

The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan

By Elliot Ackerman

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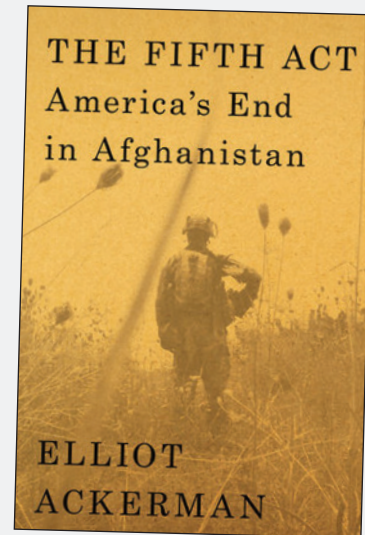
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Reviewed by Dov S. Zakheim

Elliot Ackerman's *The Fifth Act: America's End in Afghanistan* reads like one of his award-winning novels. It is fast-paced and thrilling. It also is full of flashbacks, similar to movies and extended television murder mysteries. But this latest Ackerman volume is not a novel. It is the very real story of how the author, together with many others, worked to rescue as many Afghans as they could during the chaotic days of Kabul's downfall to the Taliban. And it contrasts not only the fate of these people with the author's current peaceful life but with the anguish that characterized his own service in Afghanistan both as a Marine and as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer a decade into what became America's endless war.

Ackerman's book is not merely one man's account of his efforts to save as many Afghans as he could, and doing so by working together with a host of partners, some of whom he never actually met. It also is a bitter reflection on the policies that led to America's humiliation two decades after what appeared to have been a lightning victory over the Taliban.

Early in the volume, having provided a brief *mise en scene* of the state of play in the immediate aftermath of Kabul's fall, Ackerman offers the first of many reflections on what went wrong in Afghanistan. He does so in the context of his



own look backward to his days of training at the Marines' Amphibious Reconnaissance School in 2002, just after what appeared to be America's quick victory over the Taliban. He notes that his first deployment was not to Afghanistan but to Iraq, "leading a platoon in Fallujah," and points out that while Afghanistan was the older war, for him, as for others, "Iraq was our first war." He deployed there "first because Bush had made Afghanistan a second-tier priority." He observes that "of the many fatal mistakes made in our Afghan tragedy, the Bush administration would soon make the first: it would begin the war in Iraq... As the Iraq War raged, the lack of US focus in Afghanistan set conditions for the Taliban to reconstitute in neighboring Pakistan. President Bush's fixation on Iraq allowed this."

While it is arguable that it was less Bush's "fixation" than those of Vice President Dick Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in particular, Ackerman is on the mark regarding the priority assigned to the two wars. I vividly recall having to fund the positioning of forces in anticipation of an attack on Iraq even as we were in the midst of our initial Afghan operations. Moreover, it

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was because Iraq was uppermost in the minds of the Pentagon leadership that I was asked to coordinate our non-military activities in Afghanistan, a task that surely should have been in Under Secretary for Policy Doug Feith's writ rather than mine as Comptroller. But Feith, like his superiors in both the Pentagon and the White House, was totally consumed by Iraq.

Ackerman goes on to point out three elements that characterized the Afghan war—and for that matter the war in Iraq as well—and rendered them both unprecedented: “Never before had America engaged in a protracted conflict with an all-volunteer military that was funded through deficit spending.” Previous wars had involved two of the three elements that he outlines. America had employed deficit spending to fight the protracted war in Vietnam. Draftees, not volunteers, constituted the vast majority of America's forces in that war. The United States did employ a volunteer force that it funded by means of deficit spending; but the war in which they fought, the 1991 Gulf War, was not protracted.

Nevertheless, as American troops mobilized in the Gulf in late 1990 and early 1991, there was no way of knowing that Saddam's forces, on paper the fourth largest military in the world, would collapse as quickly as they did and inflict an amazingly small number of casualties on the American-led coalition. On the other hand, as Vladimir Putin will certainly attest after his invasion of Ukraine, wars are not short just because those who launch them think they will be. Ackerman's observation about the Afghan War is simply a reflection of the resentment that he continues to harbor.

