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# BOOKS & ARTS



## The sum of all fears

*David J. Garrow* is impressed by a superbly written and insightful account of the contemporary American military

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

*General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr*  
Naval Institute Press, pp. 326, \$35

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**F**our-star Marine General Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie headed US Central Command — CENTCOM, covering the Middle East — from spring 2019 until spring 2022. It was an eventful, and stressful, three years: taking out long-time Islamic State head Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, then notorious Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in early 2020 and overseeing the disastrous final withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Prior to CENTCOM, McKenzie had spent four years in two top-level Joint Chiefs staff posts, and before that he served multiple tours of duty on the ground in Afghanistan. As a younger officer he had been in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, when American Airlines Flight 77 hit; he was commissioned in the Marine Corps right out of the Citadel in 1979. He credits his English courses there for teaching him that “I could write and write well,” and this fast-paced, hugely impressive analytical account of his service years demonstrates the truth of that observation page after page.

Given McKenzie’s years at CENTCOM, *The Melting Point* is also essential reading for anyone interested in what Donald Trump 2.0 — i.e., Trump 47 — might mean for the world come January 2025. While recounting

numerous White House meetings, McKenzie time and again refers to “the president,” rather than specifying either Trump or Joe Biden, an implicit reflection of McKenzie’s deep devotion to the US tradition of civilian control of the military.

Yet while *The Melting Point* is always polite and measured, McKenzie never shies from bluntly calling out what he sees as a tragically long series of US blunders in the Middle East. To McKenzie, “the single greatest missed opportunity of the campaign on the military side” occurred all the way back in 2001, just months after 9/11, when “the CENTCOM commander” — McKenzie does not call out General Tommy Franks by name — “would not release the forces necessary” to kill Osama bin Laden in the Tora Bora mountains. But George W. Bush’s White House instigated a far graver error, says McKenzie; “invading Iraq is appropriately viewed as one of the most disastrous and negatively consequential foreign policy decisions ever taken” by US leadership.

McKenzie is likewise harsh when it comes to President Barack Obama, noting unsurprisingly that “the passage of time has not been kind to the decisions made by the Obama administration.” For one thing, “Obama’s decision to surge forces into Afghanistan in 2010 while also setting a firm timeline for ending those operations... completely destroyed the strategic utility of adding forces in the first place and gave a lifeline to the Taliban,” the insurgent reactionary movement that had long sheltered bin Laden. Similarly wrong-headed, McKenzie writes, was the “Obama administration’s precipitous decision to withdraw from Iraq in 2011.”

But *The Melting Point*’s firm focus is on McKenzie’s own three years at CENTCOM. “One of my first acts after assuming command in March 2019 was... to ask if we held any plans to strike Soleimani”; McKenzie wanted “a relentless focus on Iran” and the dangers its allied militia groups throughout the region posed to US forces. Nine months later a missile attack killed an American contractor at Kirkuk in Iraq. “This was a game-changer, and it was obvious to me that we would be responding.” Two days later Joint Chiefs chairman General Mark Milley informed McKenzie “that we were to strike Soleimani in Iraq if he came there” per a decisive policy shift ordered by President Trump. McKenzie was quietly exhilarated; he “had watched the Obama administration national security apparatus” — and before that Bush’s — “grapple ineptly with the dynamism and leadership that Soleimani brought to the fight.”

Late on January 2, 2020 at CENTCOM Headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, McKenzie watched a live video

feed as “a great flash of white arced across the screen,” marking the end of Qasem Soleimani’s life on an access road near Baghdad International Airport. “For me personally, as a Marine,” that moment was “profoundly satisfying on a deep, emotional level” — Soleimani “had the blood of hundreds of US service-members on his hands, and he had been plotting to kill more,” McKenzie writes. He also knew that Iranian retaliation would not be long in coming, and “for the first time in the history of warfare, US forces were subjected to ballistic missile attacks” at a base in Iraq, but no fatalities ensued. “In a wise and farsighted decision, the president chose not to respond to the Iranian attack.”

McKenzie is likewise quietly commendatory of Trump’s demeanor when the earlier decision had been made to target Baghdadi: the president “was focused, and asked good questions,” he observes, pushing back on the widespread assumption that Trump was an emotionally deranged chief executive. Yet McKenzie harshly criticizes his admin-

### *McKenzie never shies from bluntly calling out a tragically long series of US blunders in the Middle East*

istration’s February 2020 agreement to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan by mid-2021, even though at the time McKenzie himself endorsed the accord. “Setting a date was an enormous strategic mistake that gave renewed life to the Taliban, even as it deflated the government of Afghanistan. We also agreed to stop air strikes against the Taliban,” he reflects. “These two decisions represent some of the worst negotiating mistakes ever made by the United States” and were “purely a reflection of our desire to have an agreement at any cost.”

