions about the future of the country have done the same? If a coherent counterinsurgency campaign had been executed earlier would that have made a difference? Could the surge have been exploited diplomatically as well as militarily? Could a small American military presence have prevented the final collapse? Is a peaceful Afghanistan under Taliban rule worth the costs to Afghan human rights, especially for women? He provides his own opinion on many of these questions, but has also has furnished considerable information to allow us to make our own judgments. And we would do well to do so. For if history tells us anything about American foreign policy, it is that U.S. leaders have never been able to never do this again.

While Malkasian's book will remain a standard because of his unique insider perspective of US-Afghan relations, Craig Whitlock's book is just the first salvo in what will be a barrage of critical attempts initially by journalists and later by historians to condemn American leaders for the debacle in Afghanistan based on publicly available records and reports. One of my knowledgeable colleagues at the US Army War College has told me that his future book will make Whitlock's "look like hagiography." That will not be easy, as Whitlock has a very grim story to tell. While there were continuing failures to build Afghan security forces, defeat the Taliban, work with Afghan leaders, eliminate drugs, deal with corruption, perform effective stability operations, and control spending, he argues that American political and military leaders continued to lie about progress and deceive the public.

Journalists are often scouts for the historians who will follow. Whitlock quotes a statement on the wall in the *Washington Post's* newsroom, "Journalism is the first rough draft of history" (277). Though he claims that this book is a second or third draft of history, he basically is relying on the first level of data, initial oral histories of participants, mostly ex post facto with lots of hindsight. The title of this volume is misleading. The wording is designed to elicit a comparison to Daniel Ellsberg's leaking of 7000 pages of classified documents in the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971.<sup>7</sup> These exposed how the Lyndon B. Johnson administration had misled Congress and the public about the war in Vietnam. In contrast, few of Whitlock's sources are papers, and most are unclassified. His book should really be titled "The Afghanistan Interviews." Except for a collection of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's infamous "snowflakes" (4),<sup>8</sup> Whitlock's main sources are collections of interviews from the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Army's Operational Leadership Experience project at Fort Leavenworth, and the Miller Center at the University of Virginia. To be fair to Whitlock and others, it took a lot of Freedom of Information Act requests to get access to all the interviews. But there are still reams of documents to be released and many memoirs to come, which will fill in details and add nuance to the story he has offered. It will especially take some years for the majority of the real secret documents to become available.

All the various sources of information used by journalists and historians have different advantages and disadvantages, based on their origination and depending upon how they are used. For instance, Whitlock examines about 600 interviews from the Operational Lessons Learned Project at Fort Leavenworth that came from Afghanistan veterans, mostly mid-level field grade officers. By my count, he quotes 73 of them. What did the other 527 say? I suspect at least some of them were very positive about progress. For those who described flaws and failures, did the interviewees mention who was informed about the deficiencies? What kind of reports were filed? As for the project itself, what was its purpose? What kinds of questions were asked? As we all know, the way questions are asked will shape the answers.

Similar concerns apply to all the interview sets. The author worked especially hard to get access to the SIGAR interviews, which provided an even more critical view of the American performance in Afghanistan than SIGAR's published reports. A military staff officer who served in International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters there said that his colleagues and senior leaders tended to view SIGAR like policemen

<sup>7</sup> Neil Sheehan *et al*, *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: The New York Times, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> See <https://papers.rumsfeld.com/library/page/200106-snowflakes>.



might view their Department of Internal Affairs, as a group of meddlers out to cause trouble who did not really understand or sympathize with those in the field. When I mentioned this metaphor to a friend of mine who served with the Special Inspector General's office, he disagreed with it, saying that at least Internal Affairs personnel had been taken from the police force and understood the job. He described his colleagues as a pickup team who were rarely the best and brightest. He is retired military, and agreed with the view that most of them did not understand the pressures those serving in Afghanistan were under. He also questioned the motivations of some of the SIG leadership that might have shaped findings. It looks like there is another great book out there for some investigative journalist who wants to analyze the creation and operation of the Special Inspector General's offices in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Whitlock has created a condemning prosecutorial brief to "attempt to explain what went wrong and how three consecutive presidents and their administrations failed to tell the truth" (xx). For two decades American "leaders lied about what was happening and kept insisting they were making progress" (273). While it is easy to criticize Whitlock's sources, it is hard to deny his narrative because so much of the story has already been told by others, and we all witnessed the dismal results on our television screens a few months ago. I started noting the lack of a campaign plan for Afghanistan back in 2004, finding it

ironic that there was so much criticism of Operation Iraqi Freedom for having an incomplete plan for the post-conflict phase while no one seemed to care that Operation Enduring Freedom had no such plan at all. Anyone who has read Rajiv Chandrasekeran's *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan*, Malkasian's *War Comes to Garmser*, and Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars* will be not be surprised by most of Whitlock's revelations.<sup>9</sup>

While investigative journalists may see their role to make a convincing argument about purposeful misconduct, historians are supposed to be judges, not lawyers. It is too easy, and not very useful, to just postulate a widespread conspiracy to mislead the American public. Yet I know many of the senior leaders who are included as part of this alleged deception, and consider them honorable people. We need to be able to understand why they made the decisions they did. What was their intent? Either there was some sort of irresistible pressure to lie, that might be as subject for political and behavioral scientists to explain, or perhaps there was a whole different set of data that these leaders were seeing than that recounted by Whitlock.

For the various presidential administrations that Whitlock covers, there were similar dynamics at work as those described by Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts.<sup>10</sup> Their book explained how the working of the American political system encouraged presidents from 1946 to 1968 to pass on the most difficult issues about Southeast Asia to their successors to resolve. If the war could not be won on their watch, at least it would not be lost, either. While US leaders were both realistic and pessimistic in their evaluations and not deluded by false expectations, bureaucratic and political pressures caused six presidents to persist in trying to save South Vietnam from Communism, even more than were involved in Afghanistan.

It is also true that measuring progress in such conflicts is always very difficult. For anyone interested in this topic, I strongly recommend the book by Gregory Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War*.<sup>11</sup> He argues persuasively that a system of assessment that mistook effort for progress, never determined the most important threat in a mosaic war, and became more focused on

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<sup>9</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekeran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage, 2012); Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (New York: Oxford, 2013); Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 1979)

<sup>11</sup> Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 122

collecting data than analyzing it, contributed significantly to the failure of the United States to save its beleaguered South Vietnamese ally.

Both organizational and individual motivations pushed the Army in Vietnam to rely too heavily on easily quantifiable measures like body counts. These included General William Westmoreland's attrition strategy and the lure of systems analysis in vogue within Robert McNamara's Department of Defense, along with the desire of individual commanders on short tours to show significant results quickly. Staff officers with similarly short assignments had no incentive to come up with a better assessment system or reduce the 14,000 pounds of reports produced daily. General Creighton Abrams may have had a broader view of what the war required than his predecessor, but Abrams was also hamstrung by the same flawed assessments, which as the US withdrew became fixated mainly on evaluating the preparedness of the Army of Vietnam to deal on their own with a still poorly defined threat. The reliability of the main tool to measure the progress and effectiveness of pacification efforts, the Hamlet Evaluation System, depended upon the subjective judgment of more than 250 district advisers, most of whom had deficient language and cultural skills. As one frustrated officer complained "I wish people's ears would light up or something when we have won their heart or their mind."<sup>12</sup> Daddis compares the American Army in Vietnam to Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice, awash in a flood of statistics of their own creation that they could not stop. And with the lack of a well-articulated strategy or vision of victory linked to political goals, dominant numerical indicators of military success became a substitute for really understanding the war.

Daddis's description of the problems evaluating the readiness of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) echos consistently with those involving security forces in Afghanistan. His critique of the shortcomings resulting from short deployments also hit home. At least in Vietnam divisions stayed in place for years, providing some systematic continuity despite individual twelve-month tours. In Afghanistan, whole units rotated out after a year or less, creating even more problems with transitions and interfering with any sort of long term perspective. The American officer who served at ISAF headquarters whom I mentioned earlier was there for a whole year, but most of his NATO colleagues were only there for six months (just as most staff officers were in Vietnam). And he heard the same discussions as each new cohort left and arrived.

