

Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran

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A *New York Times* Notable Book

The author of the acclaimed bestseller and National Book Award finalist, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, tells the startling, behind-the-scenes story of the US's political and military misadventure in Afghanistan. In this meticulously reported and illuminating book, Rajiv Chandrasekaran focuses on southern Afghanistan in the year of President Obama's surge, and reveals the epic tug of war that occurred between the president and a military that increasingly went its own way. The profound ramifications this political battle had on the region and the world are laid bare through a cast of fascinating characters—disillusioned and inept diplomats, frustrated soldiers, headstrong officers—who played a part in the process of pumping American money and soldiers into Afghan nation-building. What emerges in *Little America* is a detailed picture of unsavory compromise—warlords who were to be marginalized suddenly embraced, the Karzai family transformed from foe to friend, fighting corruption no longer a top priority—and a venture that became politically, financially, and strategically unsustainable.

Also:
A *Washington Post* Notable Book
A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* Best Book of the Year

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Little America*:

“Beautifully written. . . . A brilliant and courageous work of reportage. . . . Rajiv Chandrasekaran has done it again. Like *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, *Little America* is a . . . deeply reported account of how a divided United States government and its dysfunctional bureaucracy have foiled American efforts abroad.”
—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Fascinating and fresh . . . Chandrasekaran is a superb reporter and graceful writer whose individual vignettes, focused on military and civilian misfires, are on-target and often mortifying.”
—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Brilliant . . . Only a journalist with Chandrasekaran’s experience and skill could tell this extraordinarily complicated story with such clarity.”
—*Newsday*

“A scalding and in-depth critique of U.S. policy and performance in Afghanistan.”
—*The Star-Ledger*

“Chandrasekaran draws vivid sketches of how Karzai and his family and their allies operate as a gang of looters, frustrating every attempt to create an honest government that could confront their Taliban enemy . . . The reader gets a keen sense of the chaos that reigns among the Americans and their allies.”
—*The Washington Post*

“A thoughtful guide to President Obama’s ‘good war’ [and] a devastating indictment of a dysfunctional war machine . . . Chandrasekaran’s expose is a stark warning to rethink how America uses its power.”
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Chandrasekaran’s apt portrayal of the Afghan perspective and on-the-ground tensions makes the book a must for policy shapers and voters alike.”
—*Mother Jones*

“Sharp and subtle . . . Enormously informative . . . *Little America* does not disappoint.”
—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“A must-read account . . . *Little America* is the best work yet in addressing our military-diplomatic campaign in Afghanistan and the dysfunction that stymies it.”
—Peter J. Munson, *Small Wars Journal*

“Searing . . . Solid and timely reporting, crackling prose, and more than a little controversy will make this one of the summer’s hot reads.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Clearheaded . . . Well-researched and compelling . . . Chandrasekaran captures the absurdity of a bumbling bureaucracy attempting to reengineer in its own image a society that is half a world away . . . A timely, convincing portrait of an occupation in crisis.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Drawing on interviews with key participants and three years of first-hand reportage, Chandrasekaran delivers a bracing diagnosis of the problem.”
—*Booklist*

About the Author
Rajiv Chandrasekaran is senior correspondent and associate editor of *The Washington Post*, where he has worked since 1994. He has been the newspaper's bureau chief in Baghdad, Cairo, and Southeast Asia, and has been covering Afghanistan off and on for a decade. His first book, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, won the Overseas Press Club book award. He lives in Washington, D.C.

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Prologue

Set atop a dusty plain between two ridgelines, the orchards of Now Zad once yielded pomegranates as large as softballs, luring visitors from across southern Afghanistan during the harvest season. After they gorged on the juicy magenta fruit, most headed home. Others grew so intoxicated by the prospect of farming the fertile soil that they transplanted their lives. Waves of settlers in the 1960s and 1970s transformed Now Zad, which means “newborn” in Persian, into the fourth largest city in Helmand province.

