

CONTEMPORARY WAR

War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier

By Carter Malkasian

Reviewed by Dr. Joseph J. Collins, Colonel (USA Retired), Professor, National War College, and author of *Understanding War in Afghanistan* (NDU Press, 2011)

The twelve years of this “Decade of War” have produced many good books on counterinsurgency. Carter Malkasian’s *War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier* will be ranked among the best of them. Indeed, the value of this book extends beyond the case in question. It speaks to the unchanging nature of war and the complex, changing character of war in the information age.

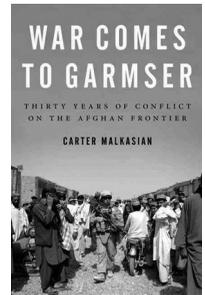
The author is well educated on the subject and has performed yeoman service on the ground as a scholar and diplomat in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In the latter theater, Malkasian learned Pashto, the local language, and stayed two years in one area, achieving great prominence as a T. E. Lawrence-like diplomatic operative. He downplays his own role, but in August 2011, *The Washington Post* wrote of “Carter Sahib” that:

The adoration [of the local population] stems from his unflinching politeness (he greeted people in the traditional Pashtun way, holding their hands for several minutes as a series of welcomes and praises to God were delivered), his willingness to take risks (he often traveled around in a police pickup instead of in an American armored vehicle with a squad of Marines), and his command of Pashto, the language of southern Afghanistan (he conversed fluently, engaging in rapid-fire exchanges with gray-bearded elders). Afghan officials and U.S. commanders credit Malkasian with playing a critical role in the transformation of Garmser from one of the country’s most violent, Taliban-infested districts to a place so quiet that some Marines wish they had more chances to fire their weapons.

To make war in a place like Afghanistan means you must immerse yourself in that milieu. In addition to friendly and enemy forces, there will be other actors. Local power centers, competing tribal structures, religious sects, drug lords, and parties to land disputes, are norms, not aberrations. Conducting war under these conditions requires soldiers who are as culturally sensitive and well educated as they are trained for the kinetic fight.

Real people are central to *War Comes to Garmser*. Malkasian modeled his outstanding book, on the famous Vietnam-era text, *War Comes to Long An* by Jeffrey Race. In both books, the study of counterinsurgency begins with an intense examination of a war in a small area. Malkasian’s book is population-centric counterinsurgency under a microscope. More than 31,000,000 Afghans live in 34 provinces that contain over 400 districts. This book is about one of those districts and fewer than 150,000 Pashtun tribesmen.

Taking advantage of a few years in Afghanistan, Malkasian researched conflict in Garmser, a district in the south-central part of Helmand Province and, at times, a Taliban stronghold. Contrary to



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most American books about Afghanistan, the main characters in this book are nearly all Afghans. It is not just about the Taliban versus the Government of Afghanistan and the Coalition in the Garmser district. This book is all about powerful tribal leaders, feuding Pashtun tribes, narcotics, land disputes, religious figures, and competing power structures. The dominant American characters here are mud Marines and a handful of US and British diplomats who fought and worked in Garmser from 2009 to 2011.

Malkasian's focus is on how and why the Taliban came to power, were ousted in 2001, and came back five years later. "In other words, why did things go wrong, and did they ever go right?" Like a good novel, the characters tell the story: men like the intrepid Abdullah Jan, the on-again, off-again District Governor, who, bereft of resources, tried to keep the tribes together to thwart the 500-man Taliban offensive, led by the treacherous Mullahs Naim Barech and Dadullah Lang. In Garmser, in 2006, the center could not hold. The Taliban seized the district and held it for a few years. It took three years of hard, dangerous work by 1,000 Marines and squads of diplomats and development experts to take it back.

In Malkasian's conclusion, he cites three key problems in Garmser, all of which are smaller-scale models of nationwide issues: "first, rifts within society and within the government, particularly the reluctance of Afghans opposed to the Taliban to ally together; second, Taliban safe-havens in Pakistan, and third, the after-effects of the [US-sponsored 1960s] canal project," which introduced landless immigrants into the area. The canal system, a potentially important feat of agricultural development, laid the foundation for a legal and ethical problem of such magnitude and sensitivity that Coalition diplomats and development experts were ordered to stay out of the land reform business. This "us-versus-them" issue became a fertile breeding ground for Taliban support. The Coalition's refusal to deal with it ensured land reform will remain a sore point in the future.

In the end, what does this book tell us about the future of Afghanistan, in particular, and counterinsurgency, in general?

Malkasian sticks to his knitting and does not try to provide the reader a roadmap for success. Judging by his analysis of problems in Garmser, he is a moderate optimist, happy about the buildup of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which could have blocked the Taliban were it strong enough in 2006, but concerned today about the Coalition's staying power and whether the Afghan government can survive after the departure of the Coalition expeditionary force in December 2014. On that subject, the ANSF is fighting well and paying the price for doing so. Today, the Afghan Minister of the Interior is in trouble with the Parliament for losing up to a few hundred policemen per week. In a similar vein, a senior American officer assigned to the theater told this reviewer in July 2013 that, today, virtually all the fighting is being done by Afghan forces, more than three-quarters of which are fighting "unilaterally," that is, without US support or partners. The Taliban has had few successes in the latest fighting season.

