

Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan¹

Reviewed by Major Temi Anderson*

Anyone who said you can go from full-on combat to transition in two years wasn't being realistic . . . [T]he lesson is that these things are going to take a lot of time and a lot of treasure.²

I. Introduction

In the wake of what many journalists perceived as failed strategy in Iraq, war correspondents chronicled numerous lessons learned by military leaders and diplomats.³ Seeing an opportunity to continue this legacy in what many refer to as the “good war,”⁴ Washington Post Correspondent Rajiv Chandrasekaran followed the story of the 2009 Afghanistan surge.⁵ The author provides readers with valuable insight into the complex world of twenty-first century counterinsurgency and lets readers decide whether the surge paid off.⁶ In furtherance of this goal, the author captivates readers with the rich details of various interview accounts from battlefield leaders. Chandrasekaran uses his experience as a journalist to pen *Little America*. This journalist approach, however, runs the risk of losing readers along the way because the author provides little independent

explanation regarding key points. In his closing chapters, the author finally explains that counterinsurgency is profitable, but is a fiendishly difficult strategy to implement effectively in the short term. Counterinsurgency requires a malleable military, effective civilian advisers, and sage policy-makers.⁷ *Little America* illustrates that those fundamentals were not always present in Afghanistan.

Little America is divided into three parts: Grand Dreams, Shattered Plans, and Triage. In eighteen chapters consisting of over 360 pages and a prologue, Chandrasekaran follows military leaders, State Department officials, and various war cabinet members through disparate paths that ultimately led them to Afghanistan. He demonstrates how their varied experiences shaped the way they viewed the path to success in the longest American war in history.⁸

The title of the book signals the author's thesis. “Little America” refers to attempts by the U.S. Agency for the International Development (USAID) to improve agriculture in the southern Afghanistan province of Helmand from 1950 to 1970.⁹ The United States invested over 21 million dollars in an effort to woo Afghanistan from a looming Soviet influence and strengthen the Afghan-U.S. partnership.¹⁰ Expatriate developers planned to create a massive irrigation project in Lashkar Gah, Helmand's desert capital.¹¹ Locals started calling the area “Little America” because the development featured stately western-style homes and stores filled with American conveniences like Coca-Cola.¹² The agricultural project eventually ran aground because it lacked

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¹ RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN, *LITTLE AMERICA: THE WAR WITHIN THE WAR FOR AFGHANISTAN* (2012).

² *Id.* at 320. This quote from a field grade officer illustrates one of the key issues the author finds with the 2009 surge: a short engagement is not profitable in a volatile country. The author supports instead a longer, concomitant military, and economic commitment to restoring public faith in the government. *Id.*

³ See RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN, *GREEN ZONE: IMPERIAL LIFE IN THE EMERALD CITY* (2010); see also THOMAS E. RICKS, *FIASCO: THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ, 2003 TO 2005* (2006).

⁴ George Friedman, *Al Qaeda, Afghanistan and the Good War*, FOREIGN POL'Y ASS'N, http://www.fpa.org/topics_info2414/topics_info_show.htm?doc_id=670946 (last visited Oct. 15, 2013).

⁵ M.J. WILLIAMS, *THE GOOD WAR: NATO AND THE LIBERAL CONSCIENCE IN AFGHANISTAN* (2011). President Barack Obama signed orders to deploy 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan in late 2009. CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1, at 128. See also *Afghanistan Profile*, BBC NEWS SOUTH ASIA (Oct. 15, 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12024253> (offering a historical timeline of events in Afghanistan). Chandrasekaran previously wrote a successful book about reconstruction challenges in Iraq. CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 3.

⁶ U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY glossary (15 Dec. 2006) [hereinafter FM 3-24]. Counterinsurgency (COIN) consists of “those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency.” *Id.* Political power is a key aim of counterinsurgency. *Id.* at 1-1. Both insurgents and counterinsurgents seek to gain the good will of the people by demonstrating that their form of government is in the best position to address issues that are important to them. *Id.* Long-term success in COIN depends on the people “taking charge of their own affairs and consenting to the government's rule.” *Id.*

⁷ *Id.* at 1-24 to 1-28.

