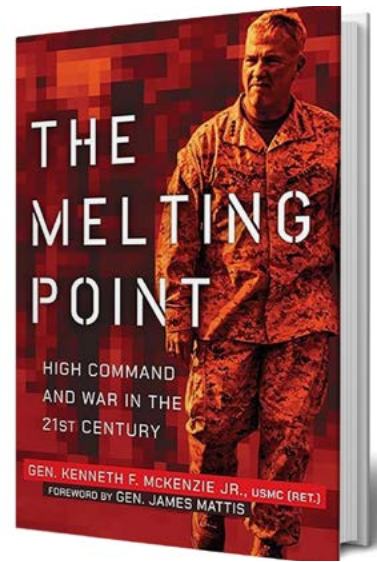


intelligence in public media

The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century

Reviewed by Alissa M.

Author: Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., USMC (Ret.)
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Reviewer: The reviewer is a CIA intelligence analyst specializing in Iranian foreign policy.



A new volume by retired former commander of US Central Command Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie offers observations about leadership through one very particular and very important echelon of decisionmaking: the theater-level military commander.

McKenzie spent three years at the helm of CENTCOM—three years during which the United States withdrew from Afghanistan, managed a fragile deterrence against Iran, and conducted consequential strikes against an ISIS commander in Syria and an Iranian general in Iraq. Those three years also spanned the second half of the Trump administration and the early days of the Biden administration.

McKenzie's views on leadership and civilian control of the military are based on his 40 years of military service

generally, but especially on lessons he learned during his command of the Middle East theater, which he frames as a vantage point uniquely positioned to see both operations and policymaking. The fact of his first-hand observation of weighty national security decisionmaking under two administrations lends heft to his judgments. And though he walks through sometimes quite granular details of how decisions were made and how the civilian leadership guided that process under both presidents, the book is not a tick-tock of those processes, nor an excoriation of former President Trump, nor an exultation of President Biden.

By McKenzie's own accounting, the book has three themes: First is the importance of civilian control of the military; second is the unique role of the combatant commander, where the development of policy and its

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The Melting Point:

execution meet; the third is that leaders matter, as does the ability and willingness to make decisions.

The book follows the chronology of events during McKenzie's tenure as CENTCOM commander, mostly centered around the three major events of those years—the US strike that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi in October 2019, the US strike that killed Iranian IRGC-Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, and the US departure from Afghanistan in August 2021. McKenzie uses these three marking points as examples for his three themes of civilian control of the military, the juncture of policy and execution at the combatant commander's role, and the role of leadership.

The first chapter opens with Iran, but Iran plays second fiddle to Afghanistan throughout McKenzie's narrative, largely because most of the policy decisions on Iran managed to avoid cataclysmic outcomes, even after teetering frightfully close to them. Afghanistan, on the other hand, is clearly the most central and most emotionally charged set of problems McKenzie managed in his career. He calls the US departure in 2021 “wrenching” (111) and puts the moment he learned the US would leave Afghanistan in total alongside the Kennedy assassination and 9/11 as moments that live vividly and indelibly in his memory. (194) He draws a line from his own experience at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, through the Afghanistan withdrawal in chapters 8, 11, 12, and 13, culminating with an accounting of the military and policy errors in Afghanistan policy during his tenure in Chapter 14, aptly titled “Accountability.”

Much of the book includes reflections on and anecdotes about leaders—many of whom are household names and others who are less familiar. If there's one thing we know the US military bureaucracy produces, it is intentional, deliberate leaders, so we can be fairly certain McKenzie has a reasonably nuanced view of leadership. As a leader himself, his views and assessments of other officials carry the weight of his experience and expertise.

