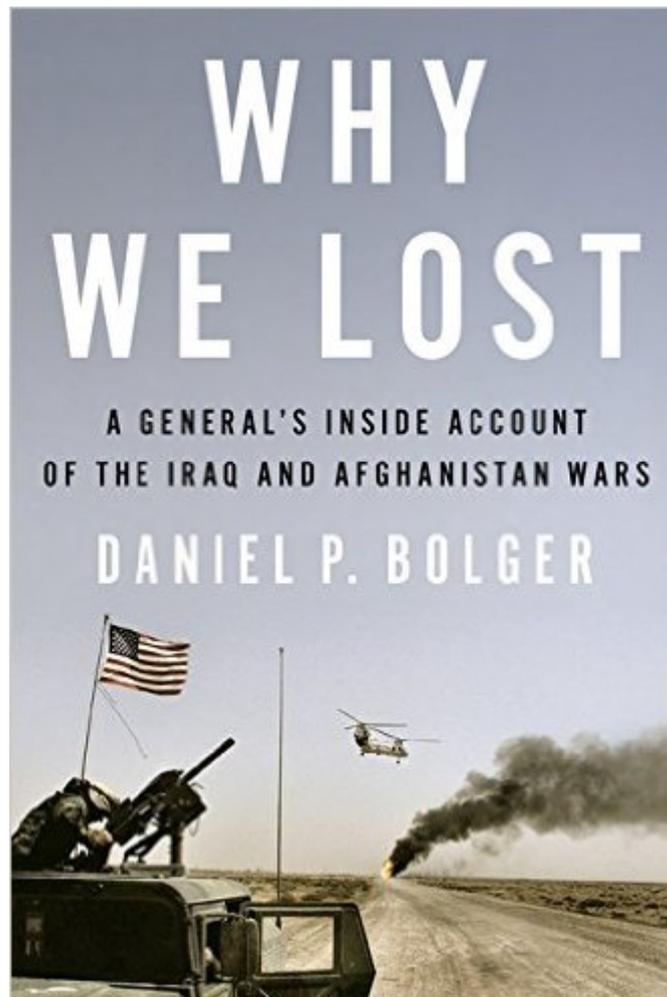


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Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account Of The Iraq And Afghanistan Wars



Synopsis

A high-ranking general's gripping insider account of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how it all went wrong. Over a thirty-five-year career, Daniel Bolger rose through the army infantry to become a three-star general, commanding in both theaters of the U.S. campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. He participated in meetings with top-level military and civilian players, where strategy was made and managed. At the same time, he regularly carried a rifle alongside rank-and-file soldiers in combat actions, unusual for a general. Now, as a witness to all levels of military command, Bolger offers a unique assessment of these wars, from 9/11 to the final withdrawal from the region. Writing with hard-won experience and unflinching honesty, Bolger makes the firm case that in Iraq and Afghanistan, we lost "but we didn't have to. Intelligence was garbled. Key decision makers were blinded by spreadsheets or theories. And, at the root of our failure, we never really understood our enemy. Why We Lost is a timely, forceful, and compulsively readable account of these wars from a fresh and authoritative perspective.

Book Information

Hardcover: 544 pages

Publisher: Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; First Edition edition (November 11, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0544370481

ISBN-13: 978-0544370487

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.7 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars See all reviews (162 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #140,088 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #169 in Books > History > Military > Afghan War #174 in Books > History > Military > Iraq War #250 in Books > History > Military > Strategy

Customer Reviews

"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." This is the first sentence of this book, in the "Author's Notes," written by retired Lieutenant General Daniel P Bolger, who leaves out the usual "LTG, (Ret)" off his name. Bolger served 35 years in the US Army. He earned his MA and PhD, both in Russian History, from the

University of Chicago and taught history at West Point. This man knows his history. He also knows how to write an engaging history piece that keeps the reader riveted. It sure kept me up late at night. Bolger was active duty for the entire duration of the Iraqi War, retiring in 2013. His references include his own meetings he attended, military journals, briefings. As a LG, many of the people he writes about were in his command. He tells the story the way it unfolds, starting with Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Things could have been so different then had the US Army gone into Baghdad and taken Saddam Hussein. Instead, we backed off, allowing the enemy and its allies to regroup and resupply for the bigger war ten years later. Veterans who served in either Iraq or Afghanistan from 2001 to 2013 may recall many of the names in this book. Bolger holds nothing back. This is a history of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and war is never nice. Some of the battles come back to life with details not released to the media at the time. Others end with an analysis never before mentioned by a general. Bolger starts with the bombing of the USS Cole in the port of Aden on October 12, 2000.

This is a candid, heartfelt and perceptive look at the US-led campaigns, 2001-2014, in Afghanistan and Iraq. It's not a spoiler to say that Gen. Bolger spells out how the two campaigns came to muddled ends. While his book doesn't have a fall-of-Saigon ending - and this book published before the full emergence of the Islamic state - it does mark the effective US departure from both wars, at least this time. The blame for this debacle, he says, is in the civilian leadership and generals, and he counts himself among them. His narrative is a full-on, but terse, military history of both conflicts, post-9/11, and he includes background with the Soviet and British empires' experience there. His post-9/11 story is almost episodic: a series of tactical incidents that demonstrate, time and again, that US and coalition forces fought well, fought smart, adapted, in a never-ending cycle of victory, withdrawal to base, return. The men and women fought superbly, he asserts, and their efforts weren't the reason for the ultimate end. He even demonstrates that coalition forces, including Iraqi army and Sunni militias, could be part of the successes, and tells us much about the Awakening ("sahwa") offensive by the latter in Iraq. He also tells of the personalities involved, the minor US and local tactical leaders, and of the generals - Abizaid, Casey, Odierno, among others, not to mention the charismatic and puzzling David Petraeus ("Malik Daoud," King David), a T.E. Lawrence figure in Gen. Bolger's telling, complete with his own book, Army Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency. It's a small but telling aside that Gen. Bolger mentions other Army doctrinal writing - the 1976, 1982 and 1993 editions of FM 100-5, Operations - which suggests both the Army's evolving tactics and also Gen.

Daniel Bolger has provided an outstanding narrative history of both Iraq and Afghanistan, and he's done solid research in integrating material from dozens of sources. He provides both compelling combat narratives, and gives a step back to the larger political and military strategic questions as well. He has on-the-ground insight across the theater, and steps in now and then to provide additional context, although it's mostly an objective historical account. However, it is not as provocative as the title led me to believe. While I didn't expect full-on regret and recrimination, I did expect deeper reflection than I found here. My instincts say that he wrote the history first, and the publisher knew that a more in-your-face title would do better in the marketplace. His opening, where he compares himself to an alcoholic admitting he has a problem is not followed up on. Dramatic prologue, sure, but the book quickly settles into a more objective - and always US-centric - narrative. He does provide an epilogue of more serious soul-searching, but it has a bit of a tacked-on feel. During the narrative itself he never steps back to explain why a decision was wrong, and why it led to such disastrous outcomes. Even Paul Bremer's catastrophic decision to fire the Iraqi Army is hardly critiqued at all (and I'm not saying Bremer was even wrong - simply that the outcome was a fiasco). I have read many narratives of small-unit combat - those aren't new to me. I wanted something more honest and far-reaching - an explanation of WHY certain small events led to larger failures. Very occasionally, and very subtly, his disappointment with events comes across.

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