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Iraq in Books: Part I

By Michael Rubin

The following article is the first of two installments by Michael Rubin in AEI's On the Issues *series. The two articles originally appeared as a review essay in the Spring 2007 edition of* Middle Eastern Quarterly.

The Iraq war has pumped adrenaline into the publishing industry. Whereas five years ago few bookstores included any selections on Iraq, today dozens of Iraq books line the shelves. There have been three waves of Iraq-related publishing: first came the embed accounts that described the military campaign, second were examinations of prewar planning, and third were studies of the occupation. Quantity does not equal quality, though, nor does popularity correlate to accuracy. Many of the most popular books have been deeply flawed. Many authors use their Iraq narrative to promote other agendas, be they related to U.S. domestic politics, United Nations empowerment, or independence for Kurdistan. Other authors have substituted theory for fact or tried to propel their experience into the center of the Iraq policy debate. While time has already relegated much Iraq-related writing to the secondhand shelf or dustbin, several authors have produced works that will make lasting contributions, be they to future generations of war and post-conflict reconstruction planners, or scholars looking more deeply into the fabric of Iraq.

More than 500 journalists were embedded with U.S. military units as they rolled into Iraq on March 19, 2003. Though quality is uneven, their accounts while embedded inject color into the military campaign. War is a composite of tens of thousands of soldiers' experiences; any particular story is important, but its reflection of the overall operation is limited. In such accounts, quality is proportional to the author's recognition of the genre's constraints.

For ambitious authors, to embed is to play the lottery. Prior to combat operations, journalists do not know whether their units will be in the center of action. When war erupted, top journalists embedded with the Fourth Infantry Division found themselves sitting idle in the Eastern Mediterranean, unable to redeploy after the Turkish government's decision to deny the coalition access to Turkish territory.

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Among the authors who got lucky were British filmmaker Tim Pritchard, *Los Angeles Times* correspondent David Zucchino, former assistant secretary of defense Bing West, and Maj. Gen. Ray L. Smith. In *Ambush Alley*, Pritchard—whose documentaries have aired on BBC, PBS, and the Discovery Channel—describes the battle for Nasiriyah, perhaps the hardest fought of the war. While he humanizes the U.S. soldiers, he prioritizes drama above accuracy. How he arrives at what soldiers think is curious, as his omniscience does not appear to result from extensive interviewing. And while he captures the confusion of battle, *Ambush Alley* does not place it in perspective. His post-publication attempt to paint the fight for Nasiriyah as the clarifying moment when it became clear that the Iraq war would be folly is not convincing.[1] Far better is military historian Richard S. Lowry's detailed and less pretentious—even if somewhat disjointed—reconstruction of the

same battle in *Marines in the Garden of Eden*, and its succinct coverage in *Cobra II*.[2]

Zucchino, a *Los Angeles Times* national correspondent, chronicles the charge into Baghdad of the Second Brigade Combat Team, Third Infantry Division (mechanized) in *Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad*. Their bold move took both Iraqi forces and outside observers by surprise. Because Zucchino amplifies a single operation into a book, he pads his narrative with the personalities of its participants. Unlike Pritchard, however, he does not substitute them with imagined clichés. Still, the heroism involved in just three battalions—less than a thousand men—seizing the heart of a city of 5 million is significant, and the tale worth telling.

Former Reagan-era assistant secretary of defense and Marine infantryman Bing West and retired Marine Maj. Gen. Ray L. Smith, who accompanied the First Marine Division on its drive to Baghdad, give broader perspective of the thunder runs and other aspects of the attack on Baghdad in *The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division*.

The quality of embedded accounts rests not only in narrative flow, but also in insight. Here, Rick Atkinson's *In the Company of Soldiers* is the best chronicle. A former staff writer and editor at the *Washington Post* and the author of several books about military history, Atkinson chronicles the 101st Airborne from its preparations in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to its deployment to Kuwait and its subsequent march through the major cities of southern Iraq to Baghdad. Maj. Gen. David Petraeus, perhaps the most media-accessible officer in the U.S. Army since Gen. Douglas MacArthur, let Atkinson shadow him from the preparatory phases through combat operations. This allows Atkinson to balance his own observations with Petraeus's explanations.

