

**Q&A with Owen West, author of:
THE SNAKE EATERS
*An Unlikely Band of Brothers and the Battle for the Soul of Iraq***

You have a busy day job and a young family. What inspired you to write this book?

Inspiration is tricky for a writer to pinpoint. Writing is in my blood. My dad, Bing, wrote the classic account of advisors in Vietnam, *The Village*, which I first read for a 4th Grade book report in 1979. I received a low grade because I went on and on about how these Marine advisors could have won the war if there were more like them. Neither my teacher nor the country was ready for a positive look at Vietnam. Growing up I was taught that one way to make a lasting contribution as a citizen was to write. And to write, you had to experience. Service in the Marines was never mentioned, probably because to be a Marine you have to have it in you—it can't be implanted. I did as a youngster. So it was ironic that forty years after my dad wrote about an advisor team in Vietnam I was assigned the same alien mission as a casualty replacement in Iraq.

I say “alien” because of the way advisors are treated by the Pentagon. But I became convinced that an advisor model should be widely adopted in place of our conventional strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq, and wrote a few op-eds to that effect in 2007, but as you mentioned, the reality of job and family soon took their proper place. Then in 2008, after a grueling yearlong duel with the State Department, my team’s Iraqi interpreter, Alex, arrived at our New York apartment on a special immigrant visa. Like every Iraqi he was obsessed with politics. Watching the Presidential candidates spar over warfighting drove him crazy. He demanded I write a book so that Americans would “know what it’s really like.”

It’s taken four years to research and write *The Snake Eaters*. It almost killed me. I interviewed the principals at all hours and typed deep into the night and on my train commute to minimize the family impact, but of course my wife sacrificed most (which is the untold secret of combat deployments!). It was worth it. The incredible contribution of these advisors is now memorialized, and with a collective voice we assert that the advisor model *works*. All my proceeds are going to the families of fallen Marines, soldiers and Iraqi soldiers known as “the Snake Eaters.”

There have been many narratives about the Iraq War. How is *The Snake Eaters* different?

Iraq and Afghanistan books have been dominated by memoirs and historical narratives of conventional units. But after a decade of fighting, we’ve seen that the conventional U.S. military is not built to fight counterinsurgencies, where insurgents pose as civilians in complicit populations. The lesson is clear: America must rely on indigenous troops, who speak the language and share the culture, to fight their own insurrections. The combat advisors who mentor these units have become the centerpiece of American military tactics. Together with their local protégés they brought an orderly end to our erratic performance in Iraq. Employing the same endgame, President Obama has ordered U.S. troops in Afghanistan to transition from leading operations to mentoring local soldiers. No matter how we enter these small wars among the people, all roads out lead through advisors and their charges.

The problem is, the role of the military advisor remains a mystery to the public and misunderstood by politicians. Reflecting a common misperception, President Obama has several times declared that advisors are not combat troops. But the exact opposite is true. Few troops take as much risk as advisors, whose unwritten orders are to set the example in battle.

This gap in understanding is not limited to civilians. Our generals are uncomfortable prescribing advisors as a solution to these 21st century wars. Advising a foreign military requires nontraditional soldiering; advisors need a wonk’s cultural awareness, the rudimentary language capability of a border cop, a survivalist’s skills, and the interpersonal savvy of a politician. Generals are resistant to

dismantle their hierarchical units to live among foreign, sometimes hostile soldiers. Bureaucratic incentives trump battlefield efficacy.

Why do you think this book is important now?

The consequences of this leadership gap are a misinformed citizenry and a malformed strategy. Our instinctive way of responding to insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan has been to send hundreds of thousands of troops at a cost of a hundred billion dollars a year, mistakes reminiscent of Vietnam that, left unchallenged, will be repeated.

There is a better way. A good twenty-man advisor team can leverage the services of a thousand foreign troops at a sliver of the cost of deploying a similarly sized U.S. unit. In military jargon, advisors are “combat multipliers.” What’s needed is an employment model designed by the military, endorsed by the President, and communicated to a befuddled citizenry.

The Snake Eaters is a case study for a new way of war: the advisor model. The first major book about advisors since Vietnam, it is a stand-alone story about combat with alien allies in one poisonous city. But it is representative of hundreds of small teams who are currently fighting in a half dozen countries, including Afghanistan, the Philippines and Yemen.

