



RENEWING THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE



We had the Watches. They had the Time

A Witness Account of the War in Afghanistan

Carol Burke

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Renewing the American Narrative

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This series calls for new visions, voices, and ideas in telling the American story through a focus on the creative energies and generative powers of the American narrative. As opposed to assuming a fixed, inherited narrative for the total American experience, this series argues that American history has been a story of inclusion and conflict, renewal and regression, revision and reversion. It examines the values, tensions, and structures of the American Idea that motivate and compel rethinking and revising the American narrative. It stresses inclusion of so-called “others” – the marginalized, the unseen, and the unheard. Rather than simply repeating the slogans of the past, the series assumes the American story demands and dramatizes renewal by engaging the questions, crises, and challenges to the American story itself and to the democratic institutions that cultivate and propagate it.

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*The opinions expressed in this book are my own and not the opinions
of the US Army or the University of California, Irvine*

*In Memory of
Staff Sgt Scott Burgess
Staff Sgt Michael Lammerts
Joakim Dungle*

*Joakim Dungle, a human rights lawyer with the UN team stationed in
Mazar-i-Sharif, was killed on April 1, 2011. Staff Sgts Scott Burgess and
Michael Lammerts, both serving the 1st Battalion, 84th Field Artillery
Unit, 170th Infantry Combat Team, died three days later while guarding
their commander, who was meeting with the leader of the Border Police in
Maymana, Afghanistan.*

*Dedicated to my team:
Aziz, Marc, Sam, & Spiker*

OTHER BOOKS BY CAROL BURKE

Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight: Gender, Folklore, and Changing Military Culture
Vision Narratives of Women in Prison
The Creative Process (with Molly Tinsley)
Plain Talk
Back in Those Days (with Martin Light)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I had written about militaries and war for twenty years before I embedded with troops during the Iraq War and later with two U.S. Army combat units as a cultural advisor in Afghanistan. Those experiences were different. In Iraq, I was there to observe, and to do that I'd go outside the wire with any unit that would take me. In Afghanistan, I worked for the U.S. Army and directed my fieldwork to answer the questions commanders had about the Afghans who lived and worked in the areas their units occupied. Before I deployed to Afghanistan, I enrolled in language instruction. Then I went through four months of Army training, followed by ten months of deployment. Only in Afghanistan did I learn what it meant to be part of a team. My team members taught me that. They are the ones I owe the greatest debt.

I am grateful to all who were willing to comment on their lives down-range. I saw the ways they personalized their Spartan living quarters, listened to the jokes they told, joined them in the call shack as we all strove to keep relations back home from deteriorating, exchanged greetings with the night shift on their way to their bunks as I made my way to breakfast, joined the memorial services for fellow soldiers, and watched how some of these fellow travelers tried to raise the spirits of others. I am grateful to have been welcomed into their communities on large bases with fast food joints and on small outposts in hostile territory. The officers I worked with and for offered me valuable insights and showed their appreciation for the fieldwork my team conducted. A special thanks to Lt Gen Bill Burlison, Lt Gen Patrick Matlock, and Col Kyle Marsh.

When I returned from Afghanistan, it was at first difficult to make sense of my year away, let alone write about it. Three opportunities, however, allowed me to step back and gain some perspective on what I had experienced. A year after returning to my faculty position, I was invited to direct Humanities Core, a year-long lecture course, and companion writing seminars dedicated to a specific topic. Although I was keen to lecture on war, I wasn't certain that I could find eight other colleagues in the School of Humanities willing to commit to the topic. I soon discovered that I had sold my colleagues short. These fellow faculty joined me not just for one year of the course on war but for three, and from them I learned a great deal. I wish to express my appreciation to the faculty who contributed their expertise on the history, literature, and cinema of war: George Van Den Abbeele, Jane Newman, Oren Izenberg, Rodrigo Lazo, Michael Szalay, Alice Fahs, Jim Herbert, and Gail Hart. The Humanities Core Writing Director, Larisa Castillo, masterfully invented a writing curriculum and coordinated the writing seminars taught by tenured faculty, lecturers, and advanced graduate students. We were a battalion-size force, learning from each other, and determined to make some sense of our complex topic.

