

Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq

Thomas E. Ricks

Reviewed by Patrick Gallagher

Thomas Ricks, the *Washington Post*'s senior Pentagon correspondent since 2000, has visited Iraq five times reporting the war and researching and writing *Fiasco*. Until the end of 1999, he held the same beat at the *Wall Street Journal*, where he was a reporter for 17 years. He has been a member of two Pulitzer Prize-winning teams for national reporting, and has reported on US military activities in Korea, Haiti, Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq. Ricks' previous books include *Making the Corps* (1997), which follows a USMC training platoon through basic training, and a novel, *A Soldier's Duty* (2001).

Fiasco offers a comprehensive and devastating analysis of the conduct of the war in Iraq by the US from the initial planning through to the handling of the insurgency up to early 2006. Ricks considers the war a misguided exercise in hubris, folly and incompetence. He supports this assessment with detailed evidence that is both vivid and persuasive, if somewhat one-sided, and he is occasionally given to hyperbole. While written from the US perspective for a US audience, the book offers many insights into the perils and pitfalls of making and implementing policy and strategy in circumstances of great geopolitical, social and cultural complexity.

Each of Ricks' main points has been made previously, but not in such detail, and no-one has yet examined the interactions of the US military and civilian leaders to the same extent. While Ricks savages the war's civilian architects, his is the first book to take on the military in detail as well. With a particular focus on Generals Franks, Meyers and Pace, he critiques the military's strange acquiescence in the development of a war plan that paid little heed to "Phase IV", the post-invasion activities needed to occupy, consolidate and rebuild a shattered state. He also scrutinises the performance of US forces on the streets of Iraq in the period since April 2003 when Hussein was deposed – until now a neglected, if not taboo, subject. That is what makes this book different and important.

Ricks' analysis is conducted in two parts. The first, the lead-up to the war and the invasion in 2003, has been chronicled in earlier books and newspaper and magazine articles. But Ricks provides a succinct narrative that emphasises how this period 'laid the shaky foundation for the derelict occupation that followed.' He reminds us that when it came to the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, the administration consistently emphasised *worst-case scenarios* even as it 'was *best-casing* the subsequent cost and difficulty of occupying the country.' He goes on to show how this blinkered approach resulted in a failure to plan for the realities of the occupation and a failure to allocate sufficient manpower and resources for the task.

THOMAS E. RICKS
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

FIASCO

THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ



But the core of his book is the second half, beginning in August 2003. As he writes, the war really began with the bombings in Baghdad of the Jordanian Embassy and the UN Headquarters and the emergence of the insurgency itself. His strongest critique is that the US military failed both to anticipate and then to recognise the insurgency, and then tried to fight it as a conventional war. What makes his analysis particularly damning are the dozens of military sources, most of them on record, who join in his critique, and the thousands of pages of internal White House, Pentagon, Army and USMC documents he uses to make his case for a war poorly planned and bravely but blindly fought.

Balanced contemporary history is difficult to write and this book is no exception. As with all such writing, there are flaws, none fatal, but they are there and three in particular should be noted. To begin with, he is overly committed to the idea espoused by retired Marine General Anthony Zinni that 'containment worked' and that Hussein posed no threat by 2003. *Fiasco* also does not offer a comprehensive picture of Bremer's occupation authority or the insurgency itself. It concentrates on the first year of the occupation, often addressing the next two years of struggle largely as a contrast to the occupation's early days. Finally, the author's conviction that a proper hearts-and-minds counter-insurgency strategy might have salvaged the debacle is perhaps naive, and pays too little heed to the intractable ethnic and religious conflicts underlying what is now, by any objective measure, an incipient civil war.

Throughout my reading I was reminded of Barbara Tuchman's *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984), which identifies the hallmark of folly in government as being the pursuit of policies contrary to the self-interest of the state involved. Essentially, Tuchman, another Pulitzer Prize-winning author, argued that such self-destructive acts are often carried out despite the availability of recognised and feasible alternatives. I finished reading this book just as the latest US 'strategy' for Iraq was unveiled – and I am again left wondering if all the alternatives have been explored. Sadly, it seems to me there is little or no basis for optimism that this new approach will meet with any more success than its predecessors. ♦

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