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Carter Malkasian. *The American War in Afghanistan: A History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.
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INTRODUCTION BY AARON O'CONNELL, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-AUSTIN

When the Taliban entered Kabul in August 2021 and the Afghan government collapsed, many Americans asked the same questions: how did this happen? Where were the Afghan army and police that the US had been funding and training since 2002? Why didn't the Afghans fight more effectively against opponents with fewer troops, worse equipment, and far less ammunition? Why in the end, couldn't the Americans and their allies succeed in Afghanistan?

Carter Malkasian's latest monograph, his fifth, published just one month before Kabul fell, addresses all of these questions before they were asked.¹ His answer: the Taliban won the war because it had cultural advantages – not material ones – over the Americans and their Afghan partners, and those cultural factors, more than anything else, help explain the course of the war and the Taliban's eventual victory. Despite Afghanistan's many ethnic and tribal factions (divisions that Malkasian understands well), the Taliban's ability to frame the conflict as a just war for Islam and against foreign occupiers gave its fighters a morale-building glue in battle, a status boost for new recruits, and an effective explanation for civilian deaths – even those caused by its own fighters. The Afghan Army and National Police, hobbled by their dependence on foreigners, could never muster a similar degree of cohesion or fighting élan. To use a term from military strategy, the Taliban's warfighting narratives became 'force multipliers' across numerous domains, giving its foot soldiers asymmetrical advantages that neither the Americans nor the Afghan government could effectively counter.

Malkasian is clear that cultural factors were not the only reasons the Taliban won; he also faults the US government for refusing to negotiate early in the war, moving too slowly to train new security forces, and mistakenly viewing the Taliban and al-Qaeda as inseparable. But in the end, the Taliban's ideological advantages were the most important factor – a necessary, but not alone sufficient, explanation for why the war ended as it did.

The roundtable's four reviewers – two historians and two political scientists, all with experience in both academia and government – are divided in their assessments of this argument and others in the book. The historians, Lisa Munday and Conrad Crane, find Malkasian's cultural claims persuasive; the political scientists, Paul Miller and Dipali Mukhopadhyay, do not. All praise Malkasian's attention to detail and use of Pashto sources – a language Malkasian speaks fluently after spending almost four years in the country. Munday offers the clearest overview to the book's major arguments and situates them in the existing scholarly literature, while rightly pointing out the source limitations of writing contemporary history. Crane's review is the most effusive; he calls the work both "masterful" and "magisterial," before noting that more attention to the disunity among NATO partners would have further strengthened Malkasian's central point concerning the combatants' asymmetries of will.

The sharpest critique comes from Miller, an experienced scholar-practitioner who served in the CIA, the National Security Council (NSC) Staff, and in Afghanistan as an Army intelligence officer before becoming a Professor of Practice at Georgetown University. Malkasian's culture argument essentializes Afghan identity, he claims, and does little to explain the motivations of anyone other than Pashtun men in the southern provinces. Miller also takes issue with Malkasian's efforts to differentiate the Taliban from al-Qaeda. More so than Malkasian, he sees the two groups as bound together – perhaps inextricably – through inter-marriage, financial ties, and shared history. Miller also faults the book for an unfairly negative portrait of President George W. Bush (whom Miller served as an NSC director during the war), and for an unduly positive depiction of the Taliban. Malkasian's book, he concludes, "not only records the Taliban perspective: it essentially adopts it."

Like Miller, Mukhopadhyay criticizes Malkasian's focus on Afghan identity for presuming "a monolithic self-fashioning on the part of millions of people"—a charge that could conceivably be leveled against almost all characterizations of national

¹ Malkasian's previous monographs are *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); *A History of Modern Wars of Attrition* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), and *The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2001).

identities. Mukhopadhyay also doubts that the United States truly wanted a sovereign or democratic state in Afghanistan. She believes hunting al-Qaeda and exacting revenge for the attacks of 9/11 were always the real goals of the war, and those priorities led to constant American interference in Afghan affairs. This American “meddling,” rather than identity politics, better explains why the war turned out as it did. Nor does Mukhopadhyay think the millions of dollars and thousands of hours spent countering corruption and encouraging good governance were ever earnest efforts. She argues that Malkasian’s description of them as genuine goals and genuinely well-meant “risks constructing a kind of neo-imperialist portrait of Afghanistan.” Like Miller, Mukhopadhyay also questions Malkasian’s objectivity. His perspective on the war, she surmises, may have been affected by “having staked a great deal of his own career in an effort that, by his own telling, failed profoundly.”

The fact that the two reviewers least convinced by Malkasian’s national identity claims are both political scientists may point to a methodological issue that all scholars should ponder regardless of disciplinary affiliation: When are arguments about national identity or the causal forces of culture permissible or convincing and what evidence makes them so? Both Miller and Mukhopadhyay are right that any generalization risks simplification, and I share Mukhopadhyay’s desire for reliable data. But what kinds of data would be free from the “essentializing gaze” that Mukhopadhyay flags here? Historians typically look first to the sources used to support such claims, and here, it seems that Malkasian is on fairly solid ground. His evidence for his identity argument comes primarily from Afghan sources, some translated from Dari, but most in Pashto, including poetry, magazines, newspapers, interviews, and biographies of key Taliban leaders that most English-language historians have not yet examined. Anthropologists and other social scientists would presumably put more stock in field work than archives, and Malkasian has done none of that in a strict scholarly sense. But he did spend a combined total of 47 months in the country, traveled to fifteen provinces, and held discussions – again, in Pashto – with Afghan governors, mullahs, tribal leaders, cabinet officials, Afghan presidents, and founding members of the Taliban, in both the cities and in the rural areas where more than seventy percent of Afghans live. If these experiences don’t give him insight into the power of the Taliban’s warfighting narratives, one wonders what experiences would.

A final issue worth pondering is the suggestion that Malkasian’s participation in the war has somehow skewed his objectivity. As with all works of history, readers will have to make this judgement for themselves, but it is hard to see how Malkasian’s years of direct contact with Afghan and American decision makers would somehow be a weakness. He is not a career state department official nor a military officer – two communities that typically place a high value on hewing to the party line. He has also seen the war from numerous angles, after spending two years with a district support team in rural Garmser, five months with a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kunar, and another seventeen months traveling the country as a civilian advisor to the war’s commander, Marine General Joseph Dunford. When Dunford became the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the principal military advisor to the President of the United States, Malkasian spent another four years as his senior civilian strategist, often making additional, multi-month trips back to Afghanistan. As a result of these experiences, when local Afghans in Garmser district complained about reconstruction issues during the 2010 surge, they complained to Malkasian. When General Dunford wanted to understand Taliban statements or actions, he asked Malkasian. When the Pentagon’s senior generals and civilians debated Afghanistan policy, Malkasian was in the room where it happened. When Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad led negotiations with the Taliban’s most senior representatives, Malkasian was there, too. These experiences obviously had some effect on his perspective – a point he admits in his introduction – but they also ground his arguments in both research and direct observation, giving him more than enough evidence to make claims about how cultural factors shaped the Afghanistan War.

Participants:

Carter Malkasian is the Chair of the Defense Analysis Department at the Naval Postgraduate School and the author of *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*.

Aaron O’Connell is Associate Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin and Director of Research at the Clements Center for National Security. A Marine Colonel, he served in Afghanistan as a Strategic Advisor to the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from 2010-2011, and as a Special Advisor to the Chairman

of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2012-2014. He was later appointed as Director of Defense Policy and Strategy on President Obama's National Security Council staff. He is the author of *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps* (Harvard University Press: 2012) and the editor of *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (Chicago University Press, 2017). He is currently working on a history of the Global War on Terror, which will be published by Simon and Schuster in 2024.

