

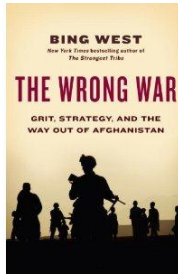


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The Wrong War: An Interview with Bing West

by Michael Few



Bing West's [The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan](#) will be out on the bookshelf tomorrow. We asked Bing, a longtime supporter of *Small Wars Journal*, for an exclusive interview prior to publication. We wanted an honest, open discussion on the current war in Afghanistan and modern warfare. He more than delivered, and hopefully, this interview will be followed in several weeks with another by [Octavian Manea](#). Enjoy the interview, and make sure that you go out and get his book! - Mike

The new book title is quite provocative. Why is Afghanistan the “Wrong War?”

Afghanistan is the Wrong War for our benevolent strategy of wooing the Pashtuns by offering money. Our senior leaders say the war cannot be won by killing. It will surely be lost if we don't kill more Islamist terrorists and hard-core Taliban. More disturbing, the US is steadily getting out of the arrest and imprisonment business, due to politics in the States.

Why aren't we the “Strongest Tribe” in Afghanistan?

In Iraq, the Sunni tribes, with an established hierarchy and strong intra-clan ties, came over to our side because, as their leaders told me, they concluded we were the strongest tribe. It was no accident that the Sunni Awakening began in Anbar, where the Marines had hammered the insurgents - al Qaeda and Sunni tribes alike - year after year. In Afghanistan, the Pashtun sub-tribes have no such established hierarchy. Many villages have scant contact with the next. The Pashtuns will remain neutral and standoffish until they decide who is going to win. They are convinced the Taliban will return as we pull out.

In 2009, General Stanley McChrystal implemented a comprehensive counterinsurgency campaign for Afghanistan. Early reports from the field suggest that some battlefield commanders misinterpreted the intent and placed restrictive rules of engagement on ISAF security forces limiting their ability to close with and destroy the enemy. Contrastingly, during this same time period, Special Operations Forces conducted numerous direct action raids killing and capturing hundreds of Taliban and al Qaeda operatives. What effect did these actions have on the grunt Marines and Soldiers in the field and the way the military views war and warfare?

In the past three years, I have embedded with many rifle companies. COIN is a franchise business. The variation among the franchises is enormous. Some companies have five outposts; others have 18. Some companies have permission to track every patrol with mortars and to fire immediately upon request of the patrol leader - no questions asked. Others have difficulty. Our senior generals did go too far in criticizing from the top. As rules of thumb, the ODA and Marine units have more degrees of freedom to call in fire at a lower level. Many of the Army platoon

commanders, after Ranger School, have expressed to me disappointment that they could not act more aggressively on their own. I know this is a tough balancing act, but most Taliban shoot and scoot successfully.

General David Petraeus famously said that we should use money as a weapon. Some interpret this guidance as a need to have a free-fire exercise in spending and reconstruction efforts in order to win hearts and minds. Others caution subtle restraint or coercive civil affairs to ensure that spending is measured to ensure increasing returns on investment and mutually beneficial partnerships. How would you describe our monetary investment in Afghanistan given the current strategy?

From Karzai to the villagers, the response has been rational: take or steal every dollar the Americans are foolish enough to give away. In the US, the Great Society and the War on Poverty created a culture of entitlement and undercut individual responsibility. We exported that failed social philosophy to Afghanistan.

Despite the initial sluggishness of the Marjah campaign, the Marines are finding success. COIN is traditionally a long, slow process. Moreover, in RC-East, commanders in the 101st are executing a violent pacification of long held Taliban and al Qaeda strongholds, and we're quietly garnering local tribal militias through the Village Stability Operations (VSO). Why should we not give ISAF more time to conduct President Obama's counterinsurgency campaign?

True, the Marine companies are spending millions in Marjah, now that the overt, armed Taliban have left. The criterion of success, however, are districts standing on their own without US rifle companies. In ten years, that has not happened, and six American commanding generals have praised their counterinsurgency campaigns. I have not seen one village with a self-defense force that has killed Taliban and stood on its own.

In a recent interview with SWJ, Karl Hack suggested, "You cannot, for instance, go straight to a comprehensive approach for 'winning hearts and minds' and expect it to work, if you have not first broken up the larger insurgent groups, disrupted their main bases, and achieved a modicum of spatial dominance and of security for the population of the area concerned." Do you agree that in many small wars security and the suppression of the insurgency must come before construction and investment efforts?

