

# Peter Molin's Strike Through the Mask!—Elliot Ackerman's "The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan" and Jamil Jan Kochai's "Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories"



Afghan resettlement camp, Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, October 2021

It's a commonplace that America largely ignored the long war in Afghanistan while it was being fought. Now, after a brief flurry of heightened interest in the 2021 evacuation of Afghan allies from Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA) in Kabul, Afghanistan has again receded from national interest. But another truism has held that a proper accounting of America's post-9/11 wars, either in fiction or non-fiction, couldn't usefully happen until the wars concluded. "Tell me

how this ends,” is a quote ascribed to General David Petraeus in regard to Iraq. The imperative now is timely in regard to Afghanistan.

And so, the first drafts of history, in the form of online articles and podcasts by veterans who fought in Afghanistan and in particular those who were involved in the HKIA evacuation, have begun to appear. In summer 2022 came former-Marine Elliot Ackerman’s *The Fifth Act: America’s End in Afghanistan*, among the first of book-length appraisals.

Ackerman has always been quick into print. His previous books—some fiction, some non-fiction—have appeared with yearly regularity and have consistently zeroed in on hot-button issues: refugees, disabled vets, Syria, China, and now the Afghanistan end-game. More a novelist, essayist, and memoirist than a scholar, historian, or journalist, Ackerman’s primary subjects in *The Fifth Act* are his own life and thoughts, which he portrays in vignettes heavily reliant on narrative and physical description, which he then connects to large-scale events in which he played parts. Though *The Fifth Act* is not a work of focused, deep analysis, Ackerman definitely has ideas born from his experience fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan and, more recently, circulation at high-levels among military and national powerbrokers. Judging from *The Fifth Act*, Ackerman has an eye-opening number of well-placed contacts in the nation’s military and security apparatus, as well as in government. An invitation to lunch with Afghanistan’s ambassador to America in the summer of 2021 is described; so too is an invitation to speak privately with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Similarly, many of the officers with whom Ackerman formerly served with in the Marines and as a CIA paramilitary officer are still in service, and a surprising number were stationed in Kabul in 2021 and involved in the evacuation effort.

These connections come into play in one of *The Fifth Act*’s two main narrative thrusts: description of the part that Ackerman

played, from afar in Italy, and operating mainly via text messages, helping busloads of Afghans evacuate in 2021. Ackerman at the time was on vacation in Italy with his wife and kids, and vignettes of tourist-life are interspersed with recaps of text exchanges with his network of fellow veterans in Kabul and around the world fighting to evacuate Afghan allies. These scenes, to my mind, are vivid and dramatic. Even more compelling are passages depicting scenes of combat in Afghanistan leading small American advisor teams and Afghan militias in battle. Ackerman has seen an extensive amount of combat, and a previous book, *Places and Names: On War, Revolution, and Returning* (2019), recounts actions in Fallujah that led to him being awarded a Silver Star. The Afghan accounts in *The Fifth Act*, however, are far from triumphant. Instead, they are haunted by Ackerman's sense that he has failed in certain respects and disappointed people who were counting on him. Two long passages describe combat missions recovering bodies of American fighting men; another describes a wrenching conversation with a mentor whom he must tell that he is leaving a CIA career in which he was being groomed for success. The connection between the two narrative arcs, mostly juxtaposed, but sometimes asserted explicitly, is clear: Failure experienced on the personal level in Afghanistan reflects the American failure at large, with both arcs culminating in the ad hoc evacuation effort in 2021. Underlying Ackerman and his network's desperate desire to rescue endangered Afghans is the battlefield ethos of "leaving no man behind."

Speaking personally, and also on behalf of at least some veterans, these passages resonated strongly. My own tour in Afghanistan was marked by events remembered remorsefully, even painfully, and my own efforts to help Afghans evacuate in August 2021 (and since) were all-consuming, though without the successes Ackerman and his network achieve. (Earlier I have helped three of my interpreters emigrate to America, and remain in periodic contact with two of them, who are doing

well. I am also still trying to assist allies still in Afghanistan who are stuck in the infernal Special Immigrant Visa purgatory.) GWOT memoirs by officers are fewer than those by enlisted soldiers, and the enlisted memoirs tend to portray officers harshly—incompetent and self-serving, often out-of-touch and even delusional, not to be trusted. Be that as it may, *The Fifth Act* excels at tracing the deep tugs of responsibility and duty that motivated at least some officers to do their best in tough circumstances. Responsibility and duty are embedded in military codes-of-honor, but *The Fifth Act* documents how they are experienced personally as desire to please, desire to not disappoint, desire to measure up, and desire to form allegiances with fellow officers of perceived merit. Early on, Ackerman describes how Marine officers are judged as either “a piece of shit or a good dude.” Something of the same emphasis on personal reputation and honor animates Army officer social dynamics, and I’m sure the other services as well.

