The Middle East Institute

Bing West: The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq
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The Middle East Institute hosted Atlantic Monthly war correspondent and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Bing West to discuss his new book, The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq.

Mr. West discussed his views on the key successes and failures of the U.S. engagement in Iraq. He began by describing the nadir of the conflict in mid-2004, when the U.S. military had no strategy for victory. He then discussed the genesis and impact of both the 2006 Sunni Awakening and the 2007 U.S. military troop surge. He attributes the recent political and security improvements first and foremost to the change in military strategy and the behavior of the U.S. troops.

In discussing the Anbar Awakening, West criticized the “Great Leader” view of history, whereby changes in public sentiment, particularly during war, are driven by decisions from the very top. He said in late 2006 the Sunni attitude in Anbar began to change first at the grassroots level. Responding to public sentiment, the mid-level tribal leadership began rallying their fellow tribal sheikhs to join the U.S. effort to drive out al-Qaeda. Along with the Sunni sheikhs turning on al-Qaeda, Mr. West said the turning point of the war was the decision by the Marines to send units back to the same cities, allowing them to build relationships with local leaders.

West then said that General David Petraeus, upon taking command in 2007, astutely capitalized on the change taking place among the Sunnis, when he began paying Sunnis in Baghdad to turn against al-Qaida and the insurgency. By 2008 there were 100,000 Sunnis, most former insurgents, backing the U.S. against al-Qaida. Petraeus implemented his motto, “Don’t commute to work”, by getting soldiers out into Baghdad neighborhoods. West also credits National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, who, along with Gens. Petraeus and Odierno, advocated the 2007 troop surge. The Sunni war ultimately turned around because tribes changed sides at the local level with support from U.S. troops.

West went on to lament the discrepancy between the recent successes in Iraq and lagging U.S. public opinion polls. He blames President Bush for failing to rally the public behind the war, and for not changing strategy earlier when it was clearly failing. West also discussed actions of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Basra, and his attempts to cull threatening Sunni leadership from the Awakening councils. He sees Maliki as now feeling overconfident and disdainful toward the Bush Administration, in part because of President Bush’s consistent bolstering of Maliki in public. Mr. West said that the U.S. must find a way to contain Maliki if he becomes too sectarian.

West concluded by saying that the upcoming provincial elections will be key for bringing Awakening members into the National Assembly, hopefully moving disagreements out of the streets and into the political arena for good.