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Afghan war unwinnable quagmire, ex-CIA man says

Dylan Welch

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THE war in Afghanistan is an unwinnable quagmire and poor US intelligence is leading to the deaths of Australian soldiers, a visiting former CIA officer says.

Robert Baer, a decorated CIA field officer of two decades experience who had spent years in the Middle East, said any chances the US and its allies had of defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan had already been squandered. The Coalition was fighting an unwinnable war, he said, and this was the case because victory required reliable intelligence.

"[US intelligence agencies] have the same problem they had before 9/11. It is a system that doesn't work."

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That system sees CIA operatives and allied intelligence officers unable to gather reliable information because security concerns do not allow them to travel widely. And most do not speak the local language. "They're all stuck behind the wire; they don't get out ... it's like the crusades where you're stuck on your castle imagining what the natives are doing," he said.

Describing Washington DC as a "blank spot on the map", he said that despite the massive growth of the intelligence agencies post September 11, 2001, there remained systemic failings.

"American intelligence after 9/11 has been unable to co-ordinate ... the FBI will not share with the CIA. CIA has operational databases which they won't share with even others inside the CIA."

All of this led to a dysfunctional intelligence community unable to provide reliable, contemporary intelligence that could allow the Coalition to win in Afghanistan.

"Twenty-two American soldiers have been killed since Friday, and Australia has lost 21 men ... Afghanistan is a quagmire and it can only be fought with an effective counter-insurgency. It cannot be fought with Abrams tanks and F16s," he said.

The author of four books and a film consultant, he has previously described how the CIA's role as a provider of human intelligence - on-the-ground intelligence gathering by field officers - has been steadily degraded under poor management.

Earlier this week Mr Baer said the Australian government should confront Washington with the poor intelligence on Afghanistan that was recently released by WikiLeaks.

"The Australians should take the WikiLeaks information to the US [administration] and say: please tell us you have better information than this," Mr Baer said.

Mr Baer is in Australia to speak at the Australian Security Industry Association Limited conference in Sydney.