Having digressed to opine on the origin and nature of the war, Ackerman turns to his initial induction into the Marines, and the flowering of a friendship with Jack, who sponsored him throughout his service with the Corps and then the CIA and who later figured in his efforts to save Afghans. Ackerman then jumps ahead in time as he offers his readers another flashback, to his decision to leave the CIA and thereby disappoint Jack, who had anticipated

that they would work together in Afghanistan, this time for the Agency. Ackerman had had enough of the Afghan War, though cutting his ties with the Agency, and his friend, was not without pain. As he writes: “I felt sick. Try as I might to rationalize it away, leaving the war meant betraying my best friend.... Every person who has fought in these wars and left them has had to declare the war over for themselves.... There has been no single peace; rather, there have been tens of thousands of separate peace deals that each of us who walked away from the war had to negotiate with our own conscience.”

It is only after these flashbacks that Ackerman turns to the heart of his tale: the contrast between his current lifestyle as a family man and successful author and the misery of those whom he and his fellows attempt to save. He begins his account as his family is about to depart for a vacation in Italy. He receives many phone calls asking him whether he knows how to raise funds to enable Afghans to leave their country and then whether he can actually help them leave. These calls come from people he knows, from people who know people that he knows, and from people with whom he has no prior connection either direct or indirect. Most of the callers are veterans of the Afghan War, as he is. They feel an obligation to their Afghan translators, guides, and fellow soldiers to a far greater degree than does the Biden Administration, which has trouble organizing a coherent rescue operation.

As his family arrives in Rome, Ackerman learns that “the issue now isn't flights but access to the airport itself. No one can get inside.” He now is being asked to help in three different ways: to find money, to help get people to the airport, and to help them get out of the country. It is a series of tasks that ultimately consumes him throughout what is meant to be a vacation.

Ackerman's flashbacks pepper his description of his efforts, together with those of so many others, to rescue as many Afghans as he possibly could. He veers between giving his readers an update as to the

state of play on the ground in Afghanistan, the interconnecting networks that strove to save whomever they could, updates on his family vacation, flashbacks to his service both as a Marine and then as a CIA operations officer. If all this seems complicated, that is because it actually was.

I can personally attest to at least some of the challenges that Ackerman so lucidly describes. I played a minor role in the effort by the senior management and trustees of the American University of Iraq in Sulimaniyeh to rescue a small number of students from the American University of Afghanistan. Like Ackerman and those he worked with both inside and outside Afghanistan, my colleagues and I also had to identify and win the commitment of financial sponsors; to give—and receive—updates from both senior contacts and desk officers in the Pentagon and from the military on the ground; to keep Congressional members and staff informed and to seek whatever assistance they could provide. Then there were the matters of getting the students to Kabul's Karzai International Airport; of finding aircraft to receive them once they got past the Marine wire; of determining the route that would get them from Kabul to Sulimaniyeh. And, like Ackerman, because of the time zone differences, several of my heroic colleagues devoted their efforts through the wee hours of many mornings.

Perhaps the toughest challenges that Ackerman faced were getting the refugees through the airport's gate and then onto a waiting aircraft. He relates how he turned to his former Marine and CIA buddy Jack for help in getting the first of several convoys past the airport wire. He tells Jack that he needs the Marines at the one gate that is not closed, the so-called Unknown Gate, to let a few busloads of Afghans into the airport. He is conversing with Jack while speaking from the gift shop of Rome's Colosseum. He tells him he has the financing, and though he does not have the tail number of the aircraft that is meant to evacuate the Afghans, he

expects to get both that and the passenger manifest in time for the Marines to open the gate at 0330 Afghan time; all Jack can offer is: "I'll see what I can do." It is an answer that Ackerman frequently hears from the officials and military on the ground.

Before the reader learns the fate of the Afghans on the buses, Ackerman returns to describe the next stages of his family vacation, as well as his partial reconciliation with Jack, who had taken serious umbrage at Ackerman's decision to retire. He then offers the reader yet another critique of the Biden Administration's Afghan policy. He notes that Biden vigorously disputed any notion that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan was inevitable. Ackerman quotes Biden asserting that "the Afghan troops have 300,000 well equipped [soldiers]—as well equipped as any army in the world—[with]... an air force against something like 75,000 Taliban." "And yet," observes Ackerman, "these forces were shown to be a plywood army, one with the capability to accomplish the mission, but with foundational problems in recruitment, administration and leadership." In other words, an army doomed to defeat.

