



The Invisible Soldiers: How America Outsourced Our Security

By Ann Hagedorn

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The urgent truth about the privatization of America's national security that exposes where this industry came from, how it operates, where it's heading—and why we should be concerned: “A brisk, disturbing account” (*Kirkus Reviews*).

Thirty years ago there were no private military and security companies (PMSCs); there were only mercenaries. Now the PMSCs are a bona-fide industry, an indispensable part of American foreign and military policy. PMSCs, such as the former Blackwater, assist US forces in combat operations and replace them after the military withdraws from combat zones; they guard our embassies; they play key roles in US counterterrorism strategies; and Homeland Security depends on them. Their services include maritime security, police training, drone operations, cyber security, and intelligence analysis (as Edward Snowden has famously revealed). Even the United Nations employs them.

When did this happen? The turning point came when the US found itself in a prolonged war with Iraq, but without adequate forces. So the Bush Administration turned to the PMSCs to fill the gap. Private contractors and subcontractors eventually exceeded the traditional troops. The industry has never scaled back.

PMSCs are an industry as essential as they are ubiquitous. Ann Hagedorn penetrates the mystery surrounding them, and her account will inspire a national dialogue about a little-known international industry on which our security rests. “The strength of *The Invisible Soldiers* is the impressive depth of Hagedorn's reporting: copious interviews, generous use of sources, and a compelling narrative...*The Invisible Soldiers* also reports on the people behind these private companies, some of whom are seemingly the stuff of fiction” (*Los Angeles Times*).

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Editorial Review

Review

“Why did America’s war in Iraq end in failure? One big reason was the decision to outsource so much of the war’s conduct to private security firms. Who ‘won’ the Iraq War? Those very same firms. Flooding the war zone with mercenaries, they walked away with vast riches, while leaving behind a legacy of corruption and ineptitude. Ann Hagedorn’s coolly devastating book exposes the causes and assesses the consequences of this travesty.” (Andrew J. Bacevich *author of Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country*)

"Well-reported and eye-opening. . . . This thoughtful book should kick-start a long-overdue debate." (Alan Cate *The Plain Dealer*)

“The strength of *Invisible Soldiers* is the impressive depth of Hagedorn's reporting: copious interviews, generous use of sources, and a compelling narrative. . . . *Invisible Soldiers* also reports on the people behind these private companies, some of whom are seemingly the stuff of fiction.” (Tony Perry *The Los Angeles Times*)

“Ann Hagedorn has given us a powerful and urgent analysis of our new military and security reality—the hiring of private warriors by governments and corporations for profit and plunder worldwide. As wars explode on every continent, and as these security companies operate in secrecy, shielded from public scrutiny or accountability, this brilliantly researched and vividly written book is essential reading.” (Blanche Wiesen Cook, Distinguished Professor of History and Women's Studies at John Jay College and The Graduate Center, CUNY and author of ELEANOR ROOSEVELT)

“A critique of the United States’ fateful turn toward private military and security contractors as a consequence of the Iraq War. . . . A brisk, disturbing account that adds to the sense that liberties taken in the war on terror have created long-term liabilities for American society.” (*Kirkus Reviews*)

“Hagedorn lucidly describes the long-range challenges to democracy caused by the privatization of security.” (*Publishers Weekly (starred review)*)

“The story of how private military security companies came to play a pivotal role in wartime operations is an important one, and Ann Hagedorn, a former reporter for the *Journal*, was right to take it on.” (Linda Robinson *The Wall Street Journal*)

About the Author

Ann Hagedorn has been a staff writer for *The Wall Street Journal* and has taught writing at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism and at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. Her previous books are *Wild Ride*, *Ransom*, *Beyond the River*, and *Savage Peace*.

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The Invisible Soldiers

PROLOGUE

What the boy would remember most were the shoes. They were not his shoes and they didn't fit, yet he was forced to wear them for nearly five hours as he crossed a desert in the middle of the night. At first glance, they seemed like ordinary leather shoes, but they were different because the heels were at the front. Shoes with backward heels and soles were the invention of the human smugglers who helped people like the boy and his parents to escape from Iraq into Kuwait. The idea was that if footprints were detected, the path of the journey would appear to be reversed. Although the boy longed to go home that night, what stopped him was his astute understanding that if he did, then his backward footprints would define a trail leading to the Kuwait border and thus expose his family's flight.

