

An Exit Strategy for Afghanistan

reviewed by Col T.X. Hammes, USMC(Ret)

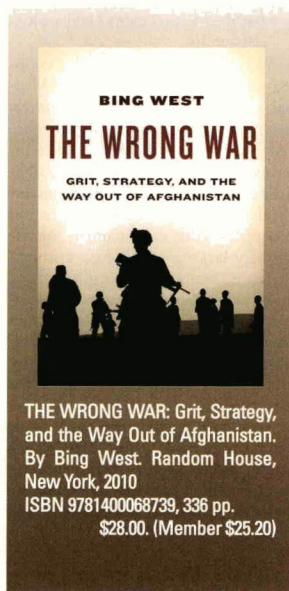
Bing West is an author who needs no introduction to Marines. From his classic, *The Village* (Pocket Books, 1972), to his remarkable efforts covering the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, West has contributed to the knowledge of individual Marines. Just as important, he has contributed to Americans' understanding of the Corps' traditions and combat performance. On both counts, *The Wrong War* is a solid addition to his body of work. It draws on eight extended trips West made to Afghanistan over the last 3 years. Unlike most pundits, his trips are not limited to Kabul. Instead, he embeds from the battalion to the platoon level, patrolling with the squads. He has sat through the shuras and endured the heat, altitude, mountains, vineyards, villages, mud, boredom, and sudden engagements. While his book focuses at the tactical level, West has the contacts and background to evaluate top-level decisions. As the title indicates, he has concluded that population-centric counterinsurgency will not work for this war. He then asks the very important question, "Since it would be disastrous to pull out and we can't win with the current strategy, is there an alternative?"

West sets out to answer that question by describing "the fighting, the objectives, the interaction with the tribes, and the different tactics our military has undertaken." To provide background, West takes the reader through a years-long summary of key efforts in both the north and south of

Afghanistan. In doing so, he provides context over time that pointedly illustrates both the grit of our forces and the failure of the current approach.

West is at his strongest in describing the action at the platoon level. His willingness to go to the very tip of the spear, combined with the experience to truly understand and interpret what he is seeing, brings both immediacy and empathy to his narration. For those Marines bound for Afghanistan, it provides a wealth of tactical scenarios that will enhance their training.

West weaves together years of repeated trips to key areas to support his contention that counterinsurgency is failing. In his chapters on the fighting in Konar Province, West traces the repeated efforts by U.S. units to pacify the Pech River valley and the highlands surrounding it. Despite the intelligent, skillful application of counterinsurgency doctrine by several units in a row, no unit was able to convince the people to openly support the government. West notes that GEN David McKiernan pointed directly at Pakistan. "It all goes back to the problem set that there are sanctuaries in the [Pakistan] tribal areas that militant insurgent groups are able to operate from with impunity." The Afghans are acutely aware that even if they cooper-



ate with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to drive out the Taliban, they will simply withdraw a few miles into Pakistan. Once there, they can patiently wait for ISAF to leave and then return to punish those who fought them.

Even more devastating than the sanctuaries is the lack of a credible Afghan Government narrative. The narrative is central to gaining support, both for the insurgent and the counterinsurgent. West notes that:

In the Korengal and across the entire Pashtun belt in Afghanistan, the Taliban narrative wove together the Pashtun warrior spirit and a jihadist duty to drive out the infidel invaders, with eternal reward for death as a martyr for Islam. In contrast, Afghan security forces usually fought for paychecks. They scoffed at the Taliban narrative,

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but their leaders didn't build a counternarrative.

West unequivocally states that counterinsurgency as reflected in *Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24)*, *Counterinsurgency*, is failing in Afghanistan. FM 3-24 states that the heart of counterinsurgency is to support the establishment of a legitimate government. Yet despite years of U.S. presence and mentoring, the vast majority of the country lacks a credible government presence. West's first person reporting at the tactical level highlights the weakness or corruption of the few Afghan civil servants in the conflict areas. Magnifying the problem, he notes that honest officials lack support from their ministries.