At the same time, I also had the opportunity to become part of a year-long faculty colloquium in which we discussed the work of other scholars on war and presented for each other's critiques our own work in progress. Art Historian Cecile Whiting was a member of that colloquium, and at the end of the year the two of us sought a grant from the Mellon Foundation to focus on Documenting War. Mellon's generous funding allowed us to teach undergraduate and graduate courses on the topic, invite guest speakers, mount exhibitions, sponsor the research of graduate students, and award a post-doc fellowship.

A Fulbright Fellowship in 2019 took me to India. Since the American efforts at counterinsurgency in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan did not lead to victory, I thought that the U.S. Army might have something to learn from the Indian Army, a force well-seasoned in the art of counterinsurgency. I am grateful to the United Service Institution of India, a defense think tank that hosted me during this fellowship. I wish to extend special thanks to USI Director Maj Gen B.K. Sharma (Retd), Dr. Roshan Khanijo, Lt Gen G.S. Katoch (Retd), Brig Narander Kumar (Retd), Maj Gen Ian Cardozo (Retd), and Gaurav Kumar.

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A very special thanks to my daughters Kate and Elizabeth and my sister, Joan, who kept me moored during deployments. They sent their love to Afghanistan in their warm emails, in a box of two dozen chocolate-covered coconut macaroons, my favorites, and in a bigger box of Lunar New Year decorations from Los Angeles' Chinatown. When I hung all the red and gold lanterns, all the tassels, and all the bright happiness flowers, my side of the room looked as glittery as an Afghan jingle truck!

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ABBREVIATIONS

AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
ANP	Afghan National Police
ANA	Afghan National Army
AO	area of operation
COP	command outpost
CRC	Continental US Replacement Center or CONUS Replacement Center
D-FAC	dining facility
FET	female engagement team
FOB	forward operating base
GIRoA	Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
IED	improvised explosive device
KLE	key leader engagement
MRAP	mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle
PRT	provisional reconstruction team
Psyops	Psychological Operations
RIPTOA	relief in place/transfer of authority, also “right seat/left seat” During a RIPTOA, the personnel of the incoming and outgoing units overlap
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The stories about any war, any phase of a war, even any single event in a war reflect their tellers' temporal and geographic proximity to the events and are influenced by the actors they choose to feature in the drama: the governing bodies who launch a war, the generals and admirals who give the orders, those boots on the ground who carry them out, or the combatants and noncombatants upon whose soil the war is fought. Tellers bring to their telling their personal attitudes toward the war: whether they see the war as just or unjust and whether they are open to changing attitudes if evidence points to the contrary.

Western philosophers and legal scholars have grappled with the determination of the justice of wars since the early Christian theologians Augustine and Aquinas first argued that although Christianity forbids the killing of ones' fellows, killing can be justified when a set of conditions are met: other forms of conflict resolution have been tried and failed, the war is undertaken for a just cause (e.g. to fend off an attack) by an appropriate authority, there is a reasonable possibility of success, and peace is the ultimate goal. An even earlier text, the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* describes a similar set of conditions.

Just war theory today is generally applied to defend going to war. It implies that if the cause is just and the war proportionate to the threat, civilians protected, and any prisoners well treated, then that war can be

considered just. The problem is that war is not static and can morph over time from one type of war into another. Although the reason for going to war may be just (*jus ad bellum*), conduct within war (*jus in bello*) may be unjust. An important concept in just war theory is proportionality. Indiscriminate bombings of cities, for example, that target combatants and noncombatants alike are considered a violation of just war. Captives are noncombatants and must be well treated, a concept clearly stated in the 1949 Geneva Convention. Recent wars, however, have served up ample examples of the unjust treatment of prisoners of war. And how much unjust conduct calls into question the ultimate justice of a war? Furthermore, tellers of war stories often speak or write about what they know and from what side of the conflict they come. Certainly an American colonist fighting for freedom from British control would write a different story about the Revolutionary War than a British officer, far from home trying to put down what he believes to be an insurgency threatening to destabilize a legitimate government—his British monarchy.