Conrad Crane is Chief of Analysis and Research for the United States Army Heritage and Education Center at the Army War College. He was the lead author for the groundbreaking Army-USMC counterinsurgency manual which was released in December 2006. For that effort he was named one of NEWSWEEK's people to watch in 2007. He visited Iraq in November 2007 at General David Petraeus's request to evaluate the new doctrine in action. In November 2008, he was named the international Archivist of the Year by the Scone Foundation. He published two 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 American strategic bombing 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.

Paul D. Miller is a Professor of the Practice of International Affairs at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He serves as co-chair of the Global Politics and Security concentration in the MSFS program. He is also a non-resident Senior Fellow with the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. Dr. Miller served as Director for Afghanistan and Pakistan on the National Security Council staff; worked as an intelligence analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency; and served as a military intelligence officer in the U.S. Army. His most recent book is *Just War and Ordered Liberty* from Cambridge University Press (2021).

Dipali Mukhopadhyay is an associate professor in the global policy area at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. She is serving as senior expert on Afghanistan for the US Institute of Peace and is a non-resident scholar at Columbia University's Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies. She is the author of *Good Rebel Governance: Revolutionary Politics and Western Intervention in Syria* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) with Kimberly Howe, and *Warlords, Strongman Governors and State Building in Afghanistan* (Cambridge University Press, 2014). She is vice president of the American Institute of Afghan Studies.

Lisa M. Munday, who earned her doctorate at Kansas State University, is an American and military historian who has worked both in academia at Norwich University and the University of St. Thomas, Houston and government history at the U.S. Army Center of Military History and NASA Johnson Space Center. She is the author of a forthcoming volume from McFarland, *Fighting the Forever War: The U.S. Service Member Experience in Afghanistan, 2001-2014; American Militarism and Anti-Militarism in Popular Media, 1945-1970* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, Inc., 2012); and co-author of *The United States Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom, March 2002-April 2005* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2013).

REVIEW BY CONRAD CRANE, UNITED STATES ARMY HERITAGE AND EDUCATION CENTER

The 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 2009-2011.² 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 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

² Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

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.”³ 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.⁴ 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 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.⁵ The author cites many American leaders, military and civilian, who recognized

³ 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.

⁴ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 126, 144-154.

⁵ 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, D.C.: Georgetown Press, 2017). See also Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War: US Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1978).

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 remind 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 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

⁶ Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1978).

⁷ 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).

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.

REVIEW BY PAUL D. MILLER, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Carter Malkasian has done us a service by weaving together twenty years of war and diplomacy in Afghanistan into one cohesive narrative. His access to Taliban sources, translation of primary source material, and military reportage have set a high bar for historians of the war in Afghanistan. His grasp of U.S. strategic decision-making is not as well-grounded and suffers by comparison. Most importantly, his analysis of the war as a whole—his theory of the case, his explanation for why the United States lost and the Taliban won—is flawed, undermining the book’s aspiration to be the defining first draft of the history of the American war in Afghanistan

The greatest strength of the book is Malkasian’s ability to craft a comprehensible narrative out of a sprawling conflict that crossed four presidential administrations and saw a dozen or more commanding generals lead the fight. He has the benefit of seeing the whole story, completing what was still unfinished in previous scholars’ efforts to write the history of the war.⁸ No single participant had the kind of perspective Malkasian does, and not just because each participant was in the moment and did not know how it would end. American policymakers are notoriously future-oriented to a fault and often do not know the history of the problem they are charged with solving. Malkasian’s familiarity with that history enables him, for example, to tell the story about the United States’ operations in the northeastern provinces of Kunar and Nuristan from 2006 to 2009 in a way that is relatively easy to follow and leads the reader naturally to Malkasian’s conclusion that the campaign in those provinces was ill-advised and needless.

As with any large work of history, the book contains a few errors. For example, it repeats the debunked myth that a proverbial lone survivor escaped the retreat to the Khyber Pass in 1842, a myth that Louis Dupree put to rest forty years ago (15).⁹ Malkasian presents the Iranian doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, taking it to be an Iranian foreign policy of defending Shia abroad rather than being the doctrinal foundation for Iran’s theocracy at home (49), and he wrongly dates the formation of the International Security Assistance Force to 2005, when NATO assumed command (131). It was formed by UN authorization in December 2001. Other errors are likely to surface with time.

Besides its breadth, one of the book’s touted selling points is Malkasian’s deep and often surprising familiarity with and access to Pashtun and Taliban sources. He quotes Taliban poetry, histories, and biographies, many presumably from his own translations (which I hope he makes publicly available for the sake of the scholarly community). Given how few historians share Malkasian’s fluency in Pashtu, it is unlikely we will see a historian of the conflict with better access to the Taliban’s perspective for a generation. For that reason alone, some of Malkasian’s volume is likely to be cited as a veritable primary source.

Unfortunately, Malkasian’s use of Taliban sources leads to issues of objectivity. The book not only records the Taliban perspective: it essentially adopts it. “The Taliban exemplified something that inspired, something that made them powerful in battle, something closely tied to what it meant to be Afghan,” Malkasian argues, “In simple terms, they fought for Islam and resistance to occupation, values enshrined in Afghan identity,” which is what the Taliban claim about themselves. He judges that their truer embodiment of Afghan identity compared to Afghan government forces gave them superior morale and better staying power and was a necessary ingredient to their victory (5).

Throughout the book, Malkasian presents the Taliban in their best light. “Islam blossomed under the Taliban,” he writes of the Taliban government during the 1990s, “adherence to its fundamental tenets had never before been so strong”—which is an odd way to characterize religious observance where a Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice

⁸ Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Danile Bolder, *Why We Lost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014); Steve Coll, *Directorate S* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

⁹ Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002) 389-395.

would harass, beat, arrest, or execute nonconformists (45). Malkasian calls Taliban government “effective” and a counterexample “for those who claim that Afghanistan is ungovernable.” He calls the Taliban’s form of Islam “traditional” despite the fact that their Deobandi practice was widely viewed as a foreign import from Pakistani madrassas when it first arrived in the 1990s, compared to Afghans’ indigenous practice of Hanafi Islam.¹⁰ He spends several pages citing poems of support for the Taliban allegedly written by Pashtun women, admitting they may just be “fabrications of male Taliban propaganda” but concludes nonetheless without evidence that they “appealed to more than a few Afghan women.” Incredibly, he writes admiringly of the Taliban’s form of order, suggesting there is “a beauty in how that order grew out of Islam and its message of oneness and justice.” The victims of public beheadings likely did not see the beauty in it (50, 51, 167, 175).

Malkasian claims that in 2009, “56 percent of Afghans admitted sympathy for the Taliban,” citing a poll by the Asia Foundation (160). The actual wording of the poll is different. It asked about sympathy “with the motivations of armed opposition groups,” and the use of violence by “anti-government groups.” Considering that 60 percent of Uzbeks and 51 percent of Tajiks expressed some degree of sympathy, it is almost certain that they interpreted the question to refer to their armed militias—that is, to warlords’ illegal private armies, who fought *against* the Taliban—not to the Taliban. But assume for a moment that Malkasian is right and they are indeed referring to the Taliban. By 2019, on the eve of Taliban victory, the same poll showed the number had plummeted to 13 percent, and just 4 percent who expressed “a lot” of sympathy. How could the Taliban’s victory be chalked up to popular support when they won at the nadir of their popularity?¹¹

The idea of Afghan support for the Taliban underscores the book’s thesis that the Taliban won because they embodied the true spirit of Afghan identity, that “the Taliban stood for what it meant to be Afghan” (454). It is likely many Pashtun men in southern provinces agree with Malkasian and the Taliban. But it strains credulity to assume that all Afghans view Afghan identity that way. Malkasian’s thesis depends on essentializing Afghan identity; adopting the Taliban’s perspective on it; and ascribing causal agency to it. But Afghan identity—like American identity—is contested, and that contest was precisely what was at issue in the Afghan war, which robs the concept of any explanatory power. There is good evidence that the Taliban’s view was the minority view compared to the 85 percent of Afghans who told pollsters they had no sympathy at all for armed opposition groups; to the hundreds of thousands of Afghans who served in the army and police fighting against the Taliban; to the 66,000 who died in combat against them; to tens of millions of Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbeks, who will be excluded under Taliban governance; and to 20 million Afghan women and Shia whom the Taliban treat as enemies. They, too, embody something of the Afghan spirit.