⁸ Thomas Nagorski, *Editor's Notebook: Afghan War Now Country's Longest*, ABC NEWS (June 7, 2010), <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/afghan-war-now-longest-war-us-history/story?id=10849303>.

⁹ CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1, at 18–23. The project was designed to harness the raging waters of the majestic Hindu Kush River, routing them to the Helmand valley to support agricultural fields with an elaborate network of canals. *Id.* The original engineer firm failed to conduct thorough soil analysis that would have uncovered the fact that Helmand farmland was shallow and that below it laid an impermeable layer of subsoil. *Id.* As a result, water pooled on the surface when farmers irrigated their land. *Id.* The remaining salt in the soil stunted the growth of anything that farmers planted. *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 29.

¹² *Id.* at 23–28.

preliminary soil analysis.¹³ The story of “Little America” is more than a subtle history lesson for readers. Chandrasekaran believes that like “Little America,” the coalition’s efforts in Afghanistan will ultimately prove fruitless because once again, America underestimated the time and requirements necessary for success.

Readers comfortable with a text book format may be surprised, as this book departs from the product-based approach found in traditional scholarly works.¹⁴ The author neither provides an explicit thesis nor spoon-feeds readers his main points. Instead, Chandrasekaran simply refers to the Helmand agricultural project from the outset and revisits the subject as he introduces various characters throughout the book.¹⁵ The implication is that like this unfulfilled endeavor, the current attempt to quickly stabilize Afghanistan will also prove fruitless. The author’s implied thesis is that short term intervention in Afghanistan is pointless because it does not remedy the core problem of the area: corruption. Corruption in the Afghan government and military serve as major roadblocks in the quest to garner lasting public support for civic entities.

Rather than using an introduction or preface to orient the reader to the book’s methodology, the author uses colorful vignettes and “vivid imagery . . . to set the stage.”¹⁶ The author uses “descriptive chapter titles” in lieu of carefully constructed points.¹⁷ This forces readers to extrapolate lessons from the voluminous vignettes. This

¹³ *Id.* at 29.

¹⁴ Chunling Sun & Gouping Feng, *Process Approach to Teaching Writing Applied in Different Teaching Models*, 2 ENG. LANGUAGE TEACHING 150, 150–51 (Mar. 2009), available at www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/350/315. A product-based approach to writing includes a fixed linear design that the writer imitates. *Id.* This traditionally includes an introduction, thesis, and conclusion organized in a logical or coherent fashion. *Id.* A process-based approach places emphasis on the progression of writing, rather than a fixed linear approach. *Id.* This is communication-based instruction (like story-telling), as opposed to communicative pedagogy. Unlike the product approach, which is more centered on the written outcome or proving a thesis, the process approach focuses on the thinking process involved in writing. *Id.*

¹⁵ CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1, at 18–23.

¹⁶ Major Evan R. Seamone, Book Review, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army*, ARMY LAW., Apr. 2011, at 1, 38. This review of *Little America* followed the same methodology that Major Seamone used in reviewing *The Fourth Star* (2009), as the author of *The Fourth Star*, similar to Chandrasekaran, also used vignettes to construct his points.

¹⁷ *Id.* Part One of the book is called “Grand Dreams,” for example. The chapters within in it, “An Enchanting Time,” “Stop the Slide,” “Marinestan,” and “The Wrong Man,” describe how Afghanistan was full of hope in the 1950s as the United States invested in a massive agricultural project only to find that the plan was flawed. CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1. “Stop the Slide” fast forwards to June 2009 where the top Marine Commander in Afghanistan, Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, begrudgingly implemented the Army’s COIN strategy to prevent escalating violence rather than his preferred approach of searching for and destroying the enemy. *Id.*

fresh approach encourages readers to experience Afghanistan through the eyes of fascinating characters carefully selected by the author, but also risks losing readers in detailed stories that are frequently not organized, chronological, or logical. The remedy would have been simple. Readers would benefit from a road map and timeline in the beginning of his work. This supplemental material would have given readers a better sense of the big picture, literary plan, and purpose of each chapter in relation to the author’s goals in telling the story of *Little America*.¹⁸ As a well established reporter, Chandrasekaran clearly embraces the storytelling structure of journalism using individual accounts in support of his main points. However, it is difficult to evaluate his points unless one can assess the credibility of each source. This review explores how Chandrasekaran’s journalism-based writing style impacts his argument, the benefits readers gain from this approach, and the lessons military leaders can glean from *Little America*.