In writing an account of a war that took place in the distant past, writers have the official records and, if they are lucky, the personal reflections of participants or chroniclers, noting what these participants and witnesses saw and heard at the time or upon reflection. In deciding how to read the preserved documents of war, writers must always ask what has, in fact, been preserved. By whom? And why? Whose perspectives do they document? Whose do they omit? Understandings of conflicts change over time. New documents appear and individual recollections fade, replaced often by collective narratives.

In representing war, a writer can focus on the part or the whole. Those who examine a small piece of a war, often concentrate on a single battle, a single unit, a single scandal, or, in my case, a single year in a two-decade war. The historians and political scientists who examine the whole consider its political and economic causes, the strategies that determined the victors, and the changes a war made to the world or to a part of it. In recent American wars, we can easily see how the geographic proximity of the participants affects their experience of a war.

On another level, consider the experience of two groups of pilots operating in a war: those who fly fighter jets and those who pilot drones. Fighter pilots, called to provide air support for ground troops engaging with insurgents, watch their digital screens from inside their cockpits and look out at the vast stretch of landscape. Drone pilots, on the other hand, drive from their homes to a base, where, from a cubicle, they prepare for

and carry out targeted killings. They keep those they target under surveillance often for weeks, studying the habits of their prey and focusing on the fine detail of all who come and go. Former Air Force drone pilot Brandon Bryant describes it this way:

I felt like a pervert a lot of the time. I am sitting in this cold, dark bunker, an air-conditioned steel box, in the middle of the Nevada or New Mexico desert, watching people live their lives out, while I'm behind a computer screen like the f**king Matrix. I had no life of my own. (Mitchell)

After delivering their deadly payload, drone pilots often circle back to ensure that the desired target was hit and to report any collaterals taken out in the operation. The fighter pilot flies a more “dangerous” mission, but the drone pilot comes visually much closer to the bloody reality of war. This explains, I believe, why drone pilots have such elevated rates of job-related psychiatric symptoms. They not only drop their bomb, but they see in fine detail its destructive power. Fighter pilots take the long shots; drone pilots the close-ups.

Consider, too, the intelligence soldiers and civilians who sit in front of multiple computer screens twelve hours a day and never leave a headquarters base except for rest and recuperation (R&R), or the EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) team members who know the danger they face in diffusing an improvised explosive device (IED) along a rural road, or the Army medics and the Marine corpsmen who tend to the wounded until they can be medevac'd to a field hospital or on to Germany if the injury is serious enough. Although all of these groups share a general mission, their views of the war are radically different, as if they inhabit different wars.

Journalists, who go to war to describe it for those who don't go, have more choice about proximity than members of the military. They can report from secure areas or from volatile ones, locations the Army calls “kinetic.” In our last two wars, some reporters arranged to embed with frontline forces or found a driver who would take them close to the action while others reported from the relative safety of Kabul or from Baghdad's Green Zone. While awaiting a helicopter ride to the unit I was to embed with, I spent Christmas day and two other long and eerie days in the Baghdad compound for journalists, the dark basement of a parking garage with a line of small white trailers located inside the well-fortified and heavily monitored Green Zone, Baghdad's ten square kilometers of palaces and government buildings, surrounded by concrete walls and secured by

US troops. To write about the war from a safe press haven like this one, a journalist must rely for the meat of her stories on the frequent military press releases written by unit public affairs officers, scattered on bases throughout the country, reporting the news they want to share with the world.