Some leaders are revealed as exceptionally capable and upstanding, like former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley (“magnificent” during

January 2021 [167]) and former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper (“a good, honorable man” [147]). Others, less so. It's hard to imagine a more damning critique of a leader than his portrayal of Zalmay Khalilzad, whose style McKenzie calls “secretive, compartmentalized” (122) and whom he describes as being more committed to achieving a deal with the Taliban than ensuring accountability for Taliban adherence to it. (132, 325)

Most of the most significant decisions McKenzie discusses fell during the tenure of two national security advisors—Robert O'Brien during the Trump administration and Jake Sullivan during the Biden administration. Each are mentioned by name only a handful of times, but both are implicated in McKenzie's assessments of the interagency policy process they oversaw. Under O'Brien, McKenzie found a “lack of clear strategic guidance” and calls out “the inability of the interagency process to clearly identify and state the gaps between the vision of the White House and the dictates of [...] the NDS,” referring to the National Defense Strategy, the document that guides much of the focus and spending of the US defense infrastructure. (106) But he finds the Biden administration overcorrected from these perceived shortcomings and indulged in a policy process that was too dialectic and lacked decisiveness. (177–78, 180)

McKenzie's depiction of then-President Trump does not always comport with some popular views of his decisionmaking style as erratic—indeed McKenzie places much of the blame for what looked like unpredictable decisionmaking from the Oval Office at the feet of the most hawkish of Trump's national security advisors. (129, 151–52) At other times, McKenzie offers experiences that make Trump resemble common caricatures of him, as when McKenzie describes paring down a critical briefing to the bare minimum points, knowing from past experience that to get the key message across would require immediate engagement and repetition of the core message. (126)

To his credit, McKenzie does not shy away from laying blame at his own feet. He foreshadows this in the preface, where he promises to detail “what we did well, and where *I fell short*.” (xiii, emphasis my own). In several instances he owns his mistakes where he feels he erred and nowhere more painfully than in recount-

ing the series of missteps and failures that led to the “unalloyed tragedy” of a US Hellfire missile strike against a completely innocent man and nine family members. (258)

Intelligence is not one of *The Melting Point*’s three core themes, but it does make occasional cameo appearances, usually as the infrastructure that provides targeting and battlefield information to the warfighter on the ground, or equally importantly, the infrastructure that cannot get that information to the warfighter when policymakers indulge in what McKenzie calls a “fantasy by some senior leaders” of distant basing of intelligence and military assets when trying to conduct counterterror operations in Afghanistan. (130–31)

McKenzie clearly appreciates (in both senses—to understand and to value) the importance of physical presence for human intelligence collection for the find, fix, finish mission of parts of the US military. (189) There is less space spent on the importance of intelligence analysis in informing the policy- and decision-making happening at the White House and Pentagon.

The penultimate chapter—titled “Iran, Iraq, and Syria”—and the final chapter hypothesizing about the future of the Middle East and warfare generally already read as somewhat overtaken by events. Any book with the modern Middle East as a backdrop runs this risk, with events changing the landscape at an exhausting pace, but especially so in light of the conflict in Gaza. In this book about leadership in the CENTCOM region, HAMAS is not mentioned. This is no fault of McKenzie’s; it is merely a reflection

of how much can change between the tenure of one commander to the next in the Middle East.

McKenzie establishes his three themes in the preface and he hews to them throughout, with nary a digression or sidebar. But in sticking so closely to his aim of describing the dynamics of civilian control of the military, the meeting of policy and command in theater-level leadership, and the importance of leaders, he fails to analyze those dynamics. He does not leave us with a template for being a good leader or rubric for how to judge the performance of leaders for ourselves.

It’s not clear whether McKenzie thinks the path to better policy choices comes through better process or better leadership. The title of the book points to the latter, but much of his narrative points to the former. He finds policy-process failures in both the Trump and Biden administrations but offers us no guidance on how to correct from either of those two trajectories.

McKenzie closes with a succinct summary of his book’s scope: “In this book I have tried to describe what it means to be a commander at the highest level of war—the command of a theater—during some of the most tumultuous days in our national history.” (279) He has achieved that with an admirably dispassionate view that details the decisionmaking process and leadership underpinning significant military strategy and operational choices without commentary on politics or personality. Some guideposts for determining how to assess other leadership or advice on how to be a better leader would have only enhanced McKenzie’s reflections on his own experience. ■