II. The Impact of Journalism on Scholarly Writing

Little America is clearly the result of countless hours of field research in Afghanistan. In the Notes section, Chandrasekaran explains that he gained direct access to confidential State Department and presidential conversations by conducting seventy original interviews for this book.¹⁹ Chandrasekaran traveled to southern Afghanistan over a dozen times to report on the Afghanistan surge for the *Washington Post* from February 2009 to July 2011, but the Notes section provides a rather incomplete list of sources to support key facts.²⁰ Endnotes are fine; however, they should be comprehensive so that readers do not question the veracity of each account while reading the book. The target audience likely includes readers with some military or diplomatic experience. Their backgrounds will cause them to think more critically about the accuracy of accounts.

For example, in part two of the book, “Shattered Plans,” Chandrasekaran provides a fascinating inside account of a 2010 Mardi Gras party at the U.S. embassy in Kabul that

¹⁸ Chandrasekaran does provide an under-inclusive map of Afghanistan to help orient readers to the area. The author also includes several photographs that improve a reader’s understanding of some key actors. *Id.* at xi.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 339. The author relies on primary sources mostly and does a good job remaining well within the scope of the 2009 surge. *Id.* The author also mentions that he obtained information from government documents released by Wikileaks, an Internet-based anti-secrecy group. *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* For example, the author fails to cite the source from which he gained a direct quote delivered by General McChrystal during a speech to more than one hundred top Afghan and U.S. officers prior to a major operation in Marja. *Id.* at 140. The author need not provide readily accessible footnotes imbedded in the text to satisfy readers’ curiosity. Endnotes are appropriate, but should be detailed enough to account for key facts upon which Chandrasekaran relies.

“almost ended all parties.”²¹ Bored and underutilized, embassy officials resorted to alcohol as a social lubricant.²² Inebriated partygoers unable to access one of only two restrooms urinated outdoors.²³ In response, the U.S. ambassador to Kabul sent the two American male offenders home, but a Turkish ambassador remained because he was outside the reach of State Department officials.²⁴ This account leaves readers wondering how the author can verify this event when the majority of partygoers were probably too inebriated to give an accurate account of others’ activities. The author neither refers to the Turkish embassy official and the two American embassy officials by name, nor does he list the source of the disciplinary account. Chandrasekaran apparently relies on a reporter’s privilege to protect his source, but including more account details would improve the believability of the account.²⁵

While the content of the vignette may seem trivial, the author misses a key opportunity to provide strong evidence that supports one of his subthemes—the United States did not use some USAID and State Department personnel efficiently; as a result, commanders missed key opportunities to improve diplomatic relationships with Afghan leaders.²⁶ The author recognizes that diplomatic relationships are necessary to successfully mentor strong Afghan leaders—a key component of COIN strategy.²⁷ The author suggests that a weak support structure for Afghan leaders diminished their credibility among Afghans and impacted U.S. military success.²⁸ Another subtheme the author suggests is that civilian personnel were a key ingredient in the surge. Bureaucratic issues, however, often made it difficult to both secure talented personnel and match them with jobs that took advantage of their skill sets.²⁹ Rather than deploying embassy officials to the field to develop public-private partnerships in support of diplomatic relations, a disproportionate number remained on the tightly guarded “prison compound” of Kabul, attending numerous meetings and drafting countless memos.³⁰ Dejected

personnel often looked for an escape from the controlling atmosphere of Kabul in limited social opportunities like the Mardi Gras party.³¹ The Mardi Gras incident demonstrates that the coalition lacked a centralized body that could both direct participating states and discipline actors for not complying with strategic goals of the coalition. Providing background information regarding the command structure among coalition partners would help readers reach Chandrasekaran’s conclusion that U.S. and NATO leaders would benefit from a centralized command structure to maintain greater command and control of personnel and operations.³²