The result is excellent. Atkinson observes, in turn, commander, soldiers, and fellow embedded journalists. He describes the scramble caused by last minute amendments to Cobra II, the military's battle plan for the Iraq invasion. While many authors inject cynicism borne

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from the omniscience of hindsight into their accounts, Atkinson recalls the concern that permeated journalists and soldiers about the likelihood they would face chemical weapons. Petraeus ranked the probability of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein possessing chemical weapons at 80–90 percent and the chance that he would order their use against U.S. troops at 50 percent.

Perhaps because he had access to a commander's concern, Atkinson's account is one of the few to address logistics. As equipment arrived in Kuwait, for example, he describes the scramble to find the missing command tent. While descriptions of battles win space on the front page of newspapers, Atkinson's descriptions remind readers of how difficult a task deployment can be.

As the 101st began to engage the enemy, Atkinson captures the character and chaos of the command. While other authors talk about the smell of gunpowder and the adrenaline of combat, Atkinson provides insight into how commanders and their staffs react in real time to battlefield news. He chronicles to the minute frantic reactions to sometimes erroneous reports of both enemy engagements and friendly fire incidents.

Most journalists ended their embedded arrangements with the fall of Baghdad. While their narratives of initial combat operations saturate bookshelves, less numerous are accounts describing subsequent operations. The best here is Bing West's *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle of Fallujah*, which will gain greater prominence in 2008 through a screen version with Harrison Ford as Gen. James Mattis.[3] West guides his audience through the various phases of the most important battle in post-Saddam Iraq. He describes the ambush, murder, and mutilation of four U.S. contractors; Washington's response; and the subsequent blockade and siege. He then describes the creation of the Fallujah Brigade in which U.S. forces empowered insurgents and Baathists to secure the city and, upon the experiment's failure, the decision to rout insurgents. West's book is important not only in providing an accurate chronicle, but also in addressing the broader issues of convoluted chains of commands, messy

civilian-military relations, and the bureaucratic interests that combined both to constrain the U.S. military and to undercut policy effectiveness. His concluding chapter—a broad assessment of the errors and successes—is both useful and succinct.

Former marine infantryman Mike Tucker provides another description of post-major combat fighting in *Among Warriors in Iraq*. Though this book pales in comparison to West's work, it remains useful for its illumination of time and place. Tucker was embedded with coalition forces serving not only in Fallujah, but also in Mosul. He is less able than West, though, to differentiate between pertinent fact and tangential detail. While he identifies weapons encountered better than many journalists, published accounts should be more than inventories of kit. Still, juxtaposition of embedded accounts authored by former military men like Tucker and West and those written by ordinary journalists show how basic journalists' understanding of military matters can be. The absence of a draft and the ban by elite colleges on both the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and on-campus military recruitment promises only to widen the knowledge gap apparent between journalists and the military.

Also useful to illustrate both combat and the lives of soldiers is Matthew Burden's *The Blog of War*. Burden, a former paratrooper and special operations officer, edits excerpts from more than fifty military blogs into chapters on such themes as "The Healers," "The Warriors," "The Fallen," and "Homecoming." He presents soldiers' own accounts of ambushes, battles, and manning checkpoints.

Separating Bad Embeds from Good

While accounts by embedded writers humanize battle (at least from the U.S. side), they often fall short when they try to analyze it. It is impossible for journalists embedded in units, no matter how astute they believe themselves, to grasp the big picture. In twenty-first-century warfare, most information and intelligence flows not to the unit commanders with which journalists interact, but to superior officers sitting in war rooms hundreds if not thousands of miles away. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) generals directed the invasion of Iraq not from frontline positions, but rather from the Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Nor do officers, let alone the enlisted men, have much access to broader policy or intelligence issues. Units may seize documents and enemy equipment, but these are exploited far away at specialized U.S. bases and facilities.

Not every embedded author recognizes the limits of the genre. It is with considerable conceit that journalists such as CNN correspondent Walter C. Rodgers infuse their embedded accounts with political commentary and Iraq policy analysis. In *Sleeping with Custer and the 7th Cavalry*, Rodgers promotes the conspiracy theory that President George W. Bush concocted the idea that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in order to please the Israel lobby and force the United States into war. That the Clinton administration also believed Saddam to have such weapons is ignored, as is the fact that Saddam threatened to use them in the weeks before the war.[4] Rodgers's venality permeates his narrative, which he cheapens with gossip about his competitors. Given its faults and content, President Jimmy Carter's back-cover endorsement of *Sleeping with Custer* may raise eyebrows.

