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Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq **by Thomas E. Ricks**

A review by Kevin Mills

The current war in Iraq is undoubtedly one of the most important challenges America has faced in the last fifty years. Although initiated under the pretenses of a relatively fast war of necessity and liberation, the U.S. effort in Iraq has now ballooned into an extended and costly occupation for which even a return to the status quo would appear an optimistic victory. It is a war that will determine the legacy of U.S. President George W. Bush, the destiny of the Iraqi nation, the stability of the entire Middle East, and perhaps the future of America's presence in the world. Although bombarded daily by news accounts of growing casualties, most of the American public is left in relative darkness as to how the U.S. entered such a precarious and costly war and of the realities on the ground in Iraq. In an effort to shed light on this matter, Thomas E. Ricks, in his new book *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, provides an extensive description of the lead up to and initial years of Operation Iraqi Freedom and attempts to answer the question of how the most powerful country in the world has wound up on the losing side of a costly occupation in a distant country that posed no great threat to American security.

Building on years of experience as a military correspondent for the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post, Ricks covers in unprecedented detail the events and persons responsible for the lead up to the Iraq War and the errors emblematic of the war's first years. As one can clearly surmise by his book's title, Ricks' account of the Iraq War is unabashedly critical, detailing how a wrong-headed, ideologically motivated idea, given new life in the post 9-11 environment and unchecked by powerful institutions, was

allowed to snowball into one of the "most profligate actions in the history of American foreign policy" (3).

In his report, Ricks is sharply opinionated yet not partisan and extends blame to both sides of the aisle and throughout the government, military, and media. For those seeking an academic analysis of the Iraq War or the political theories associated with it, Ricks' book may disappoint as he strays from conceptual arguments and instead focuses on more tangible realities. Where Ricks shines is in his ability to clearly portray major practical errors present in the lead up to the war and how it was carried out, honing in on three fundamental flaws that led to what he deems "a mess" (4). These three themes are consistent throughout Ricks' description of the war and include serious errors of commission and omission, internal conflict amongst the U.S. government, and a flagrant lack of strategy. The depictions of these three themes are insightfully combined to produce a book that most readers will likely read with a mix of disbelief, frustration and deep sadness.

Fiasco is written in true journalistic fashion, comprised by a series hundreds of interviews and other declassified sources organized chronologically and segmented with catchy newspaper-esque headlines. Ricks begins his account in the Spring of 1991 following the end of Desert Storm and the almost prescient objection by Pentagon official Paul Wolfowitz that the coalition forces should have continued on to Baghdad, rather than stop at the border of Iraq. Ricks then briefly covers the proceeding ten years of history in containing Saddam amongst some intermittent opposition by out-of-power neoconservatives until coming to the point of September 11, 2001 when "the explosion at

the Pentagon of Flight 77 and the day's three other hijack attacks provided the political opening that Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and others needed" to make a plan to topple Saddam a viable option (30). From this point the reader is presented with an almost sickening series of miscalculations, underestimates, and blatant blunders that eventually lead to the deployment of tens of thousands of U.S. troops to wage "a preemptive war based on false premises" (4). Reflecting Ricks' own military orientation, the remaining majority of the book describes in vivid detail the developments on the ground in Iraq and how U.S. tactics actually gave rise to an insurgency that threatens to defeat the entire mission in Iraq and create a debilitating civil war.

Perhaps the most striking theme present in Ricks' description of the American adventure in Iraq is the exceedingly high number of serious errors present on all levels of the U.S. lead up to the war in Iraq. He maintains that these errors go back as far as 1991 with the sloppy end of Operation Desert Storm and continue through to a dangerously misleading National Intelligence Estimate, numerous severely over-confident remarks made by top administration officials, alarmist journalism, and near unquestioning submission by Congress, military leaders, the intelligence community, and the media. These errors then are compounded once the battle begins and fateful decisions regarding the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, the elimination of Baathist civil servants, the misconduct of counterinsurgency, and the maltreatment of Iraqi prisoners are made. Ricks continues to illustrate the course of these blunders, revealing with alarming lucidity how errors began to build on themselves until the path to war careened out of control, becoming an inevitable conclusion riddled with severe setbacks.

Ricks succinctly notes, "when assumptions are wrong, everything built on them is undermined" (111). This simple principle is used by the author to sum up the process by which numerous errors were made in appraising the threat of Iraq and determining the proper course for victory. To explain how such incorrect assumptions as the immediacy of the threat of Iraq as well as the relative ease of regime change were allowed to continue unopposed, Ricks points to a variety of factors, including a weak military leadership, overzealous pentagon officials, destructive political considerations, a bumbling intelligence apparatus, an arrogant administration, and deceitful Iraqi exiles. Of these it seems that Ricks believes that "blame must lie foremost with President Bush," although such a proposition is not adequately supported in the remainder of the text in which President Bush is mentioned only in passing (4). In fact, judging by the centrality of his position in Ricks' account, one is given the impression that the Iraq War is most directly a legacy of Paul Wolfowitz.

