



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

### Interview with Ray

By *Jon Custis*

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Members of the Small Wars Council represent a wide range of countries and backgrounds. While the board has a heavy Western representation, there are a number of members from outside the United States and Europe who have been with the Council from its earliest days. These members challenge the faulty beliefs that the rest of the world understands Western intentions, offer a regional perspective on the news and analysis that frames the discussions and debates, and remind us that hubris can be a very dangerous condition if left unchecked and allowed to impact policy and strategy.

Council member Ray has been an integral part of the Council since 2006 and offers exceptional insight into AfPak relations, the foreign affairs of his beloved India, and China's involvement in the region. This insight is rooted in his 35 years of commissioned service in the Indian Army (regular foot infantry), operational experience in mountain, high-altitude, desert, and jungle environments, combat experience in two officially declared wars, and counter-insurgency experience that encompasses all phases of an insurgency. I spent some time with him recently to get a better grasp of his background as well as his thoughts on the challenges facing the region.

#### **Why the pseudonym Ray, and is it a pseudonym at all?**

No, it is not a pseudonym. It is a shortened version of my surname. My full surname, many found it to be a mouthful! Therefore, the easily pronounceable nickname stuck! Try pronouncing Zbigniew Brzezinski!

**35 years of service, and a resume of experience like yours, has a certain Kipling feel to it for me, and brings to mind images of manicured lawns, crisp white table clothes in the mess, and precise lines of soldiers on parade. The brass tacks of a soldier's life and service in combat are typically very different from the often romanticized side, however, and I'm curious how the Indian Army has changed through the years.**

I wonder why you feel it is Kipling like.

I presume manicured lawns, white table cloth, and damask including napkins with a slight touch of starch and all that builds an aura of élan and elitism, which develops a psychology where one does not feel undertaking the supreme sacrifice a task to be shy of.

Of course, it is not as if we are in the grip of the "*Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant*" syndrome, but then neither are we consumed by the "body bag" syndrome.

The evolution of the Indian Army and its ethos from the days of the British Raj to Independence is best narrated in Philip Mason's *Matter of Honour*.

#### **Do the junior ranks of today possess the same spirit and will that you had when you wore the pips?**

Yes and no. They are more gung-ho, if you know what I mean.

The usual decentralized company deployments along the borders, the CASO [cordon and search] activities in COIN, the increased number of courses to keep abreast with the weaponry and technology that is being inducted, the doing away with the old tradition where one could marry only after 25 (to be eligible for married accommodation) and thus perforce having to live in the Mess and bond with each other, is to some extent affecting the unit closeness as a body. *Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno* (one for all and all for one) is what builds the fighting spirit. We call it fighting for one's *nam, namak, nishan*, which means "defending the name, the salt and the Flag!" "Salt" is because being disloyal to one, having had one's hospitality is a matter of immense disgrace and shame.

**During your service through war and strife, did your spirit change?**

Never.

Maybe it is because I am from a military family and so I took the profession, not as a career, but as a calling. At least that is what was ingrained in me by my father.

Like many others, I keep in touch with my unit even though I am retired. It was only recently I visited my unit at the front [Kashmir] where there was, what you call life-threatening activities! I went there to identify with my boys and share their danger and hardship. That is the cohesiveness we have, and it instills a sense of great camaraderie and it is great for their morale.

**Given the opportunity to pause and take in the beauty of that disputed territory, it must be breathtaking. Do you have any pleasant memories of your times there?**

Indeed Kashmir, as is India, is breathtaking!

Everything in life is an experience that is great. It is how you look at life. I look at life as a continuous learning and it was a source of enjoyment, especially the Long Range Patrolling on the mountains where one could savour the beauty of the land and of the people.

Since you seem to be keen to know more about India, the ideal book to understand the Kashmiris is Walter R. Lawrence's *Valley of Kashmir*. Lawrence was the Resettlement Commissioner. On Rajputs, you could read the works of Lt Col James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajas'han*, which is a good reference book. Tod was a Political Agent for some parts of what was known as Rajputana.

**In your service for the Indian Army, did you have the occasion for studies abroad?**

While I did not have the experience of doing courses abroad, those in Arms and Services associated with weapons and systems of Soviet origin, did.

Of late, with "strategic relationship", avenues for interface in its entirety have opened up. I understand attending foreign courses, seminars, conferences, and interaction to include exercises, is commonplace.

However, it has its plusses and minuses. One cannot superimpose foreign concepts and practices to address India's threat perceptions or interlock the same into India's wide-ranging terrain milieu.