While the quality of embedded accounts may vary, the Iraq war has brought the very institution of embedding under the microscope. Can embedded journalists maintain neutrality? To what extent do operational security needs compromise reporting? Do the personal relationships that writers strike with soldiers lead to self-censorship? And does increased access lead to greater understanding of the military and accuracy of description? Here, liberal blogger Bill Katovsky and freelance writer Timothy Carlson's *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq* is useful. Katovsky and Carlson interview sixty embedded reporters and officials to explore some of these questions. The subjects of their interviews are diverse but cover the spectrum of broadcast and print journalists, political and mainstream outlets, and policymakers and practitioners. They allow Bryan Whitman, deputy assistant secretary of defense, for example, to address the formulation of the embed policy and the internal policy debates surrounding it; British and U.S. public affairs officers to describe its execution from a military point of view; and both print and television reporters to describe their experiences. Other reporters in the book talk about everything from life and sexual relationships on naval ships to the balance between access and constraint incumbent in the practice. Also valuable is the reproduction of the regulations governing journalists in their relationship with the military.

Less serious are other treatments, such as former ABC and CNN producer Danny Schechter's *Embedded: Weapons of Mass Deception*, which makes little effort to treat the subject with dispassion, and instead, as the title suggests, substitutes polemic for analysis.

Pre-War Planning: The Military Dimension

While Atkinson, Lowry, and West are cognizant of military workings and strategy, what is absent in many accounts—let alone in breezy journalistic descriptions of prewar planning—is a sense of the nuts-and-bolts military planning that provides the unseen backdrop for much of what transpired. Here, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* by Col. Gregory Fontenot (Ret.), Lt. Col. E. J. Degen, and Lt. Col. David Tohn adds fresh material to the literature. While authors more enmeshed in Beltway politics seek to construct the intellectual influences shaping policy, Fontenot and his colleagues take a more dispassionate and technical approach. They demonstrate how planners for Operation Iraqi Freedom incorporated lessons derived from the U.S. experiences in Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. While many commentators say that the Iraqi insurgency caught U.S. planners by surprise, *On Point* suggests urban combat preoccupied war planners. Supplemented by photos, maps, and charts, the authors describe various seminars, discussions, and exercises to prepare the U.S. Army to fight in Baghdad. Fontenot and his colleagues offer considerable detail not only of planning—training exercises in Germany, for example—but they also describe how the U.S. military managed with very little public note to ready ports, airfields, and other infrastructure in the Middle East needed for its campaign.

Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn provide thumbnail diagrams and explanations of various battles on the drive north from Kuwait. While not designed as such, *On Point* can serve as a one-stop reference to couple with embedded accounts. A chapter on the fall of Baghdad, for example, provides behind-the-scenes detail on the "thunder runs," the much-photographed toppling of Saddam's statue in central Baghdad, and mop-up operations within the city.

On Point, though, will not provide the last word: Air Force and naval planning were outside the purview of the authors. Certain items that Fontenot and his colleagues glanced over also deserve further treatment. For example, while the authors say the small number of Free Iraqi Forces—Iraqi expatriates trained in Taszar, Hungary—were significant strategically, operationally, and tactically, they do not explain why. Any elaboration,

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though, might need to await further declassification of material.

Another excellent account of prewar military planning is Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor's *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. Gordon, chief military correspondent at the *New York Times*, and Trainor, a retired Marine Corps lieutenant-general, combine their talents to weave a complete narrative of the Iraq campaign, discussing both its inception and execution. They ask "how a military campaign that was so successful in toppling Saddam Hussein's regime set the conditions for the insurgency that followed." They win the trust of a far greater range of people than others who have sought to tackle this issue, and so their narrative becomes more multidimensional than competing efforts.

The Troop Numbers Debate

While *On Point* describes the Iraq war's planning, in *Cobra II*, Gordon and Trainor delve more into its inputs, such as the debate over troop numbers. They describe the evolution of proposals outlining how to take on Iraq after Operation Desert Storm. General Wayne Downing, head of U.S. Special Operations Command between 1993 and 1996, proposed establishing a Shiite safe haven in southern Iraq to mirror the U.S.- and UK-protected Kurdish zone in northern Iraq. With limited investment beyond airpower, he argued that a southern safe haven could become a base to squeeze Saddam in the center.

