



**J. Kael Weston.** *The Mirror Test: America at War in Iraq and Afghanistan.* Knopf, 2016. 608 pp 28.95, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-385-35112-6.

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Over the last decade and a half, the war memoir has emerged as a new and compelling genre, a place where soldiers home from combat are able to share their experiences on the front lines with a broader public hungry to feel a part of the war effort. Relaying tales of heroism, courage, and fraternal bonding accompanied by oftentimes graphic descriptions of combat operations, today's war memoirs often leave the reader with the classic impression of lions led by donkeys: brave, competent, and committed brothers fighting a war being mismanaged by politicians who do not understand the nature of the conflict they face.

In *The Mirror Test*, Kael Weston continues this tradition with a description of his time as a State Department official on the front lines in Iraq and Afghanistan. He describes his experiences as a civilian political officer embedded with military units: the difficulty of making decisions that affect the safety of those around him, the cognitive dissonance of trying to explain to Gold Star parents the meaning of the sacrifice their child made, and the disconnect between Washington elites making policy and infantry soldiers dying for it. The title of the book comes from a medical phrase military doctors use to describe the first look in the mirror that soldiers take after suffering grievous wounds to the face. It is that first look, he explains, that determines how a soldier will choose to deal with

his/her recovery and muster the resilience to move on despite the trauma. The intended theme for the book, therefore, is that America faces a "mirror test" of sorts—it must come to terms with the damage that fifteen years of war has inflicted, not just in physical disabilities (though those are plentiful enough) but also the damage done to America's righteous image as liberator and global leader.

The book is divided into three parts: the "bad war" (Iraq), the "good war" (Afghanistan), and the war at home. Arriving in Anbar Province just in time for the Second Battle of Fallujah, Weston is witness to three years of war in the most violent city in Iraq, leaving just as the Anbar Awakening began to successfully reduce violence in the province. He is then shuttled to Khost Province in Afghanistan, where he worked with Provincial Reconstruction Teams, back to Iraq and Sadr City, and finally to Afghanistan's Helmand Province where he worked with familiar Marine faces before and during the 2010 surge. The final part is then dedicated to a discussion of the impact of the war stateside—from the disconnect between the broader public and military sacrifice to the impact of casualties on the still living, to the cognitive dissonance of the George W. Bush Library's portrayal of America's longest wars. It is an unvarnished look into the constant tension between

civilians and the military, and at its heart a memorial to those who lost their lives and livelihoods trying to serve their country, whether their home be in the United States, Iraq, or Afghanistan.

To his enduring credit, for seven years Weston served as State's liaison to the military in some of the world's most dangerous places. His perspective is unique: as the lone civilian in the midst of active conflict zones, he is able to bridge the gap between the policy priorities in Washington and the daily experiences of military operators in the field; as perhaps the only American in those regions to stay over the course of years, he can offer continuity and perspective of long-term trends that a single deployment cannot. He recalls, "Few Marines, even the generals, knew as much as I did—because I was the only one with a direct line into the policy-making side of government" (p. 131).

Weston offers insight into civil-military relations in Iraq and Afghanistan, adding complexity to the trite insistence of Bush administration officials that they separated the political from the military. In fact, his references to the level of political oversight in Fallujah and the rest of Iraq reveal that Washington was far more involved in military decision making than previously known, and that this interference was oftentimes unwelcome and counterproductive.

His accounting brings the brutal reality of war to the forefront and puts front and center the human element of the conflict—the impact of abstract policies and political preferences on individual Marines, Iraqis, and Afghans. Weston's lasting guilt over the decision to disperse Marines throughout Anbar Province for the January 2005 elections—a decision that would result in the largest single casualty incident over the course of either war—evokes a strong sympathy with commanders in the field who must make decisions day in and day out that jeopardize the security of their subordinates.

Weston further adds welcome nuance to the gray tones of counterinsurgency and the challenges of operating in a host country that doesn't necessarily welcome your presence, without overdoing the emphasis on "three cups of tea." Whereas he finds great difficulty persuading Iraqis to cooperate with US forces in the absence of security guarantees, he finds Afghans more friendly and welcoming. The way he contextualizes the efficacy of tribal engagement and abandons a "one-size-fits-all" approach to wartime strategy is a welcome departure from a policy community who tried to apply the wrong lessons of Iraq to Afghanistan, with little success.

However, despite Weston's vast experience and emphasis on the human element, the tone and attitude of the book at times come with their own dissonance. He insists that he keeps quiet about his opinions on the meaning of the Iraqi ballots he commandeered from the elections of 2005 and 2006 out of respect for Gold Star families, yet publishes a book full of cynical and angry comments about the futile nature of the mission in Iraq. While Weston's anger and sense of betrayal is certainly understandable, his memoir reads not as a thoughtful and critical analysis of fifteen years of conflict and its meaning for the future of American policy, but rather an opportunity to exorcise his own demons about his participation in two frustrating and seemingly endless conflicts.

The book is further confused with distracting stories that are only tangentially related to his topic at best—a chapter on a road trip out west that includes a puzzling discussion of Japanese internment and nuclear testing in Nevada, the repeated emphasis on his family's military experience in past conflicts, the undue condemnation of the logistics branch of the military disparagingly referred to in theater as "fobbits." This misdirected criticism causes the reader to wonder whether Weston is really frustrated with American policy in Iraq and Afghanistan or just disillusioned with America as a whole. True, the United States has a

checkered history regarding human rights, and the experiences of those who spend most of their deployment “inside the wire” are different from those in small combat outposts and on the front lines, but these sidebars only serve to distract from the focus and stated themes of the book.

In this, Weston fails to live up to the promise of his volume. His unique position and perspective could have offered a damning indictment of an administration more concerned about parochial politics and optics than the reality of the situation it was facing. He could have offered a thoughtful and careful look at the ways in which civil-military conflict, and the inattention of policymakers in Washington to the brutal reality of war, resulted in too many dead and maimed and tarnished the American image at home and abroad. However, the raw and unfiltered nature of his commentary forces the reader to do most of the analytical work for him, leaving us with a confused sense of the overall message he is trying to convey. Rather than a careful and critical look at fifteen years of war—the obvious goal of the book—Weston instead has produced just another war memoir, one that will do little to convince anyone not already predisposed to his political leanings of the necessity of a national reckoning over the nature of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, its consequences, and the need for resilience.

The legacies of Iraq and Afghanistan continue to shape the American public and its leaders today. Combat veterans are the single largest risk demographic for suicide, and the ability of modern medicine to save lives in the field has resulted in an extraordinary number of Americans permanently disabled from service. The image of America as a righteous global superpower and invincible force has been tarnished perhaps forever. Weston is right that the people of the United States must reconcile the intentions and execution of two bloody wars that continue to dominate national security policy today, and that that reconcil-

iation process will likely be painful and complex. However, it is clear that a structured discourse about the legacy of the wars, and the resilience needed to learn and adapt, are still a ways off in the distance.

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