

**The American War in Afghanistan: A History**

Carter Malakasian (Oxford University Press, 2021), 561 pages, 20 maps, 62 pages of notes, glossary and abbreviations, bibliography, and index.

**Reviewed by J. R. Seeger**

As the war in Afghanistan ends in a dramatic and chaotic withdrawal of Western allied forces from Kabul, there will be many “after action” books and articles identifying “what went wrong” or “what we did right.” Their findings most likely will vary according to the experiences and political persuasions of the authors. The most credible of these are and will be written by individuals who have had long experience in Afghanistan and, ideally, a deep understanding of the military and political context of the tale of an Afghan civil war that begins in 1973 and continues to this day.<sup>a</sup> Of course, Americans want to focus on our 20 years of combat operations that began shortly after the 9/11 attacks, but any credible effort has to consider more than the “American experience.”

In this book, Carter Malakasian begins with a short description of the culture, the economy, and the political history of this landlocked South Asian state. Malakasian has the critical benefits of having a PhD from Oxford and Pashtu language skill. He served for years in Afghanistan as a Department of State officer as well as a special assistant for strategy to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford. Malakasian has a very clear view of what went wrong, which he details through the 500 pages of text. He explains the reasons for writing this book in the introduction, listing a number of issues he wants to explore:

*Whether better decisions could have brought a better outcome. . . . Themes of mistreatment, Pakistan, tribalism, and Islam and occupation run throughout. They set the war on a windy and rocky course. Was there anything the United States could have done to chart a calmer course? Could it have defeated its adversaries? Could it have fought a less costly war? (7)*

If Malakasian writes in an effort to explain his position on these questions, the primary question for readers in the IC remains: Does his selection of these themes or his case

studies within the book serve intelligence professionals? The easy answer to the question is “Yes, but . . .” In the introduction, Malakasian encourages readers to explore other books focusing on these questions—although more than enough articles contributing to the discussion have already been published in US, Canadian, UK, and European journals since the evacuation during July and August 2021.

Malakasian begins his analysis of the “American war” with the 2002 expansion of US forces in country. He summarizes the reasoning behind this expansion from a few hundred to several thousand in a single paragraph.

*In early 2002, 8,000 US and 5,000 allied troops were in Afghanistan. Before the war had started, Bush, Powell, Rice, and Rumsfeld had assumed that the United States would have to leave thousands of troops to prevent terrorists from coming back. All agreed that the overriding lesson of the 1990s in Afghanistan was that the United States had created a vacuum by ignoring the country after the fall of the Soviet Union. Within that vacuum the conditions were generated for the rise of the Taliban and Al Qaida. (81)*

After that brief statement of purpose, Malakasian strays into a diatribe against senior leaders in the Pentagon and the US general officer corps. He states categorically that he sees “no greater villain in America’s Afghan War than Donald Rumsfeld.” (81) In campaign after campaign, he points to officers who continued to argue they were winning when it was clear by 2008 that winning battles was not enough. They were, Malakasian writes,

*too dedicated to winning, too prideful to accept losing, at the cost of flexibility. Instead of cutting a bad investment, they toughed it out. A little more*

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a. For example, see the set of articles in *Foreign Affairs* titled “We all lost Afghanistan” ([www.foreignaffairs.com](http://www.foreignaffairs.com)) and the articles by Robin Wright and Stephen Coll for the *New Yorker* (August 15 and 16, 2021)

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*entrepreneurship would have been good for the whole strategy.* (215)

Malakasian's book follows the detailed story of 20 years of deployments with some successes and many failures. If there is a single criticism that can be weighed against the book, it is his apparent disinterest in any of the unconventional warfare or even irregular warfare successes waged by US Army Special Forces along with other elements of the US Army Special Operations Command including the Military Information Support Operations (MISO) teams and the US Army Civil Affairs teams. A quick scan of the index demonstrates this gap in his interest and research. Also missing is any discussion of CIA efforts beyond a brief mention of the CIA partnership with Special Forces teams in 2001. This means a reader with little background in Afghanistan attempting to understand the history of "the American war in Afghanistan" is going to miss all the smallscale efforts/successes such as the counterterrorism pursuit teams (CTPTs) and the USASOC program of village stability operations.