A. Reporter’s Privilege

Like many reporters, Chandrasekaran apparently relies upon a reporter’s privilege to conceal important sources used to establish a vast array of subthemes throughout the book.³³ As a result, *Little America* assumes that readers will rely upon the accuracy of pivotal witness accounts without the benefit of substantiation. The problem with this approach is that if readers are unwilling to take this leap of faith and accept the veracity of witness accounts, they will not grasp vignette points necessary to support his primary theme.

What is reporter’s privilege? Many states have adopted statutes that grant reporters unqualified protection from divulging confidential information and a qualified privilege for nonconfidential information.³⁴ These statutes, commonly referred to as reporter’s privilege, support the First Amendment right to freedom of expression.³⁵ In New York, for example, Subsection (b) of Civil Rights Law § 79-h creates an “absolute privilege with respect to any information, including the identity of a source, conveyed to a

²¹ *Id.* at 178.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 358. The author does not cite the source in his notes.

²⁶ *Id.* at 188–89.

²⁷ FM 3-24, *supra* note 6, at 1-22.

²⁸ CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1, at 318.

²⁹ *Id.* at 172–73 (observing how State Department personnel who wanted to work in the field outside the U.S. embassy compound in Kabul were often assigned to desk jobs in Kabul, while personnel who wanted desk jobs were sent to remote Afghan provinces to advise combat commanders).

³⁰ *Id.* at 174.

³¹ *Id.*; see *contra id.* at 184 (documenting the balanced account of Carter Sahib, a successful State Department representative in Garmser, who contradicts the author’s assertion that some State Department personnel were underutilized).

³² The author does a fair job of explaining the command relationship between U.S. forces and the Marines, citing the fact that the Marine brigade commander reported to a three-star Marine general at U.S. Central Command instead of the top Army Commander in Afghanistan, General McChrystal. *Id.* at 212. The book, however, does not explain the command structure between NATO assets like Great Britain.

³³ *Id.* at 339 (“I have chosen not to cite my interviews, the documents and e-mails I received, and public comments of senior officials. I do, however, indicate where I have used details gleaned from specific State Department cables and other government documents that were released on the Internet by the antisecrecy group WikiLeaks.”). *Id.*

³⁴ Laura R. Handman Esq. et al., *New York—Privilege Compendium*, REP. COMM. FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, <http://www.rcfp.org/new-york-privilege-compendium/i-introduction-history-background> (last visited Oct. 15, 2013). As of 2011, thirty-six states and the District of Columbia adapted various reporter’s privilege statutes. *Id.* A growing question is the scope of the privilege in the age of blogging and internet dissemination. *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.*

reporter in confidence.”³⁶ Reporters comfortable with a progeny of court cases supporting this privilege in criminal and civil proceedings openly apply this rule to other communications like newspaper articles and books.³⁷ The goal of the privilege is to “increase the flow of information in circumstances in which society wishes to encourage open communication.”³⁸ Scholarly work is a form of communication. However, scholarly or historical works possess conventions that demand “complete accuracy.”³⁹ Applying the privilege to scholarly works may discount the author’s message. Readers questioning the truth of each account may lose focus on critical lessons as they meander through these detailed vignettes.

B. Immersion Journalism

Journalists who immerse themselves in the environment they cover offer readers a unique opportunity to live through the experiences of themselves and others. Some journalists prefer to immerse themselves in the lives of their subjects so that they can reenact their lives instead of simply rendering a report of a sociological study.⁴⁰ Immersion journalists like Chandrasekaran engage in the activity that they want to write about to gain an inside look at the subject.⁴¹ This writing style includes the journalist in the story, allowing readers to discover new insights into familiar topics. Some journalists have a little trepidation about “how visible they want to be in their own book” and often let the subject speak for itself.⁴² This approach has merit, but leaves readers with little interpretive guidance regarding the purpose and direction of each vignette. Readers are left to fend for themselves in the rich details of multiple accounts simply because the author wants to prevent himself from becoming part of the story.