Others said the only way to change the regime in Iraq would be to flood the country with troops. Gen. Tommy Franks, at the time CENTCOM commander, dusted off contingency plans approved by his predecessor, Gen. Anthony Zinni, who believed securing Iraq would require nearly 400,000 troops. When Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld entered the Pentagon, though, he sought to transform the military. With new technology and new thinking, he argued, less could be more. He suggested that Franks might do the job with 125,000 troops, a number which Gordon and Trainor imply Rumsfeld pulled from thin air.

As the Iraq invasion plan developed, tension between Rumsfeld and Franks escalated. Even after CENTCOM bent to Rumsfeld's wishes, the troop debate continued. Gordon and Trainor elaborate upon the oft-cited February 25, 2003, testimony of Army chief of staff Eric

Shinseki before the Senate Armed Services Committee. In response to a question from Senator Carl Levin (D-Mich.), Shinseki said that he believed it would take "several hundred thousand troops" to secure Iraq. *Cobra II* relates how a furious Rumsfeld tasked Paul Wolfowitz to chide Shinseki for commenting when he was not involved in operation planning. Why Levin would seek to reveal troop strength publicly on the eve of the operation is not discussed but is worthy of examination given military planners' real concern that Saddam Hussein might strike first while U.S. deployment was incomplete and vulnerable. In *Fiasco*, *Washington Post* senior Pentagon correspondent Thomas Ricks argues that such a debate cannot be separated from the jousting between Rumsfeld and the U.S. Army over posture and appropriations programs.

Within planning circles, controversy raged not only over troop strength, but also regarding the importance of maintaining an Iraqi face. While Franks famously called Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith "the f—ing stupidest guy on the face of the earth," a consensus is developing in recent writing to suggest Franks himself might warrant that designation. Franks worked hard to block attempts to train the Free Iraqi Force to which *On Point* eluded. CENTCOM foot-dragging and interagency rivalry hampered a program that might have put an Iraqi face on liberation or obviated the need to start training a new military from scratch. CENTCOM was not the only bureaucracy to undermine planning to preserve bureaucratic interests. Because the CIA had trained its own covert Iraqi force, it sought to quash the Pentagon's larger, overt program. *Cobra II* suggests a CIA case officer even filed a false report to sidetrack administration efforts to place an Iraqi face on the fight.

Like Atkinson, Gordon and Trainor also describe CENTCOM anxiety about the potential use of chemical weapons. On April 2, 2003, after U.S. troops crossed the Tigris and advanced on Baghdad, U.S. signals intelligence intercepted what the CIA believed to be Iraqi orders to launch such an attack.

While the U.S. intelligence upon which the Pentagon based planning was often wrong, the CIA's venality permeates the narrative. Its station chief speaks openly against de-Baathification, exaggerating the numbers of those affected. But while Gordon and Trainor imply that de-Baathification and the decision to disband the Iraqi army contributed to violence, their analysis fails to convince. Consider Petraeus's area of operation: his willingness to empower senior Baathists in Mosul bought short-term calm but provided the insurgency

with a safe haven. Had Gordon and Trainor sought quantitative data, they might find that insurgent violence was proportional to re-Baathification.

Beginning the Blame Game

Ever since a mob in Fallujah ambushed, murdered, and mutilated four U.S. security contractors on March 31, 2004, insurgency and violence have dominated discussion of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Both *Cobra II* and *Fiasco* identify de-Baathification and Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) administrator L. Paul Bremer's order to dissolve the Iraqi military as important contributors to the outbreak of the insurgency, and as majors reason why an initial military campaign that ended so well degenerated into such a chaotic and violent occupation. Iraqis certainly did greet U.S. troops with flowers and kisses,[5] but the honeymoon did not last long. Regime loyalists dissipated but did not disappear. Coalition forces stopped the looting, but violence and disorder persisted. The absence of weapons of mass destruction, the supposed presence of which was a major motivator for war,[6] embarrassed the White House and provided fodder for both conspiracy theorists and more rational war opponents who argued that such original sin delegitimized the U.S. mission, or that continued U.S. military involvement would equate to mission creep.

As violence persisted, journalists and politicians began to ask what went wrong. Two distinct narratives developed: the first blamed civilian planners, while the second focused more on CENTCOM.