Malkasian’s access to Taliban sources is not matched by a similar access to American sources, at least not at senior levels to understand policymakers’ choices. He leans heavily on secondary sources, military reports, memoirs, and interviews conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. As such, his understanding of American policymakers’ thought-process—already distorted, as discussed—is insufficient and betrays a bias. He repeats tired tropes—the Bush administration fell prey to hubris—without much new material to either bolster the case or make the accusation more insightful. One does not have to be a defender of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to find Malkasian’s quip—“There is no greater villain in America’s Afghan War than Donald Rumsfeld”—a little simplistic (81). At points, the book treats the war as a morality play in which the arrogant and bumbling Americans get their just comeuppance. One expects more from a historian of this caliber.

Malkasian’s main argument against the Bush administration is based upon a misreading of the evidence. He argues that “The [Bush] administration and the American people misunderstood the Taliban movement as inseparable from al-Qa’eda.” But Malkasian himself cites Taliban sources admitting that al-Qaida had become part of Afghan culture and details

¹⁰ Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 7; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil, and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 88.

¹¹ The Asia Foundation, “Survey of the Afghan People,” 2009, 65, and compare the 2019 report, 70.

how Taliban leader Mullah Omar's stubbornness had made war inevitable. Malkasian blames the Bush administration for not "giving compassion a little more time" to aid in the negotiations with the Taliban or bring them into a political settlement. "With more time and diplomatic effort, Taliban who were against war might have found a way to get Mullah Omar to give up bin Laden" (59, 70, 58).

This is naïve. According to Malkasian's own narrative, the Taliban chose to be inseparable from al-Qaida. It was not a misunderstanding to treat them that way—a fact that Malkasian himself acknowledges at the other end of the war, when discussing the final US-Taliban peace talks. In referenced to the 2018-2019 negotiations, Malkasian recounts, "I was with Khalilzad's delegation at the time and heard these things firsthand. One university-educated member of the political commission lectured me that the Taliban were right not to turn over bin Laden in 2001." The Taliban official asked a series of rhetorical questions, which to Malkasian "hinted at just how close the Taliban and its leadership were to al-Qa'eda," (437). The two groups have been bound together by intermarriage, shared history and ideology, and financial ties. Even to this day, the Taliban have never denounced al-Qaida, acknowledged its responsibility for 9/11, or broken ties with the group.

Malkasian makes much of a few incidents in which a Taliban leader here or there put out peace feelers in 2001 but he overlooks the bigger picture: there was no meaningful opportunity to bring the Taliban into a political settlement in 2001-2002. The US did accept senior Taliban surrenders, including Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Muttawakil in early 2002. Muttawakil, along with several other former senior Taliban leaders, later ran for a seat in the new Afghan parliament. Far from bringing the Taliban into the fold, he was disowned by the Taliban for his moderation. Another former Taliban deputy minister was twice appointed to a seat in the Afghan Senate before the Taliban assassinated him in 2012. With American support, Afghan President Hamid Karzai inaugurated a reconciliation program for former Taliban fighters early in his administration, and the Afghan parliament passed a blanket amnesty in early 2006 for anyone willing to lay down arms and forswear violence. The Taliban rejected every one of these overtures, not one of which prevented the insurgency. They are not discussed in the book. The Taliban were demonstrably committed to fighting the United States and rejecting peace talks.

Similarly, Malkasian claims that the insurgency started in 2005-2006 as a response to the United States' heavy-handed tactics, but also records that Mullah Omar had directed his followers to organize resistance as early as February 2003—before there was a long record of US mistakes and civilian casualties. He also says that most Taliban foot soldiers were recruited from refugee camps in Pakistan, not from the Afghan farmers most directly affected by American military operations, calling into doubt how important US operations were in provoking the insurgency. It seems more likely that the insurgency was a function of Taliban propaganda, stemming from their jihadist ideology, enabled by state failure and underinvestment in Afghan government capacity, more than a popular uprising against American heavy handedness. The Bush administration's principle mistake—neglecting reconstruction, stabilization, and peace keeping—gets comparatively little mention in Malkasian's narrative.

Compared to his critique of the Bush team, Malkasian is elliptical when it comes to the Obama administration. He quotes Obama's critique that, "the military was overly committed to winning the war" (236), which is an odd critique for a commander-in-chief to have of his own military. Malkasian reviews Obama's surge decision yet does not comment on the strategic incoherence of sending more troops than necessary for a counterterrorism operation yet too few troops for a counterinsurgency operation. Malkasian (rightly) defends Obama against the critique that he should have withdrawn completely in 2009, but his logic is that Obama was constrained by political reality from doing so. By the same logic—the constraints of political reality—the Bush administration should receive more credit for its decisions in 2001-2.

Most questionable is the book's treatment of Obama's decision to adopt a withdrawal timetable and announce it in advance. This, in my view, was one of the most consequential and damaging decisions of the war. While Malkasian notes that this encouraged the Taliban, he is not overly critical of the move: "altogether the evidence is persuasive that the Taliban expected the United States to leave but far too scant to prove they would have caved had there been no timeline" (238). Yet the book details examples of how the surge halted the Taliban's military momentum and acknowledges its tactical success.

Malkasian judges that “The resolve of the Taliban fighter was difficult to overcome” (304). It is easy to envision the counterfactual: that their resolve would have been easier to overcome without the public withdrawal timetable.

In interviews with senior Obama officials for my own research, I have found almost no defenders of the timetable because the logic is so clear: it undermined military progress, stalled negotiations, injected uncertainty into reconstruction planning, and incentivized hedging behavior among the United States’ Afghan allies. Malkasian underscores the same line of thought when critiquing Trump’s withdrawals because of how it undermined his negotiation efforts. Throughout the book, Bush and Trump bear the brunt of Malkasian’s criticism compared to his relatively soft treatment of Obama, who oversaw the war for longer than the other two. Obama’s timeline and withdrawals are the biggest reason why the progress made during the timeframe when the US made the most intensive effort proved fleeting. Instead, Malkasian concludes that because the surge’s successes proved temporary, Obama never should have surged at all (437, 439, 457).

Oddly, Malkasian judges that the 2020 US-Taliban deal was “Afghanistan’s best opportunity for peace since 2001 and America’s best opportunity to get out,” despite also recognizing that it was not a “well-structured” deal and that Trump’s “impatience stampeded Khalilzad into giving a lot while the Taliban promised little and gave even less” (445, 446). It is unclear how these failings would make the deal an opportunity for any kind of peace or any kind of responsible exit. Malkasian argues that the United States should have given negotiations just a little more time to improve the deal. But more time would not have changed the strategic logic: the US was negotiating from a position of weakness and the Taliban faced no pressing need to concede anything meaningful because Trump was hellbent on withdrawing and the Taliban knew it. Malkasian thinks the peace deal ultimately failed. In fact the deal did not fail: it was implemented as designed, and it was designed to hand the country over to the Taliban. The Taliban’s strategic advantage was a feature, not a bug, of the 2020 deal.

The final pages of the book offer a rumination on why each of the four presidents who oversaw the war did not withdraw. The framing is illustrative: it assumes that withdrawal was the right course all along. “The moral question for Afghanistan boils down to whether intervention is just, how our presence harms a people, how innocents pay for our security,” Malkasian concludes, adding, “the United States exposed Afghans to prolonged harm in order to defend Americans from another terrorist attack” (460). I agree with this verdict—the United States fought a selfish war with little regard for the Afghans—but my conclusion is that the United States should have fought a different war with much greater emphasis on reconstruction, stabilization, and state-building from the beginning. Malkasian argues something closer to the opposite: that the United States should never have intervened in the first place. “Without [US] intervention, Afghans would have been deprived and oppressed, but alive,” he writes in his opening pages, “We should stand back and ask: In the name of stopping terrorism for our own sake, did we liberate, or oppress, the Afghan people?” (8).