Kadhim Desmal Majed Alkanani was fourteen years old when he was forced to leave Iraq in April 1985. His mother awakened him shortly after midnight to tell him that he would soon be going on a "desert adventure." For the third time in a year Kadhim felt the anxiety of sudden change coursing through him like a forced injection. The first time had been eleven months before, when in the middle of the night he heard a rush of rapid pounding on the roof above his bed. In his half-asleep state he had a dreamlike image that it was Gasem, his brother, coming home—Gasem who had fled to Syria months before to avoid fighting for Saddam Hussein in the Iraqi war against Iran. But he knew it was not Gasem when he began to hear the loud cracking sounds of splintering wood followed by his mother screaming. Soldiers in Saddam's security forces had smashed through the front door of his family's home in Basra and, as his mother watched, they dragged away his father, who was suspected of betraying Saddam and was wanted for information about Gasem.

The second shock came in the days and months that followed his father's disappearance, when his teacher, a loyal follower of Saddam, turned against him. School had always been easy for Kadhim, but now each morning began with his teacher's brutal ritual of thrashing his hands with a stick and then whipping his back, in pursuit of facts about his father or brother. This was information that could lead to the teacher's promotion. But the boy insisted he knew nothing and that was the truth. All he really knew was that he hated Saddam, a fact he kept to himself. It was the first stirring of hatred he had ever felt, yet strong enough to shape the rest of his life.

In the aftermath of the abduction, Kadhim's uncle began a search throughout southern Iraq for his brother, while Kadhim's mother sold possessions to pay for the bribes necessary to uncover any leads. Seven months later, Kadhim came home from school to find his father sitting at the kitchen table. The faith that someday he would see his father again was one of Kadhim's mental devices for surviving the beatings. As the stick slashed across his stinging hand, he had rehearsed in his mind, over and over, the day he could tell his father all that the teacher had done. But his father had become so weary and frail that when Kadhim saw him, he knew he could never reveal the beatings. His only thoughts were to work hard at hiding his fears and to excel at school as a way to deflect any negative attention away from his family. His parents also had a plan. They would slowly and discreetly sell the rest of their possessions in order to pay the human smugglers for a safe passage out of Iraq. To protect Kadhim, they did not tell him any part of the plot until the morning of their escape.

When the family arrived in Kuwait, they were considered refugees, and it was hard for Kadhim's father to find any income except through manual labor, despite his years as an oil engineer in Iraq. A few years after their escape when his mother became ill with an incurable respiratory infection, his father was unable to afford the medical care she needed. Kadhim was only seventeen when she died of pneumonia. By then, Kadhim had adjusted to Kuwait and was again excelling in school. Although Kadhim had wanted to quit school to help with the care of his mother, his father would not allow it. Education was the key to Kadhim's

ultimate freedom, his father insisted.

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1991, Kadhim and his father were forced to move again, this time to Saudi Arabia. There they lived in a refugee camp for many months until one day Kadhim's father informed his son that he was ill with cancer and that a doctor had informed him he did not have long to live. He told Kadhim that he wanted to return home to Iraq to die, and he urged his son not to accompany him. Instead, he wanted Kadhim to go to America, where he believed his hard work and intelligence would be noticed and respected. He asked Kadhim to promise that he would never return to Iraq as long as Saddam Hussein was alive. People go to war to feel the passion of believing in something, his father said that day. "You have to feel something to win a war," he said. And someday passion would defeat Saddam. Only then should Kadhim return.