As an additional limitation on proper intelligence, just because knowledge is available does not mean that it gets to the right decision maker, or that it is uncontested. In October 2002 I was given the mission by the Army War College Commandant to head a joint and interagency team to develop a plan to reconstruct Iraq for the Army general who was then foreseen to be responsible for it.<sup>13</sup> The plan was completed and submitted to the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations office in late January on the same day that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld decreed that Iraqi reconstruction would be the job of the new Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs under LTG(ret) Jay Garner. I have been given much praise for the recommendations of that report, and many leaders have received much criticism for ignoring them. However, except for the personnel in the G3 shop at the Pentagon to whom I handed the report, and the planners in Kuwait who received emailed copies from our team, I still do not know exactly who saw it before the operation began in March. Plus I am aware that there was plenty of other information from trusted sources that decision makers relied upon which disagreed with our conclusions. Admittedly that conflicting data was more in line with the preferences of key leaders, but just because they chose to believe it does not make a case for deliberate negligence.

In order to fairly judge the presidents, administrators, and generals responsible for the campaign in Afghanistan, two classic questions must be answered. What did they really know (or think they knew)? When did they know it? That is where documents will provide more context for these interviews. Whitlock has done

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<sup>12</sup> Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Conrad C. Crane and W. Andrew Terrill, *Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003); On the process to create and distribute it, see Crane, *Cassandra in Oz: Counterinsurgency and Future War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 23-42.

well outlining the types of failures that need to be explained. The true second and third waves of history will hopefully accomplish that, and also provide some sort of actionable recommendations so that we will not again have to look back at Afghanistan as an earlier failure that should have made us wiser for the next time, like Daddis does for Vietnam.

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Review by Todd Greentree, the Changing Character of War Centre, Oxford University

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Although their books appeared shortly before the ignominious denouement in summer 2021, Carter Malkasian's *The American War in Afghanistan* and Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers* are authoritative narratives of a loss foretold and will stand as foundational histories of the Afghan War. Writing for different purposes but arriving at compatible conclusions, the authors address—if they do not definitively answer—the fundamental question of why the United States lost in Afghanistan (Malkasian, 4; Whitlock, xii, 227). A second question emerges from these narratives, one with clear and present implications: What does failure in Afghanistan reveal about the strategic behavior of the United States?

Malkasian is a knowledgeable participant-observer. Applying his training in politics and history at Oxford, he is also credibly his own best primary source. Few could claim his range of experience, which encompasses assignments as a civilian officer in Kunar and Helmand Provinces, learning Pashto, a difficult language, and serving as advisor to General Joseph Dunford during his sequential positions as Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Malkasian's neutral language and balanced analysis do not entirely disguise a tone of rueful experience, understandable for one who served a troubled mission diligently and for so long. If his comprehensive account of the Afghan War from 2001 to 2021 does not always cohere into a clean chronology, it all the more accurately reflects the complexities of America's conduct and of Afghanistan itself. 'Graveyard of empires' may be a caricature, but for occupiers, few places surpass Afghanistan's back-of-beyond foreignness with its unforgiving geography, kaleidoscopic political clans, and an inexhaustible supply of Pashtun tribal warriors for whom the highest honor was to die fighting against infidel invaders. Malkasian apportions the doomed outcome partially to the corrupt and incohesive Afghan government, along with Pakistani maleficence. However, having to his credit paid careful attention to the insurgent perspective, he concludes that the primary reason for the US loss was that the Taliban's will to resist, when welded to its fundamentalist Islamist zeal, made its cause sufficient to prevail over an irresolute US that drew its coalition partners and the Afghan government into an intractable "civil war in perpetual motion." (Malkasian, 5-6, 453-55).

Whitlock's analysis is more targeted in *The Afghanistan Papers*. An investigative journalist at the *Washington Post*, his stated aim is to expose American misconduct in Afghanistan. The book constitutes an unvarnished official record derived from more than 1,000 interviews and oral histories conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the US Army, the University of Virginia Miller Center, and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. Each chronological chapter ranges among military officers, diplomats, and aid workers, along with commanders, ambassadors, and leaders in Washington, accompanied by highlights from the infamous 'snowflake' memos of central protagonist Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the National Security Archive at George Washington University. Replete with catch-22s and ground-hog day ironies, the interviews are an indisputable contradiction of the immoderately optimistic official messaging about progress in Afghanistan that prevailed right up to the bitter end. Although Whitlock does not exactly explain why the US lost, he does conclude that an "unspoken conspiracy to mask the truth" was a crucial aspect of the troubled American performance in Afghanistan (Whitlock, xii).

Whether we admit it or not, most of us are blind to some extent when it comes to grasping the Afghan elephant. Without fundamentally refuting Malkasian or Whitlock, my own Afghanistan experience prompts two commentaries: First, the Afghan war was elementally a case of why the strong lose, not how the weak win. Second, when American officials claimed they were winning, they were not so much conspiring to hide the truth as they were suffering a collective case of self-deception.

Malkasian helps us judge how the Taliban prevailed and how the US-led mission reached its disastrous outcome, despite an overwhelming preponderance of power and the strong aversion of most Afghans to

having to suffer harsh Taliban misrule again. However, I believe that close attention to US behavior during the initial phase of the war yields a precise and plausible understanding of *why* the US lost. To expand briefly, in the shock and aftermath of the al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush declared a Global War on Terror and vowed that the Taliban "...will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate."<sup>1</sup> This with-us- or-against-us policy would soon lead to excess and eventually prove misconceived. Yet, the beginning was auspicious. After Mullah Omar, the Amir al-Mu'minin (Commander of the Faithful), refused to deliver up al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the CIA devised an expedient operation that combined Special Operations Forces, precision-guided munitions, and Afghan irregulars to overthrow the Taliban Emirate in less than 100 days (Malkasian, 53-79, 99-102).<sup>2</sup> The road to misfortune began at this culminating point of victory, in December 2001, when the Bush administration opted to pursue a vendetta rather than a rational strategy of war termination.

At the same time that US-led forces began nascent counterterrorist operations and Afghans were struggling to form their new government at a UN-sponsored, US-backed conference in Bonn, large numbers of Taliban were streaming in from the countryside to swear fealty to the winning side. This was in accord with the traditional Afghan way of war.<sup>3</sup> Newly designated President Hamid Karzai welcomed them to return to their communities and proposed inviting a few Taliban representatives to Bonn. The aim was to stabilize Afghanistan by pacifying and dispersing the Taliban, while separating them from unreconciled leaders and their patrons in Pakistan's Inter-service Intelligence, the ISI. However, the Bush administration, egged on by the Northern Alliance and others seeking their own share of power, was simply unprepared to listen to Afghans who advocated magnanimity and vetoed the idea. As UN negotiator Lakhdar Brahimi put it, this was "the original sin," a clear case of battlefield achievement squandered by incompetence in peacemaking.<sup>4</sup>

In March 2002, Operation Anaconda in the remote and cold mountains near the Pakistan border eliminated the final concentration of al-Qaeda and hardcore Taliban. The unexpectedly difficult and prolonged battle foreshadowed the challenges of fighting an elusive and determined enemy in the arduous conditions of Afghanistan. US and coalition forces continued to flow into Afghanistan seeking combat, but terrorist targets were scant. Instead, they set about pursuing Taliban, who had mostly ceased fighting, confusing them with international terrorists. The result was to accidentally ignite an insurgency where none had existed and to engulf US-led forces in a creeping, equally accidental counterinsurgency. In other words, although it is impossible to prove a counterfactual, there was no need for the Afghan War to drag on for two decades, because it was unnecessary from the beginning.<sup>5</sup>

Whitlock's central thesis is that American officials were lying when they claimed they were on the way to winning in Afghanistan, because everyone involved knew the US was actually losing (Whitlock, xviii). I believe, however, that there is a simpler and more compelling explanation.<sup>6</sup> After all, the vast majority of civilian and military professionals, on whose interviews *The Afghanistan Papers* is based, were dedicated to their missions, confident in American power and its aims. Even if many suspected the worst, they served with

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<sup>1</sup> President George W. Bush's address to a joint session of Congress following 9/11, Sept. 20, 2001, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZF7cPvaKFXM>.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Berntsen, *Jawbreaker* (New York: Crown, 2005); Henry A. Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012): 169-268.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Johnson, *The Afghan Way of War: How and Why They Fight* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Lakhdar Brahimi, Mary Sack, and Cyrus Samii, "An Interview with Lakhdar Brahimi," *Journal of International Affairs* 58:1 (Fall 2004): 244; James Dobbins, *After the Taliban* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008): 57; Colin S. Gray, *Defining and Achieving Decisive Victory* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, April 2002): 7.