With these rhetorical questions, Malkasian goes beyond even the critique of scholars like Astri Suhrke, who argued that the international coalition provoked the Taliban insurgency through its heavy-handedness and invasive presence.¹² Malkasian suggests that the United States was an illegitimate, occupying power, and he implies a moral equivalence between the mistakes of the American war and the tyranny of Taliban rule. His notion that without the US, the Afghans would be “deprived and oppressed, but alive,” suggests that the American war involved killing on such a mass scale as to make the Taliban’s rule preferable. The suggestion is untenable. As Malkasian acknowledges in more sober passages, the Afghan war was small—barely a war for the Americans, and for the Afghans hardly comparable to the Soviet-Afghan War, which truly did involve mass killing and national destruction.

That does not excuse American mistakes or Kabul’s corruption. It is to insist on some perspective. One does not have to be an American military enthusiast to recognize that millions of Afghans rejected the option to be “deprived and oppressed, but alive,” when they resisted Taliban governance, fought against them, cast votes in elections, or otherwise put their hopes in a new and different Afghan future. They understood that without the US and allied intervention, al-Qaida and their jihadist

¹² Astri Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

emulators would have continued their campaign of terror—a campaign that has killed tens of thousands across the Middle East and South Asia. They understood that the Taliban would have consolidated its power and likely defeated the Northern Alliance. A generation of Afghans would not have grown up under a regime of relatively greater freedom and opportunity. Most of all, Afghan women would have continued an existence for which Malkasian’s description—“deprived and oppressed, but alive” might lead them to ask, “but what kind of life?”

The moral question of the Afghan war is whether it was just for the United States to fight al-Qaida—which it plainly was, in which case it was just and necessary to ally with the Afghan people in their fight against al-Qaida’s allies. That second fight—with the Afghan people against the Taliban—held out hope to create a better peace for Afghanistan, South Asia, and the world, and to achieve lasting success (which continues to elude the US) against international terrorist groups that threaten the United States. But since the United States never took that second fight seriously, it is unsurprising that it lost it. Why the United States was so consistently short-sighted is an important story. Despite Malkasian’s effort with this book, it remains untold.

REVIEW BY DIPALI MUKHOPADHYAY, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA AND THE US
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In *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, Carter Malkasian has taken on a Herculean task – to construct an authoritative history of America’s longest war. His sustained engagement with US military and diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan makes him part of a generation of scholars (this author included), practitioners, and soldiers whose careers unfolded as part of this intervention. We developed our understandings of American foreign policy and international relations, more generally, through the prism of this war. While many of us still reel from the fallout of last summer’s precipitous troop withdrawal and the Afghan government’s collapse, Malkasian’s tome offers us the chance to start sifting through the collection of ideas, instruments, and errors that were this “American war” and place them into a larger historical perspective.

Not unlike the war itself, *The American War in Afghanistan* is a relentless rollercoaster ride: a series of ups and downs wherein the reader knows that every triumphant high will be followed inevitably by a gut-wrenching fall. With meticulous attention to detail, Malkasian reconstructs the tempo and tenor of the war, strategy by strategy, campaign by campaign, battle by battle, each seemingly disconnected from the last and, thus, destined to add up to a whole *lesser* than the sum of its parts. He zeroes in on a number of early, inexcusable, and, in some cases, escalating errors on the part of the United States and its allies – the diplomatic exclusion of the defeated Taliban; the ill-timed demobilization of capable, sympathetic fighting forces in southern Afghanistan; and the reliance on kinetic military action, from night raids and targeted killings to the destruction of property and arbitrary detention, much of which proved ineffective at best and profoundly counterproductive at worst. He underscores the irrationality of two decades of failed US policy towards Pakistan. And he concludes that the Trump Administration’s 2020 deal with the Taliban could have opened an opportunity for a peace process but, instead, laid the groundwork for an American exit that set the Afghan state up to fail. In all of these ways, Malkasian’s account finds no argument from this reader.

Beyond a detailed outline of the American effort, Malkasian offers up a provocative thesis meant to shed new light on why this effort failed as badly as it did. Having acknowledged the usual explanations – from ‘bad’ governance to ‘the Pakistan problem’ – he contends that one of the reasons for the US failure resides in an understudied explanation of the Taliban’s *success*. That success, he argues, derived from the fact that “the Taliban exemplified something that inspired, something that made them powerful in battle, something closely tied to what it meant to be Afghan. In simple terms, they fought for Islam and resistance to occupation, values enshrined in Afghan identity. Aligned with foreign occupiers the government mustered no similar inspiration” (5). Throughout the book, Malkasian draws on his time spent in southern Afghanistan, his knowledge of the Pashto language, and his sustained study of the Taliban as an insurgency to advance this argument.

There is little question that the Taliban’s audacity and resilience as a fighting force were remarkable; students of political violence will examine this rebel movement’s success for decades to come. But Malkasian’s argument hinges on a notion that there is something singular that connotes what it means “to be Afghan.” The argument presumes a monolithic self-fashioning on the part of millions of people, over generations, of varied ethnic, sectarian, socioeconomic, geographical, and ideological backgrounds and predilections. Put most simply, Malkasian suggests that the kinds of impositions and intrusions that came with foreign occupation were particularly odious for Afghans *qua* Afghans, especially those of Pashtun descent: “Violation of home and killing of innocent family members were deeply offensive to Afghans, especially Pashtuns. Honor demanded a man defend his home and protect the women of the family. A failure to do so signified weakness” (111). One might ask, which nation, ethnic group, or religious community would not be deeply offended by foreigners violating their homes or killing their family members? Indeed, Afghanistan has been repeatedly at the crossroads of marauding invaders and competing empires, so Afghans have had more experience with these traumas of late. But this does not mean there is anything essentially “Afghan” to the allergy of being brutalized in one’s own homeland.

Nor can it be said that the Taliban proved uniquely capable of mobilizing this so-called Afghan and/or Muslim identity in the service of its violent struggle. On the contrary, in a confusing analytical move, Malkasian also attributes “what it meant

to be Afghan” (5) to a host of other key characters from the past two decades, all of whom were, in fact, the Taliban’s main foes. In one of the book’s most moving vignettes, he writes of an army commander, Omar Jan, in Helmand who took to the battlefield to lead his men, time and again, ultimately losing his life to a rocket-propelled grenade in the fall of 2017. As Malkasian explained, “He went beyond what honor demanded by sacrificing himself and his family ... With the risk of death so high, Omar Jan could have resigned and devoted himself to them in Lashkar Gah. Was his determination the extreme of irresponsibility? Or was it the epitome of Pashtunwali, following honor to self-destruction?” (402-403).

Similarly, Malkasian’s portrait of Kandahar police chief, Abdul Razzaq, acknowledges the strongman’s reputation for brutality but focuses largely on his transformation of the Kandahari police into a force that kept the Taliban’s spiritual and political homeland under government control for many years. Razzaq’s heroic stand against the Taliban, rough as it was around the edges, animates many pages of the book.¹³ And, when paired with a 2015 Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies survey he cites that found sixty-five percent of the Afghan police attributing their service to “love of country” (336), Malkasian’s own account betrays the complexity of what motivated Afghans on all sides to take up arms.

It is Malkasian’s characterization of President Hamid Karzai, the main protagonist of the Afghan state-building story, that most undercuts the notion that the Taliban held some monopoly on ‘Afghan-ness.’ Two episodes he highlights, in particular, point to Karzai’s capacity to capture and mobilize social capital in the service of defending the Afghan state. In 2010, Karzai rallied tribal leaders in the Kandahari district of Arghandab: “The presence of the ruler of Afghanistan standing near the front line, speaking to a tribe in the tradition of Afghan heroes, was a powerful symbol. It was a reminder of Karzai’s inspirational power ... Alikozai tribal leaders later said that the combination of Karzai, Razzaq, and US operations (especially special forces activities) had turned the tide” (287). Four years later, Karzai left office without signing the Bilateral Security Agreement drafted by the Obama Administration. As Malkasian explains: “Americans watching the speech saw folly. Afghans saw a national hero. Karzai’s words rang true. It did not matter that plenty of Afghans, perhaps the majority, wanted the agreement signed. Karzai’s embodiment of Afghan values of independence and mercy mattered more than his policies ... To cross Karzai was to cross what it meant to be an Afghan” (348).