Among the first group of authors, most focused their attention on Pentagon civilians and other neoconservative "architects." In a series of articles since republished in *Blind into Baghdad*, *Atlantic Monthly* national correspondent James Fallows raised concerns about the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction and civilian planners' unwillingness to face worst-case scenarios. While many accounts lambaste Douglas Feith for poor management—a charge not without merit—almost all authors used the same narrow pool of sources to confirm often-inaccurate accounts and to propel an often-flawed narrative into conventional wisdom.

The Office of Special Plans

Take for example, David Rieff, a freelance journalist for many left-of-center publications and a frequent contributor of comments on partisan blogs. On November 2,

2003, he published an influential 8,000-word cover story in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "Blueprint for a Mess."[7] A thinly veiled polemic, Rieff blames the "blinkered vision and over-optimistic assumptions on the part of the war's greatest partisans within the Bush administration." His narrative is rife with errors and half-truths. Rieff's assertion that the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans existed "to evaluate the threat of Saddam Hussein's nuclear, chemical, and biological warfare capabilities" was a falsehood he lifted from Knight Ridder foreign affairs correspondent Warren Strobel. In a taped interview with a British journalist, Karen Kwiatkowski, a career military officer who had served as a desk officer for Morocco, acknowledged being Strobel's source. But Kwiatkowski had never set foot in the Office of Special Plans. When questioned by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, she could not provide supporting evidence, nor could anyone corroborate her stories.[8] W. Patrick Lang, a former Defense Intelligence Agency official, often seconded the myth of the Office of Special Plans to intelligence-beat reporters. When he did so, though, he seldom revealed that he was serving as a registered Lebanese agent under the U.S. Department of Justice's Foreign Agents Registration Act.[9]

Reality was more mundane. As the Iraq war approached, office space constraints necessitated Iraq desk officers to relocate within the Pentagon. This, in turn, necessitated a new name, if for no other reason than to ensure inter-Pentagon correspondence arrived at the right door. Its mission was Iraq policy, the Pentagon's equivalent of the State Department's Iraq desk.

While Rieff bases his account largely on anonymous sources, he allows those who do speak on record to discuss matters about which they had no direct knowledge. Timothy Carney, for example, speaks about the attitudes of Pentagon officials with whom he had no contact. Carney had other agendas, though. Gen. Jay Garner released Carney from his service in Iraq after only eight weeks, after questions surfaced about leaks to journalists. Carney then made his agenda public. Against the backdrop of a multibillion dollar interagency fight for control of reconstruction spending, Carney called subordination of diplomats to retired generals "a grievous flaw" and argued that "military officers simply did not understand" reconstruc-

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tion.[10] Professional reporters should gauge and at least identify agendas. Rieff preferred to cherry-pick comments to fit.

The Future of Iraq Project

Another apparent source upon whom Rieff relied was Tom Warrick, a State Department lawyer. In June 2002, the State Department assigned Warrick to coordinate the Future of Iraq Project, a series of seminars bringing together Iraqi expatriates and U.S. government officials, not only from the State Department, but also from the White House, Pentagon, National Security Council (NSC), and CIA.[11] Rieff argues that the Pentagon paid little heed to the project's reports. This was false. Rieff appears unaware of almost-daily National Security Council meetings at which Stephen Hadley, the deputy national security advisor, and Zalmay Khalilzad, then the senior NSC director for Iraq, met with officials from across the U.S. bureaucracy to discuss issues highlighted by Future of Iraq Project working groups. Pentagon policy was formulated in conjunction with the recommendations of the Democratic Principles Working Group, whose report was readily accessible to Rieff.[12] But the State Department vetoed it. Again, Rieff failed to fact-check, preferring instead to amplify a false conventional wisdom put forth by his ideological fellow travelers.

For their part, Gordon and Trainor also deflate the importance of the Future of Iraq Project. It did not provide a viable plan for postwar Iraq; its importance was limited to ideas and background. Still, this does not let the Pentagon off the hook: Kurdish leader and current Iraqi president Jalal Talabani warned Rumsfeld about the potential for looting in an August 2002 meeting. Despite Rieff's characterization, according to Warrick's supervisor, Deputy Assistant of State Ryan Crocker, "It was never intended as a postwar plan."[13]

Rieff promoted a number of other assertions not based in fact. For example, he pushed the canard, since adopted by *Washington Post* reporters and others, that the Pentagon blacklisted Warrick for his political views. The truth was more mundane: the State Department sanctioned Warrick for professional misconduct upon determining the credibility of complaints leveled by Iraqis

who resented both assertions that his Rolodex would be the future Iraqi government and threatened to blackball them unless they altered their positions. Crocker himself, placed in charge of assembling the governance team for Baghdad, passed Warrick over in the initial deployment.