In Vietnam, the mission of our Combined Action Platoons was to patrol so vigorously that the Viet Cong locals and main force would not enter the AO. The second mission then was to bring in police to ferret out the secret cadre. Overarching those two missions was the daily integration with the Popular Forces, who knew they would be left on their own, usually after nine to twelve months. (My CAP took longer - 485 days.) Security and a belief that you will win are the first requisites for a government.

In Afghanistan, our mission is patrol until the overt Taliban pull out. Then, our battalion commanders then move on to projects and economic development (over \$10 million for many, if not most battalions) and to governance. Most battalion commanders are the de facto district governor, or the co-equal. The battalion commanders are then expected to assist in the institution of the rule of law. But since US soldiers are not permitted to arrest Afghans, the rule of law has gradually been dropped from the COIN catechism.

In Vietnam, counterinsurgency focused upon the destruction of the Viet Cong insurgency, and was successful by 1970. For ten years, in Afghanistan, our new COIN doctrine has focused upon building a nation, and has not been successful. The COIN doctrine says our troops are expected to be nation-builders as well as warriors. I believe that is deeply flawed. Our military, despite the exhortations of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, should not be a Peace Corps. We need another decade or so to succeed at that, and we need about a trillion dollars and a commitment of about a hundred battalions.

The math is staggering. There are more than 7,000 Pashtun villages and fewer than 50 NATO battalions that will go into combat. Americans cannot protect 11 million Pashtuns. The open border is 1500 miles long; the government in Kabul is rotten; President Karzai is serpentine.

What do you propose for a new strategy?

Push the Afghans to fight their own war. Stop fighting for them. Create the Adviser Corps we have needed for the past ten years. Our air surveillance is so extraordinary today that we can deploy about 50 advisers per 400-man Afghan battalion and patrol rigorously without unduly risking our advisers. We do not need 100,000 troops. The average grunt sees a real live Taliban only a few times in a tour. We spend as much time in shuras as on patrols. That has not yielded return on the investment. The Taliban needs to mass in order to threaten to retake government control in the urban areas. Given our air, they cannot mass.

Given a shift to an advisor only strategy, should we turn command of the Afghanistan campaign over to Army Special Forces, the traditional American experts in small wars?

We need a three-star in charge of the advisers, who in turn must become our main effort - focused upon insisting the Afghans fight their own war. The greatest institutional defect is that we have conceded total control over promotions and firings to Karzai. That can and should be changed.

The wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan led to a resurgence and explosion of theory and study into small wars, a field once relegated to minor departments of security studies and defense analysis. Much of this discussion and debate takes place at Small Wars Journal through major stakeholders such as LTC (ret.) John Nagl, LTC (ret.) David Kilcullen, GEN David Petraeus, and LTG William Caldwell as well as numerous junior and field grade officers and NCO's returning from the field trying to apply practice to theory. Has this increase in the study of small wars provided the collective community a greater wisdom of war and warfare?

The new religion of benevolent counterinsurgency has been defined by the best writers. Especially in Big Army, attracting attention and prominence is helped enormously by an advanced degree and by the publication of theoretical papers on macro topics at the high level of warfare.

The new COIN, however, remains an unproven theory, with a distinct downside. Since non-kinetics have been advocated as the smart approach to warfare, from the top down the infection of risk-aversion has spread. Most battalions know the sections of their AOs where the troops will be shot at; those areas are avoided until rotary-wing CAS is scheduled; that takes four to seven days. Every casualty is investigated; if a junior officer has strayed from the published regulations, he is in trouble. Every company and battalion commander must give away the money he is given, and must insure his books balance, etc. We have overly entangled and

distracted our rifle companies, and we have turned a blind eye to the need to detect, arrest and imprison those in every village who are true Taliban or part-timers.

Some will respond that the new COIN is still kinetic. It's true that in the two doctrinal pubs (COIN and Irregular Warfare) there is ample mention of being aggressive. Combined, the two pubs run over 250,000 words, with appendices. There's a paragraph in the pubs for every taste and position.

For instance, Nate Fick and John Nagl wrote [an op-ed in NYT](#) on 21 February, saying, “even in Sangin, ranking among the very worst districts... the Taliban are being driven from their sanctuaries as the coalition focuses on protecting the Afghan people...”

I just returned from Sangin, where I accompanied a platoon on its daily fights. My story is published in the National Review. Interestingly, the editors, without consulting me, decided the title would be: ***With the Warriors: How our Marines go about the business of destroying the Taliban***. Note the editors did not say, “The business of protecting the population”. What I witnessed in Sangin was a straight-up battle. (See the article [with the warriors](#).) The British tried “protecting the population” for four years by doctrinal COIN means and were penned in. The Marines are slugging it out – killing - every day. The aggressive regimental commander has one rule: every firefight will end with Marines “closing to zero”; that is, standing on the ground where the Taliban fired. These grunts are doing what my combined platoon did in Vietnam – killing the enemy. Yes, that in turn brings “protection” to the people --- regardless of what the people want. That’s the nature of war.