The book follows the maxim, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." Malakasian was involved in stability efforts in Garmsir in southern Afghanistan. Given his Pashtu language skills and his experience, he makes assumptions about "Afghans" based on the common prejudice of Pashtuns throughout Afghanistan: Pashtun culture *is* Afghan culture. That is a fallacy in many ways, given that Pashtuns themselves have multiple subcultures, and even in totality, they do not represent anything but a plurality in the Afghan population. This prejudice also reinforces his argument that Americans did not and do not understand Afghan culture and therefore all "Afghans" resisted US operations. That is simply not true. Many of the Afghans committed to a modern state were Tajiks and Hazaras from northern Afghanistan, who saw the US effort to free Afghanistan from the harsh tribal laws of the Kandahar-based Taliban as a positive force for liberation from generations of Pashtun dominance.

Since Malakasian raises the question of "what might have been," it is reasonable to assume that he might look at alternative scenarios where there were successes. He does not do so. Others have discussed alternative

scenarios and their works should be considered. In her recent book, *Bullets Not Ballots*, Jacqueline L. Hazelton uses six case studies from the 20th century to argue that there are multiple roads to success in counterinsurgency but, in her opinion, none of those roads start or finish with creating anything resembling participatory democracy.<sup>a</sup> In fact, the most successful counterinsurgency case studies demonstrate the value of coercive military measures coupled with direct engagement with local elites who have a direct stake in the civil war that boils around them. None of the successes had any focus on the general population. She argues that her research results "are likely to be controversial because they challenge conventional wisdom on counterinsurgency success, a conventional wisdom that many analysts and pundits rely on as a professional position and even personal brand, and a conventional wisdom that carries significant emotional power." (151)

Other works on counterinsurgency such as the book *The Clandestine Cold War in Asia, 1945–65* edited by Richard Aldrich, Gary Rawnsley, and Ming-Yeh Rawnsley offer discussions of alternative methods that worked. The editors have assembled 11 case studies of successes and failures by the United Kingdom in the field of counterinsurgency and countersubversion.<sup>b</sup> Finally, Max Boot's recent biography of Edward Lansdale, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam*, reinforces the same theme that there were other policies and campaigns that could have been studied by planners focused on counterinsurgency.<sup>c</sup>

The single thread in all of these books that Malakasian ignores is the importance placed on small-scale military deployments. These small-unit operations (usually, though not exclusively well-trained special operations forces) were integrated with local forces. It is consistent with the successes of the US campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 and also consistent with one of the "27 Articles" that T.E. Lawrence offered in 1917:

*Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them. Actually, also, under the very odd con-*

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a. Jacqueline L Hazelton, *Bullets Not Ballots. Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare* (Cornell University Press, 2021).

b. Richard Aldrich et al., *The Clandestine Cold War in Asia, 1945–19: Western Intelligence, Propaganda and Special Operations* (Frank Cass Publishers, 2000).

c. Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (Liveright Books, 2018).

*ditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is.<sup>a</sup>*

Probably the most important single lesson in irregular warfare is that no matter how careful a conventional military component is and no matter how sincere a senior military commander is about winning campaigns and not just counterinsurgency battles, a large military mission is likely to fail. As stated above, Malakasian wishes to make failure the result of commander mismanagement or, at worst, perfidy. In fact, based on the history of counterinsurgency campaigns in both the 20th and 21st centuries, it seems far more likely that the structure of conventional military units and their training for general-purpose war

make it nearly impossible for anyone inside that conventional system to understand the challenges of counterinsurgency, much less design solutions. At least in that sense, Malakasian's general view is correct: certainly by mid-2006, the US Army, US Marines and the conventional allied forces were considered an occupation force that would never be acceptable to the Afghan population, no matter how hard they tried to protect that population from Taliban and al-Qa'ida terrorism. Unfortunately, Malakasian does not relate to the US and allied units conducting successful unconventional warfare tactics, techniques and procedures. In sum, *The American War in Afghanistan* is an incomplete history of the last 20 years of conflict.



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a. Malcom Brown, editor. *T.E. Lawrence in War and Peace: The Military Writings of Lawrence of Arabia. An Anthology*. (Frontline Books, 2015), 144–45.