When and where his father, Desmal, died, Kadhim would never know. But he did keep his promise. He soon began the long process of seeking asylum in America, and in 1995, he moved from a small town in Saudi Arabia to a Washington, D.C., suburb in Virginia. There he worked for years as a carpenter and did his best to push the past aside. But on April 9, 2003, after glancing up at a TV screen in a Washington restaurant, Kadhim could think only of his family. What he saw were U.S. Marines and a small crowd of Iraqi citizens toppling a 20-foot statue of Saddam Hussein in central Baghdad. Kadhim was spellbound. As the Marines secured the rope around the neck of the statue, Kadhim began to feel the past in a way he had never before allowed, as if sensation had returned to a sleeping limb. The grief of losing his father, his mother, his brother, and his home seemed to be surfacing in one sudden moment. If Saddam Hussein had never lived, his parents might still be alive. His family could be living in Iraq, near to one another, likely in Basra. Perhaps he would be sharing an apartment with his brother. And surely he would have experienced the higher education his father had planned for him. As he watched the statue fall, he knew that he had to return to Iraq. For Kadhim the fallen statue released enough passion within him to win five wars.

By summer, Kadhim had enlisted in the U.S. Army and was quickly sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for Special Forces training. Essential components of counterterrorist strategies, Special Forces soldiers were highly valued assets in the new wars of the twenty-first century. What qualified Kadhim were his language skills, which included fluency in Farsi, Arabic, and English. During his training, rigorous as it was, Kadhim, a muscular, stocky man in excellent physical condition, felt that he had discovered a new universe—one where all that he had endured and learned in the past could be applied to a higher purpose. His helter-skelter background and his unrelenting hatred for Saddam Hussein were useful now. In fact, by the time he was deployed to Iraq, he had begun to believe that his life, plagued as it was by an instinct of endless distrust, was changing. Perhaps his father had been right. Perhaps there was potential for a meaningful life in America, through a dedication to defend it.

In Iraq, Kadhim was determined to prove his value and to return to Fort Bragg for more training to become a Special Forces officer. This was his plan and his dream. During the next year, he earned several military awards, and he indeed showed how useful he could be. He helped to identify locations of defiant enclaves—essential information for devising strategies to counter insurgents—and he became adept at explaining to Iraqi citizens the virtues of the Americans in an effort to combat propaganda against the United States. Often, during interrogations, the Army used him as an interpreter, though more frequently he worked as a cultural translator. Like a sports commentator explaining the plays and strategies of a game to spectators, Kadhim could elucidate the Iraqi culture to his military superiors. Soldiers like Kadhim helped to empower the United States through an enlightened understanding of the Iraqi people. They worked to demystify the innuendos of a foreign culture and to counter damaging propaganda. They were tantamount to weapons. And what an excellent weapon Kadhim had become: An Iraqi-born U.S. citizen trained in the U.S. Army's Special Forces, filled with a need for a sense of purpose, and instilled with enough hatred for Saddam

Hussein to ignite an explosion of American patriotism. It was a perfect match. Unfortunately, events took a disquieting turn.

On June 3, 2005, at around 6:30 P.M., Kadhim was sitting in the passenger seat of a black European sedan leaving Baghdad and headed for the U.S. military facility at Baghdad International Airport. His car was the first in a convoy of three sedans that were transporting a dozen intelligence operatives and one medic. Eight of the soldiers were Special Forces operatives in the U.S. Army; four were from the Iraqi Special Forces. None was in uniform. And all were tired, returning from an intelligence mission that had required hours of interrogations.

From the building in central Baghdad where they had spent their day to the first U.S. inspection post on the way to the airport was a distance of about 16 miles. This was a route fraught with peril, demanding silence as the men listened for the slightest sounds of gunfire or human traps. And until they reached the area beyond the initial checkpoint, which was under the exclusive control of the coalition forces, they were compelled to hold their loaded pistols on their laps. After Kadhim and his fellow soldiers showed their American IDs and were permitted to move ahead into what was considered a safe zone, they drove immediately into the right lane, which was reserved for Department of Defense vehicles only. They then proceeded at about 15 miles per hour toward the main gate, 1.5 miles ahead.

Once through the checkpoint, Kadhim holstered his M-9 pistol. Then as if shedding the tensions of war itself, he took a deep breath and began to feel the usual sense of relief that came at the end of such a day. To be safe in wartime Baghdad, he well knew, was an illusion. Yet he was a Special Forces soldier in the U.S. Army and once again he had left the arcade of danger that was his workplace unharmed. He shut his eyes and allowed his mind to drift beyond the events of that day. No one said a word; the men in the car were still quiet, each perhaps feeling the same relief. But barely a minute later, something—a slight swerve of the car, a comment from his driver, a shout from one of the operatives sitting behind him—snapped him back, causing him to look at the road ahead. And what he saw was the barrel of a rifle, an M4 to be exact, suddenly pushing out of one of the rear doors of the SUV in front of him. Although at least 150 meters away, the shooter appeared to be aiming directly at Kadhim's black sedan.