³⁶ *Id.* The author published *Little America* in New York. CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1, at unmarked page.

³⁷ Laura Katherine Layton, *Defining “Journalist”: Whether and How A Federal Reporter’s Shield Law Should Apply to Bloggers*, NAT’L L. REV. (Mar. 16, 2011), http://www.natlawreview.com/article/defining-journalist-whether-and-how-federal-reporter-s-shield-law-should-apply-to-bloggers#_edn1. See also *Knight-Ridder Broad., Inc. v. Greenberg*, 70 N.Y.2d 151 (1987) (criminal investigation) (noting reporters have unqualified protection from having to divulge confidential information and qualified privilege for nonconfidential information).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Seamone, supra* note 16, at 39 (quoting RICHARD D. BANK, *THE EVERYTHING GUIDE TO WRITING NONFICTION* 210 (2010)).

⁴⁰ ROBIN HEMLEY, *A FIELD GUIDE FOR IMMERSION WRITING: MEMOIR, JOURNALISM, AND TRAVEL* 73 (U. Ga. Press 2012) (stating that fact-based scholarly writing often examines issues from the outside looking in, like a study).

⁴¹ *Id.* at 55.

⁴² *Id.* at 74.

In some chapters, Chandrasekaran combats this issue by providing a concluding paragraph that summarizes key points; however, this practice is not consistent. The closing chapters are the most insightful as the author emerges to discuss key takeaways. A preface and introduction geared toward providing a roadmap of the author’s key points would serve as a better compromise for future readers. While a journalist’s inside account is helpful, readers would also benefit from the clarity that a list of characters would provide. This list would allow readers to remember key players and their roles in the coalition effort.

Fellow journalist Steve Coll did this well in *Ghost Wars*, a novel recounting the history of covert wars in Afghanistan that fueled Islamic militancy.⁴³ Coll also relies on first-hand accounts from key personnel but uses a well-written prologue to clearly explain his thesis and the structure of his argument. He further provides a list of maps, principle characters, and a detailed notes section to substantiate key interview accounts. Chandrasekaran would have been well served in following Coll’s example.

III. Lessons for Military Leaders and Judge Advocates

Beyond its commentary on the interaction of civilian and military leadership in Afghanistan, *Little America* delivers fresh insight⁴⁴ that reveals the complexity of building a winning campaign. Three main points that this reader gleaned make the book a worthwhile read and summarize a key lesson learned—“great powers can lose small wars.”⁴⁵

A. Develop a Project Organization with Clearly Defined Roles

First, with regard to defining small wars, *Little America* reveals that in coalition engagements, strong powers can experience the toll of war against a fluid insurgency and within their organization if they do not establish clearly defined roles.⁴⁶ Judge advocates can assist by ensuring that

⁴³ STEVE COLL, *GHOST WARS: THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE CIA, AFGHANISTAN, AND BIN LADEN, FROM THE SOVIET INVASION TO SEPTEMBER 10, 2011*, at xvii–17 (2005).

⁴⁴ The author provides fresh insight by allowing readers to observe the surge from the perspective of actors on the ground in Afghanistan rather than second hand accounts they may have received from the news.

⁴⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Robert M. Cassidy, *The British Army and Counterinsurgency: The Saliency of Military Culture*, MIL. REV. 53 (May–June 2005), available at http://www.army.mil/professionalWriting/volumes/volume3/november_2005/11_05_2.html.