**It is common in the US for generals to retire and then have much to say. Did you have to retire to in turn speak your mind?**

I find that the US Generals are speaking out their minds even when not retired. Generals McCrystal and Peter Fuller come to mind. Personally, I don't think that is correct.

It is not that the armed forces personnel of other countries do not have a mind of their own. They do. Yet, in most countries, the service rules do not encourage views to be expressed publicly that are contrary to

that of the democratically elected government's policies. The military can never, and should not, supersede the civilian democratically-elected authority, or even appear to supersede the civilian government.

The code of conduct enshrined in our army is clear on this issue and we follow it in letter and spirit. The code unambiguously lays down that we have to resign to publicly air views that are contrary to the government policy. For instance, after Op Vijay (Kargil Ops), many officers have publicly commented on the conduct of operations and also on issues of national policies that were current then, but only after hanging their uniform.

At the same time, there is no embargo to air one's views in house or when a plan/policy is in its formulation stage.

**After so many years of faithful service, what did it feel like on the day that you hung your uniform in the closet for the last time and stepped out instead in civilian clothes?**

It was heart-wrenching. It was like stepping into a void!

When I meet my friends from the Army, who having retired and are doing well in the commercial world, I ask them how it feels. They all concede that the pay they now get is a King's ransom considering the Army pay, but there is not the camaraderie that they had in the army nor the excellent, regulated and yet humble lifestyle that was shorn of all charades!

**Would you care to share any principles of your command philosophy that you've conveyed to subordinates in the past?**

Learn to live life decently with honour and learn to forgive and forget. Never bear grudges.

And never lose sight of the sagacious words of this prayer:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference.”

**How does the Small Wars Council fit into your access to the rest of the world?**

I value the opinions out at SWC because there are many professionals not only from the military but also from the "think tanks" and well placed in the government. They do open up my access to their world. However, it is basically confined to the Western world since all apparently are Western posters.

I cannot comment on their opinions being an influence in understanding the "rest of the world". I am in two minds. One, there appears to be an insufficiency in comprehending the psychology that spurs events in non-Western countries. Two, the superimposing of the western mindset, psychology, and ethics on issues that may not lead to correct conclusions. I am reminded of the book *The Ugly American* by Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer, which the US Government attempted to ban. Both John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, I believe, often cited the book's premise—that communism in Southeast Asia could only be defeated by small-scale actions in the field, not by bungling bureaucrats who preferred the cocktail circuit and "schmoozing" with political insiders.

To wit, the ideal example of the superimposing of one's own mindset, psyche and beliefs is best reflected in General Peter Fuller's outburst. He has claimed that the Afghan leadership is "isolated from reality" and that of the Afghan generals, "[They] don't understand the sacrifices that America is making to provide

for their security."

Maybe one could question if the General himself understands the Afghan mindset and psyche. How is it that the Afghan leadership is missing out on reality – a reality that is US interest driven and not Afghan interest driven. One fails to fathom as to why the Afghan leaders or Generals have to understand the US "sacrifices"? Clinically observed, the Afghans did not invite the US to invade them and so it is natural that they cannot understand the sacrifices! It, to a nonpartisan observer, would be similar to Pakistan's claim that they are the greatest victim of terrorism, when in actuality the terrorists are merely biting the hand that created them and still feeds them!

Another issue that the western mind fails to understand is the issue of corruption in Afghanistan. Though I am not sure, but maybe the Afghans feel it right form for people to bring "gifts" to the ruler. It is an old historical custom that was even prevalent in ancient West where "gifts" are presented to the rulers! What is taken to be "bribes" these days, was known as *nazrana* and was the Mughal custom when Islam was riding high. It is only in those colonies where the British ruled and where education and Western norms were taken as standard, was this practice of *nazrana* equated as bribes. Interestingly, even the British were presented *dolis* (baskets of gift) and they gleefully accepted it; of course, with imperial hauteur to make it appear above board (Warren Hastings, who was impeached, comes to mind)! Could it be that the Afghans are still entombed in the medieval mindset having not been exposed to Western ethics or education?!

To set the cat amongst the pigeons, take the issue of Afghanistan. There are great many learned posts that justify the advent into Afghanistan merely as a reaction to 9/11 for "revenge." Maybe because I apply the Indian mindset, I find it odd that anger alone is adequate to put a nation's resources and lives at stake! Is there no strategic requirement of the US and the West that prompted it to be in Afghanistan or even, Iraq? Is the rationale that childlike and simple?