But McKenzie appreciates how the US presence had become a tragic error. “We forgot why we were there. We entered Afghanistan to remove the source of an attack on our homeland and to prevent future attacks. This morphed into an exercise in nation-building,” albeit one “where we never achieved the most fundamental condition necessary for counterinsurgency success,” namely cutting off the Taliban’s sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan. This represented “a policy failure at the highest level of our government across multiple presidential administrations.” Even more fundamentally, “it was a remarkable exercise in American arrogance to believe that we could create a democratic society in Afghanistan.”

McKenzie recounts in detail a June 2, 2020, White House meeting about drawing down US troop levels prior to full withdrawal. Donald Trump “was engaged and interactive from the beginning,” and “was very measured as he asked questions.” Trump

spoke “about all of the money that had been poured into Afghanistan — and with so little effect,” and “it was difficult to disagree with him.” McKenzie knew then “that a complete withdrawal would likely lead to a rapid collapse of the Afghan security forces and the government,” so he and General Milley strongly favored retaining a minimal US presence for as long as possible.

Come November, Trump lost reelection and soon thereafter fired superb defense secretary Mark Esper, leaving a small cast of amateur misfits as the Pentagon’s top civilians. Milley and McKenzie hugely feared that Trump’s lame-duck cast of characters might provoke the president to attack Iran, but at a December 4 White House meeting “it was the president who resisted these more aggressive approaches,” McKenzie recounts. Trump “was engaged, focused, and quite interested in both the large concepts and the small details” that his uniformed commanders laid out concerning Iran. “I found the president to be rational and very reasonable.”

Nonetheless, McKenzie strikingly states that “simply arriving at the afternoon of January 20 without a major war with Iran underway was a great accomplishment.” Yet he was far from overjoyed with the exceptionally remote new defense secretary, former General Lloyd Austin, or with President Biden. McKenzie compares April 11, 2021, when Milley informed him that Biden had ordered a total US withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of August, with the emotional impact of 9/11. “To withdraw while still maintaining an embassy... and not undertaking a withdrawal of American citizens and at-risk Afghans concurrently” was a calamitous decision that “was entirely his” and that “irrevocably accelerated the trajectory” of the inevitable Afghan collapse.

Come August, events on the ground indeed proved that “it was impossible to achieve success with the decision that was made.” As the Taliban advanced on the city, it made the ill-considered decision to free hundreds of Islamic State fighters from prisons, including one who on August 26 successfully mounted a suicide attack on the US troops who were providing security for the hurried and chaotic mass evacuation underway at Kabul’s international airport.

“The attack was not preventable by the forces on the ground unless we stopped bringing evacuees inside the perimeter,” McKenzie grimly observes, and the deaths of thirteen US service members “will haunt me for the rest of my life.” Nonetheless, “on the day of the attack, we brought out a total of 13,390 people. I consider that number any time I reflect on the loss of those thirteen brave Americans. I do not believe that their deaths were in vain.”

All in all, “our withdrawal from Afghani-

stan was a huge victory for international terrorism,” McKenzie admits, and “the return of the Afghanistan platform for terrorists will prove increasingly problematic for us over time,” he predicts.

Yet terrorism is far from McKenzie’s most dire fear. “Nuclear weapons are coming back as battlefield weapons,” he cautions, and “I am convinced that the next large war we fight will have a nuclear component.” What’s worse, “modern missiles... have made the great oceans that border the North American continent little more than river barriers,” he writes memorably. “The next war... will be bloodier than what we have come to expect,” and “other nations” — plural — “are assiduously preparing for this war, and... are targeting us.”

General McKenzie’s fine memoir is a rich and powerful testament to the qualities that our best military commanders bring to their service to the nation. It is also, to use Thomas Jefferson’s famous phrase from two centuries ago, a fire bell in the night. The United States needs to be ready for “when war comes,” McKenzie warns, for “it’s coming faster than we realize.”

## This woman’s work

Alison Kerr

### **The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum: The Rise and Fall of an American Organized-Crime Boss**

Margalit Fox  
Random House, \$32

If you thought organized crime in the United States had its roots in the Prohibition era, think again. As Margalit Fox demonstrates in this compelling and evocative biography, its seeds were sown half a century earlier, when a resourceful, daring and ingenious woman enjoyed a long and successful career as a forerunner of the familiar twentieth-century “Godfather” figure. By the mid-1880s, she was the boss of America’s most notorious crime syndicate, presiding over a multimillion-dollar criminal empire which stretched across the country and even into Mexico and Europe.