By the fall of 2006, the city looked like old death. The pomegranate fields had been booby-trapped with makeshift mines. Homes and shops had been blown to rubble. Bullet holes pocked the few walls left standing.

The Taliban had invaded Now Zad with hundreds of fighters earlier that year. After desperate pleas from Afghan president Hamid Karzai, the British commanders who were responsible for Helmand under a NATO security agreement dispatched a platoon of Ghurkas to evict the insurgents. But the fearsome Nepalese warriors were outmanned by the Taliban. A tense standoff ensued as the insurgents roamed the city and the Ghurkas hunkered down inside the police station. Every few days, the Taliban would try to storm the compound, sometimes getting close enough to hurl grenades, but the Ghurkas, and subsequent contingents of British troops, managed to keep the enemy at bay with torrents of bullets and rockets. As the fight- ing escalated, most residents fled.

The Brits were bent on simple survival. Soldiers crouched in their guard towers, gazing at the city through rifle scopes. They named a once lush pomegranate grove just a few hundred yards away Sherwood Forest. A strip of walled compounds teeming with fighters from across the border—their shouts in Urdu revealed their provenance—became known as Pakistani Alley. If the soldiers could have left their Alamo, there would have been no Afghan policemen or soldiers to accompany them on patrol, at least none who were interested in anything more than self-enrichment. The portly police chief, who holed up in the same compound as the Brits, spent his days finding the last few residents to extort and the last few boys to molest.

U.S. Marine Brigadier General Larry Nicholson was appalled when he visited Now Zad on a February 2009 reconnais- sance trip. The first thing he saw when he landed was a wall at the police station that was scrawled with graffiti: welcome to hell. American Marines had relieved the British the year before, and they had expanded the patrol zone by a few blocks, but they were still surrounded on three sides by insurgents

hiding in trenches and abandoned houses. A debris-strewn no-man's-land lay in between, trod only by wild dogs. Injuries from IEDs—improvised explosive devices—were so common, and so dire, that the Marine company in Now Zad was the only one in the country to be assigned two trauma doctors and two armored vehicles with mobile operating theaters.

To Nicholson, a compact former infantryman whose ruddy complexion made his weathered face appear perpetually sun- burned, the opposing forces staring at each other reminded him of what it must have been like at Verdun during the epic trench battle between the French and Germans in World War I. He met a Marine at Now Zad who told him, "Sir, we patrol until we hit an IED, and then we call in a medevac and go back" to the base. "And then we do it again the next day."

The first U.S. Marines had arrived in Now Zad in May 2008 on a mission to train Afghan security forces. The ninety-five-man reinforced platoon was led by Lieutenant Arthur Karell, a twenty-seven-year-old with degrees from Harvard and the University of Virginia who had postponed practicing law for the adventure of combat. When he landed at the NATO base in Kandahar, about a hundred miles to the southeast, he was given a satellite map of Now Zad marked with a small blue star that indicated where he was to build a police station to house newly trained Afghan policemen. But when he got to Now Zad, he discovered the blue star was four miles beyond the British perimeter. In between were Taliban bunkers and minefields. He crumpled up the map.

In his seven months in the city, the only civilians he saw were a few brave farmers from a nearby village who came looking for firewood. When he led his Marines on patrol, they were met with gunfire less than three hundred meters from the base. His platoon killed dozens of insurgents, but at a cost: One of his men was sent home in a casket, and 20 percent had to be evacuated because of injuries. At first, despite the danger, his Marines didn't complain. There were plenty of bad guys to kill. But even the most trigger-happy eventually started to wonder why they were in a town that had been abandoned. "There's nobody here," they said to Karell. "Why are we here?"

When Nicholson became the top Marine commander in Afghanistan in April 2009, he resolved to save Now Zad. IEDs had blown off the legs of more than two dozen Americans in and around the city. Fighting a war of attrition with fixed posi- tions was not something Marines did, at least not in his book. "If we're not showing progress, if we're not showing move- ment towards stability, what the fuck are we doing?" he asked. The situation was emblematic to him of everything that was wrong with the war.