⁴⁶ CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 1, at 152–54. The author portrays the Marines and Colonel Harry Tunnell’s brigade as units that embraced combat more than counterinsurgency. *Id.* In doing so, the author shows that without defining roles for your subordinates, the effort may win small battles, but ultimately lose complex objectives. *Id.* Strong powers

commanders are aware of the legal obligations they have to various organizations outside the military (i.e., non-governmental organizations and State Department officials operating within their area of operations) as well as their own subordinates. Leaders can also use this lesson to develop organized systems and defined roles within the teams they manage. Brigade Judge Advocates can ensure that they win small wars by ensuring that they utilize paralegals' technical expertise effectively to streamline the legal review process. This management technique will not only improve response time for commanders, but will also ensure that every member of the team is used, valued, and well synchronized. This approach helps prevent the fracture that Chandrasekaran describes among State Department, coalition forces, and USAID officials.

B. Eliminate Finger-Pointing and Public Fights

Second, *Little America* illustrates how the organization can benefit when leaders demonstrate a unified front.⁴⁷ The author points out that when General Petraeus assumed command of Afghanistan, he improved the relationship between civilians and the military by stopping public bickering.⁴⁸ General Petraeus quickly realized that cohesion among departments made America stronger on the international stage. The key take-away for leaders is that Soldiers have a greater sense of purpose when they feel the command message is consistent. Positive leadership breeds productivity and compliance.

C. Hold Team Members Accountable for Delivery

Finally, Chandrasekaran repeatedly demonstrates how corruption in the Karzai regime and a lazy, self-interested Afghan Army harmed stabilization efforts.⁴⁹ The Karzai regime did little to stop the drug trade, and failed coalition

experience the toll of war when they begin to lose momentum. Without a synchronized effort at the brigade and division level, strategic objectives can be more difficult to achieve.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 221 (explaining that when General Petraeus assumed command of Afghanistan, he improved the relationship between civilians and the military by stopping public bickering).

⁴⁸ When General Petraeus assumed command in Afghanistan, Ambassador Eikenberry, a top State Department official, told him that President Karzai was ready to endorse a controversial U.S.-backed program to expand armed village-level defense forces. *Id.* Consequently, General Petraeus mentioned it in his first meeting with President Karzai. *Id.* According to witnesses, President Karzai "went through the roof" and delivered a long and embarrassing lecture to General Petraeus about Afghanistan's history of unruly militias. *Id.* This led General Petraeus and his aides to blame Ambassador Eikenberry for misreading President Karzai. In public, however, the two leaders demonstrated a unified front. *Id.* General Petraeus ordered subordinates to stop the trash talk. *Id.* Ambassador Eikenberry instructed his staff to improve cooperation with the military. *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 141–42, 318.

efforts to maintain economic security in villages led Afghans to cultivate poppy in support of the Taliban.⁵⁰ This forced U.S. and Afghan forces into battles to regain previously held territory. Throughout the surge, military leaders repeatedly battled the issue of failed economic security and its effects on stabilization efforts.⁵¹ Through this example, Chandrasekaran demonstrates that every part of the team is important and team members must be held to the same standard. Leaders who hold parties responsible will spend less time trying to engage in damage control over weak areas.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

Military leaders will find *Little America* a thought-provoking and invigorating account on multiple levels. Chandrasekaran's passion for the subject matter emanates from each vignette carefully designed to glorify battlefield leaders that he deeply respects. As a professional journalist, the author offers a balanced approach while documenting key deficiencies in multiple government agencies that exposed the war within the U.S. effort. Despite the detracting reliance on a journalistic writing style, the book offers a unique perspective on the 2009 surge in Afghanistan and provides valuable lessons for military officers and judge advocates who are deploying to Afghanistan. If you are looking for an engaging book that offers key lessons before you deploy, *Little America* is a must-read.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 107.

⁵¹ Chandrasekaran points out that the United States would establish security in certain sectors, but then lose it to the Taliban within the next two years due to the failure of addressing the importance of economic stability. *Id.* at 106–107. For example, in sectors where security was established, Bush-era officials destroyed Afghan poppy fields, which were used to produce opium, a key source of funding for the Taliban. Destruction of the fields hurt poor farmers, who became indebted to drug brokers because they accepted cash up-front to cultivate poppy for the Taliban. Poor farmers became perfect Taliban recruits who used the day wages they earned to repay their debt and remain in contact with the Taliban, causing the previously secured sector to fall back into Taliban control. *Id.*