Kadhim never heard the sound of a gunshot nor did he make the connection between what he had just seen and the pain that suddenly perforated his left foot. In only seconds, he felt the sensation of nails pushing against his heel. And as he held his foot and watched his white socks turn red, his fellow soldiers spilled out of the cars in the convoy waving their arms, holding their military IDs high in the air and shouting, "We are Americans! We are Americans! Stop!"

Struggling to stem the bleeding, Kadhim tried to understand what was happening. Why had his car aroused enough suspicion to cause such aggression? He remembered seeing the SUV at the checkpoint and had watched it as it drove away, as his convoy stopped for the inspection. Later he would say: "The men in the SUV had to have seen us at the checkpoint. They had to have known that our cars were filled with U.S. soldiers. We so easily passed through the checkpoint. We were not speeding; we were going slow as we had just passed the inspection. We were not even close to them. If they were afraid of us for any reason, they should have warned us before shooting."

The bleeding seemed unstoppable as the medic in the convoy tried to restrict the flow of blood. The rest of Kadhim's body felt numb. Could he have prevented this somehow? He was the only Arab in the car. Did the men in the SUV think he was a threat? And who were they? Who were the men who would shoot without warning?

As Kadhim would quickly learn, the man who shot him was an employee of a private military and security company hired by the U.S. government to safeguard Americans in Iraq. In a sudden reckless moment, Kadhim's military experience evolved from commendable to unique, though not quite in the way he had planned. There were no medals of recognition, no awards for this. His legacy would now be that he was the first U.S. Special Forces soldier ever to be shot by an employee of one of the private military companies under contract with the U.S. government.

These were the companies sometimes referred to as the "new dogs of war," "neo-mercenaries," or "corporate warriors." They called themselves PMCs, short for private military companies; PSCs, for private security; or PMSCs, for private military and security, the most commonly used acronym. And they offered a vast range of services, armed and unarmed, from logistics support and intelligence analysis to diplomatic security, air transport, and police training. They were the companies filling the gap between military objectives and troop capacities. Advocates of privatization believed that these companies proved that harnessing private-sector power for national security and defense was more efficient than depending on conventional government support, which in a democracy could entail a long-drawn-out process. If the public sector was failing to fulfill its mandates in defending and securing its citizens, then the private sector should step in. Thus, these were companies that exemplified Ronald Reagan's privatization ideal. They were what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had in mind in 2002 when he told military leaders to "behave somewhat less like bureaucrats and more like venture capitalists." The following year, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion, the combination of the strength of the insurgents and the miscalculation in troop strength for the occupation started a private-military-contracting bonanza, which, in turn, caused America's Iraq intervention to become a giant laboratory for privatizing war and national security.

By the day of the shooting, Kadhim had paid relatively little attention to the influx of private firms, though there was always talk about them among the soldiers. He had heard that they sometimes paid higher wages than the traditional military and that Americans were becoming somewhat dependent on them. He had seen recruiters trying to persuade soldiers to shift their skills to the private sector when their tours ended. He knew some names, such as Blackwater and DynCorp. And he had heard stories about rogue behavior, including incidents in which contractors had opened fire on Iraqi civilians on the highways surrounding Baghdad. But Kadhim was an American soldier. He never imagined he would be a victim of private security contractors.

While it took barely a second for the bullet to pass from the M4 rifle to Kadhim's foot, what happened in the aftermath of the shooting would send his life on a downward spin for many years. In the same period of time, private military and security companies, including the one that employed Kadhim's shooter, would begin to proliferate and profit beyond expectations. Until the shooting, Kadhim's life was filled with the passion that his father once described, the allegiance to one's nation that inspires dedicated service. "You have to feel something to win a war," his father had said. After the shooting, Kadhim's shattered world represented the demise of such conviction, while the rise of the PMSCs represented the triumph of money and power, and allegiance to the pursuit of profit. As Kadhim would soon know, the privatization of defense and security was evolving into more than a trend, more than a stopgap strategy destined to end when the war ended. PMSCs were becoming a bona fide industry.

