

LTG MacFarland: Insights on *Illusions of Victory* and Iraq

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In *Illusions of Victory* author Carter Malkasian describes the cumulative events in Ramadi circa 2007 as comprising “a turning point of the Iraq War.”¹ He is correct in terms of the war fought by the US-led coalition in Iraq. Iraqis might have a contrary view given theirs has been of an all but continuous conflict since that coalition attacked in 2003. The turning point from the perspective of the country’s citizenry is arguably quite different, far broader in influence, and more negative in consequence: American support for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s retaining his position after his loss in the March 2010 election. The internal divides that continue to plague Iraq today are largely due to the overt sectarianism that characterized his tenure.

Malkasian recognizes Maliki’s role in undoing the progress made during the Awakening period (2007), as does Lieutenant General MacFarland, as discussed in the interview below. Both men avoid the common pitfall of overemphasizing a single factor as an explanation for the progress made during and in the aftermath of that too-short span of years. MacFarland’s assertion that the surge was less pivotal than others have argued is convincing and well-supported. Other factors—al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) cruelty, the group’s deliberate targeting of civilians, cohesion among tribes, US financial and other forms of support, fear of “the Persians” in Iran, and Shia politicians in general refusing to take the higher road after years of suppression under Saddam Hussein—are among those identified and analysed. No few of these topics receive attention in one or more of the many, and there are many, other books regarding al-Anbar province during the middle of the last decade. William Doyle’s *A Soldier’s Dream*, Kimberly Kagan’s *The Surge: A Military History*, Peter R. Mansoor’s *Surge*, Jim Michaels’s, *A Chance in Hell*, and Michael E. Silverman’s, *Awakening Victory*, which is a memoir by a battalion commander in Anbar during this period, cover much of the ground considered in *Illusions of Victory* from a variety of viewpoints.

It is therefore legitimate to question why Malkasian’s book deserves attention as yet another offering. The answer lies in perspective. His book is at times a broader investigation, one more strategic in perspective, and sometimes counter to the alternative sources on events in Ramadi and al-Anbar province during this critical period. Malkasian’s understanding of tribal dynamics is among the best offered by Western authors addressing competition for influencing the province. He avoids overly simplifying the situation by recognizing the myriad factors influencing Anbari support for AQI (and later the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria [ISIS]). His analysis is balanced, recognizing the tribal and individual dynamics

1 Carter Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

at play over time. The author similarly, critically, recognizes those dynamics evolved over time. Originally reluctant to employ violence against civilians other than those supporting the Baghdad government, AQI cast that hesitation aside in light of other Anbari organizations' success in competing for power and influence.

Malkasian's late entry into discussions further benefits from the passage of time. Why, he is able to ask, did the highly touted progress made prior to the 2014 departure of most coalition forces evaporate with the rise of ISIS? Yes, Maliki's (and other Iraqi leaders') malfeasance was a key element in the return to previous levels of internecine violence. Yet that exodus of US forces; consequent loss of moral, political, and financial support; and inability of Anbari leaders to maintain a cohesive resistance were undoubtedly complements to the distrust sown by Baghdad in the rise of ISIS.

These positives considerably outweigh any negatives in *Illusions of Victory*. Malkasian could have provided greater depth of analysis after positing that Colonel John L. Gronski, commander of the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, receives too little credit for setting the conditions for the Awakening. Admirable as Gronski's initiatives were, it is questionable that they established the same kind of relationships with sheikhs as did later US leaders or that Gronski's operations involved a level of risk similar to that assumed by subsequent commanders who positioned their forces in more contested parts of Iraq's urban areas. So too, more pointed consideration of what the events in Anbar offer for future counterinsurgent undertakings would have helped to balance those superficial evaluations of counterinsurgency (COIN) that suggest its total relegation to the dustbin of history rather than providing more thoughtful evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of its application in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Malkasian's primary focus is, by choice, the operational and tactical levels of war. We therefore do not but once hear of the permeating discomfort felt and suspicions held by regional Sunnis at the community level in the aftermath of Saddam's fall or the discomfort and suspicions borne of his government's replacement by an Iran-leaning authority. Little wonder that several of these communities tolerated or provided more substantive support to ISIS. He similarly does not delve into Maliki's motivations for his sectarianism, which in its rawest form was simply the overt expression of Shia vengeance after decades of suppression under Saddam's thumb. Understandably, but perhaps naively, the world has come to expect more of national leaders.²