The officers working for him agreed, as did Helmand's governor, but his bosses at the NATO regional headquarters in Kandahar felt differently, as did the American and British diplomats at the reconstruction office in the provincial capital. They maintained that Now Zad was a ghost town that lacked the strategic significance to merit more troops and dollars. They believed the stalemate was a good enough outcome in an imperfect war: A small unit of Marines had succeeded in tying down hundreds of insurgents who couldn't launch attacks else- where. Nicholson was told not to worry about Now Zad.

But he would not let go. His job was to protect the people of Helmand, and that meant allowing the displaced to return home. He bristled when British and American officials told him that the former residents of Now Zad would not come back. That's how people in the West might behave, but Afghans, he believed, would act differently. The only real assets most Helmandis had were their homes and their land. Nicholson felt they would reclaim them if they could.

It seemed as though every day he received word of another American double amputee in Now Zad. Each folded, handwrit- ten casualty notification his aide passed to him stopped his heart a beat longer. The losses

of his brother Marines had to be worth something. Failing to act, he thought, would mean they had sacrificed lives and limbs in vain, and it would condemn more Marines to the same fate. He pondered what to do.

When Nicholson's political adviser, John Kael Weston, the diplomat he trusted most, arrived in Helmand that June and asked the general which outpost he should visit first, Nichol- son did not mention the places where most of his troops were conducting counterinsurgency operations.

"Kael," he said, "you've got to go to Now Zad."

At first glance, the thirty-seven-year-old Weston seemed like a surfer who'd taken a wrong turn on the way to the beach, but his tousled hair and untucked shirts belied his place among the most erudite and experienced diplomats of his generation. Weston had spent more time in Iraq and Afghanistan than anyone else at the State Department. By the time he landed at Camp Leatherneck, the Marine headquarters in Helmand, he had already put in six consecutive years in the two war zones, with just a few short breaks to visit family and friends back home.

On the U.S. Embassy's organizational chart, Weston was listed as the State Department representative to the Second Marine Expeditionary Brigade. He was supposed to advise the Marines about Afghan government matters, palaver with local leaders, and keep his bosses in Kandahar and Kabul apprised of political developments in the Marine area of operations. Fel- low diplomats who had similar jobs generally stuck to those requirements, but Weston saw his writ in more expansive terms. He was the brigade's political commissar. He constantly reminded the Marines that the military had been deployed in support of the Afghan government, not the other way around. And he was Nicholson's confidant. They had forged an endur- ing friendship while serving side by side for a year in the Iraqi hellhole of Fallujah. The general could open up to him, sharing doubts and gossip, in ways he could never do with the offi- cers under his command. Their close relationship also meant Weston could do what none of the Marines could: When he thought Nicholson was making a mistake, he could walk into the general's office and say so.

Weston's helicopter landed in Now Zad at night. Moonlight illuminated the jagged cliffs as he descended. Over the next three days, he climbed a guard tower to see Sherwood Forest, where the dead pomegranate trees were rigged with explo- sives. He walked through the shuttered bazaar, praying that his next footfall would not be atop a pressure-plate IED buried in the dirt. Halfway through the patrol, he asked the corpo- ral ahead of him, who was scanning the ground with a metal detector, how much training he had received to use the device. "Well, sir," the corporal replied nonchalantly, "not as much as you'd like to think."

Later on, Weston talked to a few Afghan men who had con- gregated at a mosque. Some told him the Marine presence was encouraging the Taliban to occupy the city, and others pleaded for the Americans to stay. The following day, he mourned with the Marines of Golf Company when they received word that Corporal Matthew Lembke, who had enlisted on his eighteenth birthday and served two tours in Iraq, then reupped to deploy with his buddies to Afghanistan, had died from an infection. Three weeks earlier, he had stepped on an IED while on a night patrol. The blast had blown off his legs and deposited the rest of him in the crater left by the bomb.