In America, with the aid of lobbyists, impressive boards of directors, and billions of dollars in contracts, private military and security contractors were slipping into the folds of counterterrorism strategies and foreign-policy agendas. They would soon become indispensable to the Department of Defense as well as the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Central Intelligence Agency. As one Army general said in a 2009 interview, "The Pentagon has a new map and on it are the PMCs. Or better said perhaps, the family tree has a new branch." In August 2011, a congressional commission that had studied private contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan for three years noted in its final report that government

agencies lacked the “organic capacity” to perform all the necessary functions that American foreign policy demanded and thus they were “forced to treat contractors as the default option.”

By the second decade of the new century, the list of milestones in the privatization of war and national security was long. A congressional report released in May 2011 revealed a record-breaking surge in the use of private military and security contractors from June 2009 to March 2011 in Iraq and Afghanistan. This resulted in the contractors outnumbering traditional troops in a ratio of 10-to-1, outnumbering State Department personnel 18-to-1 and USAID workers 100-to-1. During that same period, casualty totals for private contractors in both nations had surpassed military losses. And as of May 2011 there were eight Americans still missing in action in Iraq, seven of whom were private contractors.

By then too, private military and security companies were supplying more than 90 percent of diplomatic security. The Department of Homeland Security was spending at least half its budget on private contractors. The United Nations had raised its PMSC expenditures by nearly 300 percent since 2009. And the expanding role of the private sector in American counterterrorism policies was increasingly evident, especially in the numbers of PMSCs working for the CIA, beginning in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attack on the U.S. and growing annually ever since. As one scholar noted, “The current conduct of American counterterrorism relies heavily on the private sector. Simply put, America cannot counter terrorism without PMSCs. America now relies extensively on PMSCs to conduct most aspects of statecraft, including defense, diplomacy, development and homeland security.”

In his testimony at a congressional hearing in late 2011, author David Isenberg, who had been tracking these companies for more than fifteen years, expressed his deep concern over the extent of such “over reliance.” He said, “Although it is not widely recognized, the use of private contractors among the complex of national defense, security and foreign policy departments and agencies is so widespread and so wide in scope that their impact can be strategic, as opposed to the merely operational and tactical.” A few weeks later, Isenberg described the U.S. government’s dependence on private contractors for defense and security this way: “Think back to the Alien series. The film’s about the indescribable alien creature that has entered the bodies of humans. The humans look normal on the outside, but inside the alien has wrapped itself around every organ and has become so entwined that it cannot be excised; the human would die without it. And here? The [PMSCs] are so entwined; the government would collapse without them.”

Isenberg was confident that these companies would continue to prosper long after troop withdrawals from both Iraq and Afghanistan. A confluence of twenty-first-century realities would guarantee such longevity, he said, including the ongoing influence of a free-market privatization ideology; tensions between America’s global ambitions and its capabilities; and the widening gap between haves and have-nots worldwide, the proven catalyst for conflicts throughout history. Indeed, PMSCs have only added to their portfolios contracts with international humanitarian aid organizations, the U.N., and corporations conducting business in hostile environments. They provide armed security on ships to guard against terrorism at sea, making maritime security one of their fastest-growing businesses. They are moving into the vast new cosmos of drones. And they are working for nations other than America or Britain, their frequent employers—including the new Iraqi government—thus becoming increasingly independent of the nations that funded their immense boost in Iraq.

But how big the industry of private military and security companies has become and how fast it is growing, how many companies there are worldwide and how much money they make—how cost-effective they may or may not be—are questions that still cannot be easily answered. Basic facts such as annual revenue are difficult to assess, with calculations ranging from \$50 billion to \$250 billion depending on which organizations provide the figures and which kinds of services and companies are included in the calculations.

Only a small percentage of firms are publicly held; one study of 585 PMSCs noted that 43 were publicly traded. Though government contracts are a major source of income, PMSCs often hold contracts with private corporations, and the private-to-private transactions are hard to track.

