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The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan

by Bing West

Reviewed by Robert Bateman, a historian and prolific writer. He has taught at the US Military Academy and is currently assigned to the Office of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense

If you are looking for an insightful analysis of operational, or strategic, or even grand strategic issues, let alone a “way out of Afghanistan,” then this is the wrong book for you. Despite the title, the book exhibits no understanding, and contains little substantive text dealing with the issues, discussions, debates, orders, or campaign plans that occurred at any level above the battalion during the time that the author was visiting forces in country. A period which ended, it should be noted, in 2009. Instead, the book offers first-person accounts at the tactical level, and a broad but vague criticism of current counterinsurgency (COIN) thought which generally prioritizes protecting the population and helping them develop so that they can support the government, rather than seeking out and killing the enemy.

It was with regret that this reviewer found that *The Wrong War* was none of those things that one looks for in a book with such a grand title. And that, perhaps, is the core of the problem. The book has the wrong title. There is nothing simple at all about the selection of a title, particularly when dealing with a large publishing house. A freakishly disproportionate amount of time is devoted by editors into selecting a title, because profit does matter. I strongly suspect that is the case here. Particularly since, “Stories of My Time with Rifle Platoons and Companies in Western and Southern Afghanistan Several Years Ago,” while honest, would create little interest. And that is the main problem.

In this book, as well as most of his others, the author witnesses and then writes about life in the infantry rifle platoon and company. At the same time he displays something akin to the “Hackworth Syndrome,” a condition named after that (in)famous infantryman-turned-military-critic, David Hackworth, who considered the staff officers up at “battalion” to be weak, and anyone at brigade or above to be a “perfumed prince.” West does not use those words, but his prose leaks with the same exact sentiments as did Hackworth’s. In *The Wrong War*, the heroes are all enlisted men, lieutenants, and a few captains. The villains are, if anyone, not the Taliban, but the field grade officers at battalion, brigade, and presumably higher headquarters. One should state “presumably” because in passing through, Mr. West did receive briefings from higher level officers, but there is nothing here about any level of war above the tactical. Yet, because of marketing, and the lack of understanding of things military, he has been greeted by the civilian press as a savant on things strategic. For example, this personal profile from the *New York Times*.

No armchair general here: Bing West has climbed mountains in Afghanistan with American combat troops, watched rocket-propelled grenades streak over his head and come close to dying of cholera. At a lean and flinty 70, he can dodge bullets along with the 20-year-olds he accompanies on infantry foot patrols, although he admits he does it by leaving the body armor behind — an eye-popping risk — and wearing a Boston Red Sox cap instead of a helmet.

Mr. West, whose book has received stellar reviews, would be easier to dismiss were it not for his pedigree: Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration, Marine infantry officer in Vietnam and author of *The Village*, a war classic for 40 years on the Marine Corps' reading list, about 15 Americans — 7 died — who trained Vietnamese farmers to defend their hamlets against the Vietcong.”

This endorser, sadly, did not notice the irony in what was being written—the fact that West's first book, *The Village*, was about living among the people and protecting the population so they might develop a normal lifestyle and support the central government, the very idea West is so critical of today. And, as so many not familiar with the military do, the endorser mistakes presence on a battlefield with generalship. If that were so, we would have literally hundreds of thousands of equally qualified generals in our ranks today. But the strangest thing is that Mr. West also contradicts himself, as he endorsed the United States' current strategy before he was against it. In the summer of 2009, just after he left his last embed which led to this book, Mr. West wrote the following (Inserts mine):

Given the vast, harsh terrain and the immense open border, instead of 60,000 American soldiers we actually need 100,000 (US forces are now over 101,000 in Afghanistan, and total NATO forces over 135,000)—and many more helicopters . . . (there are, now) Gen. David Petraeus, the theater commander, knows how to defeat an insurgency. In the north, we don't have to occupy every remote valley. (We do not.) Tribal rebels who just plain like to fight can be isolated in the harsh mountains to enjoy their privations. (They are.) In the south, the Marines and the British are cleansing Helmand Province of the toxic mixture of drug smuggling and insurgent dominance. (Which is what they are doing now.) As he did in Iraq, Gen. Petraeus wants to recruit local forces to protect their own villages. That will expand the Afghan forces to 300,000 and stabilize the situation. (Afghan regular forces are now climbing to over 352,000, let alone the Local Police, which should bring total Afghan forces to over 400,000.)

One needs to ask, if we are now actually doing, or exceeding, all that Mr. West proscribed back in 2009, and have been for more than a year, what is he criticizing? Unless one considers the possibility that the criticism, like the title, is designed for a different purpose.

In short, while an enjoyable read, in the gun-fight-level sort of way, this is not a book about anything but the lowest level of tactical storytelling, circa 2007-2009. If that is what you are looking for, then by all means, buy this 2011 book.