Born in Kassel, Germany in 1825, Fredericka “Marm” Mandelbaum came to America in 1850, part of the mass exodus of European Jews in that period. The United States — nicknamed “Das Dollarland” in her home

country — was viewed as the land of economic opportunity, but when she and her husband settled on New York’s Lower East Side, in a slum known as *Kleindeutschland*, there wasn’t much evidence of it. Certainly, for a woman who was used to being able to contribute to the household income, there were few possibilities beyond poorly-paid long hours as a servant or backbreaking, and undependable, sewing jobs.

Summing up Mandelbaum’s situation, Fox writes: “Professional advancement, to say nothing of great wealth, seemed beyond contemplation for someone who, like her,

### *The joys lie in the detailed descriptions of Mandelbaum’s operation*

was marginalized three times over: immigrant, woman and Jew.” Having spent her first five years in America peddling lace door-to-door, she crossed into criminality when she realized that it was the only route out of poverty. She came into the orbit of a noted “fence” — receiver of stolen goods — who schooled her in appraising the value of lace, silk, cashmere, sealskin and the other luxury goods which passed, fleetingly, through their hands. Intelligent and astute, she quickly established herself as one of New York’s premier fences. By the mid-1860s, she had opened the shop which would remain her headquarters for two decades, and it was here, in a sprawling warren of secret rooms, that she assembled her troops, planned heists, had jewelry dismantled and engravings removed, shipped off orders and kept watch for visits from policemen who weren’t on her payroll — yet.

Many of the joys of Margalit Fox’s book lie in her detailed descriptions of various aspects of Mandelbaum’s operation, from the boldly simple, yet effective, trick deployed to separate Tiffany’s from some of its jewelry to the audacious, week-long tunneling exploits of the burglars who relieved Boston’s Boylston National Bank of between \$150,000 and \$1 million (between \$3 million and more than \$20 million today) in cash and securities.

Particularly delicious is the account of Mandelbaum’s “bespoke security system.” Not only did it feature a trap door which her employees could use if an emergency exit was required, it also included a trick chimney in her parlor fireplace.

“Inside the back was a dumbwaiter that communicated with the floor above. If Marm, peering through the bars, saw a suspicious character enter the shop, she could take whatever swag she had on hand vanish in an instant. With the pull of a hidden lever, she would lower the

dumbwaiter, stow her cache and hoist it safely out of sight.”

The movie is simply crying out to be made, so vivid and entertaining are the descriptions.

Fredericka Mandelbaum emerges as a remarkable and inspired — inspiring, even — figure, a mother of four whose maternal nature and fondness for her employees were rewarded by generally unflinching loyalty and affection (hence the nickname “Marm”). She called the members of her shoplifting and pickpocketing squad her “chicks,” and looked after her work-family, paying salaries, supporting wives when the husbands were in jail, and even organizing company picnics. Such was her popularity in her neighborhood that the locals looked out for her; one of the reasons she was able to get away with it all for so long, another being her “friends” in the police department. Meanwhile, she threw famously lavish dinner parties which were attended by the great and the good and gave her the opportunity to sport even more recycled bling than she wore during her daily business.

Her success as a woman in what was very much a man’s world, whether the underworld or the “upper,” was highly unusual and deeply impressive. But this is not merely the biography of one unique woman; it would be a considerably slimmer volume if it were. It is a lively and engrossing evocation of an era when the underworld flourished in tandem with the respectable “upper” world.

The period following the end of the Civil War saw the outbreak, says Fox, of “an epidemic of longing” and “a mass acquisitive drive.” It was therefore, she observes, “a halcyon time” for criminal receivers, and it was relatively easy for the likes of Mandelbaum to get her hands on luxury items swiped from under the noses of sales assistants in the new department stores where goods were spread out on top of counters, a style of presentation which tantalized shoppers and shoplifters alike. She excelled at her life of crime and came out on top until 1884 when she was arrested, although, typically, she fled police bail and settled in Hamilton, Ontario, where she lived until her death in 1894.

Fox brings the period to life by providing sharply drawn cameos of a supporting cast of colorful characters. Among them are the legendary private detective Allan Pinkerton and Mandelbaum’s longstanding lawyers, of whom Fox writes: “Had Howe and Hummel not already existed, Damon Runyon would have had to invent them.” Yet even Runyon would have struggled to outdo this fascinating and compulsively readable study of the redoubtable Mrs. Mandelbaum and the age in which she thrived.