Weston had supported President Barack Obama's decision in early 2009 to deploy 21,000 more troops to Afghanistan. He too believed Afghanistan was the war that the nation had to fight after 9/11. The war that had to be won.

But after almost eight years of fighting, what did that mean? Weston shared Obama's view that the new troops—about half of whom were Marines under Nicholson's command—needed to be directed toward only

the most critical areas, the most vital fights. Their job was to hammer the Taliban so that it no longer posed an existential threat to the Afghan government. In some cities and towns, that would require a protect-the-population strategy. In others, the Americans would have to strike hard and fast against insurgent redoubts, but leave the arduous work of security and governing to the Afghans. It was, after all, their country, and Weston knew well the dangers of trying to do too much for them.

As he prepared to depart the outpost, a young corporal approached him. “Sir, I just hope this all adds up,” he said. “All of my friends are getting hurt over here.” *That’s why I’m here, Weston thought. My job, and the general’s job, is to make sure that by the time those guys are out on foot patrol, it is going to add up to something.* Now Zad seemed like a blood feud to him. “It is truly an area where you’ve got a company of bad guys versus a company of good guys,” he told his parents in an audio recording he sent them shortly after the trip. “The ques- tion for me, the general, and others at headquarters is going to be: What kind of further effort do you put towards a place like Now Zad?”

He would answer that question three months later. By then, Nawa, Garmser, and Khan Neshin—the districts that had been the Marines’ initial focus—had grown relatively quiet. Nich- olson wanted to address other problems in the province, and the arrival of a replacement battalion in northern Helmand provided an opportunity to make a big push in Now Zad. One night in early October, Nicholson made his pitch to Weston.
“I’m frustrated,” he said. “I feel like a bulldog who wants two more links in my chain.”

“You’re on twitch muscles,” Weston replied.

“I am. There are places I can’t go right now and it’s killing me,” Nicholson said. “I’d like to finish Now Zad because I think there’s a strategic payback and benefit of showing people what we’re doing—we’ll repopulate the second largest city in Hel- mand.” (Only Nicholson thought Now Zad was once that big. Afghan records listed it as fourth.)

“The people have to want to come back,” Weston said. “And right now, it doesn’t sound like they want to.”

Such raw discussions did not occur often among civilians and generals, but Weston and Nicholson trusted each other.
“If you clear it, they will come,” Nicholson continued. “I’m just being honest with you,” Weston said. “I don’t believe in the time we’ve got that Now Zad is where we should focus our attention. Our report card ain’t going to be about Now Zad.”

“When Now Zad starts to be repopulated, it will be one of the biggest stories to come out of Afghanistan.”

“If the world still cares about Afghanistan.”

“The world will care about it,” Nicholson said.

The next morning, Weston was in his office eating a bowl of instant oatmeal. He explained to me that his opposition to focusing on Now Zad was rooted not just in the risk of casualties in seizing an empty town. Committing more forces there, in his view, would mean that Nicholson would have fewer Marines to tackle places far more vital to Afghanistan’s security.

Back in Washington, Obama was considering a request from the military to send 40,000 more troops to the war front. Nicholson and every Marine officer I met thought America needed more boots in Afghanistan. But

not Weston. For him, military commanders needed to be more judicious in how they applied the forces already on the ground. He didn't believe Marines should be charging into remote hamlets in the eighth year of the war. He believed the war should be about triage—protecting the most important cities and towns so the Afghan govern- ment would have a fighting chance of holding on to power.

Two months earlier, he had been sitting next to Nicholson in a conference room during a planning session for an assault on Now Zad. Halfway through, Nicholson had been handed a folded note. A twenty-one-year-old Navy petty officer, Anthony Garcia, who had been serving as a medic for a Marine platoon, had been killed by a roadside bomb in a district almost as remote as Now Zad. The message said Garcia's comrades were still trying to remove his corpse from the smoldering wreckage.

