

Confronting the Chaos: A Rogue Military Historian Returns to Afghanistan

By Sean M. Maloney

Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009

384 pp. \$34.95

ISBN: 978-159114-508-0

Reviewed by

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Sean M. Maloney is an established military historian teaching at the Royal Military College in Kingston, Ontario. The second of a planned three-book series about the war in Afghanistan, *Confronting the Chaos* focuses on two important but neglected aspects of the military effort in that country: the multinational contribution and the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). He bases the book on a series of visits in 2004–2006 to the German PRTs at Kunduz and Feyzabad, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) nascent headquarters in Kabul, and Canada’s efforts in the capital and its PRT in Kandahar.

Maloney’s emphasis is important because NATO has adopted PRTs in Afghanistan as a linchpin of security and reconstruction at the local level. Today, their number stands at 26, and they have assumed new tasks, including counterinsurgency, governance, counternarcotics, and police training. So a full-bore treatment is welcome and overdue.

This book, however, is not that treatment. Maloney makes no attempt to draw larger conclusions about PRT practice or the multinational commitment. However, he is frank about his lack of ambition: “Each trip, each meeting, is a piece of the puzzle necessary to understand the counterinsurgency effort, and the intent is for the reader to put those pieces together to discern the picture that emerges.” That is exactly wrong. It is the historian’s job to piece the puzzle together and paint the picture through observation, inquiry, and research. Instead, he abandons the reader to his myopic, itinerant impressions. Maloney’s experiences are pinpointed to specific places in time, now 5 years out of date, and the book is compromised by serious and systematic errors.

When not an acronym-barbed thicket, Maloney’s prose alternates between the glib and the profane. While he is clearly interested in his subjects, his curiosity does not extend to any political, historical, or operational perspective. For example, he refers to the counterinsurgency effort without defining the term or linking it to the doctrinal innovations undertaken by the U.S. military in Iraq. He refers to the Taliban and other opposing forces as “the enemy” without exploring their strategies, political goals, or tactics in any detail. These are considerable oversights given his commitment to studying the war.

Perhaps worse is Maloney’s failure to answer common-sense questions that would logically follow his observations. In many cases, he has had ample time to research incidents that occurred while he was in-country but for which “details were sketchy” at the time. On one occasion, for example, he discursively explores all the nations that could have flown two helicopters (a CH-47 or a CH-53) potentially identified in a friendly fire incident involving

Canadian soldiers, only to reveal later that the helicopter was a U.S. Special Forces MH-6 and that the Canadians had stumbled into their training area. After huffing about the aggressive Americans, Maloney does not ask the obvious questions: How did the Canadians wander into the firing range? Why did the Canadians not have Identification Friend or Foe equipment? How did the Canadians mistake the tiny MH-6 for a helicopter as large as a CH-47? Those questions articulate much more compelling, relevant concerns in a complex, multinational tactical environment than pinning some nation with blame for a blue-on-blue incident that resulted in no casualties.

Maloney is a lint brush for detail. Much of his reporting that is not irrelevant or disjointed seems accurate based on this reviewer’s experience in the country during the same timeframe and may be useful to those searching for insight into “the platoon leader’s war.” For example, Maloney examines how violence, politics, and development in Kandahar are entangled in local water access, disputed land claims, and tribal rivalries. The notion that Afghanistan requires a political rather than a military solution becomes overwhelmed by the country’s sheer granularity. The axiom that all politics is local holds true in Afghanistan as in perhaps no other place.

The moments this book springs to life come when Maloney allows people in the field to speak for themselves, moments that are both compelling and useful. Canadian Strategic Advisory Team members talk about how Afghan officials they mentor transformed the Western bureaucratise of an economic planning paper into their own document, filled with Islamic allegories, historical references, and poetic allusions. The Kandahar PRT members lament

how Afghan police in one district beg for more equipment and weapons but shake down villagers in another. A Canadian soldier vividly describes an improvised explosive device detonation that injured his gunner, killed a child, and sprayed his vehicle with the bomber’s remains. Unfortunately, Maloney follows up the soldier’s soliloquy by asking him about “some of the more memorable things he’d seen in Kandahar during his time there.”

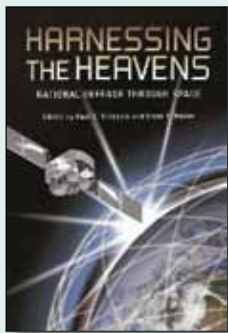
Maloney relies heavily on his own reportage, which becomes a serious liability given the book’s staggering number of errors. Maloney lists only five and a half pages of footnotes—one chapter has no notes at all—and ignores existing literature. Taken together, the book’s overall reliability must be questioned. In the case of Operation *Redwing* in 2005, for example, during which 16 U.S. special operators were killed in action, Maloney misspells the mission name and fails to identify the target of the raid. These details and others could be discovered in the 2007 memoir of the mission’s lone survivor, Marcus Luttrell. Maloney seems to conflate psychological operations with information operations and never defines the disciplines. He accuses the news media of ignoring tribal rivalries in Kandahar, although a cursory search of *The New York Times* quickly discounts this assertion.