How to reconcile this description of the president as “Afghan national hero” with a statement just pages before that “the government had trouble inspiring. It could never claim as strong a tie to what it meant to be Afghan as the Taliban” (335)? For this reader, the two statements are irreconcilable and reflect a set of underlying analytical missteps that bear note. To start, Malkasian’s characterization of Taliban rule – both in the 1990s and as an insurgency in the 2000s – tends to conflate the group’s remarkable feat of achieving social control through terror in the midst of anarchic wartime conditions with the cultivation of legitimate political authority. To describe the Taliban regime as “most remembered for justice” (45) is to imply a kind of chosen adherence on the part of millions of Afghans to the draconian *sharia* code of the 1990s. This characterization simply does not comport with other accounts of Taliban rule.¹⁴ There is, indeed, evidence to suggest that the Taliban, like the Islamic State years later, offered forms of security, predictability, and policing that were welcomed by some; but we simply do not have robust, reliable data to suggest that its approach was popular in any widespread, meaningful sense.¹⁵

¹³ For more on the complex politics of Afghanistan’s strongmen, see Romain Malejacq, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ See, for examples, Juan R. I. Cole, “The Taliban, Women, and the Hegelian Private Sphere,” *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 771-808; Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ On the Taliban’s approach to rebel governance, see, for examples, Ashley Jackson, *Negotiating Survival: Civilian-Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Niels Terpstra, “Rebel Governance, Rebel Legitimacy, and External

The portrait of Taliban rule as a reflection of Afghan social and political preferences – “Afghans, especially Pashtuns, accepted this extremism largely because it was just a gradation in their general oppression of women” – risks caricaturing a complex and variegated people. The fact that Pashtun women, presumably at least half of the population, are written out of the previous sentence – or at best, stripped of any subjectivity – reflects precisely the kind of essentializing gaze that has troubled Western intervention from time immemorial. Similarly, the related notion that “the reforms for women in Afghanistan occurred because of the United States and its allies” (89) both elides the profound harm done to women by Western military action and revokes agency from the countless women who drew on a long indigenous history of feminist thinking and newfound forms of social mobilization and activism to enact change.¹⁶

Malkasian’s focus on identity politics also eschews the larger geopolitical reality within which war-making and state-building took place for the last two decades in Afghanistan. After the attacks on September 11th, 2001, the United States claimed to have two, related goals – “to eliminate the remnants of al-Qa’eda and the Taliban” and “to help set up a new democracy that could prevent terrorists from coming back” (80). In fact, the first was the true goal – as was the quest for vengeance – and all other efforts were rendered subordinate, including the ambition to encourage a sovereign, let alone democratic, state. As one Afghan told Malkasian, “Karzai said it was America’s war, not his war” (145). The so-called War on Terror was a fight between the United States, al-Qa’eda, and the Taliban – and Americans fought it like *their* war, not one of partnership with, let alone on behalf of, the Afghan state or people. And this fact shaped Afghan elite calculations, military morale, and peace-making possibilities at every turn.

Even the work of counterinsurgency – ostensibly tied to the work of state-building – was as much, if not more, about hunting down Taliban on behalf of American vengeance or the particular operational predilections of a given commander or the imperative to protect Western forces. In actuality, none of this was about the construction of a sovereign state. As I have argued elsewhere, the means by which President Karzai attended to the nitty-gritty of tribal politics, engaged in divide-and-rule, and privileged competitive tactics over coherence reflected the larger strictures within which he and his regime were forced to operate. Without control over coercion and capital, he oriented himself in the service of political survival through palace politics.¹⁷ Given the political talents Malkasian observes in Karzai, one can only wonder what he might have been able to achieve with a freer hand.

Instead, both Karzai and his far less politically adept successor, Ashraf Ghani, found themselves routinely deprived of even the most basic modicum of control in the land they were mandated to govern. By Malkasian’s own telling, Western diplomats and generals continually inserted themselves into the business of politics for the sake of “good government” (261). President Karzai ran for a second term in 2009, and, “during the election campaign, [US Ambassador Karl] Eikenberry and [US Special Representative Richard] Holbrooke encouraged candidates to run against Karzai” (231). Malkasian attributes Ambassador Eikenberry’s approach “to a belief in helping the average Afghan and a belief in competitive elections, akin to

Intervention: Assessing Three Phases of Taliban Rule in Afghanistan,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 31, no. 6 (2020): 1143-1173; Kate Clark and Jelena Bjelica, “One Land, Two Rules” (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2018), <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/>.

¹⁶ On historical and contemporary Afghan feminist thought, see Marya Hannun, “From Afghan Pan-Islamism to Turkish Feminism: Examining Transnational Solidarities in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 17, no. 3 (November 2021): 466-472; Sonia Ahsan Tirmizi, *Pious Peripheries: Runaway Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021). On the perils of a reductionist approach to the study of “women in Afghanistan,” see Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 143-179; Helen Kinsella, “Sex as the Secret: Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,” *International Theory* 11 (2019): 26-47; Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). For a recent journalistic account on the multi-faceted wartime experiences of Afghan women, see Anand Gopal, “The Other Afghan Women,” *The New Yorker*, 13 September 2021.

¹⁷ Mukhopadhyay, “The Palace Politics of ‘Precarious’ Sovereignty: Afghan State-building in the Era of Counterterrorism,” delivered as the Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture 2021 (London: SOAS University of London, 2021); Mukhopadhyay, “Provincial Governors in Afghan Politics” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2016), www.usip.org; Mukhopadhyay (2014).

his belief in an Afghan army driven by nationalism. Democracy outweighed his own relationship with Karzai. ‘My goal is not to have a perfect relationship,’ he would say, ‘Perfect relationships exist in heaven’” (231). Relationships, perfect or otherwise, are entirely beside the point: how could indigenous democracy take root if American diplomats were propping up certain politicians and betting against others?

A decade later, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad returned to the scene as President Trump’s senior envoy and also took it upon himself to privilege the US wish to withdraw forces over the democratic project in Afghanistan. He publicly stated that “progress in peace talks could cancel the election” in which President Ghani planned to seek a second term (433). As Malkasian, who went on to join Khalilzad’s team, saw it: “Better to complete a US-Taliban agreement and be on the road toward an Afghan political settlement before the election could be a problem ... How the government’s democracy could be reconciled with the Taliban’s emirate was unexplored territory” (437-8). Without a hint of irony, he describes Afghan elections as a problem to be avoided now that the United States had decided it wanted out. Meanwhile, the book does not address the American failure to prepare for the inevitable security transition that would come with US military withdrawal. Instead, the US military lead, General Scott Miller, “convinced Ghani to appoint a wide range of generals and ministers,” deepening American meddling in the Afghan defense establishment even as US soldiers were literally headed to the exits (435).

Ultimately, Malkasian’s book fails to confront head on the fundamental causal relationship between Western war-making and Afghan state-building, all too frequently bemoaning the frustrating nature of Afghan politics without contending with the interveners’ role in making it so. By framing “good government” as an earnest effort on the part of the Americans and their allies, he risks constructing a kind of neo-imperialist portrait of Afghanistan that belies his own knowledge of the place: “Helmand represents the most ambitious and forceful British and American attempt to reform Afghan government. Even with such effort, important things could not be accomplished. Creating good government pushed up against Afghan culture and politics to an insurmountable degree” (261). This is precisely the kind of analysis that drove so many of the mistakes Malkasian’s book works carefully to document.