Intermixed with the passages about evacuation efforts and combat missions in *The Fifth Act* are ruminations on the collapse of Afghanistan in the wake of the American withdrawal and Taliban takeover. Some of Ackerman’s ideas are widely shared, but given interesting new formulations. The tendency of Americans to fight a twenty-year war “one year at a time” is brought home to Ackerman by his observation that buildings on American bases were built out of plywood rather than concrete. Afghan military ineptitude is touched on, but the real issue, he asserts, was the doomed structuring of Afghan forces that had ethnic minorities fighting outside of their regional homelands. To send, say, Uzbeks, to fight in Pashtun regions such as Paktika and Kandahar de facto deprived the Afghan National Army of local legitimacy and cultural competence. Glossed over are American military tactics and operations, either those that didn’t work or which might have worked, to include consideration of indiscriminate night raids to kill or capture high-value targets that many critics

suggest destroyed Afghan trust and confidence in the American war effort.

Instead, Ackerman holds Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden accountable on-high for decisions that led to military and government failure in Afghanistan. According to Ackerman, Obama's declaration that his 2009 surge would be short-lived was an open invitation to the Taliban to wait out the influx of forces. He judges President Trump's Doha Accords a craven notice to the Taliban that the country would soon be theirs, while messaging the Ashraf Ghani government that they were effectively out of the picture. Regarding Biden, Ackerman maintains that the final collapse that led to the impromptu evacuation was an extreme failure of leadership. He asks why, given the US military presence in so many countries around the world, it was so impossible to conceive of leaving a force of some (unspecified) size and capability in Afghanistan to protect American interests and facilitate working relationships. Finally, Ackerman suggests that the American public's failure to care much at all about anything in Afghanistan represents an egregious manifestation of a civil-military divide that left many military members and veterans (such as Marine lieutenant colonel Stuart Schiller, Jr. and former airman Ashli Babbitt) seething with resentment and contempt.

In a review of *The Fifth Act* by Laurel Miller published in *Foreign Affairs*, the author, an Obama-era diplomat who served in Afghanistan and Pakistan, refutes Ackerman's big-picture analysis while expressing scant regard for the human narratives that constitute most of Ackerman's story. Miller accuses Ackerman of basing his claims on opinion rather than scholarly analysis of facts and events : "When the book comments on policy and politics, it offers no basis for its reasoning besides Ackerman's personal experience." This is a reasonable charge, I guess, given the highly-literate *Foreign Affairs* readership. I don't think Ackerman would disagree and

general readers might not expect otherwise. But Miller makes a further claim that bears heavily on what will follow in this review. That *The Fifth Act* is so “me-centric” is actually congruent with the biggest problem with the American war effort in Miller’s diagnosis: from beginning-to-end it paid short-shrift to the cultural and structural aspects that defined the Afghanistan operating environment while remaining fixated on American goals, policies, and actions, as well as the personal experiences and opinions of participants. “Looking at the conduct of the war through a narrow aperture,” Miller writes, [Ackerman] focuses, as Washington did, largely on U.S. forces and U.S. policy; the politics, motivations, and experiences of Afghans are pushed offstage.” Books such as *The Fifth Act* illustrate, then, how Americans measured the war primarily in relation to American perspectives, while marginalizing Afghan (and Pakistani) actors.

Bad reviews suck, and valorizing the experience and opinions of like-minded individuals over those of racially different “others” and structural aspects can be a problem. In regard to Afghanistan, this line of critique also appears in a *Los Angeles Review of Books* review of Afghan-American author Jamil Jan Kochai’s 2022 collection of short-stories titled “War Is a Structure: On Jamil Jan Kochai’s *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak and Other Stories*.” Author Najwa Mayer praises Kochai’s stories about Afghans both in America and in Afghanistan for “[i]ndicting a transnational structure of war that conscripts everyone” as opposed to war literature that “glosses over the geopolitical structures that produce unequal suffering.” Continuing, Mayer writes, “War’s structure includes its diffuse militarisms, profit economies, reforged borders, and cultural marketplaces, as well as its displacements and wounds, which leave indelible marks and absences long after the bombs have dropped.” Ultimately, Mayer praises the stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* for finding fresh literary-thematic means of not “narrating the harsh trials of war and displacement through the interior life of a character.” So,

according to Mayer, down with stories that emphasize the “interior life of a character” and up with literary portraits of the “transnational structure of war.” That sounds dry, but literary efforts to alter the template of things-that-happened-to-me-and-what-I-thought-about-them are welcome. Mayer’s review elsewhere highlights how Kochai’s stories are imaginatively and poignantly crafted, a sentiment I share.

But Mayer’s review really begins to crackle when she turns her attention to Ackerman’s own review of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* published in the *New York Times*. Ackerman is not totally critical, but over-all the review is luke-warm. Ackerman is not especially impressed by Kochai’s literary verve and innovation, and outright rankles at Kochai’s failure to get military details right. Most of all, he is irritated by what he perceives as Kochai’s portraits of white American soldiers as evil and Kochai’s overall “fixation on whiteness.” Ackerman writes, “When Kochai wants to signal characters are generically bad, he describes them as white; all the characters from the U.S. military – a remarkably diverse institution in reality – are described as ‘a small clan of white boys.’” In response, Mayer states, “Yet, very few white characters appear in the collection; indeed, a narrative decentering of whiteness in a collection about the US empire’s racialized wars is, perhaps, the point. Kochai does, of course, intimate the well-documented history of white supremacy that is foundational to the enterprise of US imperialism– a history never lost on the colonized themselves.”

