

The Academy of Political Science

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POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY

Volume 121 · Number 3 · Fall 2006

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Political Science Quarterly

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Book Reviews

Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq by Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor. New York, Pantheon Books, 2006. 640 pp. \$27.95.

What the U.S. military can get young men and women to do puts all of us who are professors to shame. If we could induce such skill, dedication, and discipline in our students, our colleges and country would be in great shape. The heart of *Cobra II* is a blow-by-blow military history of the invasion of Iraq, concentrating on the American ground war (the air campaign and the role of the British are only touched on). In these 300 pages, we get powerful detail, often at the level of small units. When a tank gets destroyed, it is not a statistic but is filled with individuals; the soldiers who struggle and die are characterized and named. I have never been in combat, but Michael R. Gordon, a *New York Times* military correspondent who covered the war, and Bernard E. Trainor, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant general and former *Times* correspondent, make me feel as though I have. It is a thoroughly gripping account.

The authors make clear that the training and technological wizardry of the U.S. forces, impressive as these were, could not completely dissipate the fog of war. Intelligence was poor, and the Iraqi use of the Fedayeen came as a shock. Although the Iraqi forces had little mobility, reconnaissance ability, or effective communication, they sometimes had a good idea of where the Americans would be. American units were frequently surprised at both where the Iraqis were and where they were not. Furthermore, because the Iraqi military was very weak, crippled by Saddam Hussein's fear of a military coup, it could have been defeated by an even less-skilled force than it confronted.

Cobra II has received most attention not for this discussion, however, but for the opening and closing sections that describe the planning for the war and, more briefly, the botched reconstruction efforts. Despite the availability of sufficient time for planning, the plans for the war were not developed coherently but were based instead on an intellectually bizarre but politically understandable combination of best-case and worst-case analysis. The outlines of the story are well known, but Gordon and Trainor provide texture and detail. With the support of President George W. Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was committed to his program of "transformation"—that is, taking advantage of modern technologies to allow small and flexible forces to do the job that had

previously required massive numbers of troops. In his eyes, Afghanistan had shown that this concept would work, and Iraq would be an even more impressive demonstration. He and the rest of the administration were also committed to avoiding long-term peacekeeping and nation-building operations. These two preconceptions meant that neither the invasion nor the occupation of Iraq was thought to require anything like the 380,000 troops projected in earlier war plans. Tommy Franks, the general in charge, resisted for a while but eventually conformed. He claimed to have been persuaded, but the Secretary of the Army probably had it right when he said: “Rumsfeld just ground Franks down” (p. 461).

Many military officers felt that the United States was cutting things too close, a view that seemed substantiated when optimistic predictions about mass defections from the Iraqi army and massive support from civilians failed to materialize, and when supply lines were attacked by Fedayeen. But, partly at Franks’s urging, the offensive continued after a slight pause and liberated Baghdad with amazing speed, although the paucity of troops meant that the United States would not have been able to secure weapons of mass destruction sites had they been found.

The birds came home to roost in the wake of the major combat. Gordon and Trainor document how the top levels of the U.S. government failed to do serious planning for the post-war period and brushed aside calls for a larger security presence and the rapid training of the Iraqi police. Furthermore, in what remains an inexplicable intelligence failure, no one realized how fragile and run-down the infrastructure of Iraq was, and the Pentagon, which was allowed to take charge to the exclusion of the State Department, had neither an understanding of Iraqi politics nor plans for how the political reconstruction would proceed.

This account has weaknesses, of course. People who gave Gordon and Trainor extensive interviews come off very well; those who did not talk are treated more harshly. As in most instant histories, few documents are available and many scores are being settled. We also get only glimpses of what is happening at the highest political levels, and diplomatic considerations are shoved to the margins.

The book is filled with illuminating details and remarks. In the former category are the numerous instances of actions taken to provide good television coverage (pp. 397, 407, 417, 421, 428, 458). Of the latter, perhaps the best was made by a senior member of the initial political team sent to Baghdad: “It was very obvious to me that we could not run a country we did not understand” (p. 470). To take one crucial example that was new to me, only after having decided to abolish the Iraqi Army did the Americans learn that their assumption that most of its top ranks had been members of the Baath Party was incorrect (p. 485). (The authors attribute the decision to L. Paul Bremer, not to Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, as most other accounts have.)

The authors believe that better preparation would have produced a much better chance of reconstructing Iraq. For them, the brief period following the

military victory was a lost opportunity. They may be right, but note the story told by an American soldier, who, along with several of his colleagues had been captured during the fighting: “The Iraqis had a hard time understanding something. Shoshanna is Panamanian. Edgar is Hispanic. Joe is Philippine, and Patrick is from Kansas. ... One Iraqi said to me, ‘You no fighting each other? Why?’” (p. 441). Perhaps even good planning would not have led to a viable polity.

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The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century by Robert Lieber. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005. 272 pp. \$28.00.

The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World’s Government in the Twenty-first Century by Michael Mandelbaum. New York, Public Affairs, 2005. 283 pp. \$26.00.

Criticizing U.S. foreign policy is a popular parlor sport, rivaling the World Cup in its global appeal. Iraq embodies U.S. failures: the absence of weapons of mass destruction, a resistant insurgency, and a state at risk of collapse. Largely because of the U.S. presence in Iraq, most of the world thinks the United States is the biggest threat to world peace (Pew Research Centre, 2006). However, as important as it is for America to acknowledge the shortcomings of its foreign policy, it is equally important that analyses be historically grounded and sophisticated, and that these consider alternatives to America’s positions and policies.

Two recent books by leading foreign policy analysts take the more difficult and, indeed, more unpopular route. These books, by Michael Mandelbaum and Robert Lieber, have a common intent: to remind Americans and the world that the exercise of U.S. power has never been altruistic or problem-free. By focusing on cases in which the United States has used its power appropriately to stabilize the world and to help establish global institutions, the books consider what most detractors of U.S. policy forget: where would the world be without the United States to lead?

The Case for Goliath is clearly argued and well supported, accessible to both laymen and undergraduates. Mandelbaum details what the United States has accomplished since the end of World War II, but he is clearly not just a cheerleader for the United States, and he is realistic about what has motivated U.S. behavior. From beginning to end, Mandelbaum’s thesis is that it is more appropriate to think of the United States as a world government rather than an empire. While empires are about inequality, coercion, and control by foreigners, Mandelbaum maintains that the United States does not directly or indirectly control other states, and when it has had the opportunity to dictate