THE SNAKE EATERS is a success story—who are the major heroes in the book?

Yes the Snake Eaters (Iraqi Battalion 3/3-1) and their advisors were indeed a rare success story on a battlefield devoid of traditional victors. Life on this tiny Iraqi outpost was anything but traditional. I think the term “hero” is overused, but readers will be surprised that advising relies on interpersonal skills, making for a rich confluence of lifelong bonding and personality clashes among the Americans and Iraqis. The advisors referred to their isolated assignment as “*Survivor* on steroids.” Each Iraqi needed different motivation. The toughest man was Major Mohammed, who despised the advisor relationship, which reminded him of an arranged marriage. For this reason—and his boldness in a fight—the Americans loved him most. And no one risks more on these battlefields than our interpreters, like Alex, who are hated by their own people and even their soldiers. When a local militia discovered a Marine Corps flag in Alex’s room, they tortured his brother to death.

Who were these advisors?

Advising is traditionally a special forces mission that takes years of training. In Iraq and Afghanistan we are rebuilding entire armies, so the mission was handed over to inexperienced reservists. The men assigned to the Snake Eaters were the ultimate underdogs. Among them were a DEA Agent, a postal worker, a cop, a flooring manager, and a Rock ‘n Roll guitarist. None had combat experience. Their minimal training was irrelevant. They were thrust into the dragon’s mouth expecting to train Iraqis on a secure base with a Burger King. Instead, they quickly learned that to be a good advisor, you had to set the example in combat. Side-by-side with the Iraqi soldiers they plunged into battle.

What are the challenges when civilians and fighters are so indistinguishable?

The salient goal in counterinsurgency is to strip the guerilla of his anonymity. In Iraq and Afghanistan our enemies, who never wore uniforms, blended into the populations. The surprising thing about Khalidiya was that the Iraqi soldiers, mostly Shia conscripts, were as unwelcome to the local Sunnis as their American advisors. This makes for frustrating warfighting. The goal is to develop a source network of local informants, then cleave the insurgents from the population, like carving out skin cancer. The problem is that many innocents are swept up or falsely accused, especially after bombings

and shootings, turning the population against you. It's morally bruising warfare. In Khalidiya, few locals told the truth until the Snake Eaters were seen as dominant.

What's going on in Khalidiya now? What are their thoughts about the US?

Incredibly, Khalidiya has returned to its role as a sleepy Euphrates waypoint for farmers trucking crops to Baghdad. I don't know how they regard Americans. But when I was leaving Iraq, Major Mohammed warned me that when we Americans left, all Iraqis would "talk bad about you." That's the reality of large-scale intervention. There's a better way: a smaller advisor footprint.

Was there a moment when the team lost hope? When was hope restored, and how can their experience help us with future conflicts?

Anyone who's been to combat understands that war has its ups and downs. Losing men when little discernible progress is being made is the toughest. The team lost Doc Blakley, the most beloved advisor, to a sniper in June of 2006. His death threatened to break both the advisors and the Iraqi battalion. There was no progress in Khalidiya that they could see. Yet their leaders kept up a high combat patrolling tempo, an internal and external signal that the team was stalwart. When I arrived in Khalidiya in the fall of 2006, local attacks were at all-time highs. Five months later our war was over. The swift transformation—later known as the "Anbar Awakening"—was astonishing. The American press was quick with causation, mostly centered on the Surge Strategy implemented by General Petraeus. That was a natural narrative. Americans wanted American heroes. But the battle for Khalidiya was never about Americans. The truth is, we'll never understand precisely why a population turns, but the key ingredient to the recipe was population control by local forces. When the sheiks believed Iraqi soldiers were the dominant force in Khalidiya, they switched sides.

The military's counterinsurgency handbook, 3-24, has received unprecedented media attention for a military manual – including a rollout on *The Jon Stewart Show*. But it needs to be rewritten to reflect the reality of street fighting insurgents embedded in complicit populations. Only local soldiers can turn them out. The advisor's first job is to imbue an ethos of military dominance in his local protégés, not rebuild local villages.