Ackerman then rightly criticizes the Biden Administration for its failure to develop a coherent evacuation plan in the period that immediately followed the president's announcement of America's planned withdrawal from Afghanistan on September 11. He notes that several Congressmen, many of them veterans, wrote to Biden asking for an evacuation plan and calling for a massive airlift and temporary housing for the refugees on Guam. He quotes a few of the signatories, including Seth Moulton, a friend from his days as a Marine, who points out that "the US...has managed such evacuations before." "Yet," he observes, "in the months before Kabul's fall, while there's still an opportunity to significantly expedite the visa process or even begin a wider evacuation, the Biden Administration does neither." And he pointedly adds, "the September 11 deadline has, since its inception, been arbitrary, of arguably of no military

significance, a gimmicky way to add symmetry to an otherwise asymmetrical conflict. As the withdrawal begins, and the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, the date is moved up, to August 31. If our back is up against a wall, it is a wall that we have built.”

Ackerman then returns to relate how from Rome he continues to monitor the situation on the ground in Kabul. Thanks to the coordinated efforts of his network, the non-Afghans accompanying the buses with 109 Afghans, his friend Jack, and the Marines at the gate, all the refugees are able to get into the airport and board the awaiting flight. Their convoy is only the first, however. The work that Ackerman and his contacts have undertaken has only just begun.

Before turning to the fate of a second convoy of Afghans that he worked to assist, Ackerman offers another flashback, this time to an American special forces operation against Taliban fighters in a town in Farah province, located in southwestern Afghanistan near the Iranian border. But Ackerman interrupts this narrative by returning briefly to his tale of helping Afghans escape while he and his family continue their Italian adventure. And then he reverts to the operation in Farah.

He writes about the Farah operation in a town called Shewan because it involved the death of a Marine whose body Ackerman decided his unit should not attempt to recover because it was still under fire. That decision continues to haunt Ackerman, because Marines never leave a comrade behind. Indeed, ultimately, another unit did recover the body. Before the reader learns that this was the outcome of the incident, however, Ackerman has again reverted to the progress of his family vacation, to the latest developments in the effort to rescue Afghans, and to yet another critique of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“If insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome, in Afghanistan the Biden administration has adopted an insane policy, setting itself up for a repeat of Obama’s experience in Iraq with what has proven

to be a debacle of a withdrawal.” In what almost becomes a rant, he continues in this vein for several more pages before returning not to Shewan, but once again to the situation on the ground in Kabul, and only then turns to relate the the denouement of the episode in the Afghan town.

Ackerman then brings his readers back to the rescue effort. He continues to expand his network in order to help a second convoy enter the airport, this time through its North Gate, which he had previously related was closed. Again, it cannot enter that gate. He reaches out to retired Marine General John Allen, former commander of Central Command, who links him with the Command’s headquarters, which could order that a gate be opened for this latest convoy of four buses of Afghan escapees. Allen contacts the CENTCOM Director of Operations, as well as Ackerman’s journalist friend Nick, who is organizing the convoy, which then proceeds to the airport’s South Gate.

Noting that he has given his wife an update on his latest efforts and developments on the ground, and that she responds that “it’s total collapse,” enables him once more to interrupt his narrative with yet another biting critique of America’s war and its chaotic aftermath:

Collapse is a good word. The past couple of weeks have not only seen a collapse of our country’s competence as we’ve unconditionally lost a twenty-year war, but also a collapse of time, space and hierarchy. . . . Time has collapsed as those of us who fought in Afghanistan years ago have found ourselves thrown back into that conflict with an intensity as though we’d never left. . . . Space has collapsed, as those of us coordinating these evacuations are spread across the world. . . . And hierarchy has collapsed, as from the President on down, we are all subject to the vicissitudes of this catastrophic withdrawal.

When he returns to his account of the second convoy, Ackerman conveys the conversation taking place among the leaders of each bus and those who

are working feverishly to find a way to get into the South Gate. The attempt also fails, and the convoy is forced to return to the Serena hotel from where it began its perilous journey. The failed attempt to enter the South Gate took just over an hour; but the private citizens who organized and directed the effort had barely slept for two days. The military at CENTCOM headquarters and on the ground had tried their best as well. One can understand Ackerman's frustration with the Biden Administration.