Ironically, if we accept that Ramadi was a turning point during the first phase of Iraq's post-2003 invasion insurgency, it was equally so in 2016 when ISIS forces were defeated in the city—a defeat facilitated by a new operational approach introduced by the recently arrived commanding general of the Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria. Ramadi's fall at once shattered the myth of ISIS invincibility while at the same time convincing Iraqi leaders of America's commitment to the group's ouster. The ability of ISIS to recruit and to maintain those leaders' support suffered accordingly. As the past

2 The reviewer thanks Colonel Wade Foote, USA Retired, for his notable insights that underlie the material in this paragraph and that immediately following.

decade and a half has demonstrated the Middle East is nothing if not extraordinarily complex. Perhaps regional stability rather than ideology should take precedence when selecting America's strategic objectives.

Then a colonel, MacFarland's performance as the commander of 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, in Tal Afar and Ramadi receives considerable attention in this and many of the other books addressing the war in Iraq. His later leadership of Operation Inherent Resolve ran from September 2015 to August 2016, and contributed valuable insight on *Illusion of Victory* during this interview on January 23, 2018.

The Interview

Dr. GLENN. What is your overall impression of Carter Malkasian's book?

LTG MACFARLAND. Carter's book provided me a bit more texture regarding what had been going on around me. He filled in a lot of gaps. He's right that the success in al-Anbar and elsewhere was due to a combination of factors. An Awakening-type of event requires elements like those needed to operate an internal combustion engine: fuel, air, and a spark. The fuel was obviously the tribes and number of fighters who were willing to step up. Air was provided by the coalition; we gave it the room to grow. The enemy provided the spark by overplaying their hand and creating the backlash for the Awakening. You can't have an Awakening without all of those three elements present. And then success begets success. That's why when one tribe looked over at another tribe and saw they had a pretty good thing going, they wanted to keep up with the Joneses. That's how it spread. It created a domino effect.

GLENN. In your experience, what factors were key to abetting US-led coalition progress? Which instead reduced the extent and duration of success?

MACFARLAND. I would think the main impediment to progress was, of course, Maliki and his ilk and their natural suspicion of anything to do with arming Sunnis. I saw a very similar reluctance in Baghdad during Operation Inherent Resolve. Some things aren't going to change.

GLENN. Focusing specifically on the Awakening, Malkasian blames its "breakdown" on three factors: Maliki's government turning against the Sunnis, the tribal system's inherent instability, and the Sunnis' strong support for AQI and the Islamic State.

Do you agree with his conclusions? Considering more than coalition military capabilities alone, what could the United States have done to prevent ISIS's rise?

MACFARLAND. The Iraqi government tried to marginalize [the Sunnis] while we were there and then actively turned against them when we weren't. [On the second point,] I don't know if I would go so far as to say the tribal system is inherently unstable. After all, it has endured for over a millennium. I think it was destabilized by our actions as well as Maliki's . . . and even Saddam's. A series of actors for differing reasons actively sought to undermine or co-opt the tribes. It's going on today in Iraq during Inherent Resolve: Tehran is trying to buy off some Sunni sheikhs to help them achieve their goals, which are really not in the best

interests of the Sunnis. The MacFarland clan was a Scottish Highlands clan that fought on both sides, against or for the British, depending on the battle. The Sunni tribes are not that much different than a Highland clan in that respect. You could often find them on both sides of a fight. [Regarding the third point,] “AQI and then the Islamic State enjoyed a critical mass of Sunni support.” This was engendered by Maliki’s persecution of the Sunnis, driving them into the arms of al-Qaeda.