<sup>5</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Antulio Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014); Hew Strachan, "Strategy in the Twenty-First Century," in Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers (eds.), *The Changing Character of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 503-23.

<sup>6</sup> Farnam Street, "Hanlon's Razor" (2015), <https://fs.blog/2017/04/mental-model-hanlons-razor/>.

honor, expecting and hoping for the best. By the same logic, it is highly improbable that a succession of senior leaders and commanders were endeavoring to dupe four ambivalent presidents—Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—by arguing that staying in Afghanistan was in the national interest and worth the cost. Rather than malicious intent, the cumulative evidence points to an equally insidious and dangerous manifestation of Sun Tzu’s axiom that “All warfare is based on deception”: self-deception.<sup>7</sup>

To offer a third observation, given American primacy in Afghanistan, it is understandable that Malkasian and Whitlock pay secondary attention to the impact of coalition partners. Theo Farrell’s excellent history of the Afghan war from the British perspective provides a counterbalancing critique of US leadership and shows allies in key roles at crucial moments. For example, Farrell recounts how Prime Minister Tony Blair’s government cajoled Bush and skeptics in his administration into nation-building and spearheaded the unprecedented Chapter 5 collective defense declaration that fatefully joined NATO to the Afghan War.<sup>8</sup>

Building from the proposition that the fumbled war termination and the mistaking of the Taliban for the enemy provoked the insurgency, why did subsequent adaptation and increased effort by the ISAF coalition fail over the long duration of the Afghan War? Two inter-related explanations stand out: ISAF conducted the war as a series of operations, which, lacking strategic sufficiency, never sustained the initiative. Second, multiple and cumulative errors of policy, strategy, and performance assured the war was unwinnable—at least the way it was fought. Malkasian and Whitlock thoroughly document a litany that encompasses constraints on war-making in liberal democracies, challenges inherent to limited war and foreign intervention, unmanaged contradictions of counterinsurgency, institutional overextension, and reliance on militarization that contravened the limited utility of force in ‘war among the people.’<sup>9</sup>

Overarching these specific issues was lack of attention to classic principles of strategy, as if somehow, they did not apply to low-intensity war in Afghanistan. The first, most important concern was the absence of consistent and competent strategic leadership by senior US decision-makers. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld may have had the right instinct in wanting to limit the US commitment to Afghanistan. However, his infamous ‘snowflake’ memos were no substitute for deliberative decision-making, and he was clearly mistaken in his assumption that a technology-driven Revolution in Military Affairs guaranteed success (Malkasian, 80, Whitlock, xvii).<sup>10</sup> When Vice President Richard Cheney and other members of the Bush administration used 9/11 as a pretext to invade Iraq, their determination to open a second front reduced Afghanistan to an economy of force operation, depriving the effort there of resources and attention. While preventing further attacks on the United States was clearly in the national interest, the negative aim of the so-called War on Terror was mismatched to its ambitious application in Afghanistan—on the geographic periphery and of negligible intrinsic interest. America’s distinctly mixed record in pursuing democracy at the point of bayonets should have cautioned against a wildly ambitious modernizing project especially when, after decades of war, anarchy, and misgovernment, what Afghanistan needed most but did not get was civil order (CM 95-97).<sup>11</sup> Despite generosity and much good work, American and international largesse had perverse impact, fueling rampant corruption and broken trust that ultimately backfired by undermining the authority and legitimacy of the state they were trying to build. (Malkasian, 83; Whitlock, 30).

Then there was the tyranny of time, with a dilatory procession of adaptations that took too long and came too late. By 2003, the insurgency had taken root with Pakistan’s complicity. Serious alarms bells did not ring until

<sup>7</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, ed. & trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963): 66.

<sup>8</sup> Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force* (London: Vintage Books, 2008); Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare,” U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, November 2002, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA408757.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Peceny, *Democracy at the Point of Bayonets* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

2006, when Canadian and British forces configured for peacekeeping found themselves mauled in tough combat against the Taliban who had regrouped in their Southern heartland (Malkasian, 149-53; Whitlock, 105-06). It took yet another three years, including a US presidential election cycle, to come to grips with the growing threat. ISAF commander and respected Special Operations leader General Stanley McChrystal grasped the impossibility of US forces killing their way to victory and authored a major change in strategy. His rules of engagement, issued in early 2009, emphasized protection of the population over firepower, fundamentally contradicting the American way of war and paving the way for full-spectrum counterinsurgency—Big COIN. In December 2009, after long debate focused largely on troop numbers, President Obama finally announced a surge that would bring US forces to over 100,000, with the coalition topping 130,000. Unfortunately, Obama deferred to domestic politics and limited the surge to 18 months. The counter-strategic blunder was immediately recognized, most importantly by the Taliban who merely determined to wait it out.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of 2014, as the Taliban burgeoned, US and allied troop levels dropped toward the 10,000 range. ISAF shifted emphasis to training and equipping Afghan security forces and handing off responsibilities to the Afghan government, which should have been top priorities from the beginning. Hesitant efforts to negotiate an exit from the Afghan entanglement also began. To have opted for both options from a weakened position meant that the strategic dynamics were backwards and, in retrospect, a predetermined failure.<sup>13</sup> But more than hindsight, US leaders should have known better, and there is a reason why.

This roundtable is not the first to review these two histories in tandem, nor was Afghanistan the first war in which America suffered strategic failure. In his review for the *New York Times*, Fred Logevall terms the two books “a one-two punch.” As the author of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in History for *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, his references to the parallels between the Afghan and Vietnam Wars have strong credibility.<sup>14</sup>

Both authors pay their own homages to Afghanistan’s tragic precedent in Vietnam. Malkasian titled his earlier memoir of service in Helmand, *War Comes to Garmser*, to evoke the 1972 classic, *War Comes to Long An*, Jeffrey Race’s poignant account of a district in the Mekong Delta under the irrevocable control of the Viet Cong.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Whitlock’s title, *The Afghanistan Papers*, echoes the Pentagon Papers, the top-secret Department of Defense study that inflamed controversy by revealing how US officials had hidden profound problems in Vietnam from the public and became a landmark Supreme Court case over its leak to the *New York Times* by Daniel Ellsberg in 1971.<sup>16</sup>

Significant differences between Afghanistan and Vietnam in effect highlight the many and specific parallels in US behavior in both wars. In just one example, so badly did the US relationship with Afghan leaders disintegrate, that in 2009, a leaked cable in which Ambassador Karl Eikenberry referred to President Karzai as “not an adequate strategic partner” prompted explicit comparisons with the demise of President Ngo Dinh

<sup>12</sup> Hew Strachan, “Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War,” *Survival* 52:5 (2010): 157-182, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2010.522104>.