Before returning to his efforts to extract Afghans from their war-torn land, Ackerman indulges in several more flashbacks. He relates a 2016 chance encounter in New York's Essex House hotel with a retired Marine helicopter pilot nicknamed "Dutch" whom he has not seen since they were both in Afghanistan five years earlier. Their meeting prompts yet another flashback, this time to Ackerman's days advising a Counter Terrorism Pursuit Team (CTPT) operating in Shkin, a town in the Taliban-infested Paktika province. He is working with those who are carrying out targeted killings, which the Obama Administration increasingly came to rely upon as it drew down American conventional forces. Ackerman notes the "discomfort" of those who planned and carried out the killings, "because it felt like we were doing something, on a large scale, that we'd sworn not to. Most of us felt as though we were violating Executive Order 12333 [which explicitly prohibits assassinations]. Everybody knew what was happening. . . . [But] in the United States we veiled these assassination programs behind the highest levels of classification. In Afghanistan and Pakistan. . . these programs were part of daily life. . . . They were no secret to the residents of these countries, while to us, in our country, these campaigns became a secret we kept from ourselves."

It is not only to indict the targeted assassination program that Ackerman writes of his chance meeting with "Dutch." It is also to demonstrate the fog that engulfed even the most sophisticated assassination attempts. While working together in Shkin,

the military had targeted a Taliban commander named Nazir. The air strike that was meant to kill him killed four Talibs, but it was unclear from the satellite imagery whether Nazir was among them. In fact, he was not. It was only after an Afghan informant of sometimes dubious reliability showed the Americans where the Taliban commander lived that the man met his fate.

Before returning to his main narrative, Ackerman offers another memory, one of his father-in-law, a member of the Greatest Generation who fought in World War Two, which he juxtaposes with a conversation with his friend Congressman Seth Moulton. Moulton had bravely arrived in Kabul to see for himself what was going on, and offered to help any way he could. Ackerman then further couples his recollections of his father-in-law with his conversation with another veteran who also fought in Fallujah, and later in Afghanistan, to opine yet again on the tragedy that was the Afghan War. When his friend remarks, reflecting a view that many hold, that "Afghanistan was the good war. . . . No one attacked us from Iraq," Ackerman takes a contrary view. "One could make a credible case that our other war, in Iraq. . . was the war we didn't lose. . . particularly as the country has now held four consecutive sets of parliamentary elections without any meaningful violence." Harking back indirectly to his father's vastly different wartime experience, however, he adds: "America's mixed outcome in Iraq paired with our unequivocal loss in Afghanistan feels not only like a national indictment, but also a generational one."

There follow more flashbacks, more reports on the family itinerary, more updates of the situation on the ground. And more opportunities to bemoan the incompetence of the American government. In one notable instance Ackerman turns to the Trump peace deal with the Taliban, which he terms a "betrayal." He correctly observes that the Afghan government was kept out of the negotiations, a "strategy [that] resembled the flawed American negotiations during the

Vietnam War...in which National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger cut out the government of South Vietnam.” He goes on to point out that just as South Vietnamese president Nguyen van Thieu was handed a *fait accompli*, so too was Afghan president Ashraf Ghani. As a result, the deal “fatally delegitimized President Ghani and his central government.”

Even more than the Paris Peace Accords to which Ackerman refers, the February 2020 Doha Agreement was reminiscent of the 1938 Munich Agreement, in which Britain and France gave away the Czech Sudetenland to Germany without Czechoslovakia’s agreement. In the days immediately following what British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain crowed would bring “peace in our time,” the British and French forced Czech President Edward Benes to accept the deal; like Benes, Ghani, had little choice but to cave in to pressure from his more powerful putative allies.

The debate over whether the Paris Peace Accords were the reason South Vietnam fell has raged for decades. But even a cursory review of America’s deal with the Taliban is enough to lead one to conclude that it was a complete giveaway. Washington agreed to release five thousand prisoners—without the consent of the Kabul government; the Taliban offered virtually nothing in return. Neither did Hitler in 1938.