That night, at fifteen minutes after midnight, Weston stood with Nicholson as Garcia's flag-draped body bag was hoisted across the tarmac, between a long row of ramrod-straight Marines, and placed inside a C-130 Hercules transport plane. The chaplain said a prayer, and Nicholson walked up the tail ramp, knelt before his fallen fighter, and paid his respects. The following day brought news that four Marines in the same area had burned to death in their Humvee after striking another bomb.

Weston knew war meant middle-of-the-night repatriation ceremonies, but he wanted each grieving parent who received a knock at the door from Marines in dress blues, bearing the worst possible news a father or mother ever could receive, to know their son had died fighting for key terrain.
In August 2007, exactly two years before Kael Weston gazed on Anthony Garcia's body bag, Senator Barack Obama had declared Afghanistan "the war that has to be won." He pledged to deploy more troops and increase reconstruction funds. "We will not repeat the mistake of the past, when we turned our back on Afghanistan," he had said. "As 9/11 showed us, the security of Afghanistan and America is shared."

For Obama, Afghanistan had been the good war, the war that began with two fallen towers, not the war that stemmed from faulty intelligence and exaggerated claims of weapons of mass destruction. Republicans and Democrats alike had embraced the Afghan operation—to exact revenge and prevent another attack, to sideline radical mullahs and allow girls to attend school. But the war in Iraq had distracted the Pentagon and the White House and had diverted troops, helicopters, and other essential resources from Afghanistan.

When he moved into the White House in January 2009, Obama sought to make good on his campaign promise. His administration's approach to salvaging the failing war, forged through sometimes contentious discussions among his national security team, amounted to calling a mulligan in the eighth year of the conflict: He doubled troop levels, dispatched thousands more civilian advisers, devoted vast sums to recon- struction, and demanded greater accountability from Karzai's government. The Pentagon and the State Department put their best people onto the challenge, many of whom had gleaned valuable counterinsurgency experience from their years in Iraq.

I traveled to Afghanistan soon after Obama's inauguration to observe the war he had inherited, and I returned more than a dozen times over the following two and a half years to track America's progress there. I flew with generals and hiked with grunts, feasted with warlords and walked fields with share- croppers, ducked my head during firefights and witnessed the human toll of roadside bombs. This book traces Obama's war, from early 2009 to the summer of 2011—from the surge to the drawdown. It is set in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, where most of the new troops were sent, and where the story of the United States in Afghanistan began in the late 1940s, when Americans launched an enormous development effort whose legacy is etched across the Helmand River Valley.

After observing the dysfunctional American attempt to secure and rebuild Iraq, I wondered whether we could get Afghanistan right. Had we learned from our failures? Would more troops, civilian advisers, and reconstruction funds resuscitate a flatlining war? Would a protect-the-population counterinsurgency strategy work in Afghanistan? Would the Pakistanis crack down on Taliban sanctuaries in their country, and would Karzai work in good faith with the United States?

Confronted with a stubborn insurgency in a primitive land, could officials in Washington adapt? Could we wage a good war?

PART ONE

Grand Dreams

1

An Enchanting Time

PAUL JONES ARRIVED in a Chevy pickup, billowing dust clouds in his wake as he crossed the desolate desert. The khaki-clad engineer had set out from his base soon after first light to observe a massive construction project aimed at transforming the long- neglected valley along Afghanistan's Helmand River into a modern society. Irrigation canals would feed new farms that would produce so much food that the country would export the surplus for profit. New towns, with Western-style schools, hospitals, and recreation centers, would rise from the sand. So too would factories, fed by electricity from a generator at a dam upriver. Jones had witnessed a similar metamorphosis near his house on the outskirts of Sacramento, and he was certain it could be duplicated on the moonscape of southern Afghanistan.