<sup>13</sup> Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Stephen Biddle and Eli Bermin, Security Force Assistance: Cases and Policy, Office of Naval Research, 2017, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1047427.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Fredrik Logevall, “How America Lost Its Way in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/16/books/review/carter-malkasian-the-american-war-in-afghanistan-craig-whitlock-the-afghanistan-papers.html>; Logevall, *Embers of War* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> National Archives, Pentagon Papers, 1969, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers>; Christopher Hitchens, “Straight is the Gate,” *London Review of Books*, 16:14, 12 July 1994, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v16/n14/christopher-hitchens/strait-is-the-gate>.

Diem in 1963, arguably South Vietnam's certain point of no return.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of the matter was a complex of conceptional and institutional shortcomings that produced mistaken reliance on military force and disregard of critical political factors, while leaving those who understood the true character of both these wars effectively marginalized.<sup>18</sup> Blame can be pointed directly at those who bridged the two wars and apparently ignored the lessons of Vietnam or applied the wrong ones to Afghanistan. They include Rumsfeld, who was President Gerald Ford's Chief of Staff, and Cheney, his deputy, who were in the White House in April 1975 when Saigon fell. Also notable is Richard Holbrooke, whose contentious career began as a young Foreign Service Officer in Vietnam from 1962 to 1969, long before his fatally fraught turn as President Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (Malkasian, 309, Whitlock, 180).

In an admission so frequently cited it has become something of an epitaph for failure in the Afghan War, the White House czar for Afghanistan and Iraq, 2007-13, Lieutenant General Doug Lute, told his SIGAR interviewer, "We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking" (Whitlock, 110). However damning this excuse may be, it offers insufficient explanation for why the best and brightest architects of Afghanistan got it so wrong for so long.<sup>19</sup>

The diagnosis is evident, and it is not new; the classics, reaching back to Homer and Thucydides, attribute the source of self-inflicted strategic tragedy to hubris. Our modern era has confirmed the affliction, including its prevalence in the Cold War, traceable through a pedigree originating with Hans Morgenthau and his protégé Robert Osgood. One upshot is that behavioral psychology conveys greater explanatory power than international relations theory. RAND analyst Michael Mazzar, for example, uses the term "war by moral imperative" to describe how highly subjective perceptions of threat bias decisions commonly presented in the guise of objective national interest. Former Army Lieutenant General and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, whose *Dereliction of Duty* discussed how US officials had misconceived Vietnam, has more recently coined a pungent term, "strategic narcissism," to denote "the tendency to view the world only in relation to the United States and to assume that the future course of events depends primarily on US decisions or plans."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Karl W. Eikenberry, US ambassador to Afghanistan, to Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, "COIN Strategy: Civilian Concerns," November 2009, in "Ambassador Eikenberry's Cables on US Strategy in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, January 5, 2010; and Don Snow, "Watching Karzai, Seeing Diem," Atlantic Council, April 8, 2010, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/watching-karzai-seeing-diem/>.

<sup>18</sup> R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on USUS-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1972); Todd Greentree, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: US Performance and the Institutional Dimension of Strategy in Afghanistan," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36: 3 (2013): 325–56, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.764518>; Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008); George Packer, "Why Rufus Phillips Matters," *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/george-packer/why-rufus-phillips-matters>; Edward G. Lansdale, "Concept for Victory in Vietnam," 8 June 1964, Lansdale Papers, Box 74, The Hoover Institution, Stanford University, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf6v19n8cp/dsc/>.

<sup>19</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Random House Inc., New York, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1997); McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2020): 15, 436; Book Review Roundtable: Surveying H.R. McMaster's "Battlegrounds," *Texas National Security Review*, 8 March 2021, [https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-surveying-h-r-mcmasters-battlegrounds/#\\_ftnref18](https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-surveying-h-r-mcmasters-battlegrounds/#_ftnref18); Michael J. Mazzar, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America's Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019); Thucydides (Robert B. Strassler and Richard Crawley, trans. & ed.), *The Landmark Thucydides: a comprehensive guide to the Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 1996): xx; Rose McDermott, "The Nature of Narcissism," H-Diplo | ISSF Policy Series, 15 June 2018, <https://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5BE-Narcissism>; Robert, Jervis, "Hans Morgenthau, Realism, and the Scientific Study of International Politics," *Social Research*, 61:4, (Winter 1994), 853-76; Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).



Illustrations from the Afghan War abound. Leaving aside the estimated \$2.3 trillion price tag, one looms above all: the disproportionality of the war's casualties. In the US desire to avenge the 2,997 who died on 9/11 and pursue the War on Terror in Afghanistan, 3,468 US and allied troops died, but the total number of Afghan war dead approached 250,000.<sup>21</sup> Of course, many of those were "enemy KIA" and the Taliban themselves were responsible for much of that bloodshed. However, like Vietnam body counts, by the inescapable logic of what came to be known as McCrystal's math, the more Afghans who died, however unintentionally or sanctioned, the more Afghan adversaries arose. This was President Karzai's point, a major source of broken trust, and not merely on humanitarian grounds, but because no rate of attrition could eliminate the Taliban cause. (Malkasian, 145, 278). About this, Malkasian is dead right.

Returning to the opening discussion, 'endless war' is a notion born of fatigue, a strategic fallacy not to be mistaken for the most important thing about a war, which is how it ends.<sup>22</sup> The difficult end in Afghanistan followed a pattern. In Vietnam, protracted negotiations obscured a loss and belied proficient warfighting, while Korea was an earlier precedent, albeit ending in a draw and without the alibi for exit. From this perspective, the bungled Afghan endgame was merely the culmination of strategic failure two decades in the making. President Biden's decision to withdraw, taken contrary to advice, was not a surprise. As Vice President, he had dissented when President Obama approved the surge in 2009, and in 2010 he lost patience with President Karzai's complaints and stormed out of dinner (Malkasian, 449; Whitlock, 274-75). Russia's invasion of Ukraine relieved the Biden administration from further flaying over the botched withdrawal. More importantly, prudent conduct of limited war in Ukraine has restored NATO's relevance and US leadership in defense of freedom in a way that Afghanistan, which lies at such distance from the European core, could not meaningfully signify.

The larger point is that Americans are more deeply entangled in their past than they think they are, whether they are aware of it or not. "For us, history starts today," Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage admonished Pakistani Lieutenant General Mahmud Ahmed in Washington, DC on September 12, 2001.<sup>23</sup> But the ISI director, an avowed Islamist, knew perfectly well that what would become America's longest war did not begin the previous day, but in December 1979, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when for over a decade the US stoked the fires of radical Islam by arming the Afghan mujahedin, from whom the Taliban emerged. Assessing consequences, the two post-9/11 wars America fought and the detour into counterterrorism appear less a strategic turning point than a costly distraction from the core purposes of American power.<sup>24</sup>

The story that Malkasian and Whitlock tell, which my own experience has regrettably confirmed, is that the self-deception and myopia of treating Afghanistan as a battlefield more than a nation amounted to folly, and while it would be unreasonable to expect leaders to have been clairvoyant, it is not too much to have expected strategic competence.<sup>25</sup> The United States can and must do better.

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<sup>21</sup> Watson Institute, Brown University, Costs of War, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

<sup>22</sup> Fred Charles Iklé, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, Campaign against Terror, PBS Frontline, 19 April 2002, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/campaign/interviews/armitage.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019): 357; Robert W. Tucker, *The Purposes of American Power: An Essay on National Security* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984): 6; Linda Robinson, et al, RAND, *Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War*, January 9, 2014, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR816.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR816.html); Robert Gates, "The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 99:4 (July/August 2020): 121–32.

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Review by Elisabeth Leake, The Fletcher School, Tufts University

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It is almost impossible to read either Carter Malkasian's *The American War in Afghanistan* or Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers* without a keen awareness of the events of the last year. Both books were published after US President Joe Biden had announced the final withdrawal of American forces would take place by September 11, 2021, but before the American withdrawal had actually been effected. Yet the stories told by both authors clearly presage the chaos that emerged in the summer of 2021: the sweeping Taliban gains, the indeterminate US reaction, the tumultuous troop withdrawal, and the desperate attempts of thousands of Afghans to flee. Both books imbue recent events with the sense of being a foregone conclusion.