On the other hand, reporters who venture out into the thick of the war can see for themselves as long as they find a unit willing to take them off-base on a routine patrol or a planned mission. They face a different problem from those who never venture far from safety. Can they be sure that their narrowed focus on a single incident with a single unit isn't simply an idiosyncratic glimpse of the war? Their concern, however, is less about whether the truth they report says something about the whole; their job is to deliver on a tight deadline a story of the war that readers of their dailies or their weeklies will eagerly consume.

Journalists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, even folklorists and ethnographers like myself write about war, and as we engage in our tasks of research and writing, the questions we ask are informed by our training. Some of us do fieldwork while embedded with combat forces. Some conduct interviews back in the States. Others rely on reports issued by national and international groups, including nongovernmental agencies. Some of us work in the weeds; others rise above the fray to take the long view. I focus on the former, investigating how our own forces spend their time in deployment, how they interact with those they perceive to be friendly and those they regard as hostile, and how, in some instances, it can be hard to make such distinctions.

All writers bring to any topic their personal interests, their previous experiences, their attitudes, even their prejudices. Those of us who get close to those we write about, sharing sleeping quarters, sharing meals, sharing close calls, even performing tasks for the group, know that pure objectivity is elusive. In my career, whether I've been collecting the stories of Midwestern farmers, inmates in maximum security prisons, or members of the armed services, I've welcomed opportunities to get to know as individuals those with whom I interacted. In this book about the War in Afghanistan, I've traded the arm's length view, grounded in historical accounts and interviews with participants for the intimacy of living and working with troops on FOBs, on remote command outposts, and on missions off-base into sometimes calm, sometimes hostile territory. With that proximity, I have tried to tell the story of what played out before me along with the cultural contexts of those I observed. I readily acknowledge that

every account, every story about a war or a single event in that war is an interpretation, and every interpretation a simplification. I believe that there is no single truth about a war, but there are many honest ways of describing it, and I have tried to follow one of those paths in this first-person description of what I witnessed and participated in. I have observed life in deployment, listened to what others shared with me, on and off-base, and offered cultural context to what I saw and heard.

No stranger to military institutions, I taught for six years and received tenure at the US Naval Academy before accepting a position at Johns Hopkins University, where I continued my research on military culture. Over the years, I have conducted research on military culture in America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, England, India, and while embedded with the US Army in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to research in scholarly collections, I have also gathered ethnographic information from observations and interviews at military bases throughout the United States and abroad. I serve as the Director of the Military Culture Archive, a collection of personal recollections and memorabilia contributed by veterans.

Throughout my scholarly career, I have written about military culture, both its official traditions and its unofficial folk customs. I have written about the power of military culture to transform the citizen into the soldier, to define insiders from outsiders, and to instill a class structure in a rigidly controlled hierarchical institution. I have written about the ways in which cultural assumptions and practices in the military have historically retarded change, particularly when it came to welcoming women in the ranks. For the past decade and a half, my writing has examined the experiences of members of our all-volunteer military, particularly those “boots on the ground” who have been sent on repeated deployments to wage wars of counterinsurgency. In 2008, I embedded with the 10th Mountain’s 3rd Brigade in northern Iraq to write about the US Army’s use of cultural advisors. In 2010–2011, I took a leave from the University of California, Irvine to serve as a cultural advisor to two US Army combat units (the 10th Mountain’s 1st Brigade and the 170th Infantry Brigade) in Afghanistan.

In this book, I examine the ways in which culture complicates counterinsurgency, both the military culture that troops bring with them and the cultures they encounter when they leave their bases and engage with the population in an area in which insurgents vie for control. The book opens with the Army’s four-month training program for cultural advisors, my pre-deployment preparations, and my travels downrange to arrive at the beginning of an Afghan winter. I write not only about the routine life on

a secure headquarters base but also about the Spartan and unpredictable life on a rustic, remote combat outpost in the middle of an insurgent-controlled district from which I ventured “outside the wire” to interview local farmers and merchants trying to survive and to provide for their families’ survival in the middle of a multi-year drought and a decades-long war.

