

Considering *Why We Lost*

Tami Davis Biddle

ABSTRACT: In his high profile book, *Why We Lost*, Lieutenant General (Retired) Daniel Bolger argues the US Army stayed too long in the Afghanistan and Iraq theaters, becoming mired in wars it was ill-equipped to fight. This commentary challenges Bolger's thesis, arguing different strategies could have produced better outcomes. The US Army will not, in the future, as in the past, be able to pick the kinds of wars it fights; it must be prepared to fight the wars that the President and Congress call on it to fight.

Daniel Bolger begins his book *Why We Lost*, with a jarring opening sentence: "I am a United States Army General, and I lost the Global War on Terrorism." It is an odd *mea culpa*, one that puts the reader off balance even as he/she is struggling to know what to make of the title. Who is "we," exactly? The US Army, the US military and its Coalition partners, the United States? Does Bolger speak for all of them? Clearly he does not, but this first impression puts one on guard. Is this hubris or humility? The answer, it turns out, is complex.

Bolger, who retired as a lieutenant general, had a long career in a US Army that repeatedly reinvented itself to meet changing global demands. Born in 1957, he graduated from the Citadel, and holds a PhD in History from the University of Chicago. In the latter years of his career he held several key posts including Commanding General, Coalition Military Assistance Training Team, Multinational Security Transition Command, Iraq, and Commanding General 1st Cavalry Division, Iraq, 2009-2010. Between 2011 and 2013 he was in charge of the US-NATO mission training the Afghan army and police. The author of several books including *Dragons at War*, Bolger is at his best when describing fast-moving, intricate events on the battlefield. He pulls readers into the middle of these tactical actions, allowing them to feel the dramatic nature of combat, and the stressful split-second choices it forces upon its participants.

However, *Why We Lost* wades directly into a debate over the purpose and future of the US Army; this debate has been raging for years now, but it is crucially important, not least because it will have a direct impact on the way the Army plans, trains, educates, and equips itself for the future. The debate deserves sustained attention and vigorous intellectual engagement. Bolger makes his own view clear: he believes the United States should have left Afghanistan and Iraq as quickly as possible after the major combat phase ended in each theater. The US Army is designed for rapid, overwhelming strikes; counterinsurgency and nation-building are, in his view, swamps that suck their victims in and consume them. At points in the text Bolger seems willing to concede counterinsurgency and nation-building may work in situations where the state conducting

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them is willing to stay “forever.” But that phrasing is hardly the way one would describe such a strategy if one were seeking to sell it. Principally, Bolger regrets that senior officers did not push the case for leaving earlier; their reluctance to give this option a full endorsement was, he believes, a collective failure on their part.

Bolger states the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq ended up pitting American soldiers against enemies who embraced hit-and-run tactics and opportunism, and who melted into the civilian population. Counterinsurgency environments, in his view, lure good men and women into a moral mire; one should not be surprised, therefore, by instances of battlefield excess and even atrocity. Bolger has no issue with enhanced interrogation techniques, and has little time for counterinsurgency principles that seek to limit civilian casualties; indeed, he sniffs at the “odd Zen-like” principles of Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, and describes General Stanley McChrystal’s tactical directive in Afghanistan as “handwringing on paper.”

For Bolger, protracted wars have other disadvantages, not least of which is they subject the Army to Congressional delegations, the vagaries and shifting sands of domestic and presidential politics, the intrusion of defense analysts, and – worst of all – the prying eyes and selfish intentions of the media. Bolger cannot abide the press, and cannot abide anyone who does not share his view of it. His opinion on all these matters can be summed up in a reference he makes to General David Petraeus, for whom he feels one part grudging admiration, and nine parts loathing: “With his Princeton doctorate, French-speaking wife, sharp wit, and endless desire to network, Petraeus saw the inquiring journalists, visiting academics, and members of Congress not as dirty interloping pests but as kindred souls. ...Like docile carrier pigeons, they conveyed his messages far and wide.” (239)

Senior military leaders who operate in democracies have no choice but to learn to cope with the vagaries and frustrations of domestic and congressional politics. Those living in the 21st century will find no quarter from the press, or the world of social media. This is simply the environment one must operate in, regardless of how one may feel about it. Bolger’s conclusion regarding battlefield excess is troubling. While he is right insofar as counterinsurgency campaigns are intensely stressful, not least because the enemy seeks every chance to blur the line between combatant and non-combatant, the consequences can be mitigated by dedicated training and education, and by careful attention to command climate. The vast majority of those who fought in the “Long War” sought to uphold the principles of *jus in bello*, and succeeded in doing so.