In essence, Whitlock and Malkasian, in two books published around the same time, seek to trace the same history: that of the American war in Afghanistan, beginning in 2001 and ending in early 2021. Both take a chronological approach, tracking change over time, and largely focus on political elites, key decisionmakers within the US government and military or, more occasionally, leading Afghan figures. Most prominently, the authors focus on the different decisions that not only continued to embroil the United States within Afghanistan for twenty years but which prevented an American military or political 'victory.' Taken together, they highlight why the American war in Afghanistan ended in failure.

In *The Afghanistan Papers*, Whitlock draws on his longtime experience as an investigative reporter to focus on the American 'side' in the war in Afghanistan. He seeks "to explain what went wrong [in Afghanistan] and how three consecutive presidents and their administrations failed to tell the truth" (Whitlock, xix-xx). Of the two books reviewed here, Whitlock's is the more primary-research oriented. Whitlock draws on a wide array of US-based primary sources: government documents and memos (obtained through FOIA requests), as well as oral interviews conducted by the government, the army, and institutions such as the University of Virginia. These interviews provide exceptional color to the history, revealing the levels of frustration, anger, or despair that often resulted from bungled US decision-making.

Whitlock documents the decisions and policies undertaken by the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. In great detail, he explores the perspectives of each president, as well as those of their key foreign policy advisers and secretaries of defense. Whitlock also reveals the roles played by different military commanders, noting the vast range of interests (or disinterests) they brought to the war in Afghanistan and the ways in which generals agreed or clashed with civilian leadership. More than Malkasian, Whitlock also highlights how, from 2003, the war in Iraq distracted US officials away from and fed into a broader sense of ambivalence about what was taking place in Afghanistan. For example, Whitlock cites an interview with Army Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, who was appointed Bush's White House 'war czar' for both Iraq and Afghanistan: "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn't know what we were doing" (Whitlock, 110).

One point that Whitlock is particularly keen to emphasize throughout his text is the extremely different messaging taking place within the government and military versus that broadcast to the general public. Time and again, he contrasts officials' interviews with the press, where they claimed that the United States was making progress in Afghanistan, with internal discussions and memos, which often painted a much more pessimistic picture. In a particularly memorable anecdote, Whitlock links the sacking of Army General David McKiernan to his unexpected public admission that the war was stalemated: "Unlike other commanding officers, he did not deceive the public with specious language. He told it straight to the end" (Whitlock, 146). Whitlock excoriates the US government for effectively selling a series of half-truths which covered up indecision, a lack of strategy, or decision-making failures. This is perhaps the point he is keenest for readers to grasp: "as the conflict degenerated and the quagmire deepened, their [US] leaders lied about what was happening and kept insisting they were making progress" (Whitlock, 273). This point no doubt is driven by Whitlock's work as a reporter; as he pointedly notes in his acknowledgments, "*The Washington Post* ... made an institutional commitment to uncover the truth about the longest war in American history" (Whitlock, 277).

Malkasian takes a more nuanced approach in *The American War in Afghanistan*. He covers much of the same ground as Whitlock when discussing key US actors and decision-making, but where Whitlock relies on brief historical summaries, crackling oral history quotes, and pithy observations on the events and people of the time, Malkasian delves painstakingly into the details of the American war (it is no coincidence that his book is more than twice as long as Whitlock's). Drawing not only on more extensive secondary literature but interviews he conducted during his time spent as political adviser to US General Joseph Dunford, Malkasian not only traces the history of high-level political decision-making but the ways in which these played out militarily within Afghanistan. *The American War* is at its most instructive in deconstructing both American and Afghan military operations, how they resulted in success or failure, and their subsequent consequences.

Yet perhaps Malkasian's most important contribution is the attention he pays to the Taliban, not just the United States. He traces the Taliban's development across twenty years of war, revealing how it not only regrouped after fleeing Kabul but ultimately reasserted itself as a potent political opponent to the reigning Afghan government. Malkasian demonstrates how different Taliban leaders (often with the support, either tacit or explicit, of Pakistani officials) embedded themselves across Afghanistan's provinces, especially in the southeast, taking advantage of a host of factors: shortcomings in US strategy; local discontent with the new Afghan government; Afghans' suspicions about the United States' intentions, especially as civilian casualties grew; superior military tactics and infighting among Afghan armed and police forces; and the ruthless use of violence against government forces and civilians alike to enforce their rule in captured areas. While, like Whitlock, Malkasian largely points to US mistakes resulting in American defeat, he also reveals that the war in Afghanistan failed because of local and regional factors, including the shortcomings of the Afghan governments under Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, the role of Pakistan, and the Taliban's tenacity.

Whitlock and Malkasian highlight many of the same key issues. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld looms particularly large, due to his reluctance to expand the US remit in Afghanistan to include nation-building. Both authors spend extensive time recounting the promises and pitfalls of the 2009 surge, highlighting the tensions between President Barack Obama and his military commanders over the strategy's importation from Iraq and the ways in which Obama's insistence on time-limited action shaped the surge's shape, successes, and (ultimately more visible) failures. Both reflect at length about opium production and poppy growing and the ways that US leaders reacted hostilely to this illicit economy, while the Taliban and local Afghan elites used it to their advantage.

Notably, there are two areas in which both books stumble. The question of Afghan representation and identity looms large, as does the issue of Afghan state- and nation-building. Neither are treated with satisfactory nuance nor adequately historicized, which in turn leads to the reinforcement of certain unhelpful and problematic stereotypes about Afghans and Afghanistan.

Turning first to the issue of Afghan representation, Whitlock's book particularly presents problems. Afghans, who usually remain nameless in his narrative unless well-known government officials or 'warlords,' are often presented as ignorant, uncivilized, and backward. This is made especially clear in chapter five, in which Whitlock recounts how US officials attempted to train an Afghan national army. The chapter argues that the US failed to create a functional, effective Afghan army because American officials tried to force recruits to accept Western military models rather than accommodating local practices. However, Whitlock's illustrations for this argument demean the Afghans recruits, not the Americans. Whitlock's quotations and observations focus on Afghan ignorance - of Western military tactics and equipment or commodities such as urinals and towel racks - or on practices that American observers found distasteful, such as Afghan communal cooking. It is unclear the extent to which Whitlock is trying to represent the views of his American subjects or make more general observations about Afghanistan, a point he would have done well to articulate. There is little self-reflection on Afghan representation, and thus, the effect is to problematically reinforce stereotypes about Afghans as ignorant and incapable of modernization and Afghanistan as "riven by feuding tribes and implacable warlords" (Whitlock, 36).

Malkasian clearly seeks to provide a more academic approach, as demonstrated by an early chapter which sets out Afghanistan's ethnic, tribal, and religious landscape, briefly acknowledging the country's great diversity. Nevertheless, his analysis is similarly blinkered. His arguments often boil down to highlighting a fundamental tension between tribal Afghanistan, on one hand, and the US-led Kabuli elite, on the other. In some instances, this argument is warranted, reflecting long-term disconnects between Afghan ruling elites and the broader population. But Malkasian's analysis does not account for the diversity he describes, nor does he discuss the often-fraught history of so-called 'tribal' politics, and the ways in which both British and Americans have ascribed certain (pejorative) meaning to this category, to the detriment of their local understanding.<sup>1</sup>

Malkasian's treatment of Afghan identity provocatively culminates in his argument that the "Taliban stood for what it meant to be Afghan." He explains: "The Taliban embraced rule by Islam and resistance to occupation, values that ran thick in Afghan history and defined an Afghan's worth" (Malkasian, 454). While Malkasian provides evidence that such ideas drove the Taliban, and its leaders employed riffs on these themes to justify prolonged resistance to the US and their Afghan allies, he provides little concrete proof to back up the claim that Afghan civilians subscribed to the same viewpoints, instead pointing to polls and interviews that reveal Afghan frustrations with the government in power.