Still, the Future of Iraq myth has legs. In *Losing Iraq*, an account of his experience as a consultant to the project, former Council on Foreign Relations fellow David L. Phillips underlines and amplifies Rieff's declarations. Phillips's insight though was limited. He did not recognize that Iraqis with whom he met held separate meetings in the Pentagon, NSC, and CIA. He was not a participant in NSC meetings at which issues were discussed that arose within the Future of Iraq program. Nor was Phillips aware that ideas for which he claims credit had been discussed and, in some cases, implemented weeks if not months before. Phillips's narrative is, in many ways, the archetype for a larger trend of Washington hallucination: bit players believing themselves central to decision-making. Soon after the *Wall Street Journal* caught Phillips plagiarizing accounts of Iraq from newspaper descriptions to suggest greater experience in the country,[14] he left the Council on Foreign Relations.

Initial Deployment

Hindsight is always 20/20. Although the dominant narrative suggests only inadequate preparation, there was also misdirection. While Fallows points out that too many civilian authorities assumed best-case scenarios, there is scant memory of exaggerated worst-case scenarios. Fallows cites William Nash, a retired two-star army general and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, who said, "You are going to start right out with a humanitarian crisis." U.N. officials predicted the initial military campaign could injure 500,000 Iraqi civilians, create almost a million refugees and 2 million additional displaced persons, and cause more than 3 million Iraqis to face starvation.[15] Opponents of U.S. and British policy used such predictions to argue against ousting the Iraqi regime. "An all-out war that caused devastating suffering to the people of Iraq would be wrong," Clare Short, the British secretary for international development, said.[16] Col. Kim Olson, USAF (Ret.), describes the focus on humanitarian concerns in *Iraq and Back*, one of the few accounts of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance interlude. Few journalists or writers have explored how the politicization of nongovernmental organization analysis

undercut the general credibility of warnings and muddled more legitimate concerns.

The Rieff and Phillips narrative, however flawed, permeates George Packer's *The Assassins' Gate*. Declaring that "[t]he story of the Iraq war is a story of ideas about the role of the United States in the world, and of the individuals who conceived and acted on them," Packer, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, weaves together an account of the planning and personalities involved in the Iraq war. He is at his best providing character sketches of individuals involved in postwar Iraq. In a chapter entitled "The Palace," for example, he offers snippets of conversations with national security advisor Meghan O'Sullivan; Iraq's former acting minister of higher education Drew Erdmann; and Col. Paul Hughes, Garner's planning chief, interspersed with description to give a sense of atmosphere so often lacking in newspaper accounts. The chapter "The Captain" follows the experiences of Capt. John Prior, a mid-ranking officer who fought his way north from Kuwait, then spent several weeks in central Iraq before heading to Baghdad and the province of Al-Anbar. Here, though, his account does not hold up to the much more complete sketches offered by Atkinson or West.

What undercuts *The Assassins' Gate* is Packer's tendency to treat Iraq as a template upon which to act out agendas that have more to do with Washington than with Iraq. Like Rieff, Packer seeks to amplify a narrow range of sources into a more comprehensive narrative. He channels the thoughts and even the dreams of State Department officials such as Barbara Bodine, O'Sullivan, and Erdmann, but does not place sources in context. He cites Noah Feldman, for example, a New York University (now Harvard) law professor and fluent Arabic speaker, but is unaware that the Coalition Provisional Authority dismissed Feldman after less than a month because, like Warrick, he promoted himself at the expense of the Iraqis and misrepresented his position.

Hostile to the Pentagon, Packer gets offices and staffs confused. Those with whom Packer disagrees, such as then deputy defense secretary Paul Wolfowitz, he treats as two-dimensional foils. There are other errors: I attended no meeting in which he placed me. His discussion of prewar planning is facile. He repeats the Rieff narrative, amplifies Warrick, and ignores both the National Security Council and CENTCOM.

Underlining Packer's failure to assess information and his enthusiasm to substitute polemic for research is an endnote in which he acknowledges "benefit[ing] from"

the blogs of Juan Cole, a University of Michigan history professor, and Laura Rozen, a correspondent for *The American Prospect*. Both argue that dual loyalties motivated Jewish officials in the Pentagon to pursue the war.[17] Neither had been to Iraq nor had direct knowledge of the people or events about which Packer consulted their writing. While *The Assassins' Gate* became a bestseller, Packer's willingness to substitute polemic for research takes its toll; his narrative pails beside the far more thorough *Cobra II*.

