

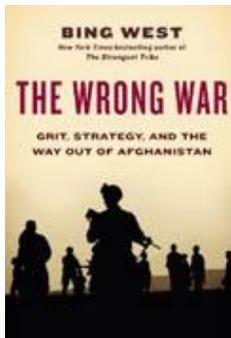


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Wrong War, Wrong Policy, or Wrong Tactics?

Review by F. G. Hoffman



Bing West, *The Wrong War, Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan*, New York: Random House, 2011, 307 pg, \$27.95. (maps and photographs)

The Long War against extremism has spawned an explosion in books on global terrorism and America's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. While Operation Enduring Freedom was the first counter-blow, following quickly on the heels of 9/11, it has not garnered as much attention as the larger Iraqi conflict. In contrast, the protracted contest in Mesopotamia generated George Packer's *Assassin's Gate*, Tom Ricks' superlative *Fiasco* and *The Gamble*, and Linda Robinson's *Tell Me How This Ends* among others.

Afghanistan has produced some notable exceptions. Sean Naylor's *Not a Good Day to Die* topped the field until Sebastian Junger's *War* was issued last year. The former was an operational history of the ferocious fight against Al Qaeda in the Shahikot Valley during Operation Anaconda in March 2002. Junger's micro-epic focused more narrowly on a small unit over a longer period of time in 2008 in the Korengal Valley.

The imbalance in our bookshelves is starting to become rectified, and Bing West's latest book tops the list. Mr. West, a former Marine, Pentagon policy official and noted author, brings much insight and no small amount of prior experience to this particular subject. During the Vietnam War, he had the opportunity to closely examine creative approaches and political complications of modern conflict. His first book, the renowned *The Village*, captured the complexity of American efforts to provide local security assistance to a foreign population beleaguered by a fierce conflict.

West strapped on his armor once again decades later in *The March Up*, co-authored with Marine Major General Ray Smith. This offered a close up account of modern ground fighting with the 1st Marine Division during its rapid drive to Baghdad from 20 March to 10 April 2003. West surpassed it with *No True Glory*, a magisterial depiction of Operations Vigilant Resolve and Phantom Fury, the 1st Marine Division's two thrusts into the dangerous streets of Fallujah.

As in all his works, Mr. West brings an experienced military eye to his project. He captures the military viewpoint extremely well, both in terms of the nature of the terrain and the character of

the fighting. I don't think anyone else has truly captured the day-to-day life of the infantryman (Marine or Army) since James Webb, another Vietnam grunt. There is probably no better chronicler of a grunt's perspective of combat today. His writing is so vivid, one almost feels the heavy packs cutting deeper into the shoulder, smells the sweat in soiled Under Armor T shirts, and the lingering cordite in the air after each contact. *The Wrong War* complements West's superb narrative with equally excellent maps, an all too rare necessity for truly comprehending the story.

Simply, put, West's ability to capture the tactical context of battle and the human element is unsurpassed. There is something to be said for the maxim that war can only be best described by those who have borne witness to the face of war and fought themselves.

While nine tenths of *The Wrong War* is a graphic narrative of patrols and daily military life in Afghanistan, West's central theme is that American military forces are not fighting the war properly. To West the U.S. military is following academic theories about counterinsurgency, based on a doctrine that links operational success to the constrained use of force and population security, coupled with development and assistance. To West this has sapped the martial spirit of our armed services, making them a "gigantic Peace Corps" too involved with conducting shuras, sipping tea, and doling out dollars for local projects. The notion that Afghanistan can be won indirectly by winning over the neutral population is labeled a fantasy.

Despite his own experiences in Vietnam, West finds modern COIN doctrine incoherent. He correctly notes that FM 3-24 has shortfalls, particularly in its treatment of religion. To West, COIN doctrine fails to cover relevant circumstances found in today's theater, namely a government lacking legitimacy or competence, and insurgents that enjoy external support and nearby sanctuary. These are not immaterial conditions, but they are quite normal for modern insurgencies. They complicate the application of sound COIN tactics and extend the length of insurgencies, but nonetheless they don't invalidate best practices. Admittedly, we need a broader range of operational approaches for modern COIN, but FM 3-24 is simply doctrine not a cookbook. It requires professional judgment in application, and American generals in Afghanistan have not been lacking when it comes to creative techniques or the measured use of violence.

West makes existing US COIN doctrine into a caricature, "benevolent nation building" and "political drivel." The doctrine has its detractors, but few offer a cogent counter argument or an alternative doctrine. The COIN doctrine does not eliminate the need for force to "clear" enemy forces from population areas, quite the contrary. As the manual clearly notes, "killing or capturing insurgents will be necessary, especially when an insurgency is based in religious or ideological extremism." (p. 1-23)

Many insurgents were killed in Iraq in 2007 pursuant to the "surge" there, and many Taliban leaders and cadres have been targeted in Helmand and inside Pakistan. Good COIN doesn't eliminate the need to "neutralize the enemy," which Bing West properly calls the US military's core competency. However, the application of violence has to serve a large political objective and context, despite the U.S. military's strong predisposition to think and act tactically. Fighting and winning tactical battles was too often the problem in Vietnam, where we won almost all the

actions. Despite the handicaps Mr. West aptly captures and the evident frustrations it creates, the solution is not to be found in sweeps, kinetic surges, or massive bombings. Many observers find concrete signs of success in recent operations in places like Marja and Sagin, and those operations fit within our current COIN doctrine even if they focus more on influencing the hearts and minds of the opponent instead of the civilian population. As Nate Fick and John Nagl of the Center for a New American Security, both veterans of the long war, recently wrote on the progress being made in the southern provinces:

The United States certainly 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, depriving the enemy of support and giving the coalition more sources of useful intelligence.

While Mr. West may find it to be a "theory that has enfeebled our warrior ethos," one has to conveniently overlook that progress in Helmand where aggressive patrolling, population security and local development projects are slowly degrading the Taliban. The grit being displayed by Marines there offer a way out, ultimately, and one more consistent with the COIN manual than simply dealing with the Taliban as a conventional adversary.

Surely, historically speaking, revolts and insurgencies can and have been beaten with sheer force. But I think Mr. West recognizes that neither ISAF nor the United States has the political will and resources to outfight the Taliban indefinitely. He recognizes that time is not on our side, that our efforts to bring about a less corrupt government depend on Mr. Karzai and eliminating the opium trade, and that our development projects and cash created a sense of dependency or entitlement in Afghanistan. His preference for Afghanistan's fledgling forces bear the burden of their own defense has merit, but is it not a likely way to ensure U.S. core interests in the near term.

West is perceptive enough to realize that the clock is running out on America's patience. As this summer rolls around, and the 2012 Presidential election starts to heat up, the subject of our experiment in state-building in Afghanistan will be the central national security debate. Sustaining our forces there until 2014 is needed to bring about sustainable security. But many voters will find it hard to justify spending another \$300 to 400B (borrowed to boot) to keep Hamid Karzai's government in power and the Taliban at bay. The fragile state of our own economy makes it hard to sustain our commitment to a government in Kabul at the expense of Kalamazoo or Kansas City.

This is a timely product with clear policy implications. Thus, if you have not gotten a copy of this book yet, I would encourage you to do so immediately. If you have it at the bottom of a stack by your bedside, put it at the top and start it today. You won't regret it and I don't think you'll put it down either. One can argue with Mr. West's solution as a way out, but his pessimism and assessment come honestly and from intimate contact with the problem.

Mr. Hoffman is a retired Marine Reservist and frequent contributor to Small Wars Journal.

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