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

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weapon useless if precise operating procedures are not followed. Regarding concern over terrorists building their own bombs, it is very hard to steal fissile material, and the work of constructing a bomb is “difficult, dangerous, and extremely exacting.” A great deal of complex experimentation, experimentation beyond the capabilities of substate groups, would be required.

Mueller points to a raft of alarming but mistaken predictions about the likelihood of a terrorist group using a nuclear weapon. For example, John Negroponte, as UN ambassador (2001–2004), suggested that there was a “high probability” that al-Qa’ida would attempt to use a nuclear weapon on the United States within two years—an ominous warning offered in 2003.

Those concerned by the threat of nuclear terrorism against the United States are likely to find *Atomic Obsession* a well argued, engagingly written, thought-provoking, and ultimately reassuring work.

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West, Bing. *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan*. New York: Random House, 2011. 336pp. \$28

“We have fought the wrong war with the wrong strategy”—so ends Bing West’s *The Wrong War*. West, a former assistant secretary of defense and Marine officer with combat experience in Vietnam, is an award-winning author whose books have appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list and the Commandant of the Marine Corps’s reading list. His latest work is an engrossing

compilation of tactical vignettes, cataloging changes to the strategic and operational-level approaches of two administrations and six theater-level commanders, over the ten-year history of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. West’s concluding view on the key to exiting Afghanistan, though perhaps an oversimplification of the challenge, is nonetheless a valid consideration for a potentially long-term military commitment in Afghanistan.

The strength of West’s work is in his vivid descriptions of operations undertaken by coalition and special operations forces (SOF) in Kunar and Helmand Provinces. The author’s credibility and ability to connect with war fighters provide him intimate access to small-unit leaders, resulting in narratives of tactical-level successes that ultimately evolved into strategic-level failures. West also describes the complexities of the regional, tribal, and national-level political influences in Afghanistan, the latter best illustrated by operations in Nuristan Province forced upon the coalition by President Hamid Karzai. There are also numerous examples of what West describes as the “culture of entitlement,” whereby Afghan leaders gain the benefits of coalition-provided security and development projects while seemingly providing—at best—only neutrality in return. West’s portrayals of the war fighters’ courage and heartbreak are well supported by a number of revealing photographs. His method of numbering the photos for specific reference in the text is particularly effective. Aside from some minor editorial errors, this work is remarkably detailed yet still easy to follow, despite the change over time in local leadership, unit rotation, and the periodic

renaming of forward operating bases and combat outposts.

The proposed way out of Afghanistan is offered in rather abrupt fashion in the final chapter of the book. West's examples and repeated references to Vietnam-era Combined Action Platoons and his comparisons of them to effective SOF-led forces in Helmand are indeed well founded. However, as painstakingly as he describes the regionally compartmentalized long-term failure of small units in one region, caution is warranted in prescribing one district's successful approach as a theater-wide solution. Furthermore, while West identifies the challenges, his solution does not address the broader problems of the narcotics trade, district-level corruption, and the synchronization of incentives-based development programs—all of which must be addressed while simultaneously balancing an "exit" strategy with mid to long-term advisory force structures. Also noticeably absent is the inclusion of a chapter on the P2K (Paktia/Paktika/Khowst) region and the Haqqani network insurgent group.

*The Wrong War* will undoubtedly be a popular read among junior leaders and war fighters, as well as the general readership, and it should be considered for battalion-level reading lists and pre-deployment cultural-awareness training. Nevertheless, and while the lessons of Kunar and Helmand are certainly relevant and West's advisory-team structure is well considered, policy makers and strategists will find the book lacking sufficient depth in addressing the broader-based challenges for a long-term, comprehensive solution.

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Evans, Thomas W. *The Education of Ronald Reagan: The General Electric Years and the Untold Story of His Conversion to Conservatism*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2006. 302pp. \$20

Thomas Evans is the first author to examine comprehensively Ronald Reagan's eight years (1954–62) as host of the television show *General Electric Theater* and then as a traveling spokesman for General Electric. Evans has deepened our understanding of how a devoted "New Dealer" became not only a champion of Barry Goldwater but then displaced him as the patron saint of American conservatism. Evans's fine book examines a critical period in Reagan's life during which his skills as a public figure blossomed. Reagan was one of our most ideological presidents, yet at the same time he considered himself a master of the art of negotiation and frequently compromised with political opponents in Sacramento and Washington. As Reagan developed his negotiating skills as president of the Screen Actors Guild (1947–52), he saw the other side of midcentury American labor strife, from the perspective of management, during his time with GE. General Electric was a formidable and respected union adversary in terms of countering big labor's demands; the company poured considerable resources into "educating" its workers to reject union radicalism. GE's management was also ahead of its time in communicating directly with its labor force, over the heads of the union leadership—a tactic Reagan employed to great effect in the White House when Congress stood in his way.

At the same time, Reagan also learned to "work a room"—meeting GE