What could the US have done to prevent ISIS’s rise? Very simply: stay engaged. If we had not pulled out of Iraq at the end of 2010 and 2011, ISIS wouldn’t have had the ability to grow because the Sunnis would have felt they had a friendly external power in the United States that they could turn to for arbitration with Maliki and his government. But without us, they had no alternative other than ISIS. Although the Sunnis were very suspicious of ISIS, they probably believed because they had defeated al-Qaeda with the Awakening, they would be able to control ISIS. What they didn’t bargain on was that ISIS was a more virulent brand, which they weren’t able to control. But they were willing to give ISIS a shot to act as a buffer between themselves, Maliki and his government, and Tehran. Unfortunately, they were deluded in their thinking because what had allowed them to defeat al-Qaeda was our support. That wasn’t there this time.

GLENN. What did your enemy prisoners of war and other sources tell you were the bases for successful AQI and ISIS recruiting? What roles did insurgent intimidation of potential recruits, religion, money, or other factors play? How might a US-led coalition impede an insurgent’s success during future conflicts?

MACFARLAND. The basis for their recruiting was, “We’ll fight those dirty rotten Shia for you.” “What roles did insurgent intimidation of potential recruits play?” Well, they were running press gangs and forcing children in some cases to fight under their banner as things became more desperate. ISIS—and al-Qaeda to a lesser extent—forced people into their ranks. They were not all willing believers. Religion played about as much a role in recruiting as Catholicism did for the IRA [Irish Republican Army]. The Troubles weren’t really about whether or not my Irish forebears should go to Mass on feast days and honor the Virgin Mary; it was really more about the Protestants representing an external power, the British Crown. I think to a great extent the fighting in Iraq is because, to the Sunnis, the Shias also represent a Persian foreign power. They just don’t trust them. So religion’s a factor, but I don’t think it’s the only or the biggest factor.

Money? Money had lot to do with ISIS. Once they took over the oil fields in eastern Syria and then the banks in Mosul, they were an incredibly well-financed organization. One of the key things we did was begin a deep fight, a deliberate targeting of their oil, banks, and other revenue streams. And that hollowed them out. In fact, I named our counterrevenue campaign “Tidal Wave Two,” because their money was predominantly oil based and [Operation] Tidal Wave was the name of the bombing raids against the Ploesti oil fields in Romania during the Second World War. So we named our strikes on the ISIS oil fields in eastern Syria, and around Mosul, in honor of that operation. We needed to go after revenue streams, because you can have all of the ideology in the world, but you also need money to wage a significant campaign.

The other thing we must do to impede insurgent success is to have an enduring presence in eastern Syria, northern Syria, western Iraq, and northern Jordan to keep it from metastasizing.

GLENN. To what extent was there either formal or informal passage of coalition lessons learned and insights between those in-country and from rotation to rotation? Did this occur only internally to a service (Army, Marines) or between services?

MACFARLAND. What [then-Colonel] H. R. McMaster did up in Tal Afar—and I followed H. R. in Tal Afar before my brigade was ordered to move to Ramadi—was definitely a model that I lifted and shifted to our new area of operations. But the problem was that Tal Afar is a ship in a bottle. It is a Turkmen city in an Arab country, so progress there never had the potential of spreading. But because of my engagements there and the opportunity to work with police, army, and so forth, I could see that there were certain things happening in Tal Afar that were not present in Ramadi. One of the things I had to do was [identify] a mayor. The governor was basically the mayor of Ramadi, and there was effectively no governor of al-Anbar.

No police or tribal force was present, either. There was the Western Ramadi police station with about 140 cops when I got there, but they weren't really doing very much. My DCO [deputy commanding officer], Lieutenant Colonel Jim Lechner, stood up the west Jazirah police station, which was actually a pump plant on the Euphrates River. It was the first tribal police station, but it was not part of the central plan for police stations where the [US Army] Corps of Engineers or anybody else thought it should be. It was precisely where the tribes thought it should be, however. So that's where we put it, and a lot of former cops who had been trained and were still on the payroll came out of the woodwork with their old uniforms, willing to man that police station. These were guys that were in the immediate area, but not reporting for duty out of fear or intimidation.

