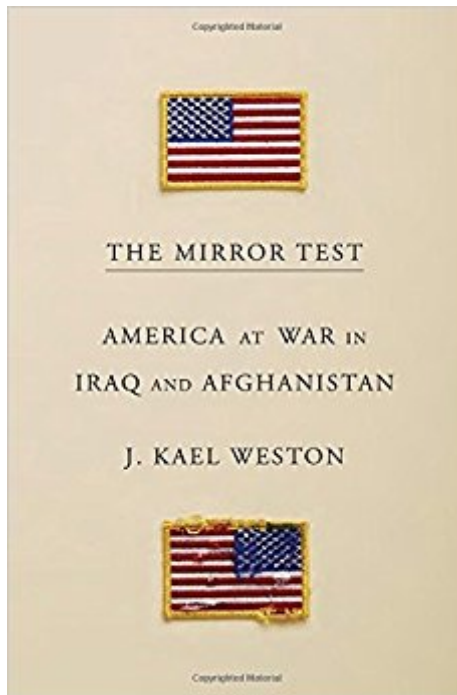




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# **The Mirror Test: America At War In Iraq And Afghanistan**



## Synopsis

A New York Times Editors' Choice  
A Military Times Best Book of the Year  
A powerfully written firsthand account of the human costs of conflict. J. Kael Weston spent seven years on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan working for the U.S. State Department in some of the most dangerous frontline locations. Upon his return home, while traveling the country to pay respect to the dead and wounded, he asked himself: When will these wars end? How will they be remembered and memorialized? What lessons can we learn from them? These are questions with no quick answers, but perhaps ones that might lead to a shared reckoning worthy of the sacrifices of those troops and civilians alike whose lives have been changed by more than a decade and a half of war. Weston takes us from Twentynine Palms in California to Fallujah in Iraq, Khost and Helmand in Afghanistan, Maryland, Colorado, Wyoming, and New York City, as well as to out-of-the-way places in Iowa and Texas. We meet generals, corporals and captains, senators and ambassadors, NATO allies, Iraqi truck drivers, city councils, imams and mullahs, Afghan schoolteachers, madrassa and college students, former Taliban fighters and ex-Guantánamo prison detainees, a torture victim, SEAL and Delta Force teams, and many Marines. The overall frame for the book, from which the title is taken, centers on soldiers who have received a grievous wound to the face. There is a moment during their recovery when they must look upon their reconstructed appearance for the first time. This is known as "the mirror test." From an intricate tapestry of voices and stories Iraqi, Afghan, and American Weston delivers a larger mirror test for our nation in its global role. An unflinching and deep examination of the interplay between warfare and diplomacy, this is an essential book—a crucial look at America now, how it is viewed in the world and how the nation views itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Praise for J. Kael Weston's *The Mirror Test*: "Closely observed and illuminating. . . . Weston's reportage recalls the finest foreign correspondence of the Iraq and Afghan wars." *The New York Review of Books* "Weston is. . . a diplomat of great bravery, erudition and heart who befriended Afghans and stood up to his superiors. . . . The emotional core of *The Mirror Test* is Weston's profound love for the Marines. . . . Weston is [a] civilian hero." *The New York Times Book Review* "Weston, who worked as a State Department official for more than a decade, brings balance and cultural perspective different from the previous war books. . . . Along the way, he heralds humanitarian efforts and describes a fascinating dynamic of American dollars simultaneously rolling out to fund the allied war effort and the Afghan infrastructure." *The Desert News* "This book shines when it recounts Weston's day-to-day dealings with Marines (and Iraqis and Afghans). . . . [The *Mirror Test*] deserves a salute." *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* "Weston, a former State Department official, spent seven courageous and harrowing years on the front lines as a political adviser to American troops. His memoir offers a serious examination of the effects of terrorism from a personal and emotional perspective." *The New York Times* (Editors' Choice) "As a former Foreign Service officer, Weston is perfectly positioned to provide a different perspective on these wars' sometimes-particular complexities. . . . The *Mirror Test* offers insights into tribal, cultural and religious dynamics; the limits of military power as a political instrument; the use of drones; the heavy reliance on special operators; cooperation and failed cooperation among military services, agencies and allies." *The Washington Post* "This long book about a long wartime tries to do many things—and succeeds. It is an atonement and an assessment, a eulogy and an exposition, a reflection of a nation and a memoir by a man who survived seven consecutive years in two wars." *Military Times* "If you read only one book about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, read this one. . . . Weston's is indeed a great, heart-rending, powerful book you won't forget. You especially won't forget why it is called the mirror test. It refers to a terrible, often repeated event, but as a metaphor for this war it is an insight of tremendous value. Read this work to learn what a mirror test for a man, and for a nation, is." --Decatur Daily "Kael Weston is the

