



Members of FARC guard the surrounding area of a safe house in Cundinamarca, Colombia, April, 2002

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Gods of the hills

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Visiting the US Army's mountain combat school in Vermont, Judith Matloff notes a sign outside the main building. "The Gods of the Valleys", it warns, "Are Not the Gods of the Hills."

The otherness of the world's great mountain ranges, and the cultural, political and military implications of the uniquely difficult conditions to be found there, are the themes of Matloff's new book, *The War is in The Mountains*. A fascinating, informative and compassionate tour of some of the world's more scenic and rarefied trouble spots, the narrative ranges from Albania to Afghanistan, with stops in such diverse places as Chechnya, Colombia, Nepal, Kashmir – even, surprisingly, the Pyrenees and Switzerland.

The big mountain chains, Matloff says, are anthropological islands, set above and apart from the lowland cultures that contain and divide them.

Their peoples are often ethnically distinct from their lowland neighbours, and culturally and economically alienated from the states that claim to rule over them. And despite their geographic isolation from each other, she argues, many highland peoples share certain traits, derived from the common difficulties they face in their fight for survival. While the cities of the plains are repeatedly convulsed by wars, migrations and technological change, old ways linger in the high places. Introverted, clannish, suspicious of outsiders, highlanders often prefer to settle their differences outside the government's courts, resorting to traditional laws or, at worst, vigilante reprisals and blood feuds. The difficulty of the terrain, where government tanks, aircraft and conventional infantry are of limited use, can also attract political and religious rebels fleeing the lowlands. Leftist FARC guerrillas endured for half a century in the Andes of Colombia – the subject of a particularly interesting chapter – while elements of the Taliban, al-Qaeda and ISIS have held out against superior conventional forces in pockets of Afghanistan, Yemen and the Anti-Lebanon range of western Syria.

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There are times in the book when the central theme can seem a little strained, as if the author too is attempting to bend all her diverse mountain subjects to a lowland, rationalist will. Are the Kanun blood feuds of northern Albania really to be compared to the clash between state powers, fundamentalist religion and local allegiances in places like Chechnya and Kashmir? Are mountains really more inherently violent than cities, deserts, jungles and swamps? Somalia is mostly a desert. Fallujah and Baghdad lie amid flat, irrigated farm lands. The US Marines

may have harsh memories of the Vietnamese highlands, but the Mekong paddy fields weren't a picnic for the Army.

Such quibbles aside, there is still a great deal of apparent sense to Matloff's main argument. Whatever their causes, mountain conflicts tend to be especially intractable, and governments would be wise not to overestimate their ability to settle them with brute force. It is better, the author says, to listen to the unique concerns of upland peoples, and bear them in mind when doling out spending on roads, hospitals and schools. Matloff is a skilled and courageous journalist, adept at sketching the realities – often grim, sometimes lyrical – of remote highland regions. The plight of Albanian boys marked for death in pointless clan blood feuds, wasting their young lives behind the walls of their homes, is poignantly described. Her semi-clandestine visit to a Kashmiri psychiatric hospital reveals a whole population pushed beyond breaking point by state-sponsored violence. A trip to Chiapas in Mexico, where the “Zapatista” uprising of indigenous Mayans in 1994 has now subsided into an isolationist cult, shows what a good reporter can achieve with a sharp eye and a notebook. The supposedly Marxist rebels, she notices, are strangely fond of Coca-Cola, and seem to derive much of their cash from gift shops selling radical chic to dreadlocked foreign tourists.

Yet in a country laid low by narcos and criminal impunity, these people were actually trying to keep the peace. They had chosen to cut themselves off, perhaps not fully aware, at first, of the deprivations this would entail. They had managed to rise above the exploitation and corruption. On some level, a very deep one, they were blessed: they had the mountains to protect them. Maybe that was as good as it could get.

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