We had to break that cycle of fear. Putting the police station where they felt strong enough to man it was critically important. The enemy also understood this, which is why they attacked the Jazirah police station with a chlorine bomb, a massive car bomb, and a big fuel truck as well. That fuel truck inflicted some pretty horrendous casualties on both US Army MPs [military police] and the Iraqi police. Moments after the attack, I drove over there and talked to the [Iraqi] lieutenant colonel station chief and offered to move them onto [Camp] Blue Diamond while we helped rebuild the police station. He said, "No, no, no. We can't let the enemy win." I call it the Iwo Jima moment, Mount Suribachi: the moment the Iraqi police put their flag back up that had been knocked down by the blast, and that afternoon [they] went out on patrol looking for the cell responsible for the truck bombing. . . . It was part of a series of events that led to the Awakening. Al-Qaeda bombed the police station, but that didn't work. So, they killed the sheikh who was contributing the young people for the police force. That was the final spark that really initiated the Awakening process. But without that spark, and the spontaneous reaction by the sheikhs, I couldn't have done what I did. Timing is everything, right?

There was no Awakening in Tal Afar. McMaster set up combat outposts, but he overwhelmed the opposition with coalition forces supported by Iraqi security forces. He leveraged the Shia population within southern Tal Afar. Northern Tal Afar was still “Indian territory” when we got there. The Awakening was the sheikhs’ idea, and I just went with it. Just as you set a thief to catch a thief, the tribal forces were the ideal counter al-Qaeda force because they were truly an indigenous force, even more than some of AQI.

“To what extent was there either formal or informal passage of lessons learned and insights between those in-country and from rotation to rotation?” There was a COIN academy in Taji, but I’m not sure how much we got out of that. *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24, hadn’t been written yet. In fact, General Petraeus, when he got there, asked me if I’d read it. And I said, “No I haven’t. Sorry.” He said, “Well you don’t need to. You’re doing everything it says.”

GLENN. How did your experiences in Tal Afar influence your approaches to COIN in Ramadi?

MACFARLAND. What I thought was good about Tal Afar was the combat outposts to secure neighborhoods, to lock them down. My idea was to leapfrog and secure neighborhoods in Ramadi, turn them over to Iraqi security forces, and then my guys could move onto the next set of combat outposts (COPs). But I knew I would have to provide the Iraqi police to fill in behind us. I thought it would be us, followed by the Iraqi Army, and then the Iraqi police. What happened in practice is that we turned COPs over directly to the Iraqi police, and the Iraqi police were relieved of responsibilities outside of Ramadi by tribal auxiliary forces.

The Iraqi Army was just not interested in fighting their way into the city. And even during Operation Inherent Resolve they said, “Well, you know, the army doesn’t really fight in cities. The police go into cities and the army stays on the outside.” The problem with that way of thinking is that the enemy was in cities like Ramadi, Mosul, and elsewhere and the police can’t do it all by themselves. The Iraqi Army has a very strong self-preservation instinct, which is something you don’t typically find in effective military forces. The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service, on the other hand, had no such problem, so we relied heavily on them in OIR.

GLENN. How do you view the author’s analysis of al-Anbar tribal relationships and motivations?

MACFARLAND. Abdul Sattar Abu Risha did not start out as the leader of the Awakening. He was the spokesperson. The older sheikhs let this young hothead be the face of the Awakening so that if anybody was going to get assassinated, it was going to be Sattar. He parlayed that into a more powerful role when he became the de facto leader, and we played a role in that. I said, “Okay, if you’re running all the risks, then you are going to get the rewards.” So I funnelled money through him to the other sheikhs which elevated his status and gave him more *wasta*. It was all quid pro quo, a symbiotic relationship.

Their sheikhs’ motivations were, in my opinion, mainly self-preservation first of all, and then economic opportunity and political power. They were concerned with two threats. They were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: the Persians—the Shia—and

al-Qaeda. We offered them a way to rid themselves of al-Qaeda by arming them. This gave them the means to defend themselves against al-Qaeda and not have to rely on Persians from Baghdad, who would be just as bad if not worse than al-Qaeda, at least in their eyes. You don't want to invite a vampire into your house if you don't have to. So we said we would help them develop a home guard. They could then secure their own neighborhood and wouldn't need help from Baghdad or al-Qaeda. It's the way things were 100 years ago when the tribes provided their own security. That's what was so attractive about this to them: it was a combination of economic incentives and the ability to defend themselves.