There are several additional problems with this argument. First, it relies on an overly simplistic definition of 'Islam,' which does not recognize the very different ways in which Islam has been understood and practiced both within Afghanistan and across the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup> Malkasian does not acknowledge Islam's often shifting political role, especially in Pashtun communities (he effectively ignores Islam as practiced by non-Pashtun Afghans), or the ways that Islam was increasingly politicized within Afghanistan from the late twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Second, the focus on 'resistance to occupation' offers a similarly narrow reading of Afghan history. It disregards the myriad ways in which Afghanistan has been embedded in global social, political, economic, cultural, and religious networks, and the ways in which Afghans have sought to engage with peoples and countries across the world and have welcomed various foreign influences at home.<sup>4</sup> While the idea of resisting foreign military intervention does have potency – as do historical myths in any country – defining Afghan history and identity largely through the perspective of resistance is fundamentally self-limiting. It does not hold true in much of the recent scholarship on Afghanistan, it does not take

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<sup>1</sup> The scholarship on this is extensive, but, for example, see Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020); Elisabeth Leake, "Spooks, Tribes, and Holy Men: The Central Intelligence Agency and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 1 (2018): 240-62; Martin Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808-1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); B.D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> On Afghanistan, see, Nile Green, ed., *Afghanistan's Islam: From Conversion to the Taliban* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); on the broader Muslim world, see Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017); Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Islam's evolving social and political roles is evident throughout the scholarship, including in the works of authors with whom Malkasian actively engages. See, for example, David B. Edwards, *Before Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986; 1990); Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland* (London: Hurst & Co., 2007); Green, *Afghanistan's Islam*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015); Marjan Wardaki, "Rediscovering Afghan Fine Arts: The Life of an Afghan Student in Germany, Abdul Ghafur Brechna," *Modern Asian Studies* 55, no. 5 (2021): 1544-80; Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah, eds., *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Roundtable, "The Future of Afghan History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013): 127-48; "Afghanistan roundtable," *Afghanistan* 4, no. 1 (2021): 47-86; Elisabeth Leake, "States, Nations, and Self-Determination: Afghanistan and Decolonization at the United Nations," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (2022): 272-91.

Afghanistan's vibrant or complex history seriously, and it does not recognize that not all Afghans see themselves or their country in the same way. Everyday Afghans who actively engaged with political and social changes after 2001 are often noticeable for their absence in the histories of Malkasian and Whitlock. Malkasian's framing of local dynamics serves to flatten Afghanistan's social and political landscape, thus reinforcing the same dubious message found in Whitlock's book: that Afghans are fundamentally incapable of change or modernity.

Alongside the question of Afghan representation, neither Malkasian nor Whitlock examine 'nation-building' in particular depth. Malkasian acknowledges that he covers nation-building only "in broad brushstrokes" (Malkasian, 9). Given the already impressive length of his text, this is perhaps understandable. Whitlock, meanwhile, is largely dismissive of nation-building efforts and portrays them entirely as foreign-led: "instead of bringing stability and peace, the United States inadvertently built a corrupt, dysfunctional Afghan government that depended on U.S. military power for its survival" (Whitlock, 30). However, the limited analysis of both authors of the realities of complex local dynamics within Afghanistan also potentially plays into this lacuna.

Both Whitlock and Malkasian use 'nation-building' and 'state-building' largely interchangeably. While this in part reflects government and public rhetoric, disaggregating the two, and giving further attention to both, would have been useful. It is clear, especially from the US perspective, that military strategy often trumped attempts to shape Afghanistan's political structures; nevertheless, the question of both state-building and nation-building require further scrutiny, as they played a key role in the failures of the United States and the Afghan elites it backed.

On the question of state-building, both authors acknowledge some of the forms this took: new government structures, including a parliament and president; the creation of professional police and armed forces; the building of schools and hospitals. Whitlock, in particular, treats these activities as a novelty, citing US officials who made observations such as: "They [Afghanistan's leaders] were capable people but they didn't [have] anything to run a government with so it really was from scratch both organizationally and materially" (Whitlock, 32). In fact, US officials and representatives from other foreign governments and international organizations effectively replicated earlier modes of Afghan state-building. All of these projects – road-building, education and health initiatives, the creation of political infrastructures – had been attempted by Afghan elites in the twentieth century (again, often with foreign aid). Even the new constitution drew on Afghan precedents.<sup>5</sup>

State-building thus has a much older, if often complicated, history within Afghanistan, but notably it is an endeavor that has been driven as much by Afghans as by outsiders. In his chapter on the 2014 elections, Malkasian notes that that 8 million Afghans voted in the 2004 elections, and 6.6 million voted in 2014 (Malkasian, 356). This fact alone indicates that many Afghan civilians actively engaged with the evolving political processes within the country, disrupting his claims about a static Afghan identity. Both *The American War* and *The Afghanistan Papers* reveal the need for a history of the war in Afghanistan that delves into how state-building took place as a shared Afghan-international endeavor. Afghan civilians from a range of backgrounds engaged with these processes, often for a variety of reasons, and their motivations and activities

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<sup>5</sup> On longer histories of Afghan state-building, see Faiz Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft between the Ottoman and British Empires* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Artemy Kalinovsky and Antonio Giustozzi, "The Professional Middle Class in Afghanistan: From Pivot of Development to Political Marginality," *Humanity* 8, no. 2 (2017): 355-78; Michael B. O'Sullivan, "The Little Brother of the Ottoman State: Ottoman Technocrats in Kabul and Afghanistan's Development in the Ottoman Imagination," *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 6 (2016): 1846-87; Nick Cullather, "Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State," *Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 512-37.

need to be taken seriously. This, in turn, will help reveal and nuance understanding of the factors that undermined the government's long-term success while recognizing Afghan, not just foreign, agency.

Additionally, while Whitlock and Malkasian discuss some of the infrastructures that US officials and soldiers, alongside other members of the international community, helped to construct, they do not actually reflect on how these were intended to *nation-build*: how they were meant to create a sense of national unity or identity, to overcome the ethnic, tribal, social, or regional differences both authors are quick to identify. This is a separate but related phenomenon from state-building which requires additional reflection. In tracing developments within the Afghan government, Malkasian reveals how alliances between different ethnic groups and political factions increasingly broke down, particularly after the 2014 elections. This observation raises several provocations. First, it demands further consideration of how successive Afghan governments envisioned a truly 'national' government that represented and accounted for Afghanistan's diversity. Second, it raises the point that the Afghan governments of the early twentieth century *were* successful in uniting a variety of political factions, some of which had very different ideologies and had fought each other in earlier decades.

Clearly, a moment existed, at least briefly, in which a diverse range of Afghan elites, many of whom had previously competed, were willing to work collectively to rebuild the Afghan nation-state. That such alliances were possible raises important questions about the potency and potential meanings of Afghan nationalism, as well as the mechanisms sought by Afghan elites to create a united Afghan nation. What activities were designed to create a sense of 'Afghanness?' Particularly in relation to Malkasian's arguments about the Taliban, how did the Afghan government or other Afghan leaders frame Afghan identity and belonging? What alternatives to 'Islam and resistance to occupation' did they present? And how did Afghan citizens respond? Interrogating the question of Afghan nationalism and nation-building would provide an additional means of gauging the Afghan government's successes and failures but in a way that recognizes how many Afghans actively engaged with state-led endeavors, even while others resisted them.<sup>6</sup>

In many ways, the histories told by Whitlock and Malkasian are those that will be most familiar – and, ironically, comfortable – to readers. For Western audiences who have taken part in debates about the ongoing war and experienced declining interest in Afghanistan, the story of American failings does not come as a particular surprise. These books offer an easy way to understand the war in Afghanistan: through the lens of American hubris. However, telling the history of the war in Afghanistan largely from the perspective of American elites is fundamentally limited. Malkasian's book shows as much in his research into the Taliban: we cannot understand their return to power in August 2021 without scrutinizing their activities over the past twenty years. But the Taliban are only one group of Afghans, albeit one that has seized power. Both books still fall short in telling a history that will be far less comfortable or familiar to Western audiences: a history of Afghanistan and Afghans in the twenty-first century that does not rely on dismissive summaries or static images of Afghans as tribal, parochial, and resistant to change. A history of the war in Afghanistan that takes state-building and broader Afghan political engagement seriously is still needed.