To overcome the frequently made counterargument that we have just started to use a counterinsurgency approach, West makes the point that we actually adopted a counterinsurgency strategy in 2008 under GEN McKiernan. Thus the idea that we have only been using this approach since the arrival of GEN David Petraeus is simply not true. Our evaluations of success of counterinsurgency should not be tied to last summer's arrival of Petraeus. Instead we must evaluate its effect since 2008. West is convinced it has failed. He concludes one chapter on the fight in the Korengal Valley with, "The American goal was to persuade Afghan tribes to support a centrally controlled, deeply corrupt democracy." Not surprisingly, we failed. Later West noted that both Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ADM Michael Mullen could not define the mission but simply conceded we are there to win. He observes:

If the highest-ranking officer in the military cannot explain the mission, he cannot expect a corporal to carry it out. . . . How do you tell a squad leader to 'diminish' the enemy?

Over the course of 13 chapters West provides a detailed tactical look along the critical Konar and Helmand Province fights. However, with his typical directness, West provides the bottom line up front. In his introduction, he states:

There is a grinding inconclusiveness to the battles that yields a grudging admiration for the endurance of the Pashtuns and a resentment against the sanctuary Pakistan provides. The valor of our soldiers is on display as well as the determination, cunning, and Islamist fervor of the Taliban and other opponents. Different strategic and operational approaches are tried, but none provides pivotal moments or political breakthroughs. Instead, there is a frustrating repetition of patterns. The American military loathes the mere mention of 'a war of attrition.' But that's what Afghanistan is. But that's the kind of war the military is fighting. It is past time for our military to shift its effort in order to ensure that the Afghan forces can win their own war.

This introduction ties directly to the very brief strategic recommendation West makes at the end of the book. During the first 15 chapters, West makes a very convincing case that the current approach is not working. Unfortunately, he dedicates only a few pages to an alternative approach. In essence, he proposes a combination of a large-scale advisor effort backed by effective counterterror operations. West's model is the highly successful special forces team he observed advising an Afghan kandak (battalion). Reinforced with a platoon of infantry, engineers, and fire support specialists, the special forces team proved Afghan Army units can meet and defeat Taliban units and successfully protect the population. This is critical because "such advisor task forces offered the means of transitioning the war at a faster pace, with a higher risk." West suggests that expanding the program nationwide will require about 50,000 U.S. troops. And while the U.S. population is rapidly tiring of the current massive but inconclusive effort, he feels the U.S. public will support such a very long-term but smaller advisory-based effort to achieve success in Afghanistan.

West's strategic recommendation is the weakest part of the book. This reviewer was left wishing West had expanded on this idea and where he

envisioned it going. It was particularly difficult to buy into the recommendation since West had undercut this approach earlier in the book. At the end of his section on just such a combined task force, West quotes the special forces team commander, CPT Matt Golsteyn:

We're the insurgents here and we're selling a poor product called the Kabul government. The district governor has been Taliban for years. The people believe Kabul's the enemy. Now we're here with askars (Afghan soldiers) who are Tajiks and Uzbeks—outsiders like us.

West's closing recommendation never addressed two key problems he identified repeatedly in the book—the corruption/incompetence of the Karzai government and the unwillingness/inability of Pakistan to close the border. While recognizing the local successes an advisory system can create, this reviewer questions whether any approach can work as long as these two problems remain unaddressed. Without an effective government, neither the Afghan population nor the Afghan Army has a real motivation to fight. And as long as the Taliban has sanctuary in Pakistan, they can choose the level of attrition they are willing to sustain.

Despite my discontent with the final analysis, *The Wrong War* is an essential read for those Marines going to Afghanistan, as well as those who have returned and want a longer view of the tactical actions in which they participated. I also recommend it for family members so they can better appreciate the realities our Marines are facing on the ground. Most important of all, national decisionmakers need to carefully consider whether West's conclusion that counterinsurgency has failed in Afghanistan is correct. And if it is, how do we adjust our strategy?

>Author's Note: The views expressed in this review are those of the author only and do not represent those of the Department of Defense or National Defense University.

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