They also hated the Iraqi Islamic Party, the IIP—Governor Mamoun [Sami Rashid] was a member of it—which they saw as aligned with al-Qaeda because it got money from outside. So, the sheikhs saw the IIP as more part of the problem than the solution and wanted to rid themselves of it in order to become more self-governing. And economically, these sheikhs make money from all sorts of sources, either legal or questionable. Smuggling is historically what Bedouins do. Perhaps that's why there are so many truck companies in al-Anbar province to run back and forth between Jordan and Syria to Baghdad. But the tribes are also into construction. It seemed as though every sheikh has his own construction company.

GLENN. Is Malkasian correct in noting, "Certain writers later accused the Marines of opposing the [Sattar] movement" but "this is untrue?"

MACFARLAND. I would rephrase it. I would say the Marines were leery of the Sattar movement and hesitant to embrace it initially. It took them longer to come around than I would have liked, but I wouldn't say they opposed it. They were just more skeptical.

GLENN. You worked for the Marines. Did you being Army give you more slack than if you had been a marine?

MACFARLAND. It worked to my benefit. I could not have asked for a better boss than General Richard C. Zilmer. To be honest, if I had been working for an Army headquarters, I don't know that the Awakening would have happened. That's not a knock on the Army necessarily. But General Zilmer epitomized the tenets of mission command better than almost any boss I have ever had.

GLENN. Was Baghdad more willing to support Sunni counter-AQI initiatives in al-Anbar than in Baghdad itself? If so, is the author correct in concluding that the key variable was al-Anbar's distance from the capital?

MACFARLAND. Absolutely. I think the mind-set with Maliki was that he was up to his eyeballs in Sunni terrorist crocodiles there in Baghdad. If we could reduce the throughput from Syria in the pipeline that ran through al-Anbar to Baghdad, it was a good thing. There were no real Shia equities at risk out there. I think he figured what happens in al-Anbar would stay in al-Anbar. He started to get a little more attentive when the Awakening moved closer to Baghdad, but as long as it remained out west he wasn't too worried. Nevertheless, he remained reluctant to provide any heavy weapons that could eventually be used against Iraqi security forces.

GLENN. But Fallujah and Ramadi weren't really that far away from Baghdad.

MACFARLAND. Well, Fallujah is pretty close. . . . And in Baghdad, the Shia see Fallujah as the boogeyman, the number one place they need to worry about. It is astride the historic line of drift of bad actors and is the first major town of any size outside of Baghdad that is Sunni. They are pretty worried about it and keep an eye on it. So, yeah, Carter was right about that.

GLENN. Malkasian wrote, "In September 2015, Sean MacFarland, now a lieutenant general, became the commander of US forces in Iraq and Syria. . . . Even he withheld from rekindling the Awakening. He realized that the movement was too broken and discredited to be resurrected." Comment.

MACFARLAND. I wouldn't say that I withheld from it. I would say that there was not an opportunity. Some of the old gang was around but their influence was much diminished. Maliki had done a pretty thorough job of undermining the tribal structure and authority. Al-Qaeda wasn't as focused as ISIS on getting everyone to behave a certain way. As long as you were taking the fight to the Americans or fighting the Shia, that was good enough for AQI. They would worry about installing their catechism—or whatever they call it—later.

Not so with ISIS. They were incredibly brutal. Everyone had to walk the talk, or else. People had to live a certain way, which was onerous even by al-Qaeda standards. Sunni tribes could sit on the fence with al-Qaeda. As long as they let AQI fighters pass through their area, they would often leave the tribes alone. It was live and let live. There was none of that with ISIS. If the Sunni sheikhs felt that if in Operation Iraqi Freedom they were caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, by the time coalition forces returned to al-Anbar in Operation Inherent Resolve they were completely submerged by the deep blue sea and the devil was underwater with them. It would have been too hard; it would have been a very artificial Awakening. It was a grassroots movement in '06, but it would have been mostly Astroturf in 2015.

GLENN. Ultimately, Malkasian concludes, "The people of Anbar would have been better off had the United States stayed out of Iraq in the first place." Your perspective?

