

The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq

George Packer

Reviewed by Neil James

Popular experience of long wars is a major underlying reason for differences in the warfighting culture of the United States compared to Australia and the other countries of the traditional Anglo-US alliance. Another is differing experiences of lengthy defeat and disaster followed by the long fight back to victory. Vietnam is the only real exception to the first rule, and the associated collapse of US popular will (unused to not winning and not doing so quickly) thoroughly proves the second.

In late 2006 the duration of the war in Iraq passed that of US participation in the latter two-thirds of World War II. While the morale of US troops deployed in Iraq has remained notably high, especially in the circumstances, the last year has seen a collapse in popular support for the war at home. Some of this stems from traditional American insularity, ignorance and impatience about foreign complexities. Just as much stems from a loss of confidence in the planning and direction of the war by the Bush administration.

Much of this steep decline in confidence is justifiable, based on the abysmal record of US failure chronicled in four major books published over the last year. All have been written by prominent US journalists and none could fairly be accused of having a political axe to grind.

Tom Ricks' *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* is reviewed opposite. Another two are the 640-page *COBRA II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* by Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor (the latter a retired USMC lieutenant general); and the 576-page *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* by Bob Woodward, following his contrasting earlier paeans *Bush at War* (2002) and *Plan of Attack* (2004). All three books concentrate, almost exclusively from the US viewpoint, on the disastrous political and military planning for the war. To varying degrees, they all devote less attention to its actual conduct.

The Assassins' Gate was originally written in 2005, before the other three, and is now republished in 2007 in a well-updated third edition. Most importantly, it is the only one of the four books to also provide equal and balanced coverage of the ensuing counter-insurgency war, in all its phases, and to comprehensively include Iraqi viewpoints. It is also the only one to cover the participation of other coalition partners in any detail (*Fiasco* and *State of Denial* barely mention them at all).

Packer has followed the various ructions in Iraq and among Iraqi émigré groups since before the 1991 Iraq War. He has visited the country on numerous occasions and has discussed Iraq's problems with a broad range of Iraqi interlocutors for nearly two decades – not just conducted interviews over the last few years for newspaper articles or a book. *The Assassins' Gate* is therefore easily the best of the four books and its coverage of the Iraqi side of the invasion and the insurgency has no rivals. Even former US diplomat Peter Galbraith's 260-page *The End of Iraq: How American*

Incompetence Created a War Without End cannot match it.

Packer, a 'liberal' journalist in US terms, admits to having been reluctantly in favour of the invasion based on his deep knowledge of Iraq, the failures of containment and the troubles of the region. This has not stopped him from excoriating the US for its subsequent conduct of the occupation, the transition back to Iraqi sovereignty, the attempted introduction of democracy, and the conduct of subsequent counter-insurgency operations in a disintegrating polity and society.

The great strength of *The Assassins' Gate* is that it discusses all the war's ramifications objectively because it is based on real understanding of the depth to which Iraqi civil society was so thoroughly destroyed by the 1968-2003 Baathist regime. It is therefore a balanced assessment of how catastrophically this civil society vacuum was unknown, unappreciated, misunderstood or simply ignored by American military and diplomatic planners and their political bosses.

Packer is also very good on the mix of wishful thinking, seat-of-the-pants planning, under-resourcing, political interference and downright arrogant incompetence that characterised the Coalition Provisional Authority led by Paul Bremer. The reputation of the original retired officer given this task, the hapless Lieutenant General Jay Garner, is much enhanced by this account.

The bottom line of all four books is the utter naiveté of the Bush administration's core assumption that three or four months after toppling the Saddam Hussein regime the number of US occupation troops required in Iraq would be down around 30,000 and the UN would somehow have taken over the rebuilding of Iraq and its financing. Moreover, the Pentagon's dominance of pre-war planning excluded the State Department, and indeed the whole-of-government effort required to study how, and then implement, the rebuilding of a completely shattered society in an artificially constructed polity held together by military force since its inception in the 1920s. That Cheney and Rumsfeld so ruthlessly crushed opposition within the Pentagon, and to some extent at Central Command, only made all this worse.

If you read any of the other three books read Packer as well. If you read only one of the four, *The Assassin's Gate* is the must read. ♦

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