Nate and John acknowledge in their op-ed that, “The coalition has been able to capture or kill far more Taliban leaders in nighttime raids... The United States can’t kill its way to victory, as it learned in Vietnam and Iraq, but it can put enough pressure on many Taliban fighters to encourage them to switch their allegiance.”

While Nate and John praise our SOF raids for killing, they add the obligatory new COIN bromide that “we can’t kill its way to victory”. No single phrase has sown more confusion among a generation of riflemen that we have trained to kill. Any war is about killing, first and foremost. That is what distinguishes war from diplomacy. Vide our Revolutionary War, the Civil War, WWI, WWII, Vietnam and Iraq. North Vietnamese killed the South Vietnamese soldiers and seized Saigon with tanks. The Sunni tribes eventually informed upon those affiliated with Al Qaeda, and they became targets to be killed or captured.

Over the course of three years of embeds in the north, east and south of Afghanistan, I did not find one village that fitted the pattern of Vietnam. For instance, in the village of Bing Nghia where I fought, 15 Americans arrived in June of 1966; the large majority of villagers welcomed them; the US squad trained a local platoon by fighting the Viet Cong night after night; no big projects were constructed; no Americans tried to help with governance; 17 months later, the Americans left the village to fend for itself. Before the Americans arrived and after they left, most of the villagers had an anti-Viet Cong ideology.

That is not the case with the Pashtuns. Their Islamic and cultural association with the Taliban is different. Their refusal to commit is much deeper and more conflicted than we encountered in Vietnam.

I agree with Nate and John that most Americans are leaving Afghanistan sooner than 2014. However, the cause will not be that we have protected a Pashtun population that has in turn reciprocated by rejecting the Taliban. Undoubtedly that will be the public claim. But the president is not going to run for re-election with a perceived mess in Afghanistan. Hence, we will have achieved our basic objectives by 2012. That is a political given. Regardless of how we leave, our political leaders will declare victory; e.g., Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for “ending” the Vietnam war. How the Afghan narrative is shaped will depend upon the skill of the White House.

Nate and John and I also agree that we must hasten the transfer of responsibility to Afghan soldiers backed by more advisers. However, the *cause* of the transfer will not be that we have succeeded in protecting a Pashtun population dispersed over a vast countryside ideal for guerrilla tactics. The math is staggering: 7,000 Pashtun villages and about 250 US rifle companies. The Pashtuns are determined to remain neutral until one side or the other wins. The Pashtuns are the prize for winning the war, not the means of winning it.

The new COIN theory is based on the social contract: the US provides protection and money, and the Pashtuns reject and inform on their Taliban relatives in their midst. The Pashtuns have not kept their side of the contract. Their self-interest lies in remaining neutral until they see a clear winner.

We have confused our soldiers and our mission by clinging to one theory – population protection - about counterinsurgency. Galula popularized that view when he was at Harvard. But his earlier and more honest book about how he fought in Algeria is revealing; he employed tactics – execution, threatening to bake people, etc. – that contradicted his latter encomiums. Every war creates its own facts, regardless of theories. In Afghanistan, the population will not determine the outcome. The end will be determined by the tenacity of the Taliban, or by the infusion of a fighting spirit into the Afghan army, or by a messy deal that will cause us all to ask: why did we fight so long and hard for that? All three outcomes are separate from the Americans. The Afghans are perfectly willing to take our money and let us continue to do the heavy lifting.

It is time to subordinate the misplaced rhetorical emphasis upon population protection and insist that the primary mission be partnered training – to include the relief of ANA incompetents - with timelines for the turnover of security responsibility, including Afghan soldiers patrolling in the villages. The US military should explicitly downgrade the effort devoted to nation-building projects, shuras, governance and economic development. Yes, this means the ANA becomes the power behind Karzai's throne. The armies in Turkey and South Korea provided a stabilizing influence.

Our current level of effort is politically unsustainable here at home. Our generals cannot want to give freedom more than the Pashtuns are willing to fight to gain it. If we cut back our spending and our troop levels, we will be able to persuade the Congress and many in the Executive Branch to stay longer in Afghanistan. I did not come to these conclusions quickly or lightly. In [The Wrong War](#), I recount battles that have gone on for years; we are trying to do too much.

Michael Few is the Editor of Small Wars Journal.

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