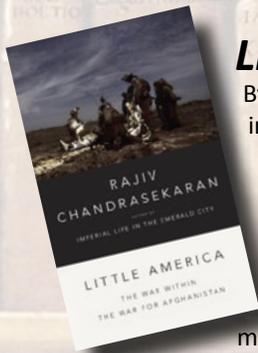


TURNING PAGES

~ book reviews of interest to the aviation professional



Little America: The War Within the War For Afghanistan

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran. New York: Knopf, 2012. Maps, photographs, appendices, 384 p. Available in hardcover, softcover, and Kindle formats. Click on book to access an online retail source.

a book review by LTC Charles Bowery

Washington Post reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran has become one of America's most trenchant and insightful commentators on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. His best-seller, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006) chronicles the political and strategic missteps in Baghdad's Green Zone that derailed the reconstruction of Iraq in the wake of the 2003 ground offensive. In *Little America*, Chandrasekaran turns his lens on the American effort in Afghanistan in 2009-2011, and the results are equally unsettling.

The book's title and historical context come from a series of nation-building projects undertaken in the 1950s in Afghanistan's Helmand River Valley. The U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, participated in American's containment of the Soviet Union by developing an allied government and society in Afghanistan, at the crossroads of historical trading and communications routes in Southwest Asia. USAID planned to develop farming communities and land reclamation projects that would turn Afghan farmers away from opium poppy cultivation, and by extension away from the Communist orbit. These communities became, in the words of the residents, "Little America" settlements with rows of homes, schools, swimming pools, movie theaters, and other distinctly American amenities. USAID's agricultural programs in Helmand gradually failed over time, however, because the land was unsuitable for food crops, the Afghans were unable to sustain irrigation infrastructure, and the tribal nature of Afghan society (with its omnipresent system of warlords) did not lend itself to a distinctly Western approach. USAID attempted to impose Western ways of thinking on an indigenous population, and failed utterly.

If these failings sound familiar and similar to those of the NATO counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, it's because they are intimately linked. Chandrasekaran deftly weaves the two eras, the USAID programs of the 1950s and 1960s and Operation Enduring Freedom 2001-present, into a unified narrative. British failures in Helmand province in 2005-2008 led directly to the United States Marine presence there. The Marines portrayed pacification of Helmand as strategically critical to the effort to defeat the Taliban and Al Qaeda, but the Marine campaign in Regional Command-Southwest did little more than divert critical combat power and U.S. Government resources from the true Afghanistan centers of gravity- the Afghan/Pakistan border in RC-East and Kandahar Province in RC-South. The Marines pursued a largely separate agenda from the rest of the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and although they have won tactical victories over hardened Taliban fighters there over the years, this success has come at immense cost, both in casualties and resources. Along the way, the U.S. Government systematically ignored the advice of former USAID employees and Foreign Service professionals with years of experience among the Afghan people.

While the author highlights U.S. and NATO failures in Afghanistan at the strategic and operational levels of war, he also describes vividly the bravery and sacrifice of NATO Soldiers, who fight in some of the most difficult conditions imaginable, against a tough and adaptive enemy. Their commitment and sacrifice, viewed through the lens of the Afghanistan Surge of 2009-2011, is both inspiring and frustrating.

In his treatise *On War*, the military thinker Carl von Clausewitz wrote that one of the first steps in formulating a military strategy is to determine what type of war one is facing - in modern terms, the conditions on the ground, the objectives to be achieved, and the end state. In the final analysis of the American efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, it will become clear that the United States failed to meet these important preconditions in either case. This failure has played itself out as a lack of unity of effort in Afghanistan. Bickering between politicians and generals, differing agendas and goals, and failure to understand the enemy and the people of Afghanistan have led us to where we are today. Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Little America* details this process, and is thus a profoundly frustrating and depressing, but at the same time important, story. All professional Soldiers should read it to place their personal experiences in Afghanistan into proper context. This context does not denigrate our service there as an Army; rather, it should serve as a cautionary tale for those of us who rise to critical leadership and decision-making positions in future conflicts.

