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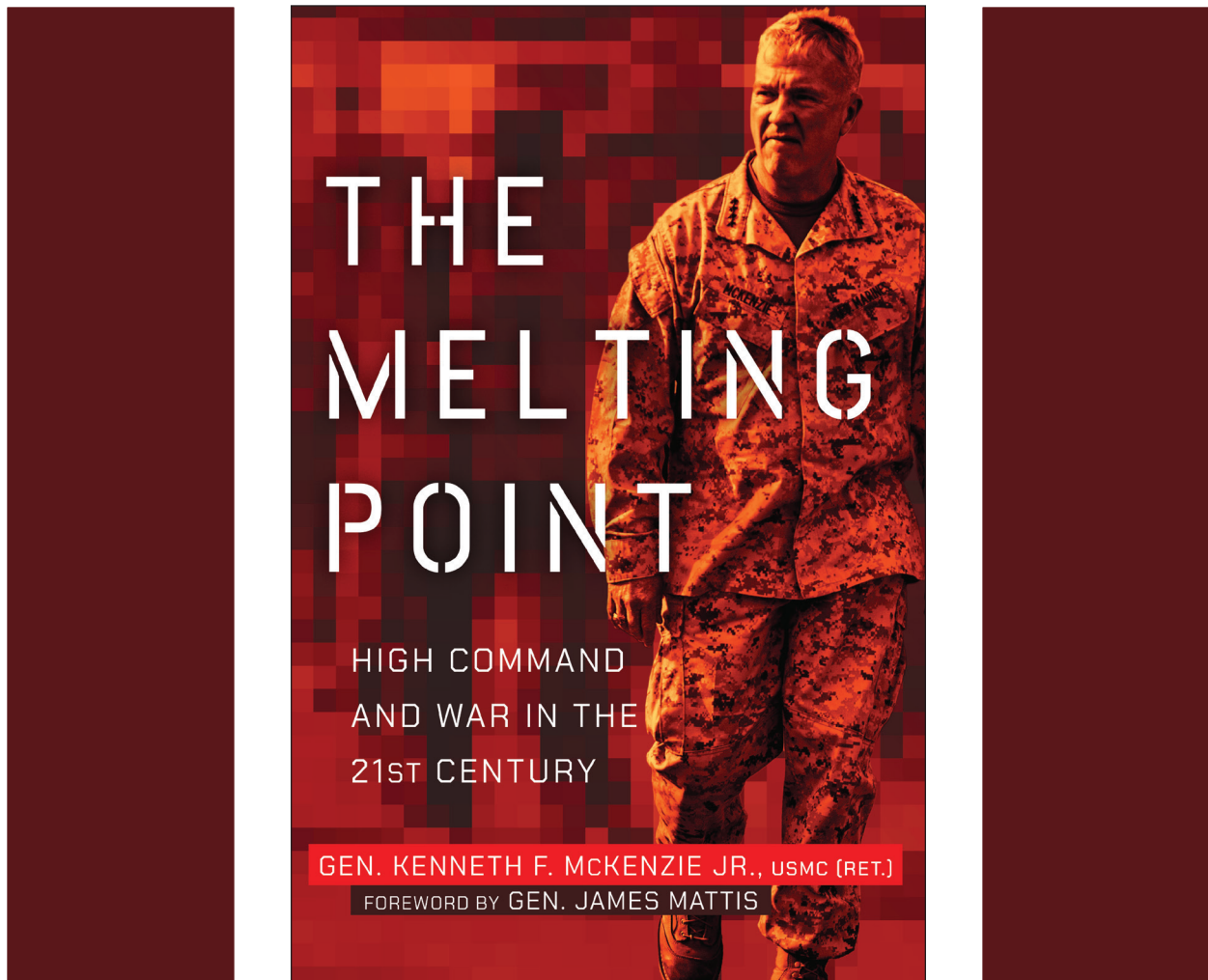
Book Review: The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century