Iraq, for instance, is believed to have been for oil! I wonder! I have already articulated my views on the issues in the various threads of the forum. [SWJ note: Ray references the numerous posts that can be found at the [Small Wars Council](#), the discussion forum companion to the Small Wars Journal.]

I believe the US is going to quit Iraq. Yet, they are going to hunker down in Kuwait--a safer and non-controversial area--in consonance with Dick Cheney's postulations that the US should be well placed in areas of possible conflicts as also to ensure energy security! Isn't that the same reason why Bahrain has a huge naval base of the US? And what about quelling the unrest in Bahrain, where the US, which champions freedom, has sided with the Islamic minority sect headed by the Sultan?! Isn't that for good reasons too?! Some strategists comment that the US cannot afford letting Bahrain become a democracy since it is a Shia majority country and Iran, the current nemesis of the US, is sitting alongside, for just this opportunity to have an Iran- friendly neighbour to dictate terms on the oil flow through the Straits of Hormuz!

Now, take the issue of China. There is this view of some honourable posters that the US is keen to allow China to grow and help her all the way! If that were so, then why have naval exercises with the Philippines Navy and then with the ex-foe, Vietnam, that seriously upsets China and gives rise in China, the feeling that the US wants to "contain" China?! Hardly an indication that the US wants China to grow and is extending a helping hand!

And why is the US having a "strategic relationship" with India, throwing in so many "confidence building and interoperability" exercises with all services of the Indian armed forces? All this dispels, at least to me, that the US strategists and policy makers are not that naïve as is made out to be in the posts.

**Do you see, in light of radical influences that appear to grow continually within Pakistan, that there can ever be peace and compromise between Pakistan and India?**

A very difficult question to answer. Every day, there is a different reaction from Pakistan over peace initiatives. There are too many power centres, and each have their own views and agendas. In fact, after the recently-concluded SAARC meet in the Maldives, there was this rather odd statement given that the Pakistan Army is keen to have peace with India! That itself should indicate how ridiculous the situation is.

There are conflicting signals practically daily. Pakistani leaders speak something one day and go back the next. It appears Pakistanis are themselves confused or they are being too clever by half?! Therefore, the situation is very fluid, very misty and, if I may say, very confusing for the average onlooker to fathom!

The radical influences have overhauled the Pakistan democracy, if it was there in the first place!

As I see it, Pakistan itself is a conundrum of internal struggle encouraged by strife that haunts Islam itself, ever since the death of their Prophet, wherein there has been the power struggle between the Shias and Sunnis and it continues till date. That churning is muddied by the Wahabis, who have added a new dimension to militant Islam, which some may feel is resurgent Islam. Add to it the sub-national struggles and the struggle between the civilian government and the military and Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). The worst thing that could happen from Pakistan is that they have made Islam take on the world, having exported terrorism from their madrassas the world over. Now, the Frankenstein cannot be stopped and it is devouring Pakistan itself. Interestingly, Pakistan is so helpless that its homegrown terrorists have not even spared their all-weather friend China either. They have spawned their terrorist misplaced religious poison to Xinjiang! Pakistan is brazenly supporting the terrorist groups in Pakistan, which they term as their "strategic assets". However, clinically observed, one cannot hold it against their mindset since unless there is *Dar al-Islam*, there can be no peace. Hopefully, one day better sense will prevail given that we live in modern times.

**Twenty years ago, the specter of impending nuclear war was just beginning to fade from the collective mindset of most Americans, and there are few pundits, analysts, and think tanks that put anything into print these days about the stockpiles that remain in the US and Russia. Does the average man on the street in New Delhi live under the gloom of a possible thermonuclear mushroom cloud on the subcontinent?**

I don't think so. Possibly because they don't understand the issue! Also because there is a sincere belief that none would be stupid enough to do so or even dream of using nukes as it would mean the other side too will get destroyed!

**What would it take for either side to employ one of the warheads that India and Pakistan have stockpiled?**

Indian politicians are too docile to even think of using it! Pakistan may use it if an Indian attack threatens their existence.

**Do you worry about Pakistan gravely miscalculating on that note?**

Pakistan cannot do anything without the assurance of some large external power that they will back them. Each war they had with India, they had the backing of the US. In the Kargil War, Musharraf tried to be too clever by half! He attempted to organise a local war without taking anyone in confidence and without even bothering about the logistics of the troops he infiltrated. The result was copybook in disaster!

**If you could step back in time to have a pot of tea with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, what would you want to discuss?**

Why was he so stupid to prevent Mujib from becoming the Prime Minister when the latter had won hands down democratically? If he had acted democratically then Bangladesh would have never come into being!