It is, of course, easier for all outsiders to see the mistakes of those inside as theirs rather than the product of those outsiders’ bad choices. The great strength of Malkasian’s analysis is his confrontation with those bad choices, maybe best exemplified in his description of the US military’s campaign in places like the Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan, where some modicum of stability only arrived once the Americans finally left. And, indeed, this characterization fits neatly with the notion that any people – Afghan or otherwise – are prone to rise up against the injustices of occupation for as long as it lasts. But there are other moments in his book when Malkasian operates from the positionality of an interventionist, proud of the work he and his colleagues did and disappointed that more was not done: “I thought we should have done more early on to build a stronger military, remove bad leaders, and manage tribal infighting.” (7) he muses, later asserting that “the shortcomings in the resourcing of the army were neglected for years” (95). And of Helmand province, where he served: “Marjah and the other districts cleared by the marines in 2009, would be among the most stable in Afghanistan” (257). In the end, does Malkasian support counterinsurgency done right or is he proposing that the United States should stay out altogether? The answer is not clear. After all, Malkasian was deeply involved in an effort that, by his own telling, failed profoundly.

REVIEW BY LISA M. MUNDEY, NORWICH UNIVERSITY

Carter Malkasian presents an excellent one-volume, top-down overview of the United States (U.S.) war in Afghanistan based on open-source information and personal interviews. Given his experience in the country and access to participants to interview, Malkasian has insights from government and military officials as well as members of the Taliban – an important voice to be heard. His argument that the Taliban won the support of the population because they embodied Afghan identity and Islam is persuasive, particularly given the swiftness of the collapse of the Western-backed Afghan government in August 2021.

Malkasian's work complements other works that address "what went wrong" in Afghanistan. Tim Bird, in *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way*, argues that the West fundamentally misunderstood Afghanistan and its population, which led to strategic incoherence.¹⁸ Malkasian adds to this argument that the U.S. failed in understanding Afghan identity and tribal politics and that its counterterrorist strategy alienated the population. Carlotta Gall points her finger at Pakistan as the true villain in *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014*, an argument that Malkasian accepts as important but incomplete for explaining America's failure in the war.¹⁹ *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan*, edited by Aaron B. O'Connell, collectively argues that problems of culture were central to the failures in the war, which dovetails nicely into Malkasian's larger arguments about how the Taliban captured Afghan identity and positioned itself to fight foreign occupiers.²⁰ Both Malkasian and Craig Whitlock, in *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War*, argue that the U.S. conflated al-Qaeda and the Taliban, thereby extending the conflict in Afghanistan even after the terrorist organization had essentially been derailed. Both authors also take U.S. officials to task for leaving out the Taliban from the process of forming a new Afghan government, a move which might have avoided an extended war. Malkasian and Whitlock argue that the Afghan population came to view the Americans as foreign invaders and the Afghan government as tied to them.²¹ Two other volumes offer more detailed but singularly operational narratives of the war than Malkasian but only through the end of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014: Anthony Tucker-Jones in *The Afghan War: Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001-2014* and Michael G. Walling in *Enduring Freedom, Enduring Voices: U.S. Operations in Afghanistan*.²² Malkasian brings readers all the way through President Joseph Biden's decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of August 2021.

It is important to note that most of the official records from the military, State Department, and other government agencies are classified. Only historians who work for the agencies with the proper security clearances can access, research, and write from the official documents. Classification leaves most scholars reliant on open-source information, which is the basis of Malkasian's history as well as many of the other works mentioned here. Much can be learned from these sources from news media, embedded reporters, government reports, memoirs, and most insightfully, personal interviews with participants. Large segments of Malkasian's book rest on information from these discussions. Malkasian went to great lengths to include the voices of the Afghans in this volume, which is an important element to understanding the war. Government historians can and will fill in the history based on the official records, such as the forthcoming U.S. Army history of the Afghanistan

¹⁸ Tim Bird, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ Carlotta Gall, *The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

²⁰ Aaron B. O'Connell, ed., *Our Latest Longest War: Losing Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²¹ Craig Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 19, 25, 151.

²² Anthony Tucker-Jones, *The Afghan War: Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001-2014* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2014); Michael G. Walling, *Enduring Freedom, Enduring Voices: U.S. Operations in Afghanistan* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2015).

War. Other scholars will have to wait for declassification or go through the Freedom of Information Act to accelerate the declassification process to access official records, as the *Washington Post* did with the Afghanistan Papers.²³

As Malkasian acknowledges, he could not cover the entire war from every perspective and from every geographic area. Indeed, a full history of the war would need to include all of the activities of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Coalition partners as well of the northern and western provinces. In addition, it would require a deeper discussion of Provincial Reconstruction Teams and other reconstruction, mentoring, and policy efforts. Having said that – and given the weight of the U.S. contributions to the war – it is appropriate to focus mainly on U.S. actions in the eastern and southern provinces, which were the center of violence through decades of conflict. Since Malkasian is interested mostly in policy decisions and overall strategy, much of the narrative focuses on the thinking of U.S. presidents, top officials, and commanders. Indeed, the errors of the war reside at the level of these decision-makers. Although there are occasional voices from the lower ranks, this work does not address the war from their perspective. Importantly, Malkasian's access to Afghan sources allows him to delve into Afghan tribal politics and tribal relations with the Afghan national government.

Malkasian asserts that for centuries a central part of Afghan identity has resided in the resistance to occupation. The other centralizing force in Afghan identity stemmed from devotion to Islam. Malkasian's principal argument is that Americans became occupiers, though it is important to note that Americans themselves never perceived themselves as such, and the Taliban laid claim to Afghan identity and Islam by fighting the foreigners. In this way, the Taliban identified as being more Afghan than the central government and its security forces, which were allied with the outsiders. In this respect, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was correct to warn that the U.S. should avoid being seen as occupiers, although it is also clear in retrospect that the "light footprint" he advocated proved insufficient to secure Afghanistan, particularly after it became a secondary, economy of force, theater after the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. By staying in Afghanistan for nearly 20 years, the US "may have done more harm than good" in the end, Malkasian argues (8).

As noted, he asserts that the U.S. mistakenly conflated the Taliban with al-Qaeda. While the Taliban did host al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the two groups were never the same movement. Once the U.S. invaded Afghanistan to topple both al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime, Afghan religious leaders called for the people to rise against the invaders as a religious duty. This call gave the Taliban a legitimacy that the Afghans allied with the U.S. lacked. The American association of the Taliban with al-Qaeda prevented President George W. Bush or other U.S. officials from allowing the Taliban any role in the process of creating a new constitution and government for Afghanistan. Malkasian argues that the rejection of any role for the Taliban in Afghanistan's future stands as one of the greatest mistakes the U.S. made in the war. He asserts that Bush and his team "resisted sensible courses of action, such as peace talks, building a competent [Afghan] military, and reducing civilian casualties" and thus ended up creating the very conditions for a long-term, open-ended commitment to Afghanistan that they initially wanted to avoid (215).

A fundamental problem, according to Malkasian, was the division among Afghan tribes. Instead of uniting against the Taliban threat, they remained divided, thanks to Afghan President Hamid Karzai's attempts to weaken his political rivals. Had the tribes united against the Taliban in 2006, Malkasian asserts, it is possible that the Taliban's resurgence could have been defeated. At that time, the Afghan National Army was too small and too inexperienced to fight the Taliban insurgency proficiently, largely due to the slow approach Americans took to building that organization. Additionally, U.S. counterterrorism strategy – capturing and killing Taliban leaders – failed to damage the insurgency significantly.

Malkasian asserts that while the Taliban insurgency grew in strength in the southern provinces, the U.S. was distracted by going into Nuristan and Kunar provinces in the eastern part of the country. The Nuristanis have their own distinct culture in the mountains, and they resisted any foreign presence. While Americans pursued a strategy of "clear, hold, build, and engage" in the mountains, they established small, vulnerable outposts in the river valleys (183). These outposts came under

²³ The Afghanistan Papers Digital Document Archive, *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database/>.

near-constant attack, and a few of them were almost overrun. The U.S. eventually abandoned these bases, signaling several years of wasted effort. The Americans “neither eliminated terrorists nor protected the populous lower valleys” (215).