MACFARLAND. Possibly. Under Saddam, that was probably true because Saddam didn't mess with the Sunnis too badly. Now the 60–70 percent of Iraqis elsewhere in Iraq who were Shia would probably disagree with that. The reality is, Sunni and Shia, Arab and Kurd, could all have gotten along in a federalized Iraq had we stayed engaged after we defeated al-Qaeda. We were in the driver's seat. We could have ensured a good outcome for that country and put it on the road to stability. Instead, we walked away and the country fell apart . . . much to the advantage of the Iranians.

Right now there is a good prime minister in Iraq named Haider al-Abadi. If we work with him I think the people of al-Anbar might find a *modus vivendi* with the government of Iraq. But we'll have to stay engaged. It won't be as good for the Sunnis as it was during their "salad days" under Saddam. The Anbaris' memory of those days is why we

had to fight them so hard until we said, “You know, you aren’t the only ones that don’t like the Iranians. We don’t think much of them either.” And the scales then fell from the sheikhs’ eyes. They also realized we could give them a lot more money than the Iranians ever would. Unfortunately, we turned our backs on them, and they paid the price for their partnership with the United States much as was the case with [the] South Vietnamese.

GLENN. Were you there when Maliki stayed in power after being defeated in an election?

MACFARLAND. No, but I read about it. That was a strategic tipping point.

GLENN. Any concluding thoughts? How does this compare with other books on the Awakening?

MACFARLAND. Some of them have a very noticeable slant. There’s the Marine history of the Awakening. I won’t render judgment on that. It’s a very complicated story. Other people have written about it. I don’t know that anyone will get to all the little subcurrents and things that were happening simultaneously out there, most of which I didn’t know about, and few of which I controlled. My principal accomplishment was managing to navigate through all those various currents and eddies to achieve my military objectives, riding on top of them without capsizing the boat. I didn’t know what was going on beneath the surface, especially with the tribal dynamics. And there’s more to them than Carter has written about or that anybody can probably ever write about or know.

None of the Sunni sheikhs are writing any books, and if they did they would have their own bias. It’s not like the end of the Second World War when we interviewed all the German generals and they told us, “You did this and I did that” because they kept meticulous records and could cross-reference what happened on a particular day. We can’t do that in this war, so we’ll never know. The al-Qaeda guys are all dead or scattered, and so are a lot of sheikhs. But I think Carter does as good a job as any, and better than most, in piecing it together and coming up with some sort of coherent narrative.

As my previous remarks make clear, tribal relations in al-Anbar were extremely complex. For example, the chief of police in al-Anbar worked with a sheikh. The chief of police used to be the head of the border patrol, and the sheikh was a smuggler. It was kind of like a Road Runner-Wile E. Coyote relationship, [a] love-hate relationship. They had an understanding of what was allowed, what wasn’t allowed. And of course they’re all intermarried with one another. Until you can get to that level of understanding of the dynamics out there, it’s like walking into a big family argument at Thanksgiving but you aren’t part of the family. They may be talking about something that happened to a cousin’s sister-in-law fifteen years ago. And you’re wondering, “What the hell are you people talking about?” But they’ve all got it right there, in their heads. It’s as if it happened yesterday to them.

Trying to understand how that perspective affected the sheikhs’ thinking, and how they dealt with one another, was a complete waste of time for me. I just decided, “I’m just going to back a few sheikhs, and hope the other ones will fall in line to get CERP [Commanders

Emergency Response program] money or whatever. That's how I'm going to play this game." I couldn't learn how to play cricket. It was too hard for me in the time I had. I was just going find somebody to bat for me.

A last note . . . I couldn't have done half of what I did without [Stu(art) Jones, ambassador to Iraq from 2014–16]. He opened a lot of doors for me. Ambassadors are such important players, and they don't get enough credit.

Interviewer's Closing Thoughts

Despite the claims of some, counterinsurgency is no more dead than is conflict. Students of the latter continue to learn, adapting lessons from post-World War II, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere to inform practitioners of the former. And adapt they must. Insurgents evolve, adopting new techniques, and technologies, as well as finding some success in urban areas, historically the graveyard of such movements. Well-reasoned additions to the literature and clear-eyed insights, such as those offered by Malkasian and MacFarland, provide guidance for essential counteradaptation and, ideally, innovations that will keep us "left of boom" in years to come.