conscience of our wars. After spending more time in Iraq and Afghanistan than any other American diplomat, he has emerged with a powerful-yet-nuanced story of sacrifice, misadventure, humanity and resilience. This is not another war memoir or a volume of combat reportage, but one of the few truly great and enduring books about America in the post-9/11 world." --Rajiv Chandrasekaran, author of *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* and *Little America* "Kael Weston is an American hero. He has spent more time in Iraq and Afghanistan than any general, diplomat, journalist or grunt. He has seen the wars up close, lived their cultures, watched people die. As a front-line political officer for the State Department, Weston has perhaps seen more of Iraq and Afghanistan than any single American. But what makes this book special--what makes Weston special--is his ability to transcend his own experience and bring it all home, and force us, as Americans, to ask ourselves the larger questions that these wars demand. This is a necessary book, and one that will last." --Dexter Filkins, author of *The Forever War* "Few Americans have served their country with greater courage, commitment and lucidity than Kael Weston. As the United States comes to terms with over a decade of war, it needs his values and vision." --Roger Cohen, author of *The Girl from Human Street* and *Soldiers and Slaves* "The Mirror Test is an elegy, and a love story, and like all elegies and love stories it involves equal parts ardor and heartbreak. It is also an assignment to Americans: look at yourselves, look at these wars. It's not only Weston's experience at State which place him in a position to deliver this assignment; it's his humanity, humility, and literary grace. These qualities bleed through the pages of this book, and reflect the humanity, humility, and grace of its subjects •Marines in Fallujah, Iraqis and Afghans in Anbar and Khost, leaders who tried to do right. And eventually, essentially, of civilians who mourn their children among the war dead." --Lea Carpenter, author of *Eleven Days* "Kael Weston has written more than a book, he has written a requiem for the dead and the living. For those of us who fought and still fight in America's never-ending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan any sense of closure will continue to be illusory until we as a nation reckon with how this conflict has refigured our identity. Until then, *The Mirror Test* gives us something to gather around: our monument in pages." --Elliot Ackerman, author of *Green on Blue* "Kael Weston's *The Mirror Test* is essential reading for anyone seeking to come to terms with our endless wars. Weston spent seven years in Iraq and Afghanistan working for the State Department, traveling among Iraqi sheiks, Afghan law students, senior diplomats and front-line Marine infantryman. A riveting, on-the-ground look at American policy and its aftermath." --Phil Klay, author of *Redeployment*

JOHN KAEI WESTON represented the United States for more than a decade as a State

Department official. Washington acknowledged his multi-year work in Fallujah with Marines by awarding him one of its highest honors, the Secretary of State's Medal for Heroism.[www.jkweston.com](http://www.jkweston.com)