Senseless typographical, stylistic, and editing problems also proliferate. In one case, Maloney footnotes a geographic mistake that he made in his previous book only to commit the same error nine more times. In another, he hints that he will again meet some special operators he clashes with en route to theater, but they never reappear.

The larger argument with Maloney’s effort is his myopic approach. The book fails as an autobiography because he

spends little time in the country, and because his experience and reporting are so mundane. He collects outdated spot reporting largely unconnected from the broader campaign, PRT practice, and the evolution of the multinational effort in Afghanistan. He relies to an almost stupefying degree on official mission statements to learn about the activities of the various PRTs—an approach that does not tell the reader much more than a Web search would. If he had committed to more research, followed up interviews, and talked to more people, a more cohesive and coherent volume could make a vital contribution to the limited literature on Afghanistan. The war, now approaching its first decade, demands much from those committed to fighting it. A similar commitment is required to understand it as well. **JFQ**

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**Harnessing the Heavens:
National Defense Through Space**
*Edited by Paul G. Gillespie and
Grant T. Weller*
Chicago: Imprint
Publications, 2008
235 pp. \$29.95
ISBN: 978-1-879176-45-4

Reviewed by
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This book comes at an interesting time in the history of U.S. space activity. Its publication is within 1 year of the 40th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon mission. Ironically, it is also within 2 years of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA's) planned date for the termination of space shuttle flights, with no replacement until at least 2015, when the Orion system should be available. This conscious abdication of human spaceflight capability forces the United States to depend on Russian (or Chinese?) rockets to ferry astronauts to and from the International Space Station, a structure built with over \$25 billion of U.S. investment.

What are the national defense implications of such actions? To evaluate such situations properly requires both historical knowledge and forward thinking. This book provides both. Organized as 14 essays divided into 4 sections, *Harnessing the Heavens* offers contributions from Everett Dolman, Roger Launius, Howard McCurdy, and others in the pantheon of space authors with hundreds of years of collective experience analyzing space issues. They share their wealth of experience not only through superb prose, but also with extensive endnotes.

The book's first section, "Space and the Cold War: Prime Motivations for Space," consists of five outstanding essays that provide historical context regarding the early development of U.S. spacepower. The essays analyze issues at the strategic level and consider the influences of all elements of national power. Common themes among the authors include the emergence of the trinity of civil, military, and intelligence communities for space application; the evolution of diverse priorities given to space programs by the Dwight

D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson Presidential administrations; and the influence of competition with the Soviet Union in space efforts.

The lead article sets the stage with a summary of space development from the German V-2 rocket to the present day, stopping just short of including the 2006 space policy. It explains the important distinction between *weaponizing* space and *militarizing* space, and it presents the six major perspectives on the debate regarding the presence of weapons in space. The next four compositions delve into some of the specific national competitions that characterize the space portion of the Cold War. These articles provide fascinating details on such topics as the separate studies for possible moon bases made by the Army and Air Force, the emphasis placed on unmanned reconnaissance satellites over manned spaceflight by Eisenhower, and Kennedy's initial reluctance as a space supporter that changed only with the political realities following Soviet Yuri Gagarin's triumph as the first man in space.

The next section, "Doctrinal Faith: Strategic Dimensions of the War Fighter and Space," builds upon the trifurcated structure of space introduced in the first section with particular focus on U.S. Air Force contributions. The first composition is a concise survey of the manned space program pursued by the Service from 1959 to 1963, highlighting the interactions with NASA's Mercury and Gemini programs as well as the Dyna-Soar spaceplane. The next article steps through several recurring themes in Air Force space history, such as the pursuit of peaceful purposes, need for assured access, challenge of building space-savvy leadership, role of commercial sectors, and debate on establishing a separate Space Corps. This

section's final article addresses the compelling topic of space weapons as a driver to transform warfare. However, due to some unfounded and extraneous material presented for dialogue, it is not as credible as the book's other works.

The third section, "U.S. Space from the 'Other Side of the Fence,'" provides an outstanding overview of strategic issues related to other nations' space programs. The lead article addresses the evolution of Soviet space power during the Cold War, delivering succinct summaries of the key players and institutions as well as their roles within the context of evolving global security. It concludes with a recap of five broad patterns of Soviet space activity. The next article is a perfect companion to the first, covering China's space program with its emphasis on a "two bombs [nuclear fission and fusion], one satellite" goal that was achieved between 1964 and 1970. The author, Dean Cheng, argues that China sees space as a "major component of future conflict," although its motives remain unclear at times, such as those surrounding the January 2007 antisatellite weapon test. The third article talks to the celebrity nature of women astronauts. Although a well-written commentary, it is not consistent with the theme of the section, and it fails to mention Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to orbit the Earth. A better essay to complete this section might have been one assessing the implications of commercial space enterprises, especially those of the European Space Agency.

The final section, "Technological Change and the Transformation of American Space Power," offers excellent historic context with strategic analysis of the role of technology in space power. Its first essay focuses on the realm of hypersonic travel as