By the time President Barack Obama took office, the Taliban had made steady gains. His military commanders recommended a troop surge to regain control of lost territory and a shift in strategy to the protection of the population through counterinsurgency operations. Malkasian suggests that “Obama was driven toward a surge he otherwise would have avoided” (236). Controversially, Obama placed a public deadline on the time the surge troops would deploy to Afghanistan, a move that was heavily criticized. Malkasian states “the evidence is persuasive that the Taliban expected the United States to leave but far too scant to prove they would have caved had there been no timeline” (238). After all, the Taliban were not leaving. They could wait indefinitely for America’s will to evaporate, whether it be 18 months or several more years.

Malkasian argues that the surge was a tactical success – it temporarily secured Helmand and Kandahar provinces – but a strategic failure. Ultimately, “the U.S. military could not change the trajectory of the country” (351). Moreover, counterinsurgency operations fell out of favor after the surge, prompting a return to counterterrorism operations. Other programs that attempted to shore up the local security effort, such as the Afghan Local Police, proved ineffective. Obama turned to peace talks with the Taliban. In Malkasian’s estimation, the surge drawdown constitutes an “unintended unilateral concession” on the part of the U.S. since “the Taliban had to do nothing in return” for it (313).

Although Operation Enduring Freedom officially came to a close in December 2014, the Taliban were hardly done fighting. They launched offensives in 2015 and 2016, which prompted Obama to extend the mission beyond just training and advising. Malkasian criticizes Obama’s tight restrictions on air support for Afghan security forces. The absence of air support lowered the morale of the Afghan National Army and police forces, which started to cooperate with the Taliban. The reasons for Taliban success in 2015 and 2016 hold for the years afterward as well. As Malkasian documents, the “strength of the army and police declined... whole battalions and district police forces dissolved or went combat ineffective” (395). In retrospect, it is clear that this trend continued through the years and throughout numerous territories, allowing the Taliban to take control of the country in 2021 with minimal Afghan security forces resistance.

There is not much to celebrate in the peace deal signed by President Donald Trump and the Taliban, according to Malkasian. He asserts that “Trump was too impatient to sponsor a well-structured peace agreement” (446). Trump decided to remove American troops from Afghanistan with few concessions from the Taliban. The Taliban failed to follow through on any of their promised tasks. Although Trump had intended to get the U.S. out of Afghanistan, “Trump had left Biden with the unenviable choice of following through with the May 1 [2021] deadline [from the peace agreement] amid a stalled peace process or staying in Afghanistan in an unending and escalating war” (448). Biden determined to end the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan.

Timing is everything. At the publication of this volume, it is too early to tell how Americans will remember the war in Afghanistan. Now, with the complete collapse of the Ashraf Ghani government and the takeover by the Taliban, it is clearly a failure. Comparisons with Vietnam have abounded, though Malkasian is correct to assert that the two wars are not the same. Afghanistan was largely a forgotten war, very far from the center of American social, cultural, or political discourse that the Vietnam War had inhabited. Unlike Vietnam, the Afghan War “warranted few protests, no counterculture, and no meaningful political opposition” (452). What Malkasian could not have known at the time he wrote this book is that there would be one unfortunate comparison – photographs of helicopters rescuing people from the U.S. embassy as enemy forces closed in around the compound, an eerie echo of a similar photo from Saigon in 1975.

Malkasian asks, “was failure inevitable?” and answers “at certain points, the United States could have made different decisions that might have averted failure or at least led to a far less costly stalemate” (455). These decision points include Bush’s decision to exclude the Taliban from the new political process; the delay in building the Afghan army; too aggressive counterterrorism operations, which alienated the population; tolerating the corruption in the Afghan government; and launching the war in Iraq, which diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan. Malkasian also argues that the continuing threat of terrorism against the U.S., plus the reluctance of military commanders to admit defeat contributed to

America's ongoing presence in Afghanistan. When Biden decided to follow through with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, analysts predicted the fall of the western-backed Afghan government as soon as six months later. It was then revised to 90 days. Five days later, the Taliban patrolled Kabul and the Afghan president fled the country.²⁴ Malkasian alerts readers to the warning flags that the Taliban were making gains and the Afghan security forces lacked the morale to resist. It just happened more quickly than most anticipated.

²⁴ Aaron Blake, "How Wrong the Biden Administration Was about Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/16/how-wrong-biden-administration-was-about-afghanistan/>.

RESPONSE BY CARTER MALKASIAN, NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

I would like to thank the four reviewers and Professor O’Connell for reading and their work on this roundtable on *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. I take note of their many good points for future editions of the book. Thank you to H-Diplo for providing a forum for the roundtable.

Before covering each review, I want to make two broad points. First, I tried to write the book in a way that helps the reader understand the good and the bad of different actors and does not conceal evidence for and against various arguments, including my own. Consequently, the picture is often grey instead of black and white. Second, one of the main arguments of the book is that a necessary condition in the US defeat in Afghanistan is that the Taliban exemplified resistance to occupation and Islam, deeply engrained notions that enabled their forces to be more motivated than those of the government. It follows that the American presence in Afghanistan, regardless of what strategies were adopted, was a major impediment to the Afghan government standing on its own. I know that this argument is controversial but also strongly think that, absent its consideration, the discourse is missing something substantial.

Conrad Crane is right to point out several gaps in the book. Yes, future books should examine the part played by allies, partners, and the entire international history of the war. He also makes a fair point about our knowledge of the motives of Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qa’eda; more caution may have been called for on my part. And separating moral and ethical grounds of the intervention from outcomes certainly has merit.

To this list, I would add one other. My book discusses the role of generals in affecting high-level US decision-making, especially decisions to keep the United States in the war. President Barack Obama describes in his own book how he was trying to think broadly about all the interests of the American people whereas generals would prioritize not losing wars.²⁵ As the full documentary record becomes accessible, there may be more for historians to ponder on whether US military preferences contributed to the length of the war.

Paul Miller’s review is more critical of the book. I appreciate the small errors that he points out and will correct them. I also appreciate his assessment that few other scholars have had my access to the Taliban’s perspective. I actually think, though, that other scholars such as Ashley Jackson, Anand Gopal, and Bette Dam, to name just three, have done groundbreaking work on the Taliban.²⁶ I am always learning from them.

It should be unsurprising that I disagree with Miller’s larger criticisms. Miller says that I’ve adopted the Taliban’s perspective. I find that interesting since others, including one of the reviews in this forum, sometimes criticize me for having an American or Western point of view. In seeing me as a Taliban apologist, he incorrectly states that I portray the Taliban and al-Qa’eda as inseparable—a view they themselves reject. What I actually try to show is that the two groups were intertwined but separate, a reality that does not excuse US leaders for too often treating Taliban as if they were al-Qa’eda. He also says that I state that the insurgency started in 2005–2006 as a response to US tactics. I actually write: “The argument carries weight but needs to be considered in light of other conditions,” which I subsequently detail (114).

In disagreement with my explanation that resistance to occupation was a necessary condition in the US defeat, Miller mentions the majority of Afghans who, when polled, indicated support for the government, the hundreds of thousands of

²⁵ Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020), 436.

²⁶ Ashley Jackson, *Negotiating Survival: Civilian-Insurgent Relations in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). Anand Gopal, *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War Through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014). Bette Dam, *Looking for the Enemy: Mullah Omar and the Unknown Taliban* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2021).

Afghans who served in the military, and the tens of thousands who died. He misses the point. Numbers did not equate to motivation. I write in the conclusion:

“The people supported the government in many, many places, as shown by polls and hundreds of thousands of volunteers for the army and police. More Afghans liked the government better than the Taliban. And more Afghans were willing to serve on behalf of the government than the Taliban. But more Afghans were willing to kill and be killed on behalf of the Taliban. The Taliban had an edge in inspiration” (455).