I examine the relation between the sacred and the profane in war and about the deaths of two sergeants in my unit who often protected me when I went into harm’s way, deaths that would not have taken place had not an American evangelical pastor video-taped his burning of a Quran. I write about the ease with which technicians manning surveillance devices in hostile areas can misinterpret what they see because their training has included little about Afghan culture. The book’s last formal chapter examines my own return from war, subsequent PTSD, and the power of narrative to suture the memory of an event with the emotions it produced, emotions that at the time were bracketed by the numbness that allows one to soldier on.



CHAPTER 2

Training for COIN (Counterinsurgency)

“In the Army, there are both meat eaters and plant eaters. You are the plant eaters,” Captain Chris explains to an audience of trainees. Those who complete this four-month training program will form small teams of cultural advisors to embed for a year with either an Army brigade in Iraq or one in Afghanistan. On the one hand, Captain Chris knows that it’s nearly impossible to describe life on a FOB to the few civilians in his audience who have never lived it. On the other hand, he knows that anything he might say to the larger group of veterans, many who outrank him and several who have lived far more of the downrange dark and dirty than he has, will ring as cliché. So he opts for the clichés and directs his comments to the neophytes.

“You’re not about the red [bad guys]; you’re about the green [civilians].” With a dose of the disgruntled and the disinterested, this slightly disheveled, cynical young officer is clearly marking the days till he can leave his current assignment. He’s speaking to the three dozen of us in a basement classroom in a large brick building that in its heyday housed thriving retail businesses but now is home to a few low-inventory shops and the Tampico Mexican restaurant that seems to serve only a few patrons, no matter the time of day.

The rent for classroom space in downtown Leavenworth is probably the only thing that’s cheap about this four-month training program. Although the Army is footing the bill for lodging in extended-stay hotels

and rental cars for all trainees, British Aerospace Systems (BAE) is the contractor hired to manage the program. Formed in 1999 in a merger of British Aerospace and a subsidiary of General Electric, within a few years BAE expanded into one of the largest international defense contractors. It's baffling to think that a defense contractor developing Typhoon aircraft for the Royal Saudi Air Force, new products of cyber-warfare, and "cutting-edge autonomous platforms that will shape the air, land and sea markets in the future," could lend any expertise to the cultural understanding of Iraqi and Afghan civilians whom the coalition forces have committed to protect and whom we have come here to learn more about.

A glossy 16-page BAE brochure we receive on the first day offers little clarity. It opens with a statement by Chief Executive Ian King characterizing his corporation as one "with an absolute commitment to Total Performance." How can a commitment to "total performance" distinguish this corporation from any other? What company would ever commit to "partial performance" I wonder. But maybe Chief Executive King, or the PR firm he hired to generate the company puff, should have used the word "dominance." "Performance" suggests efficiency and productivity, whereas "dominance" describes a corporation aspiring to lift its status among the top ten defense contractors, maybe muscling out one of the old reliables like Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics, Raytheon, Boeing, or Lockheed Martin by broadening its focus from hardware and technology to "the human terrain," from the meat eaters to the plant eaters.

It is a little confusing initially to those of us without defense contractor backgrounds to understand how the corporate and the military mesh, but Mark, the BAE representative in his late thirties who manages this training program, makes it clear. He puts his corporate spin on our task by explaining how to win friends and influence commanders. Like those selling the machines of war to various defense departments, we, in our small ways, will "sell" what we learn of the culture and history of our small slice of the war zone to our commanders. Mark doesn't stress courage in the face of danger or the ethical waters that some of us may find ourselves having to navigate. No, armed with a bachelor's degree *from* Iowa State, an online MBA from the University of Phoenix, and a license in real estate sales, Mark speaks with the confidence that he represents one of the giants in the military—industrial complex that Eisenhower warned about in his final address to the nation.

He explains that although every brigade has a different character, we must regard the one we join as our "customer" and "sell them products