Mr. Weston has provided us with a true depiction of war, loss, and disappointment. The stories come from every side of the American conflicts that define the early 21st Century. We hear the stories of Marines, American civil servants, American families, and especially the side we do not often hear: that of the Iraqis and Afghan people who many writers ignore or over-simplify. The stories of sacrifice by young Marines and Iraqi and Afghan patriots are painful but need telling. Mr. Weston's use of the term "mirror test" is a perfect analogy for what all of us should do after a decade and a half of war. Some of us have done it since the beginning, but it has felt like a house of mirrors to some (confusing and frightening). To others it may seem like the Evil Queen's mirror and tells us what we want to hear until the ugly truth finally reveals itself. Mr. Weston's writing brings out that truth and allows you to observe the folly of our political leadership, the naivety of our society, and the impact of our Imperial actions on the American Homefront and on Iraqis/Afghans alike. This work is a graphic and realistic depiction of our time in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the aftermath back home. He writes in an easy to read manner that only becomes difficult due to the emotion that his prose stirs. The reflection you begin to see as you read it is testament to his literary skill. This is not a book written by a policy wonk or fresh-faced journalist wanting to pontificate on his/her view of a world seen in books, peer reviews, or the couple weeks they may have spent in Baghdad enjoying a salsa night or country/western dance at the Embassy. As you read this work, you will see that Mr. Weston bled on the pages with us all. His work is aimed at everyone: the Service members who were there, the politicians who ignored wisdom, the Americans at Home who likely only saw these conflicts through the Fourth Estate, and the Iraqi and Afghan people who live in a house of mirrors. After reading, you can decide if you want to ignore what you see in the mirror or pretend that it is something it is not. But that means that you and all of us will fall prey to the valor of ignorance and to the hollowness of hubris. Taking the Mirror Test is a taking step to our Nation's recovery.

I'm retired mil and also spent time at Walter Reed during OIF. Have read many books about war--have been a first hand witness to its impact on those who serve. This book just blows me away. It's not only well written, but Kael's reportage (I'll call it) is just so touching due to the truth he tells. Politicians who send our kids off to war should be made to read this book. Trump needs to read this

book--unfortunately, that's my sick joke of the day. This book is a singular achievement. I'm surprised I never crossed paths with Kael at the State Department. He's someone I'd love to have a chat with. This book will stay with me for a long time. Thank you Kael for remembering our fallen.

Powerful. I've read a lot (100+) of military history/political intrigue books and this is right up at the top of the list. I consider it a must read. The experiences conveyed by the author are sobering and many times hard to get through. In a day with so many rah-rah shoot'm up books, with very little focus on the personal sacrifices of war. This book is a refreshing, as it is a deeply personal look at how war affects people at all levels of involvement, from the most powerful Presidents, Politicians, Generals, Diplomats, to the Grunts tasked with carrying out the will of the nation. I really respect that this book shows us what happens to the other side when the might of the US Military is unleashed. It gives voice to those who never have a platform from which to speak. For example, the views of a young boy left to watch-over his grandfather, who refused to leave his ancestral home in Fallujah, and was killed (collateral damage) as a result. No blame on the US or condemnation from the boy just the realization that War is ugly and his only request, that his grandfather be given a proper burial. The rational side of me says, he was told to leave and he should have. But I can't help feel for the boy and what toll the war had on him and his family. The book really got me to think and ask questions of myself. Would I leave my home if a foreign power told me to do so? Would I be willing to give my life to better my community (like many of the Fallujah city council and those in Afghanistan were willing to do)...This book covers more ground and has more depth than any I've read to date concerning the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is truly a heart wrenching first hand look at the affects of war; the death and destruction, the aftermath and most importantly, what comes after the guns are silenced and people return to rebuild their lives, both here in America and in the Middle East. This will be a book I will have my sons read when they are old enough to understand true sacrifice and War (sometimes necessary and often times not).

To understand the Iraq and Afghanistan war this is a must read book. Weston's first hand accounts of our military efforts followed by diplomatic efforts to win the minds and hearts of the locals is one of the most clarifying text I have ever read about these two costly conflicts. His decision to take the ballet boxes to some of the most dangerous spots in Iraq in an effort to spread democracy across the country resulted in loss of American lives. The impact of the losses are profound on Weston. It is amazing that upon his return to US, the author does his best to visit the burial site of the marines who lost their lives as a result of a decision Weston takes responsibility for. His mission and tasks

are daunting as the top US diplomat on the ground and shoulder to shoulder with our military men and women (or sometimes behind them), to convince the Iraqis and the Afghans that we are indeed the nice guys and they should forget about the bloodshed and trust us as we build schools and water sources, etc. His encounter with ex Guantanamo prisoner(s) in some of the most dangerous places in Afghanistan is riveting and breathtaking.

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