All this takes us to the central problem with Bolger’s argument, which is simply that the “break things and leave” approach is not an option in most circumstances since the situation you leave behind may be no better than – and indeed may be worse than – the one that existed before you arrived. Our recent participation in the Libya campaign might be brought to bear as an example of the risks of such an approach. Plenty of mistakes were made by civilian and military authorities in the Afghanistan war, but these were not inevitable. Getting Afghanistan on a stable footing needed to rest centrally on using coercion to lower the level of corruption in the Karzai government – corruption that preyed upon the Afghan people, and undermined any hint of government

legitimacy. The reasons this did not happen are too complex to be explained here, but Bolger's preferred option would have left a weak and destabilized Afghanistan—probably wracked once again by civil war—in the wake of American departure. And this situation would have further endangered the political stability of an already fragile, nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Bolger does a better job than most explaining why his political masters opted, in 2002-2003, to wage war in Iraq. Once that choice was made, however, the Bush administration had to be prepared to ride the tiger. If you take down a government and leave a power vacuum in a state comprised of people who live in existential fear of one another, things might well get worse before they get better. Leaving Iraq promptly would hardly have guaranteed security for the United States or for anyone else in the region. (And one must consider, as well, the moral obligations of *jus post bellum*.) Yes, civilian and military authorities made some costly mistakes in this theater too – not least of which was mis-interpreting a sectarian identity-war as a Vietnam-style ideological insurgency. But, again, these mistakes were not inevitable. The US Army engaged in some commendable real-time learning, and after the surge of 2007-08, the Obama administration had an opportunity for something approximating a reasonable outcome if it had been willing to press for such. But it would have required sustained pressure on Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to keep him from exploiting sectarian tensions for personal political gain. Anxious to switch off the lights and close the door on an unpopular war, the administration failed to keep that pressure on. The result has been anything but felicitous.

Afghanistan and Iraq are not the places one would choose to fight if one could choose, but military leaders do not get to dictate where and when (or sometimes even how) they will fight. Many believe Army leaders in the 1990s tried to tie civilians' hands by refusing to build a force that could do peacekeeping or stabilization missions efficiently; they ended up doing them anyway when civilians in authority told them to. Taken to its logical conclusions, Bolger's argument would proscribe, or at least severely limit, the Army's preparation for counterinsurgency and nation-building. But what if the President—the highest elected official in the land—orders them to be undertaken anyway? Does the Army owe the nation some degree of readiness to do messy jobs it would rather avoid but might be ordered to do? Is preparedness tantamount to endorsement? Or can senior officers cultivate an ability to play a sophisticated but subordinate role in what Eliot Cohen has called the “unequal dialogue” of civil-military relations by preparing to do whatever they might be ordered to do while clearly presenting the serious costs and perils of doing so?

Military leaders must hope the President and Congress will make sound, informed, and sober choices about war and peace – choices that consider the blunt nature of military force, the unpredictable nature of warfare, and the ever-present risk that a war will last longer and cost far more than anyone would like to imagine. But if US decision-makers feel compelled to fight an adversary or take down a government because it is thought to pose a grave threat to the security of the United States or its allies, then the US Army cannot rule out having to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign after major combat operations, or being pulled

into nation-building. (The United States and its allies were fortunate the Germans did not wage an insurgency after the death of Hitler. Certainly the US Army planned for such a prospect.) These efforts may be difficult and lengthy; they may force us into interaction with weak and corrupt leaders. We will succeed only if we do a better job of understanding the dynamics of the situation, and the ways to address them successfully. This realization will require greater attention, in particular, to the imperative of creating good governance—and to the mechanisms, both coercive and non-coercive, required to bring it about.

If the US Army is responsible for fighting and winning the nation's wars, senior officers must accept the fact that most of the work of "winning" will come well after the major combat phase has drawn to a close. Contingent events will break in unexpected ways and the ground will shift constantly under one's feet. The choices political leaders make will be just as important as the ones military officers make. And, in the end, the extent to which the two sets of choices can be reconciled, coordinated, and harmonized will determine, in all likelihood, the success or failure of the strategy. At every turn, civil-military relations will matter profoundly. And the obligation to get them right will rest with both sides.