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After three grueling years as the commander of United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and 42 years of service, General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. refused to rest in his retirement. Instead, he wrote a valuable book for military professionals, Middle East scholars, and civil-military relations experts. McKenzie presents an honest, often critical, assessment of military and policy leaders, including himself. Unlike many post-career biographies that span entire careers—such as Stanley A. McChrystal’s *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (Portfolio, 2013) or James Mattis and Bing West’s *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead* (Penguin Random House, 2019)—or offer broad analysis on warfare—such as David Petraeus and Andrew Robert’s *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine* (Harper, 2023)—McKenzie focuses on his three years as CENTCOM commander. This tight focus creates space for details rarely available so close in time to the events he describes.

McKenzie makes three central arguments:

1. Recent accusations of a civil-military relations “crisis”—specifically, an overpowered military dictating to civilian authorities— are overblown, a point he supports with ample evidence.

2. Combatant commanders executing policy and directing military forces in conflict have a unique role. McKenzie compares the combatant commander to other four-star generals, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the service Chiefs of Staff, who are not in the operational chain of command and do not bear moral responsibility for US servicemembers in combat.
3. Leadership matters, and combatant commanders' decisions have profound effects on battlefields.

McKenzie describes in detail his interface with the chairman, the secretary of defense, and the president as he presented military options, orchestrated operations, and balanced risk surrounding events, including the raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the strike that killed Iranian Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani. He argues that Iran is the most important threat in the Middle East and defends the much-criticized Soleimani strike as justified and impactful on Iran's ability to orchestrate military operations. McKenzie highlights moments of civil-military disagreement and the frustrations of managing CENTCOM as successive presidential administrations shifted focus to the Indo-Pacific. He criticizes what he calls a strategic "system of expedients" versus "a cohesive, coherent whole, applied within an overarching concept" when allocating forces to the Middle East (102).

While McKenzie argues that Iran is the central problem in the Middle East, he dedicates nearly half the book (151 of 306 pages) to Afghanistan. I am glad he did, as his description is the best I have read of the strategic events that led to that dramatic end. McKenzie casts blame all around for the ultimate failure in Afghanistan: on the military, Department of State, and the executive branch. For the dramatic collapse, he blames the most recent and current presidential administrations for failing to enforce the terms of the Doha Agreement and places blame squarely on President Joe Biden's administration for the chaotic exit in August 2021. Specifically, the administration decided to reduce the military below his recommended cap of 2,500, permitting no more than 650 American troops, while maintaining an embassy with a significant presence of Americans and Afghan allies. This decision was naive to the type of enemy facing the United States—one determined to win a military victory, replace the government, and remove all Western influence. His convincing argument demonstrates military responsiveness to civilian orders, but it left me questioning if the military could have better prepared for the worst-case scenario that became a reality.

In his nuanced conclusion, McKenzie defends his central argument against what many academics have called "an ascendent Joint Staff that has tended . . . to mute or quiet civilian voices" (290). Each side has its place, and he is critical of officers who fail to understand that the military must ultimately yield to the political and the civilian. He is equally critical of politicians who, instead of executing their responsibility to manage the more difficult task of making policy, tend to "substitute tactical micromanagement for policy creation" (291). He claims that if the military seems overpowering, it is likely attributable to the experienced military planners building courses of action, versus often-inexperienced civilian politicians. This scenario was especially true at the end of the Trump administration, after Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper's firing, a period McKenzie refers to as "amateur hour" on the civilian side of the relationship (166).

McKenzie's valuable advice to future strategic military leaders should be required reading at senior levels of professional military education. Military advice matters because it is rooted in experience, judgment, and the practice of war. Politicians should not elevate it above other advice

but should always listen and insist that military advice be unfiltered. Few would argue this point, yet trust has eroded between senior politicians and their military leaders. One hopes that books like McKenzie's will help future civilian and military leaders understand their role better.

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