Aligned with foreign occupiers of a different religion, the government could not get its supporters to go to the same lengths.

Miller also overlooks the research I have done into US senior policymaking. His review does not discuss the new material I provide on Obama’s 2014–2016 withdrawal decisions, President Donald Trump’s 2017 strategy, and the 2010–2020 negotiations with the Taliban, not to mention a great deal of new information on the George W. Bush administration coming from released US documents, interviews, and Rangin Dadfar Spanta’s book in Dari on his time as Hamid Karzai’s foreign minister and then national security advisor.²⁷ To be clear, there is quite a lot of evidence that hubris marked the Bush administration in the wake of the 2001 invasion. It is one of several occasions in history when military victory has fed overambition.

Criticism of the famous Obama surge deadline decision, according to Miller, is the biggest lacuna in the book. I do agree that the timeline may have been unwise. What I question is that Taliban resolve would have been significantly easier to overcome or that the loss in American lives and resources would have been significantly less in lieu of that timeline.

Those disagreements aside, Miller is absolutely correct when he says that I suggest the United States might have been “an illegitimate, occupying power” and that I imply “moral equivalence between the mistakes of the American war and the tyranny of Taliban rule.” This is something Americans and American leaders should seriously think about, both in remembering the Afghan war and before embarking on future interventions. History helps society consider the balance between the “polarities of oppression and liberation.”²⁸

In her piece, Dipali Mukhopadhyay also disagrees with my argument that the Taliban were better motivated because they were fighting for Islam and resistance to occupation. Contrary to what Mukhopadhyay writes, I myself see it as one of several conditions for US failure, not a singular or sufficient one and state as much in both the introduction and conclusion (6, 454).

Discussing identity is tricky and Mukhopadhyay accurately points out that resisting occupation is hardly unique to Afghans. Nowhere in the book do I say that it is. I explicitly agree that other peoples can share the same beliefs and motivations. In the introductory chapter I state: “Many people in many countries behave the same when faced with foreign intervention” (7). The explanation comes up in arguments about the outcome of Vietnam, Iraq, and other interventions.²⁹ The fact that many peoples oppose occupation does not lessen the power of the explanation for the outcome of the war in Afghanistan

²⁷ Rangin Dadfar Spanta, *Afghan Politics: Sense of the Time* (Kabul: Aazem Publications, 2017).

²⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147.

²⁹ See: Mao Zedong, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel Griffith (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, 1989), 42, 48, 100; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1983); Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); Ahmed Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

any more than the role of industrial strength in the outcome of the US Civil War and First World War lessens the power of that explanation for the outcome of the Second World War. Identity need not be unique to have weight.

The centerpiece of Mukhopadhyay's counterargument are descriptions from my book of Afghan leaders who could be inspirational, particularly Abdul Razziq and Hamid Karzai. Yet these descriptions do not convey what I actually wrote. She leaves out how I go through their serious shortcomings. Razziq could never rally enough support to be independent of US support and he knew it. Her statement that Razziq ever had a "heroic stand" is wrong. The United States always backed him with money, air power, advisors, and usually special operations forces. He readily admitted, "Taliban morale is better than government morale. The Taliban morale is very high. Look at their suicide bombers. The Taliban motivate people to do incredible things" (30). For his part, Karzai was so aware that he had been compromised by his alignment with the United States that he regularly refused to call the Taliban his enemy and unsuccessfully pursued a strategy that focused on Pakistan as the enemy. Mukhopadhyay refers especially to my impression that Afghans saw Karzai as a national hero in 2013. What she omits is that I wrote this statement in direct reference to a specific event in which Karzai aggressively opposed US policy, very publicly refusing to sign the bilateral security agreement with the United States. The extent that Afghans saw him as a national hero at that particular moment was *because* he was opposing the occupiers, as a quotation on the next page from a Kandahari political leader makes clear: "Karzai has become very strong. Before, he was America's slave. Now he oppresses America, so he is strong" (349). Few events better show how alignment with America obstructed Afghan leaders from inspiring their people.

Mukhopadhyay's review contains other incorrect statements. I do not describe the Taliban regime of the 1990s as experiencing high levels of popular support, nor do I endorse the view that the 2019 elections were a problem. She mentions a cited survey that 65 percent of a sampling of policemen joined for love of country yet leaves out the equally important point that only 11 percent had joined to fight—clearly a sign that love of country was insufficient to die for it. (336)

Mukhopadhyay's own argument is that state-building in Afghanistan would have been better if the international community had let Karzai run the country as he saw fit. I think there is something to this argument. Mukhopadhyay critiques my statement that ambitious and forceful British and American efforts in Helmand to create "good government pushed up against Afghan culture and politics to an insurmountable degree," saying that I risk constructing a "neo-imperialist portrait of Afghanistan." That strikes me as ironic, since I wrote the statement as a fundamental criticism of efforts to change another society with a foreign vision of "good government." All that said, arguing that things would have been better under an unfettered Karzai is a counterfactual that requires thinking several steps into the future and changing multiple variables (are US forces present or not?). Given the mixed existing observable evidence between 2001 and 2021 that Karzai or other Afghan powerbrokers performed well on their own, what would have happened is distinctly unclear. For that reason, as much as I am unopposed to it, I did not take up the argument.

Mukhopadhyay's review ends with an insinuation that my judgment is flawed because I was deeply involved in an effort that "failed profoundly." She ventures that I may be an interventionist and think counterinsurgency could have been successful in Afghanistan, citing my judgment that the battle of Marjah was a tactical victory. Once again, Mukhopadhyay is misrepresenting the evidence, in this case in a particularly personal way. How does Mukhopadhyay square her claim with my argument that US presence incited resistance to occupation and was a root cause of its own defeat? My conclusion clearly states that "the United States had few chances to succeed" (459). Even those chances are qualified as likely to have led to a less costly stalemate, not victory. None of the chances are a better counterinsurgency strategy. I list the surge, the apex of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, as a mistake. As for Marjah, the last sentence of that specific chapter reads "only time would tell if the successes would last. No time was needed to tell that they were unlikely to equal the cost." (262)

In terms of being an interventionist, I'm surely not objective on whatever it is that I am—Taliban apologist as per Miller's review or US apologist as per Mukhopadhyay's assessment—but the final paragraph in the book clearly states my judgment of the moral perils of intervention: "Foreign intervention was a blight on the peace and well-being of the people of Afghanistan" and "The painful reality is that peace could have come a lot sooner without foreign intervention." (460–461) It would be hard to find a better place to search for my views on intervention than the final paragraph of a 461-page book.

Lisa Munday's review points to a few last gaps in the book. I did not dig into provincial reconstruction teams as much as I have done previously and the book has a great deal of top-down examination of events. Of great service is her observation that the lower ranks receive little treatment in the book. I wish I had included much more on the war from their perspective. I tried, especially in the chapters on the war in the east and the surge, but I take Munday's criticism to heart and may attempt to address it in future editions. A full history of America's war should share views and experiences across the ranks.

Above all, Munday makes the essential point that many of the official documents have yet to be released and that future historians will fill in the gaps in the current record. I agree and also suspect that they will find new explanations and reveal critical new evidence that is as yet unknown. The decision-making behind President Joseph Biden's withdrawal decision comes first to mind. Furthermore, future researchers may teach us more about Taliban decisions and the role of Pakistan in the conflict. It is hard not to reflect on the histories of the Vietnam War in this case. Thanks to the work of historians such as Lien Hang Nguyen, we have learned that North Vietnam played a greater role in the war than previously known and that the Party first secretary, Le Duan, was the key decision-maker.³⁰ Did the Taliban have a behinds-the-scene manager like Le Duan? What role was Pakistan really playing in Afghanistan? Right now, the best answer to such questions is often "I do not know." Future historians will surely teach us much more.

³⁰ Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).