Moreover, as Ackerman notes, the American negotiators seemed to have overlooked the inconsistency between the formal American refusal to call the Taliban a government and the demand that it not issue travel documents to those who might threaten the United States. Kissinger won a Nobel Peace Prize for the Paris Accords; none was even contemplated for those whose negotiation at Doha was merely a cover for America’s decision to cut and run.

Some of Ackerman’s most powerful writing contrasts his own family vacation and the situation that he is attempting to address in Kabul. For example, as his family is in a taxi to the airport on their way to their next Italian stop, he records the efforts

of his network to support an Afghan couple trying to make its way to Kabul airport. As Ackerman’s wife is handing over her passport and checking bags, this couple is making its way through the crowds before Kabul airport’s North Gate. And the couple makes it through the gate just after Ackerman’s family has arrived at theirs.

This episode, like others in the book, is accompanied by photographs. The photos are meant to highlight his various recollections, as well as the progress of the vacation in Italy. But those that illustrate the conditions surrounding the Afghan couple’s escape are especially moving. There are no friendly flight attendants. No signs for priority boarding. No loudspeaker announcements of a gate that is about to close. Instead, the photos are of a handwritten sign to alert the Marines at the gate to the escaping Afghans; of the crowd of desperate Afghans milling in front of the gate; of the barbed wire topping the fence and wall, laced with garbage in between them, that mark off the barriers to entering the airport.

As Ackerman begins to conclude his twofold account of both his efforts to help fleeing Afghans and his experiences over a decade earlier as a CIA officer, he expands the aperture of his critique of the war. After repeating the several parallels between the Vietnam War and America’s Afghan misadventure, he argues that there remains a fundamental difference between the two, as illustrated by the reactions to the 1971 publication of the Pentagon Papers and that to the *Washington Post’s* Afghanistan papers that appeared two decades later. While the earlier revelations had what Ackerman terms a “galvanizing effect” that reinforced public opposition to the Vietnam conflict, the Afghanistan papers did nothing of the kind, apart from enflaming “certain members of Congress [who] noisily expressed their outrage,” (page 182) which Ackerman sarcastically dismisses. “Such sudden indignation,” he remarks cynically. “Do we, the American people, really need an unearthing of thousands of

previously classified documents to tell us that our efforts in Afghanistan have not gone well?”

It is, of course, a rhetorical question. Ackerman faults not only policy makers and the military, but also average Americans who never mobilized to oppose the war and who have ignored its costs, allowing them to be passed on to future generations. He calls it “societal duplicity.” And somehow, he then transitions into a discussion of his reaction to the January 6, 2020 insurrection, arguing that “the level of insanity witnessed that day” is comparable to fighting in a war: “anyone who has been to war can tell you that no matter how honorably it is conducted, it is an exercise in collective insanity.” That observation may hold more than a grain of truth, but hardly contributes to the progress of his narrative.

Although the Afghanistan papers indict all administrations since 2001, Ackerman appears to have a softer spot for Barack Obama than for his predecessor and his successors. His bias is most marked when in the course of indicting the American public for what he terms its “fatigue,” he digresses to Obama’s futile threat to Syria’s Bashar Assad against crossing a “red line” by employing chemical weapons. Instead, he blames “the international community,” the Congress, and indeed “the fatigue of voters.” It is as if Obama’s hands were tied. They were not. Just as he could order retaliation for attacks on American troops, just as he could order targeted assassinations, so he could have ordered a serious retaliatory strike against the Syrians. That he failed to do so was no one’s fault but his own.

Following his seemingly never-ending political commentary, Ackerman inserts another flashback. He is attending the burial of a war buddy at Arlington and he spies Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, watching at a distance. Ackerman goes on to discuss his high regard for Mullen, which the Admiral justly deserves. I offer full disclosure that he is a friend; no matter, few will disagree with me—or with

Ackerman—that Mullen has always been as down-to-earth as he has been thoughtful; that he puts his interlocutors, no matter how junior, at ease; that he is always curious to learn new facts; and, most important, that he always has cared, and still cares—and cares deeply—for the men and women who once served under his command. Equally important, he has long been a firm believer in an apolitical military; at a time when there is a growing debate over the politicization of those in uniform, Ackerman’s portrayal of Mullen is especially welcome.