Frank on Franks

Ricks's *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* does not absolve Bush administration civilian appointees from blame, but emphasizes more military decision-making. Ricks's narrative begins after Iraq's 1991 defeat in Operation Desert Storm. When Iraqi Shiites and Kurds heeded President George H. W. Bush's call to rise up against Saddam, Paul Wolfowitz, at the time an under secretary of defense for policy, was perhaps the only senior official within the administration to advocate for intervention in their support. U.S. inaction enabled Saddam's return to power. For the Shiites, betrayal was complete. But the Kurds got a second chance: after Kurds began to stream to the Turkish border, fleeing Saddam's vengeful forces, Turkish president Turgat Özal—Ricks mistakenly credits the UN—called for establishment of a safe haven so refugees could remain inside Iraqi territory. Wolfowitz flew to Iraq to observe Operation Provide Comfort, and met Zinni, at the time the operation's chief of staff, at Sarsang. Zinni recounts that he saw the work as strictly humanitarian while Wolfowitz, like Gen. Downing would later, saw something more.

Over the next decade, Wolfowitz and Zinni would anchor opposite poles in the Iraq policy debate. While Wolfowitz would urge regime change, Zinni would advocate containment. Zinni ridiculed as "the Bay of Goats" plans by Wolfowitz, Downing, and other advocates to duplicate the lessons of the Kurdish safe haven and to support Iraqi oppositionists' quest to liberate Iraq. Ricks cites the wisdom of prominent realists who lambasted Wolfowitz's ideas,[18] but, dishonestly, does not identify

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the authors as Clinton administration officials with partisan—as well as ideological—agendas.

Wolfowitz's advocacy gained little traction until September 11, 2001, when Rumsfeld demanded action. Here Ricks departs from earlier narratives and criticizes CENTCOM. Franks, he suggests, abdicated responsibility for planning. While unsympathetic to Wolfowitz and Feith, Ricks faults the uniformed military as much as civilian leadership for Pentagon dysfunction. He places Shinseki's testimony in the context of unrelated procurement battles rather than altruistic Iraq advice. He also deconstructs the military's myths: while Zinni said Pentagon civilians had discarded his plans to control Iraq, Ricks implies Zinni lied. Citing CENTCOM's deputy chief of planning as his source, Ricks notes, "The quality of planning done under Zinni may have improved in Zinni's memory with the passage of time."

Fiasco suggests Franks was a pivotal failure. He did not covey with urgency the concerns of the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), which was to lead the charge to Baghdad, nor did he issue orders stating what he wanted done. CENTCOM morale plummeted as Franks berated his staff. Ricks argues that by prioritizing speed in the drive to Baghdad over consolidation, "Franks flunk[ed] strategy. . . . Speed didn't kill the enemy—it bypassed him."

Franks failed to fulfill his responsibility to oversee Phase IV work: military planning for post-conflict stability and reconstruction. True, Garner's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Affairs may have botched its job, but its task was Herculean given Franks's abdication of planning. Garner's executive officer, Olson, depicts the confusion in her short account of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance interlude.[19] Here, *National Review* editor Rich Lowry points to a pivotal issue Ricks bypasses. While there were Phase III plans and a thumbnail sketch for Phase IV, the Pentagon failed to coordinate and implement its own plans.[20] Neither CFLCC commander David McKiernan, CENTCOM commander Franks, nor Rumsfeld made the call as to when Phase III ended and Phase IV began. The result was a vacuum filled by chaos and looting.

In *Fiasco*, Ricks continues to examine decision-making—both civilian and military—during the initial reconstruction phase and the insurgency. He criticizes military tactics and the disconnection between Rumsfeld's refusal to prioritize nation-building and the reality that U.S. troops in Iraq found it a major component of their postwar responsibility. Here, though, Bing West's *No True Glory* is a more substantive read. Ahmed S. Hashim, a professor at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, provides a useful chronicle of insurgent groups in *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq*, but undercuts his narrative with both politics and lazy analysis.