Mayer’s concern expressed here is measured compared to numerous other denunciations of Ackerman (and the *New York Times*) following publication of his review. Played out in Tweets and blog posts, one of the charges was that in a short review Ackerman focused obsessively on trivial aspects of *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*—getting military detail right—at the expense of more considered evaluation of its virtues. The

larger charge was that the review was racist and so per force was the *New York Times* for commissioning a former Marine officer and CIA operative to write a review of a book that illustrated the ravages of war on Afghans in their home country and displaced throughout the world. Ackerman's review is curious in respects (*The Haunting of Hajji Hotak* has otherwise been universally acclaimed), but Ackerman upon reading the social media firestorm that followed his review must have been thinking about his own endeavors on behalf of Afghanistan. To have lived and fought side-by-side for some 500 days-and-nights with Afghans and to have successfully engineered the evacuation of hundreds of endangered Afghans, to say of nothing of having written a novel—*Green on Blue* (2015)—that is focalized through the eyes of a Pashtun, only to be reductively categorized as a member of a “small clan of white boys” by Kochai and “a former Marine and CIA officer” by Kochai's supporters must have grated. The closing words of *The Fifth Act* quote a video-message from an Afghan who with his family squeaked through the HKIA gates and is now on to a new life:

*For such a help, for such a mercy, for such a service, I have no idea how to thank. But I'm thankful of everyone, of every single person of US America, because we never dreamed of such a thing. Their love. Their mercy. Thank you. Thank you for everything.*

Jamil Jan Kochai's family emigrated to America from Afghanistan in the early 1980s; they might have had similar high hopes and equally copious amounts of gratitude. The stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*, heavily autobiographical (though enlivened with flights of magical-realism fantasy), trace the subsequent decades of transiency, menial jobs and poverty, sickness and injury, constant cultural clash (both within the family and up-against the larger strictures of American life), and ultimate disillusionment and remorse bordering on regret that the



family had attempted such an audacious transplantation. Roughly half the stories are set in contemporary Afghanistan as characters travel back to their home province of Logar or the capital of Kabul. War has ruined the lives of the Afghan characters in the novel, and to the Afghan-American characters it's a matter of chagrin that it is the Americans, not the Taliban, who are responsible for blowing apart Afghanistan culture and society and making so many people miserable. And yet, as fractured as modern Afghanistan is portrayed in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*, the Afghan-American characters, given a choice, commit to life, on whatever terms, in contemporary Afghanistan as preferable to continued second-class citizenship and cultural alienation in America.

All in all, a grim vision, but making the tension and anxiety compelling as stories are the characters that (perhaps) most resemble Kochai himself—immigrant sons imbued with American habits and attitudes who carry the weight of their family and cultural expectations. These characters for the most part come to detest how thoroughly Westernized they have become, though they also struggle with their parents' old-fashioned ways and outlooks. It is these characters' often sulky and sometimes irreverent voices that spice up the stories in *The Haunting of Hajji Hotak*. To my ears, they are in the great tradition of young male adult American fictional characters—think Huck Finn, think Holden Caulfield—struggling with the circumstances of their lives and who wield scorn as a weapon to protect the shreds of their idealism while desperately searching for place and purpose in adult life. The opening paragraph of the first story, "Playing *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*" illustrates:

*First, you have to gather the cash to preorder the game at the local GameStop where your cousin works, and even through he hooks it up with the employee discount, the game is still a bit out of your price range because you've been using your Taco Bell paychecks to help your pops, who's been out of work*

*since you were ten and who makes you feel unbearably guilty about spending money on useless hobbies while kids in Kabul are destroying their bodies to build compounds for white businessmen and warlords—but, shit, it's Kojima, it's Metal Gear, so, after scrimping and saving (like literal dimes you're picking up off the street), you've got the cash, which you give to your cousin, who purchases the game on your behalf, and then, on the day it's released, you just have to find a way to get to the store.*

That's a bravura opening, to be sure, inflected throughout with vivid detail and signifying resonances. Not to make too much of it, but the wildly undisciplined melange of sentiments expressed by the young male narrator also resembles that of disgruntled Iraq and Afghanistan military veterans flailing against the limits of their own lives, as expressed in many GWOT stories and memoirs.

It's doubtful anyone will be inviting Jamil Jan Kochai and Elliot Ackerman to the same dinner party anytime soon, nor ask them to share a conference stage. The war-of-words surrounding their recent works reveals that the civil-military divide still gapes, and efforts to speak across it can easily exacerbate mistrust and miscommunication. However, it's not impossible to like both authors' books. Readers interested in Afghanistan-American relations and the Afghan diaspora in particular can read them in tandem for insight into how the population flows linking the two countries are often experienced individually as confusing and disappointing.



Former site of the Joint Mguire-Dix-Lakehust Afghan Resettlement Camp after its dismantling. July 2022

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