Ackerman’s final section, which, like the title of his book, he calls “The Fifth Act,” again intersperses his account of Afghans he helped rescue with yet more—and repeated—criticism of the Biden Administration, the Trump Administration, and the American public. There are still families to save, however; still Afghans whose lives are at risk because they worked with Americans and now have been left by Washington to twist in the wind. Ackerman and his network press on, and they do manage to get more Afghans out of the country, though far too many are still left behind.

Ackerman’s bitterness comes to the fore most starkly as he brings his volume to a close. He relates the content of a video by a serving Marine lieutenant colonel named Stuart Scheller, who castigates the senior military leadership and quotes Thomas Jefferson’s famous (or infamous) remark that “every generation needs a revolution.” Ackerman writes that Scheller’s video cost him his military career. He notes that “my first instinct is to categorize it as a rant.” One might say the same of so much of the content of *The Fifth Act*. Regarding the video, Ackerman observes that “emotions are raw—so a rant...—seems understandable.” That may be so, up to a point, but Ackerman has just too many rants of his own, and it ultimately detracts from the raw power of his narrative.

The same might also be said regarding the book’s many flashbacks. While they do offer a contrast with

his main theme, and indeed can be enlightening and informative, they also can be overdone, to the point of bewildering the reader. Ackerman's story just has too many wheels within wheels, too many digressions. Some are necessary, others not so much.

Ackerman is both a brilliant novelist and a decorated veteran. His efforts, and those of his many compatriots—from ordinary citizens to the most senior officers in the land—to rescue Afghans for whom America simply had not provided, are nothing short of heroic. And he is certainly entitled to express his revulsion at Washington's ignominious departure from Afghanistan. Yet his bitterness against government and military leaders blinds him not only to the good work of many of those leaders, but also to the fundamental decency and generosity of the American people.

Ackerman published his book before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Most intelligence experts, including those of the United States, expected Ukraine to collapse within days. Instead, due in no small part, not only to the brave Ukrainians, but to the American led coalition that has aided them with arms, materiel, training, and funds that have flooded into the country, the supposedly overmatched Ukrainian military has fought the Russians to a standstill for the better part of a year.

In 2022 the Biden Administration and Congress—two of Ackerman's primary targets—directed almost \$50 billion in aid to Ukraine. More will be forthcoming in 2023. Congressional support for aid to Ukraine is overwhelmingly bipartisan, as is that of American public, despite economic hardship and the highest level of inflation in decades. Evidently, "fatigue" has paralyzed neither government nor public support for Ukraine.

It is true that there have been murmurs in both Washington and Western Europe that the Ukrainians should settle their differences with Moscow by making some difficult concessions. Nevertheless, even if the Western Europeans would

prefer to forget the Munich Agreement, the Biden Administration cannot overlook its predecessor's disastrous deal. As long as the heroic Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky refuses to participate in a meaningful negotiation, despite what already may be strong American pressure to do so, there will be no negotiated settlement with Russia. The Doha Agreement, and even more so the chaotic departure from Afghanistan, will continue to haunt the White House just as it haunts Ackerman and those who fought in that decades long debacle.

Things could have been different in Afghanistan. America had good reason to attack the Taliban and al Qaida, which until the Iraq War were both on the run. Millions of exiled Afghans returned home during the early years of the conflict; women were freed from their medieval drudgery; small businesses began to flourish. Even as the war dragged on, there had still been progress: free elections, education for women, tolerance for minorities. These were no small accomplishments, despite widespread corruption and Taliban control of a good part of the countryside.

The Biden team simply could have renounced the Doha agreement on the perfectly justifiable grounds that the Taliban continued to harbor terrorists. It could have retained a small troop presence in the country, as well as Air Force units operating from Bagram air base, which should not have been abandoned as quickly as it was. Had the Biden team—which reversed so many other Trump decisions—reversed Trump's pullout, Afghanistan might not be suffering both socially and economically as is the case today. But Biden did nothing of the sort, and for that reason, even if Ackerman's scathing political observations are far too repetitive, and his flashbacks too frequent, his book is still worth reading. It offers lessons that America should have learned after the fall of Vietnam, but did not. And it is high time that it did.