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<sup>6</sup> For scholarship seeking to disrupt narratives ignoring Afghan agency in the twenty-first century, see, for example, Nile Green, ed., *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes* (London: Hurst & Co., 2015); Robert D. Crews and Shahzad Bashir, eds., *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Wazhmah Osman, *Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You By Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

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 Review by Jeffrey H. Michaels, Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals
 

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The two-decade war in Afghanistan that began with a lightning American victory and ended with a Taliban victory can be understood on many levels. First and foremost, it was a human tragedy. It can also be understood as a kind of miracle. A ragged and relatively ill-equipped group of religious fundamentalists survived the worst the world's most advanced military superpower, supported by NATO and other Western powers, were able, or at least willing, to muster against it, and then go on to defeat the Western-supported Afghan security forces in battle and oust the Afghan government. How could this be? Why did America's longest war end so badly? Was America defeated by the Taliban, or was America's loss self-inflicted? When reading Craig Whitlock's and Carter Malkasian's accounts of the war, three images came to my mind that offer insights to these questions and help assess the merits and shortcomings of both books.

The first image is Hannah Arendt's critique of the Vietnam war that was captured in her 1971 *New York Review of Books* article: "Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers."<sup>48</sup> In Afghanistan, US officials' distortion of the truth both to the public and among themselves was a constant feature of the 'American war' that Whitlock brutally captures with a mountain of documentary evidence. As Whitlock describes: "an unspoken conspiracy to mask the truth took hold. Omissions inexorably led to deceptions and eventually outright absurdities" (Whitlock, xii). Unlike Arendt, who utilized evidence of official deception during the Vietnam war to offer an original and provocative thesis about the war, Whitlock provides far more evidence but offers much less analysis. Whilst capturing what effectively constituted a culture of deception, with numerous examples provided of officials showcasing progress and downplaying or hiding facts that contradicted an optimistic narrative, there is no effort to move beyond a collection of individual cases to provide a broader critique of American policy and way of war.

As a reporter, Whitlock is mainly interested in the deceptive practices utilized by officials to mislead the public, placing less emphasis on assessing the impact of the lies told within the system. Interestingly, Arendt does make a brief appearance in Malkasian's book, with an anecdote about the US Ambassador to Afghanistan, Michael McKinley, presenting his views on why the Taliban kept fighting. McKinley reportedly stated: "Maybe I have read too much Hannah Arendt but I do not think this is about money or jobs. The Taliban are fighting for something larger" (Malkasian, 5). Whether Ambassador McKinley's corpus of reading on Arendt included her Vietnam critique is unknown, but one gets the sense reading Whitlock's account that even if the ambassador was aware of it, a reference to it could not be politely uttered in the company of other officials. Accusing other officials of being dishonest, much less claiming that deception is rampant, can scarcely be considered a wise career move.

To the extent that Whitlock uncovers widespread deception, this is based on candid assessments of officials being interviewed by other officials with the understanding that their words would not be made public. In these interviews, officials conveyed their critical observations which were distinctly at odds with the official narrative. Although Whitlock's account can hardly be claimed as an original perspective on the 'American war' given that exposure of falsehood had been a regular feature of reporting on the war for many years,<sup>49</sup> it is nevertheless a more complete and up-to-date account than exists elsewhere. Arguably its key limitation is the lack of an overarching evaluation of what impact deception and self-deception had on the war's outcome. That the system was dysfunctional, and that self-deception made matters worse, is made plainly evident. But could the war have been won despite this? Was defeat inevitable because of it?

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<sup>48</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers", *New York Review of Books* 17/8 (18 November 1971): 30-39.

<sup>49</sup> A key work from nearly a decade earlier that addressed the wide gap between official optimism and the reality on the ground is: Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

It is here that a second image comes to mind, namely the critique of Vietnam that appears in Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts's *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*. Gelb and Betts' claim that despite the obvious failure of the Vietnam war the "system worked," can also be applied to Afghanistan, albeit in a slightly amended way.<sup>50</sup> In both Whitlock's and Malkasian's accounts of Afghanistan, the war is portrayed as a failure, with the reasons for the failure examined. Naturally, this is a reasonable claim, all the more so given the events that would occur shortly after the publication of both books. Unfortunately, the war viewed as a failure is presented as a given, with far too little consideration of the possibility that a key reason the war lasted as long as it did, and was fought in the way it was, had to do with a prevailing belief, at least among US officials, that supporting a continuation of the war was what the system they worked for demanded. For individual bureaucrats, pointing out mistakes or to suggest that US policies were making matters worse rather than better was internalized as a career dead-end; it was therefore better to go along and keep critical views to oneself. For politicians, the everyday failures that were an integral feature of a policy of continuing a failed war were considered lesser failures than *admitting* to a failed war, biting the bullet, and performing corrective surgery. Far easier to encourage a can-do attitude, publish positive statistics, let others risk their lives, and hope the curtain did not come crashing down anytime soon. Revealingly, the security threat to the United States posed by a return to power of the Taliban was viewed by most US political leaders as inconsequential relative to the perceived domestic political fallout. It is this fear that Whitlock captures at numerous points. For example, then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's reluctance to negotiate with the Taliban was linked to fears it would damage her presidential ambitions (Whitlock, 267).

After the high point of the US 'surge' of forces had passed by 2011 and al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden had been killed, American politicians of all stripes wanting to be seen as tough could scarcely risk advocating a complete withdrawal, but notably they were reluctant to argue for any further escalation of the war. What emerged was a decade of policy drift, bureaucratic inertia, a slow drawdown, with a looming defeat being indefinitely postponed. There was little expectation of any sort of meaningful policy success. The long-term outlook was almost always one of a Taliban victory rather than the Afghan government prevailing. The only question was what form the Taliban victory would take and how soon it would occur. Either the Taliban would be incorporated into the Afghan government through a power-sharing arrangement and gradually gain more power through subversion, or it would win an outright military victory. As the power-sharing option was opposed by the Kabul authorities, and held limited appeal in Washington, this meant having to prevent a Taliban victory through the continued application of Western military power and sustaining the Afghan security forces. However, this still left the problem of a slow strangulation. The Taliban might only be increasing their territorial control at a snail's pace but the trend was clearly one of Taliban gains and government losses. The Afghan military could slow the Taliban down but lost territory was effectively lost for good. Yet so long as defeat was not imminent, American policymakers could bide their time as the ultimate crisis remained a distant prospect and hope for the best, which effectively meant aiming for a military stalemate.

A belief arose during this period, though in retrospect it might be classed as a delusion, that because the Taliban could not achieve any major victories, such as capturing and holding major population centers, its willingness to continue fighting would gradually decline. This, in turn, would lead to a negotiated settlement of some sort. For American officials, there was no notion this would be anything other than an 'American peace.' That the US was negotiating on behalf of the Afghan government, and that US leaders did not want to risk Kabul negotiating on its own with the Taliban, does not seem to have appeared as out of the ordinary or set off any obvious alarm bells. Even if it were successful in reaching a peace deal with the Taliban, the US was always going to have a hard time trying to sell any deal to the Afghan government. The experience of Henry Kissinger's 'secret negotiations' with the North Vietnamese and the difficulties he encountered with America's allies in Saigon regarding the terms of the peace agreement he negotiated privately with Hanoi could have offered a useful analogy about the perils of negotiating on behalf of an ally but failing to

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<sup>50</sup> Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1979).



coordinate the negotiating terms with them in advance.<sup>51</sup> Both Whitlock and Malkasian only devote small portions of their respective books to the peace negotiations, and in fairness, this accurately captures the relative emphasis Washington placed on seeking a settlement as opposed to continuing the fighting.