The press is full of pessimism, bombast, and Karzai's latest antics. Subtracting from a message of unity and resolve, the US government has vaguely threatened a post-ISAF "zero option," which could only

benefit Mullah Omar. Afghanistan is about ten months away from an election that will tell us—if it is honest—how the Afghan people assess the contending narratives and view the future. The Coalition and the Government of Afghanistan can only help the pre-election narrative by completing the future security agreement and agreeing on the post-ISAF advise-and-assist force.

This book is proof positive of how difficult and costly counterinsurgency is. It requires tremendous resources to achieve gains that often prove temporary. At the height of the surge, the Coalition used 140,000 foreign troops and over 350,000 Afghan soldiers and police officers to block 30,000 full-time Taliban and their local recruits. Success in Garmser, one of Afghanistan's more than 400 districts, required 1,000 Marines for a few years. Indeed, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, in his 2013 book, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan*, judged the Helmand deployment to be excessive, given greater needs elsewhere in theater. In my own trips to Afghanistan in 2011 and 2012, it was not unusual to see Army brigades in the eastern part of Afghanistan responsible for three provinces.

Whether or not Chandrasekaran was right, the Marines in Helmand did great work, and one can be sure that their Grunts never felt they had an excessive number of troops. The Marines in Garmser lived up to the traditional aggressive fighting standards of Marine infantry, a hardy perennial that has not gone out of style in the information age. They were among the Marine contingent awarded a Presidential Unit Citation.

Financial resources also rose to incredible heights under the Obama surge. From 2010 to 2012 inclusive, by Congressional Research Services (CRS) calculations, total US expenditures averaged 109 billion dollars per year. It is fair to ask how many more conflicts on the scale of Iraq or Afghanistan that the United States can afford in the future.

The counterinsurgency effort is not only huge and costly but also organizationally complex. Security is paramount, but it is only one line of operation. Diplomacy, development, capacity building, and rule of law are all part of what some call “armed nation-building,” and others refer to as population-centric counterinsurgency. The military surge required a civilian surge. In the Coalition, interagency cooperation was in high demand but short supply. As the overwhelming presence of coalition combat forces fades, one may expect the impetus for interagency cooperation will tend to do likewise. More importantly, while the Afghan security forces are robust, the civilian government is still weak, corrupt, and illegitimate in many eyes. Pakistan, beset by its own Taliban revolt, remains both ally and antagonist. At the risk of understatement, the uncertainties associated with the future of the conflict in the Hindu Kush are considerable.

Another dimension of the complexity here is knowledge. Large-scale counterinsurgency requires thousands of experts with area knowledge and language skills. Local intelligence officers need to understand their districts with the same level of expertise that Malkasian and the Marines did in Garmser. Sadly, many of our “strategic corporals,” to borrow General Krulak's phrase from 1997, and many of their officers have not always shown such sophistication.

The unique character of such conflicts poses tough questions for force planners: Are these levels of knowledge and language skills reasonable expectations for general purpose forces and a poorly resourced State Department? Is large-scale, expeditionary-force counterinsurgency even do-able? (The last undisputed US success was in the Philippines in 1902.) Can large-scale expeditionary forces avoid the mistakes of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan? Can forces focused on high-intensity combat rapidly transition to fighting a counterinsurgency or vice versa?

On counterinsurgency, it would seem wise to get in early and light with well-trained, area-educated forces. In this technique of COIN Lite, the advise-and-assist force should focus on developing the host nation forces and turning operations over to them as quickly as possible. All of this, of course, is more easily typed than accomplished.

It is difficult to be completely optimistic on prospects for success in Afghanistan. In the end, the future of Afghanistan will be in the hands of the Afghan government and its people. We can provide assistance and advice, but Afghans will have to win the Afghan war, if the “w” word even applies to wars in the Hindu Kush. While this challenge is daunting, it pales in comparison to what Taliban leaders will have to accomplish to have a successful outcome.

Lest he be accused of local-itis, the broad-minded Malkasian concludes that “thinking objectively about strategy demands a degree of attachment that the individual on the ground must foreswear—at least if he is to do his job. Emotional commitment, with all of its biases, is irreplaceable. Grand strategic calculations on costs and benefits are best left to far-off policy-makers” (page 274). Statesmen must figure out when, where, and on what scale to engage in this form of war among the people. No amount of skill in counterinsurgency techniques can remove the burden of strategic decisions from our nation’s leaders.



Breaking Iraq: The Ten Mistakes That Broke Iraq

By Ted Spain and Terry Turchie

Reviewed by LTC David G. Fivecoat, US Army, former Infantry Battalion Commander in Afghanistan, and veteran of three tours in Iraq

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, thousands of books have been published on the conflict. Regrettably, very few have been written by the hundreds of officers who led battalions and brigades in Mesopotamia for a year or more in combat. By my count, only six battalion commanders and one brigade commander—Chris Hughes of 2nd Battalion, 327 Infantry; Nate Sassman of 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry; Steve Russell of 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry; Pat Proctor of 2nd Battalion, 32nd Field Artillery; Jim Crider of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry; Harry Tunnel of 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment and Pete Mansoor of 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division—have written about their experiences. *Breaking Iraq: The Ten Mistakes That Broke Iraq*, by Colonel Ted Spain, US Army Retired, and Terry Turchie, adds to the short list by describing Colonel Spain’s experience leading the 18th Military Police (MP) Brigade in Baghdad, Iraq, from April 2003 to February 2004. Unlike other commander’s memoirs, *Breaking Iraq* attempts to go one step further by

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