Malalai Joya was born in a small mountain village in western Afghanistan. Three days later, a communist coup overthrew the government in Kabul. The Soviet Union invaded not long afterwards. War, she writes, is all we Afghans have known.

She lived as a refugee in Iran and Pakistan, ran an underground school for girls during the rule of the Taliban, and went on to become the youngest member of Afghanistan's parliament. She's a staunch advocate for women's rights in a country where such rights often exist only on paper. In her memoir, Joya writes about her family's struggle against Islamic fundamentalists, warlords and foreign occupation.

If you'd like to speak with her about her past and about her country's future, our telephone number is 800-989-8255. Email us: talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our Web site. That's at npr.org, click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Today, Malalai joins us from NPR's bureau in New York. She tells her story in a book called "Woman Among Warlords." And Malalai Joya, nice to have you on the program today.

Ms. MALALAI JOYA (Author, "A Woman Among Warlords"): Thank you. Thanks for this interview.

CONAN: And you write that one of your early memories as a child was clinging to your mother's legs while a policeman ransacked your house searching for your father.

Ms. JOYA: Yes, it is true. As - when I was child, after four days that I born, Russia occupied
Afghanistan and their puppets come in power. So the situation was very risky for freedom-loving fighters, especially democrats, the people of my country.

As my father was one of the democrat person who was a student of university, and when - and they were occupied my country together with other freedom-loving fighters. They start to fight against occupation. That's why they killed millions of Afghan, innocent Afghan and also thousand democrat in Afghanistan, and my father was one of those unfortunately. And he did struggle against and now he's alive.

CONAN: Yes. But he lost his leg. And there were many months after the incident in which he was injured when you didn't know whether was dead or alive.

Ms. JOYA: No. Never I know as (unintelligible) so you can read some stories that when I was a baby that he lost one of his legs and have to go or have to leave Afghanistan. He went to refugees - neighbor countries. So after four years, when I was four years old, I left Afghanistan. And for the first time, I met my father and my uncle.

The older brother of my father took care of our family as well. And he - he was very close to me. And they're crying to me and I called him always daddy, father. So, for me, it was difficult to accept that that's not my father. And that means that my uncle is not my father and my father is my father.

CONAN: There's a touching story you tell, after your family moves to the - Iran to be with your father who's in exile there in a refugee situation. And he overhears you, a small child, one day singing a silly song about my father only has one leg.

Ms. JOYA: Yeah, still my families remember. And a friend of my father also made jokes because first time that I accept that - I said, this is my father and I was singing that silly song that, as you said, with my salsa(ph) and then my father - I didn't know that he was listening to me - and then he recognized I was (unintelligible) just lost.

CONAN: Yes, because he understood at that moment you accepted him as your father.
Ms. JOYA: Yes.

CONAN: Yes.

Ms. JOYA: Yes.

CONAN: Then later, your family moves to Pakistan, to a refugee camp, first in Quetta and then up in - near Peshawar. And these are - well, million of Afghans were forced into refugee status during the struggle against the Soviet occupation and later during the civil war.

Ms. JOYA: Yeah.

CONAN: But this was where you first became exposed to the politics as you tried to go to school to get an education.

Ms. JOYA: Yeah. Like, as you said, like many Afghan, millions of Afghan, we also become refugee and because Iran was not - no school for a garrison - Afghan (unintelligible) in Pakistan (unintelligible). And on that time, a refugee (unintelligible) class in high school when I was, I thought to be a social activist. And in the morning I was a student of the school, in the evening I was a teacher for literacy courses.

So we belong to political situation. We are (unintelligible) generation. As I said, I was four-days-old baby that Russia occupied Afghanistan. Then criminal Mujahideen come in power, these warlords, this civil war from '92 to '96. Then Taliban, these fascist people come in power. Then back after 9/11 tragedy, these warlords, these criminal Mujahideen (unintelligible) democracy, they come in power.
And we saw nothing in our life, just war and these violences. And I believe even children (unintelligible) Afghanistan through politics, even stones of Afghanistan (unintelligible) speak, that politics (unintelligible) like children of Palestine that always inspired me, that they fight against occupation, even children with the stone.

**CONAN:** And there is - you've described a lot of history in very quick terms there. But there is a chapter of your story that I think most people would find fascinating, and this is during the rule of the Taliban. Your family returns home to Western Afghanistan. And in fact you run an underground school to teach girls.

**Ms. JOYA:** Yes. I was activist of organization of promoting Afghan women capabilities called OPAC, even on that time it was not register. They had health and education activities for women and children, underground activities, especially in the period of Taliban in '98. I was famous in the camp (unintelligible) they were searching for activist and they contacted me.

And I like the idea and as a social activist because there was no education for girls and women, so that's why I moved with my family and my father, as democrat, and they will agree. And we moved to (unintelligible) and there also underground activist I was since after 2001 (unintelligible) but now when you compare my life with the dark period of Taliban as activist and now, on that time it was risky.

But now, even with (unintelligible) bodyguard it's not safe. There's many assassination attempts (unintelligible) changing the safe house to safe houses, many death threats receiving, not only me, many other democrat of my country, the social activists and political democrat activists.

**CONAN:** We'll get to the present day in just a moment. But I think listeners would be interested to hear. You were forced during the Taliban time to wear the burqa, a piece of clothing which you detest. Nevertheless, it made it possible for you to smuggle schoolbooks underneath it without being detected.