Both authors could probably have devoted more attention to the war ‘taking on a life of its own’ dynamic, as this is a fundamental reason the war lasted for two decades. Arguably the major failure of Afghanistan was not a military one, though there were plenty of those, but rather that a peace settlement was not reached years earlier. In Washington, negotiations received periodic support but there was a surreal quality to the way they were approached. With tens of billions of dollars and thousands of troops committed on an annual basis to supporting the Afghan government, which was backed by a large political and bureaucratic constituency committed to a continuation of the war, the American negotiators possessed limited leverage. Not only were they negotiating on behalf of a reluctant US government, but they were ostensibly also negotiating on behalf of an Afghan government that would need to be coerced into accepting peace conditions that would reduce its authority, if not place Afghan officials in mortal danger. Thus, the very format of the negotiations meant that any peace deal would be an ‘American-imposed peace’ even though it was an Afghan peace, with the international coalition in support, that was needed.

This relates to a third image that came to my mind reading these books, namely “The Jewel in the Crown,” the 1980s British television drama about the final days of British rule in India. Watching it I was struck by the fact that although the show took place in India, there were hardly any Indian characters. This was very much a show about British characters who happened to be living in India, whereas, at best, some Indians could occasionally be spotted in the background scenery. Similarly, both of these books are very much written in the style of ‘Afghanistan on the Potomac’ narratives. The war physically took place in Afghanistan, and Afghans should be the key actors, with non-Afghans playing the part of the supporting cast, but it is always the ‘American war’ that is being lost. The title of Malkasian’s book, *The American War in Afghanistan* captures this perfectly. This is not about ‘The War in Afghanistan’, ‘The International War in Afghanistan’ or ‘Why Our Afghans Lost’. It is primarily about the ‘American War’ in that country, perceived mainly through an American lens. To his credit, Malkasian engages a fair amount with Taliban perspectives, and frames his overall argument in terms of the Taliban’s willpower and attractiveness to other Afghans compared with the alternative offered by the Afghan government supported by its international allies. Unfortunately, the argument reads as though it has been grafted on to the book rather than constituting its central thesis around which the rest of the narrative is built. By contrast, Whitlock makes no pretensions about understanding the Afghan side of the story, nor that of US allies. The declassified papers he examines are American papers about what American officials thought about Afghanistan, or, in most cases, what American officials thought about what other American officials were doing in Afghanistan. What comes across is an American critique of an American way of waging the war. Whilst there is nothing wrong with this in principle—after all, the American story is central to an understanding of the war and should be told—some reflections by the authors about what is included and excluded in such a narrative, and acknowledgement of the existence of alternative perspectives, would have been useful.

Despite their limitations, the two books still provide useful insider perspectives on the ‘American war.’ Whitlock focuses squarely on the utter dysfunction of the war. In many places the reader is playing the psychiatrist sitting beside a military officer or high-ranking official who is laying on a couch letting loose a torrent of pent-up anger and frustration and being honest about prior dishonesty. Whitlock presents an abundant amount of evidence of self-censorship and self-deception. Ultimately, this phenomenon must be understood as existing in a permissive culture that was permissive for a reason. Regrettably, Whitlock’s book does not contain a broader cultural critique, thus keeping his analysis limited to the individual rather than the system level. His ‘secret history’ bares only a passing resemblance to the leaked Pentagon Papers from the

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<sup>51</sup> Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

Vietnam period, and to the extent any original criticisms and insights about the Afghan war can be found, it is a real struggle to find them. Nonetheless, as a compilation of insider critiques of the war, Whitlock's book is probably the best work published to date.

Malkasian's account is much more of a traditional military history narrative that is rich in detail, including a number of maps showing the disposition of forces in different battles. The book's key shortcoming is the disconnect between the effort to describe the war and the attempt to explain it. Malkasian argues that the US had the right system, more or less, but that the war happened to be the wrong one. In his opening chapter entitled "Thinking about America's War in Afghanistan," Malkasian states that "the Taliban's tie to what it meant to be Afghan was necessary to America's defeat in Afghanistan ... the possibility that Islam and resistance to occupation played a role in America's Afghan war has gone oddly unnoticed, almost shunned" (Malkasian, 6). This explanation of why the US failed may very well be merited in principle but Malkasian does not meaningfully substantiate it and offers only a short discussion in the final chapter to distinguish his preferred explanation from various other ones (453-461). While focusing on some individual factors and decisions that might have resulted in a more favorable outcome, such as the US not having employed air strikes "sparingly" in 2014-2015 (Malkasian, 457), Malkasian does not offer a significant discussion about what success would have looked like. At what point would the cost-benefit analysis have worked in the American favor, or to put it another way, after which point was the US merely digging a deeper hole for itself?

It may be there is no good answer to this question. Perhaps Afghanistan was destined to be a tragedy, the only difference being one of degree. And here we come to the ultimate issue at the heart of these books: why did the Taliban win, or to be more accurate as both books were written prior to the Taliban's ultimate victory in August 2021, why were the Taliban still winning after nearly twenty years? This type of war evaluation has many precedents. After the American Civil War, a standard explanation of why the South lost was that they simply did not possess the resources to prevail. Had the Taliban been decisively defeated years earlier, they could most certainly have made a decent claim to have been overwhelmed by superior force. Indeed, the answer to why the Taliban lost would have been considered so obvious it probably would have received no serious scholarly attention. Explaining why the US, the Afghan government, and the international community more generally, lost, is a more complicated task for the historian and political scientist. Awkwardly, despite the sophisticated debate about what theories and methods were most appropriate to evaluate other wars, such as the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, or the American and South Vietnamese defeat in Vietnam, Malkasian doesn't draw on this literature as the basis for constructing a framework to evaluate the war in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> For instance, despite its military inferiority relative to the Afghan government, did the Taliban win due to superior strategy, or was poor strategy and a lack of Afghan government willpower the primary reason the collapse occurred when it did? Notwithstanding Malkasian's attempt to make a case for why the Taliban prevailed, which other reviewers of his book have also found unconvincing<sup>53</sup>, a history of the war that addresses in a more rigorous and systematic way the basic problem of why the Taliban won and everyone else lost is one that still needs to be written.

One question neither book sheds much light on is why the US eventually gave up on Afghanistan in the way it did. Whilst it is certainly possible to trace Washington's declining interest in Afghanistan, with other crises

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<sup>52</sup> Several notable examples include: David H. Donald, *Why the North won the Civil War* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); Richard E. Beringer, *Why the South lost the Civil War* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986); Brian Holden Reid, 'The influence of the Vietnam syndrome on the writing of civil war history', *The RUSI Journal* 147:1 (2002): 44-52; Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2009); Marc Jason Gilbert, 'Introduction' in Marc Jason Gilbert, ed., *Why the North won the Vietnam War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> For instance, see reviews by Paul D. Miller and Dipali Mukhopadhyay in H-Diplo Roundtable XXIII-44, on Carter Malkasian's *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, ed. Diane Labrosse, 27 June 2022; <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT23-44>.

and emerging geopolitical challenges viewed in more pressing terms, US leaders, had they wanted to make the effort, could have taken any number of steps—increased air support to the Afghan forces, sending US ground troops, etc.—to ensure that the Taliban would be unable to win the rapid victory they did in the summer 2021. It is entirely plausible that total defeat could have been put off until 2022 or sometime thereafter. In the end, however, as was the case with Vietnam in 1975, the conflict seems to have reached the stage where any further effort to postpone an inevitable defeat was viewed as no longer worth the bother. Perhaps it was simply the case that America had finally moved on—it would now be for others to clean up the mess.