Although Ricks provides a necessary correction to earlier accounts, *Fiasco* is not definitive. While more careful than some colleagues with respect to Zinni, Ricks becomes dependent and, perhaps, too deferential to others, leading him to embrace inaccuracies and conspiracies. Shortly after *Fiasco*'s publication, *Washington Post* executive editor Len Downie chided Ricks for promoting on national television[21] the idea that the Israeli military declined to shoot down Hezbollah's rockets because home-front casualties would generate sympathy. He attributed such charges to unnamed military sources.[22] That Ricks would accept and parrot such a theory calls into question his judgment and undercuts the credibility of his work. In *Fiasco*, for example, he uses then deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage as a source, someone who both friends and foes acknowledge uses the press in service of his agenda. Ricks also cheapens his work, like Rodgers, by using his narrative to engage in petty vendettas toward colleagues.

Notes

1. Tim Pritchard, "When Iraq Went Wrong," *New York Times*, December 5, 2006.

2. Michael R. Gordon and Gen. Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), 234–59.

3. Michael Fleming, "U Finds 'Glory' in Iraq War Pic," *Daily Variety*, December 16, 2004.

4. Bill Clinton (speech, Democratic National Convention event, Sacramento Capital Club, CA, November 15, 1997); and Julius Strauss, "We Will Gas You When US Bombs Fall, Kurds Told," *Daily Telegraph* (London), February 28, 2003.

5. See, for example, Brian MacQuarrie and Scott Bernard Nelson, "Celebrations Whirl in a Capital of Free Regime," *Boston Globe*, April 10, 2003.

6. Colin Powell, "Remarks to the United Nations Security Council" (speech, UN Security Council, New York, February 5, 2003), available at www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/17300.htm.

7. David Rieff, "Blueprint for a Mess," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 2003.

8. U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Prewar Intelligence Assessments on Iraq* (Washington, DC: July 9, 2004), 282–83.

9. See W. Patrick Lang, *Report of the Attorney General to the Congress of the United States on the Administration of the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938, as Amended, for the Six Months Ending June 30, 2003*, U.S. Department of Justice, Appendix B-18, available at www.usdoj.gov/criminal/fara/SemiAnnual-ReportsToCongress2000-2003/June30-2003.pdf; and W. Patrick Lang, "Drinking the Kool-Aid," *Middle East Policy* (Summer 2004).

10. "US Plans for Iraq 'Flawed,'" BBC News, June 26, 2003, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3021632.stm.

11. "Iraqi-American Conference Focuses on a Future Democratic Iraq," *Washington File*, U.S. State Department, June 10, 2002.

12. Iraq Foundation, *Transition to Democracy Report* (Washington, DC: December 10, 2002), available through www.iraqfoundation.org/foundation.html.

13. Quoted in L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 25.

14. Robert Pollock, "The Armchair Analyst," *Wall Street Journal*, May 10, 2005.

15. Quoted in Brian Whitaker, "Threat of War: Dual Crisis Looms for Millions in Iraq," *Guardian* (London), January 23, 2003.

16. Jo Dillon, "1M Refugees Will Flee Iraq War," *Independent* (London), December 29, 2002.

17. On August 29, 2003, Cole, a University of Michigan professor, wrote, "These pro-Likud intellectuals concluded that 9-11 would give them carte blanche to use the Pentagon as Israel's Gurkha regiment, fighting elective wars on behalf of Tel Aviv (not wars that really needed to be fought, but wars that the Likud coalition thought it would be nice to see fought . . . especially if someone else's boys did the dying)." In a September 9, 2004, comment on her own blog (www.warandpiece.com), Rozen, a political commentator for *The American Prospect*, wrote, "Do you think Feith has not demonstrated throughout his career as a government official . . . and in his writings . . . an extraordinary commitment to the hard-line policies of the

Likud party? The political party of another nation? What is there to dispute?"

18. Daniel Byman, Kenneth Pollack, and Gideon Rose, "The Rollback Fantasy," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 1 (January/February 1999).

19. Col. Kim Olson, *Iraq and Back* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 1–110.

20. Rich Lowry, "What Went Wrong?" *National Review*, October 25, 2004.

21. "Coverage of War in the Middle East," CNN, August 6, 2006, available at http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0608/06/rs.01.html.

22. Alex Safian, "*Post*'s Thomas Ricks Charges Israel Intentionally Leaving Hezbollah Rockets Intact," Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, August 9, 2006, available at www.camera.org/index.asp?x_context=2&x_outlet=38&x_article=1174.