Jones was sixty-three but appeared as hale and trim as a man two decades younger, save for his graying hair, which he cov- ered with a hat or helmet while outside. One of his sons, an Army aviator, had been killed in the war a few years earlier. His wife, who remained at the family home, could not fathom why he wanted to embrace a hardscrabble existence halfway around the world. He had been indecisive, despite his employer's urg- ing, until he heard a preacher on an AM radio station out of Modesto: "Go into a far country—a strange land—inhabited by a different people. Let God within you point the way!" So he let himself be lured by the prospect of adventure and altruism. His country and his employer, the construction firm Morrison-Knudsen, were doing something grand and noble. He wanted to be a part of it.

The year was 1951.

Before he departed the United States, his boss told him that the company's first residential project, encompassing 16,000 acres, "must be completed at once." The Afghan government had promised new settlers, who had begun traveling west and south to Helmand on meandering camel trains, that they would be able to farm irrigated fields within sixty days. But surveyors had not yet finished apportioning the plots, and construction crews had not even begun to dig the canals.

To oversee the work, Jones had to leave his comfortable base, which had whitewashed barracks, a weekly movie night, and food that, he reckoned, could compete with the best restau- rants in San Francisco, whipped

up by Afghans who had been trained by Americans in Kabul. One recent menu had featured steak, fried potatoes, fresh chard, and canned pineapple. There were even cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer to slug back at the end of the day. Almost everything at the base had been sent by sea from California or Oregon and then trucked for six hun- dred miles from Karachi.

Plans drafted by his fellow engineers specified that the first settlement be divided into four villages spaced exactly four miles apart. Each would have 120 identical single-story multi- family dwellings in long rows. Every family would receive an apartment—four to a building—and a half acre of land nearby on which to plant a personal garden. The families would also get at least 10 acres of farmland outside the village on which they were to raise crops for sale. Alfalfa, clover, cotton, grapes, fruit trees, and wheat were to cover a 2,000-acre experimental farm that would verify which crops were best for the new residents.

On that cloudless but chilly February morning, Jones toured Village No. 1 with Jan Mohammed, the director of building construction for the Helmand Valley agricultural commission. Jones recorded his recollection of the conversation and his guide's accent:

"What else will be on this project?" he asked Jan.

"We will have a central city. Here will be a big hotel—big mosque—big business. . . . In each village we will have school through *eight* grade—compoolsury education for both boys and girls, as you say in Amrika."

"And you will have high schools?" "Oh, yes—high schools. Here *weel* be ooneeversitee." Jones wanted to know what crops the people would grow.

"Oh, many *theengs*—wheat, cotton, corn, sugar beets, alfalfa, clover, fruit. We will have sugar mill and *fabreek* factory."

What about electricity?

"We want that very soon," Jan said. "We weel have hospitals.

We *weel* have sports area in each village."

"How long will it take to get going on these things, Jan?"

"Maybe ten to fifteen years." "That will be marvelous."

As Jones watched Afghan laborers toiling under American
supervision, he came to share Jan's enthusiasm. A modern Afghanistan would soon rise from centuries of conflict and neglect. He was certain he was witnessing "the beginning of a new civilization."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lynda Wright:

This Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan book is not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you receive by reading this book is definitely information inside this book incredible fresh, you will get info which is getting deeper a person read a lot of information you

will get. This specific Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan without we realize teach the one who reading through it become critical in considering and analyzing. Don't always be worry Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan can bring whenever you are and not make your case space or bookshelves' turn out to be full because you can have it within your lovely laptop even cell phone. This Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan having excellent arrangement in word as well as layout, so you will not really feel uninterested in reading.

Anderson Austin:

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Marcus Casale:

In this time globalization it is important to someone to find information. The information will make someone to understand the condition of the world. The condition of the world makes the information much easier to share. You can find a lot of referrals to get information example: internet, paper, book, and soon. You can view that now, a lot of publisher this print many kinds of book. The book that recommended for your requirements is Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan this guide consist a lot of the information in the condition of this world now. This kind of book was represented just how can the world has grown up. The vocabulary styles that writer value to explain it is easy to understand. Often the writer made some exploration when he makes this book. That's why this book appropriate all of you.

Donna Muniz:

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