**Ms. JOYA:** Yeah, it is true. It was difficult (unintelligible) burqa, I had some funny memory in the meantime, not only sad but how my other friends, these colleagues of OPAC, and even my
father was saying that among all women when I see you, I recognize who you are, because it was really difficult how to (unintelligible) and, but now…

CONAN: He said you walked like a penguin.

Ms. JOYA: Yes.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Ms. JOYA: But now even with the burqa and bodyguard, as I said, it's not safe. And now this disgusting burqa, which for me, as always I'm saying, this is like symbol of oppression. And I'm sure for most of women of my country, and it's like (unintelligible) but now it gives life.

CONAN: Let me ask you a question. You describe the situation of your country over the past 30 years, and of course much suffering caused by the Soviet invasion and occupation and the long war then, as you mentioned it, the terrible civil war, which Americans know relatively little about that followed, and then the Taliban, which came to power, and then, of course, the war that has continued ever since September the 11th and the United States and NATO forces led, a war which you say, described as just another occupation.

Ms. JOYA: Yeah.

CONAN: And you described the terrible criminals, you say, the warlords and many of whom are in power now. Yet you also say in your book - and I wanted to ask you about this, it's a statement of great optimism: A longing for freedom beats in every Afghan's heart and we have eventually repelled every foreign occupier. After all of that, the fundamentalists, the warlords, the Taliban, do you believe that a longing for freedom beats in every Afghan heart?

Ms. JOYA: You know, in the mind and also in the hearts of my people, this criminal has already brought to the court, has been faced to the court. People do not support them. Karzai's corrupt
mafia system is a good example how much (unintelligible) and this election is another example, non-democratic election. Millions of Afghan, they did not attend in the election.

And now that my (unintelligible) people, that the reason I'm not - I'm alive that - because of support of these poor people. And they wish that one day these criminals must be paying into the International Criminal Court. But they imposed on my people, that was the main reason of the wrong policy of US government and its allies, that they replace one terrorist like Taliban with another terrorist, these warlords, these criminals.

So that's why situation of Afghanistan goes to a disaster, especially for a woman. In most of provinces, it's like hell. First of all, they change my country to the center (unintelligible)…

CONAN: Let's get a caller in on the conversation. And Pauline is with us. Pauline calling from East Hampton in New York.

PAULINE (Caller): Yes. Hi. I wanted to ask you - I just got a little bit of a hint of how you feel from your last statement. But I wanted to ask you how Afghans feel about the American occupation right now and the ratcheting up of -potential ratcheting up of the occupation.

There's a lot of reporting here that tries to tell us that the Afghans want the Americans in to protect them from the Taliban. Can you give us a little more insight into that?

Ms. JOYA: Yes, why not? You know, my people, now they're sandwiched between two powerful enemies. From the sky, this occupation forces bombing and killing innocents of our lands under the name of Taliban, most of them women and children. In the ground, these warlords in Taliban is now negotiating with each other, continue to their fascism. For example, these occupation forces as they did the bombing in (unintelligible) Province, maybe you hear through media. And one day more than 150 civilians has been killed, even they used white phosphorus and cluster bomb.

I think democracy never come by white phosphorus or cluster bomb or by war. Also, on 9th of September they did bombing in Kunduz Province, this month, recently, and 200 civilians has
been killed.

After all of these crimes, White House says apologize and Karzai’s puppet, corrupt mafia system says thank you. No, my people are fed up. They don't want to listen anymore thank you and apologize. Even they’re bombing our wedding parties, what they did in Jalalabad and also Nuristan, that day by day, civilians are the victims. You can go and see Professor (unintelligible) and these troops themselves are the victim of the wrong policy of their government as they send them for bad cause for war.

I said condolences and I say condolence to those family who lost their sons, but they must raise their voice against this wrong policy. But now Obama want to surge more troops in Afghanistan, which will bring…

**CONAN:** Excuse…

**Ms. JOYA:** Yeah?

**CONAN:** I don't mean to cut you off. And Pauline, thank you very much for the call. But we just have a minute left, and I wanted to ask you if US forces did withdraw, which you want them to do, why would we think for a moment that it would not either be the Taliban or the warlords still in control in Afghanistan?

**Ms. JOYA:** When these occupation forces stop bombing and killing civilians and their government do not support warlord in Taliban, then - as I said, now we are fighting two enemies, against occupation and these warlords and Taliban.

With the withdrawal of one enemy, it's much easier to fight against one enemy instead of two. If really Obama honest for my people first, in this occupation, they are saying civil war will happen, but today (unintelligible) civil war. We do not have security - poverty, corruption. It’s increasing rapidly in Afghanistan, the situation of woman is getting disaster.
Obama, first of all, must say apologize to my people and bring this criminal Bush to the International Criminal Court. (Unintelligible) power in Afghanistan. Now they are negotiating with Taliban (unintelligible) these terrorists as a moderate, while (unintelligible).

Obama must support democratic minded people of my country while we have a lot. There are many risks for them. Educationally support my people and also (unintelligible) the U.N. must stop neighbor countries like Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan that support Taliban and these warlords. So as long as these occupation forces be in Afghanistan, the worse civil war will be.

CONAN: Malalai Joya, we thank you for your time today and good luck with the book.

I should note you said some facts about the bombing in Kunduz, which are disputed by the U.S. government about the use of white phosphorus and cluster bombs. But anyway, these are in dispute.

Anyway, thank you very much for being with us today.

Ms. JOYA: Thank you. At the end, I want to say that democracy never come by war. Please raise your voice, great democrat American people, first of all, against the war crime of your government. And I want to say they will destroy all of the flowers, but they never can stop this pain. No history except occupation and no nation can donate liberation to another nation.