How did he not realize how wily General Zia-ul-Haq was when he promoted him to be the Chief out of turn?

What was his vision for the future of Pakistan?

I wonder if he would have had a pot of tea. I presume he would have had something more stimulating as most of them do behind prying eyes!

**Bangladesh statehood seems to be of some concern to you. Why is that?**

Bangladesh statehood is of no concern to me or India since India, itself, has been a party to its emergence and thereafter quit having achieved the aim, thanks to Bhutto's greed for power. Currently, we have an excellent relationship. What is of concern is that Bangladesh is going the Pakistani way. Fundamentalism is being spawned with Saudi money and ISI's patronage. It is obviously a matter of concern.

**Earlier this year, you made the statement that no one can save Pakistan except Pakistan itself. What do you think Pakistan will look like in ten years, considering the coalition withdrawal from Afghanistan, the aims of the Taliban, fractures within Pakistan right now, and the aims of China?**

I admire your researching ability that you have fished this out of the maze of posts on the forum. I had forgotten that I did say that Pakistanis alone can save Pakistan.

Pakistan is an enigma. It is a maze of unresolved, self-created contradictions. While it wants to be a modern democratic and thriving country, it also wants to be an Islamic country in its true sense. I presume that is a rather difficult situation to resolve to full satisfaction either way!

Pakistan inherited the instruments of a democracy on Partition and should have been a success story. However, while Jinnah claimed in his 11 Aug 1947 address to the Constituent Assembly that Pakistan would be a secular country, it almost simultaneously embraced Islam as supreme, and which anyway, was its *raison d'être*! Therefore, the Qaid (Jinnah) contradicted himself, where he spoke of secular aspirations and yet he had fought for the creation of Pakistan to free the Indian Muslim from the domination of the Indian Hindu.

That apart, sub-nationalities also came into play. The land (Pakistan) belonged to the West Pakistanis who were the "sons of the soil" and yet, unlike the West Pakistanis who were the feudal lords, *jagirdars* (large land holders who had been given this as rewards for loyal service to the Raj, mostly military men), military men (this was the recruiting zone for Muslims of the British Indian Army) and a large mass of illiterate and bonded peasants, the *Mohajirs* (refugees from India) were the educated elite, well versed in government administration, judiciary, commerce and so on. It was but natural that the instruments of governance to include judiciary and commerce were taken over by the *Mohajir* and they became the natural "heirs" to Pakistan. Obviously, it did not endear the *Mohajir* to the "sons of the soil"! However, in the euphoria of having got their "Land of the Pure", it did not have public manifestation, even though it simmered below the surface.

The *Mohajir* were equally uncomfortable, they had no roots to the land, being basically usurpers! They had to create an identity for themselves that would make them acceptable. They used Islam (which no Muslim could dare contest) as the foundation and imposed their language, Urdu, as the national language.

Thus, they became the *de facto* ruling class of the newly created Pakistan, the sons of the soil coming a poor second!

Kashmir came as manna to the sons of the soil who were the backbone of the Pakistan Army. It helped the Army to showcase themselves as the sword arm and champion of Islam, and muscled back into reckoning. Ever since, they have ensured that the Army is made the paramount shareholder in Pakistani politics and governance.

The extent the Army has taken over the reins of governance has been illustrated in Musharraf's book *In the Line of Fire*. ISI, in addition, has become a major player ever since Zia's foray into Afghanistan and which is so evident till date.

Democracy has lost its sheen in Pakistan due to the rampant corruption signaturing every single Pakistani government, and this has given *ipso facto* the military the right to remove governments and install themselves without any protest from the citizenry. This is the rationale for the see-saw in government formation that is seen in Pakistani governance between the elected government and the military.

To add to the murky milieu of the Pakistani governance, thanks to Zia, who promoted Islam as the panacea of all ills, as also to give legitimacy to his illegitimate government, the fundamentalist terrorists have found a chord and acceptability with the Pakistani populace in the misconceived belief that Islam shall reign supreme. One cannot fault them, especially the unlettered ones, since it is instilled in their psychology that Islam is *uber alles* being the true religion, and a Muslim is the purest form of human existence in all aspects.

Therefore, until Pakistan reconciles these contradictions that they have created themselves and adopt a rational mindset, keeping in conformity with the demands of the modern world, none others can help them out.

## About the Author



### Jon Custis

Jon Custis is an active duty Marine Corps infantry officer and moderator with the Small Wars Council.

Available online at : <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/interview-with-ray>

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