In addition to the sheer number of errors present in the U.S. mission in Iraq, Ricks focuses a great deal of his narrative on the persistent internal conflicts within the U.S. government that have plagued the handling of Iraq. In interview after interview, Ricks details how personal feuds and institutional rivalries drastically disrupted the day to day business of conducting the war and reconstruction of Iraq. Beginning with strategic disagreements between Wolfowitz and General Zinni and ranging to traditional rivalries between the State and Defense Departments as well as between civilian and military leadership, Ricks shows that these conflicts rose beyond healthy checks and balances into debilitating logjams. Even more disturbing is the level at which personality conflicts, such as those that existed between General Sanchez and Ambassador Paul Bremer,

created an environment in which necessary cooperation could not occur, leading Ricks to comment that "the CPA and the U.S. military acted less like partners and more like adversaries" (212).

Although this focus on bitter rivalries between individuals involved in the U.S. war effort demonstrates a key component of America's lack of success in Iraq, some of Ricks' reporting seems excessively inflammatory. For instance to quote a soldier describing how he would "look at [Bremer] like he was a piece of shit" (327) as he walked to the toilet or calling Paul Wolfowitz "crack-smoking stupid" (17) seem gratuitous and exhibit degenerate forms of print journalism. Furthermore, many of Ricks' subjects seemed to be antagonistically caricatured through selective and indirect quotations, depicting Paul Wolfowitz as a Holocaust fanatic with a "verbal tic" (16) or Major General Odierno as a reckless commander who "turned a blind eye to...brutalities" (289). This treatment contrasted sharply with Ricks' treatment of apparent protagonists like General Zinni who were vindicated through extensive direct interviews in which their views were cohesively expressed and were even allowed to give opinions on the motivations of other actors, as Zinni did in describing his take on Wolfowitz's reaction to Operation Provide Comfort (10).

A third major theme Ricks focuses on in *Fiasco* is the flagrant lack of strategy the Bush administration exhibited in the conduct of the Iraq War, resulting in what the author calls "the worst war plan in American history" (115). As Ricks darkly muses, "the irony is that in eighteen months of planning, the key question was left substantially unaddressed: What to do after getting to Baghdad" (78). Expanded on throughout the majority of the

book, this crucial flaw helped spawn an insurgency for which the U.S. military was unprepared and untrained to fight, leading to a confused tactical antagonism towards the very people they had come to liberate. This point is made extensively clear by the large number of insider interviews conducted by Ricks of military personnel in Iraq who spoke candidly about their confusion of the mission, a characteristic that helps to set *Fiasco* apart from other accounts of Iraq War blunders.

The detailed accounts of U.S. errors culminate in the tragically titled final chapter "Betting Against History," in which Ricks leaves a grim picture of the current state of the Iraq War. In this chapter Ricks presents three possible scenarios for the future, all of which reflect a weakened and dangerous status for America that falls well below the expectations for which the war was launched. Curiously, Ricks even projects the terrifying possibility of a modern day Saladin who could arise in Iraq, uniting the Arab world in a nuclear campaign against the West.

While being slightly heavy on military jargon for many readers, *Fiasco* largely neglects deep consideration of the theories behind going to war. Relying mainly on short allusions to Holocaust fixations and shadowy reports of Iraqi WMDs, Ricks offers almost no discussion of larger strategic goals of democracy reformation in the Middle East in the context of the war on terrorism or as contemplated in books like Natan Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy*. Furthermore, Ricks does not venture into the realm of political theory in analyzing the Iraq War nor does he offer original insights for possible victory in Iraq, containing himself to pointing out flaws instead.

Regardless of these relatively small failings, Thomas Ricks' *Fiasco* is a timely and well-written account of a period in U.S. history that urgently needs such an extensive and critical investigation. Combining journalistic reporting with insightful analysis, *Fiasco* provides an unprecedented insider's view of the Iraq War from the viewpoint of those who know it best, the soldiers on the ground. In this rich narrative, Ricks clearly presents the picture of a Bush administration and U.S. government decision and conduct of war doomed to fail due to numerous errors of commission and omission, debilitating internal conflicts, and a foolhardy lack of strategy. Undoubtedly, Ricks' *Fiasco* is an important account of the tragedy of America's present and an indispensable lesson for its future.

Work cited

Ricks, Thomas E. *FIASCO: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006