

Jump TO Article



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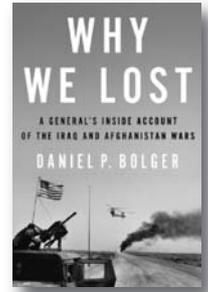
Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW

Why we lost: a general's inside account of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars

by Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger (U.S. Army Retired)

Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: United States; 2014; 544 pp.; ISBN 9780544370487; RRP \$43.99 (hardcover)



Daniel Bolger's *Why We Lost* starts off as a bracing confessional: "I am a United States Army General, and I lost the Global War on Terrorism. It's like Alcoholics Anonymous. Step one is admitting you have a problem. Well, I have a problem. So do my peers. And thanks to our problem, now all of America has a problem. To wit: two lost campaigns and a war gone awry."

Bolger places the blame for 'why we lost' not to any particular person or persons, decision or event, but at the feet of United States (U.S.) generalship – his peers. "Above tactical excellence yawned a howling waste", Bolger laments. Typically, such criticism comes from lower ranking officers or in time from historians. Bolger seems an unlikely source for such an assessment and I'm pretty sure that he didn't secure an agreement on such a confession from all his general officer peers.

Bolger served in Iraq from 2005 to 2006 as the officer in charge of training the Iraqi army, and then from 2009 to 2010 as commanding general of the 1st Cavalry Division. After that, from 2011 to 2013, he led the U.S.-NATO mission training the Afghan army and police. He holds a doctorate in history and has written several military histories. He speaks his mind, comparing himself to General Joseph 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell of World War II fame, who was known for his coarse personality.

Why We Lost is neither a memoir nor a window into high-level meetings and discussions. It is largely a casual open source history, U.S. centric and well-padded with heartfelt stories of erstwhile soldiers and Marines in firefights and other challenging circumstances. It does not, however, clearly identify the key reasons 'why we lost', or even establish that 'we' have indeed 'lost' (versus having shortfalls in meeting the original objectives).

Bolger's honesty is refreshing, but his prose at times reads like an exercise in introspection and venting personal frustration – something a psychologist would suggest a patient does to expunge demons. In measured doses, self-flagellation cleanses and clarifies, but placing all the blame on America's generals lets too many others off the hook. There is always a risk that professional military advice to politicians becomes 'politicised' or compromised to some degree; particularly in the more challenging circumstances involving insurgencies and nation-building as we have seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is little doubt that both of these 'projects' required much more than just a military response.

Despite his thesis regarding a failure of generalship writ large, with a single exception, he describes the three- and four-star officers who have run those wars as "decent and well-meaning"; perhaps damning them with

the absence of terms like intelligent, bold or courageous. That exception is David Petraeus, who Bolger clearly loathes.

Bolger's strategic case is that the U.S. military should have left Afghanistan and Iraq as quickly as possible after the combat-operations phases and never started down the road of counter-insurgency and nation-building. He believes that 'we lost' largely because our generals never argued vigorously for this course of action.

Why We Lost weighs significantly into the ongoing debate over how the U.S. should wage war. Bolger wrestles with defining the nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In both cases from the external interveners' perspective there seems to have been a distinct combat operations phase to remove two governments, followed by a 'post-combat/counter-insurgency/reconstruction/stabilisation/nation-building' phase. Within the second phase there have been insurgencies against the two new governments 'playing host to a semi-imperial occupier', as well as 'civil wars' between different ethnic and religious groups within both countries. Bolger recognises that post-combat/counter-insurgency/reconstruction/stabilisation/nation-building actions of this type are complex, difficult and expensive, and require a long-term commitment in support of a legitimate host-nation government. Bolger believes that, given the circumstances in Afghanistan and Iraq, the objectives for this second phase were preordained to failure from the outset. He may be right, but such a judgement is much easier in hindsight.

Bolger argues that the U.S. military is not designed or suited to post-combat/counter-insurgency/reconstruction/stabilisation/nation-building operations and should focus on short conventional combat operations against a clearly-defined enemy force. This is almost identical to the perspective in the U.S. military after the war in South Vietnam and which saw the organisation eschew military operations other than 'real' war for the better part of three decades.

Bolger's book is an important one – a testament to the frustrations and complexities of more than a decade of war after '9/11', the end of which remains out of sight. But as Bolger himself admits, the young men and women who served at the sharp end will be far more able to process the lessons of these wars than his own generation. This book is worth reading and, hopefully, will help that generation begin this necessary and important process.

Marcus Fielding