Furthermore, U.S. government figures on this subject have not always been reliable, especially those coming out of the Department of Defense. One congressional study showed that the DOD did not begin to gather data on private security contractors until the second half of 2007. That same report described the data that was collected as “understated” and “approximations at best.” One glaring example, uncovered in the August 2011 congressional commission report, was “\$38.5 billion recorded for ‘miscellaneous foreign contractors.’” Although this was the second-highest category of contracting expenses in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the DOD, USAID, and the State Department, the government could not explain which companies got the money or for what services. And these weren’t the only agencies blocking the view of the industry’s scope. The CIA, for example, is an agency that falls “outside the normal contract licensing protocols,” which means that the agency does not have to report operations conducted by its private contractors to Congress.

Even to estimate the number of PMSCs, whether in America, the U.K., or worldwide, is quite a challenge. New ones pop up as quickly as conflicts erupt, while the well-established firms swallow up smaller ones and add subsidiaries in response to new markets, becoming one-stop shopping for their government and corporate clients. Companies sometimes even change their names. And further complicating the task of assessing the industry, they often have headquarters in several nations. They sell their services to countries and corporations on every continent, and they subcontract jobs to firms and workers worldwide.

For any single U.S. contract, there could be as many as five layers of subcontractors. Such a massive web of subcontracting effectively changes the face of U.S. security forces from national to international, as a large percentage of subcontractors doing defense work in the name of America come from Africa, South Asia, and Latin America—often countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Philippines, Colombia, Chile, and Uganda. As one scholar wrote, “In the past non-Americans who wanted to serve in the U.S. armed forces had to live in the U.S. and demonstrate some loyalty to the country. Iraq changed that.” The Washington, D.C.-based Center for Public Integrity noted in 2010 that because of subcontractors “the U.S. government often doesn’t know who it is ultimately paying.”

What is most remarkable, though, is how invisible it all seems, and how silent, despite the fact that at least one out of every ten returning U.S. soldiers goes to work for a PMSC. Every few years a scandal surfaces, reminding the world that such companies exist. But when the stories disappear from the headlines and the noise dies down, the companies seem to vanish too. Although inherently governmental functions such as intelligence-gathering and embassy security are now performed by private contractors, few politicians have ever debated such practices. But then, this is a slippery topic without precise figures to define the industry and without battalions of reporters to follow it. And despite the evolving sophistication of private military and security firms—their slick websites, savvy lobbyists, and impressive boards—they can be just as elusive as their shadowy mercenary predecessors.

What is clear, however, is that one of the outcomes of the American wars of the early twenty-first century was the success of the privatization experiment and the ensuing rise of a bold new industry. The quest to privatize defense and security empowered companies now moving beyond their roles in Iraq and Afghanistan to wherever the markets for force might be found and becoming wild cards of global policy. How this happened is one of the more intriguing stories in business and military history—a story that started in England in the aftermath of the Second World War. When former British Army officer Eric Westropp, a respected PMSC industry leader, commented on the recent evolution of private military companies, he said it was “a story straight out of science fiction. There’s always the seed, and the Iraqi conflict watered it, big

time. Now we have a new crop that will spread globally. Many years from now it may have to be stopped, but for now it will be used and must be closely monitored. Anyone taking a close look will tell you that.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Randy Garrison:

In this 21st century, people become competitive in most way. By being competitive at this point, people have do something to make these people survives, being in the middle of the particular crowded place and notice by means of surrounding. One thing that oftentimes many people have underestimated it for a while is reading. Yeah, by reading a book your ability to survive improve then having chance to stay than other is high. For yourself who want to start reading some sort of book, we give you this The Invisible Soldiers: How America Outsourced Our Security book as nice and daily reading guide. Why, because this book is more than just a book.

Allison Phelps:

Why? Because this The Invisible Soldiers: How America Outsourced Our Security is an unordinary book that the inside of the guide waiting for you to snap that but latter it will shock you with the secret this inside. Reading this book alongside it was fantastic author who have write the book in such wonderful way makes the content interior easier to understand, entertaining technique but still convey the meaning thoroughly. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any longer or you going to regret it. This book will give you a lot of gains than the other book possess such as help improving your talent and your critical thinking technique. So , still want to delay having that book? If I were you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

Beverly Barber:

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