

2007

The Assassins' Gate by George Packer

John Deniston
Pepperdine University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides>



Part of the [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Military and Veterans Studies Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Deniston, John (2007) "The Assassins' Gate by George Packer," *Global Tides*: Vol. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol1/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Seaver College at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Tides by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Assassins' Gate **by George Packer**

A review by John Deniston

Controversy has recently erupted over President Bush's assertion that current difficulties in stabilizing Iraq will be remembered as "just a comma" in the hindsight of history.¹

Should this prediction prove unfortunately yet likely correct, the reality of an uncertain understanding of this conflict in future generations underscores the critical importance of analysis by its contemporaries. In *The Assassins' Gate*, George Packer, a staff writer with *The New Yorker*, delivers a compelling first-hand account of the war in Iraq that brings readers fresh revelations of the strategic, cultural, historical, and human dimensions involved in the undertaking.

Packer's transparency in grappling with his own internal tension over support for the invasion builds his credibility as one who offers a good-faith treatment of the raw and complex challenges canvassing the conflict. "I would run down the many compelling reasons why a war would be unwise, only to find at the end that Saddam was still in power, tormenting his own people and defying the world," writes Packer in an examination of his own loyalties, "The administration's war was not my war... but objecting to the authors and their methods didn't seem reason enough to stand in the way."² In the 400+ pages that surround this introspection, readers are rewarded with the insights of Packer's immersion in a search for truth.

Unique to *The Assassins' Gate* is Packer's ability to blend an abstract historical and strategic framework of the conflict with the front-line reporting of an experienced

journalist. Packer's rich commitment to developing this wide-ranging perspective led his investigation through experiences likely shared by no other writer: from a pre-war planning conference of Iraqi exiles in London, to life embedded with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Baghdad, to observation outside the safety of the Green Zone in Iraq and within the corridors of Washington power. Counterbalancing this success in scope, however, is the absence of a cohesive thesis that entices the reader's focus throughout the book. Nevertheless, the historical archive framed by Packer's work proves to be an invaluable resource to both curious novices and expert researchers.

Packer articulates several defining inflection points in the war's planning, execution, and recovery. National Security Presidential Directive No. 24, labeled as "one of the fateful decisions of the Iraq War,"³ gave postwar control to the Department of Defense, resulting in limited influence of the Department of State's Future of Iraq project. Packer points to Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, leader of the CPA, as responsible for three "momentous decisions" shortly after assuming his position: dissolution of the Iraqi army, purging high-ranking Baathists from the civil service, and an abrupt halt of efforts to form an interim government.⁴ *The Assassins' Gate* rightfully exposes the gravity of failure in post-war "Phase IV" nation-building operations, noting that even at the height of its effectiveness, reconstruction funds from the CPA flow at the "pace of tar poured on a cold day." Some 10 months after a massive \$18 billion Congressional reconstruction appropriation, less than two percent of the funds had been spent.⁵ Without disputing the importance of these decision points, Packer's analysis helpfully extends beyond the litany of criticisms and defenses promulgated by many other authors.

Among Packer's most helpful contributions to the reader's understanding of the conflict's context is an exposition of Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi exile that crafted a persistent ideological basis throughout the 1990s to support the overthrow of the Hussein regime. Packer writes of this proponent and his agenda, "The lonely dream he'd pursued for so many years in Cambridge was suddenly converging with history. Such chances did not occur often in life, and Makiya was determined to make the most of this one."⁶

In the buildup to war, Makiya spoke passionately and persuasively in support of invasion. Following a pre-war description of his vision for liberty in Iraq, Makiya charged, "If there is a sliver of a chance of what I just said happening, a five to ten percent chance, you have a moral obligation, I say, to do it."⁷ The New York University audience, Packer records, reacted with "exploding applause" to this comment. The delicate interlacing of Makiya's story throughout the book provides a valuable motif from which readers grasp the divergence of worldviews between Iraqis in exile and Iraqis under the Hussein regime. "Iraqis, it turned out, were not who [Makiya] had thought they were," summarizes Packer, "The returned exiles in Baghdad lived in a world apart."⁸

While the rift between expectations and reality was most poignantly exposed in the case of returned exiles, Packer's unique ethnographic perspective returns to this dichotomy throughout the text. Quoting a freelance Kurdish journalist's perception on post-war Iraq: "The Iraqis have the knowledge. They know what is right, they know what is wrong. But you know what? They don't care... They don't have the will to do what is right."⁹ The outcomes of this disillusionment became disastrous when matched against American expectations. "Confused, frustrated Iraqis, who had never before been allowed to take any

initiative, turned to the Americans, who seemed to have all the power and money; the Americans, who didn't see themselves as occupiers, tried to force the Iraqis to work within their own institutions, but the institutions had been largely dismantled."¹⁰ Moving beyond the abstract policies issues and into the everyday human realities of this conflict positions *The Assassins' Gate* as an essential addition to American understanding of the ground reality in Iraq.

Packer provokes an intriguing discussion of the decision-making behaviors underlying the Bush administration's move toward war. *The Assassins' Gate* references the insight of Richard Haass, Director of Policy Planning at the State Department, in discussing the organizational climate: "A decision was not made—a decision happened, and you can't say when or how."¹¹ Other observers, such as the analysis captured in private intelligence expert George Friedman's *America's Secret War*, substantiate this claim: "There was no debate over whether or not to go to war. That had been decided months before. There was, however, a debate over what strategy to use."¹² Packer skillfully ties this explanation of problems in planning to problems in execution.

In addition to piercing the thick fog that hung over discernment within the administration, Packer explores the public justifications for war. Importantly, he draws on comments from Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in asserting, "WMD was the least common denominator: 'The truth is that for reasons that have a lot to do with the U.S. government bureaucracy, we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on, which was weapons of mass destruction.'"¹³ Though successful in contextualizing the WMD issue through the events of Operation Desert Storm, *The Assassins' Gate* fails to grasp the

truly tectonic shift in security paradigms that gripped the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11. A period of domestic nuclear scares following 9/11 (the most well-known of which is associated with Dragonfire, the codename of an informant who warned of nightmarish terror in an American city) panicked the Bush administration and ignited a chain of events that allowed snowballing concerns of the nexus of rogue state nuclear proliferation and Islamist terrorism to flourish. Packer's work seems disconnected from the administration's War on Terrorism that defines it (indeed, the phrase "war on terror" appears only six times in the book).

Continuing this investigation of the broader motivations for war, Packer asks, "Why did Iraq become the leading cause for the hawks?"¹⁴ In his assessment, two primary reasons explain this attachment: festering desire to "finish the job" of the 1991 Gulf War in dismantling the Hussein regime and a distinct neoconservative interest in protecting Israel. Packer's analysis illuminatingly traces neoconservative scheming against Iraq through the 1990s, but these two separate explanations fail to comprehensively place Iraq in the neoconservative post-9/11 ideology. A more fundamental explanatory theory overlooked by Packer suggests that Iraq offered the best place in which to continue momentum gained in the invasion of Afghanistan. Noted historian John Lewis Gaddis describes this explanation:

How, though, to maintain the momentum, given that the Taliban was no more and that Al Qaeda wasn't likely to present itself as a conspicuous target? This was where Saddam Hussein came in: Iraq was the most feasible place in which to strike the next blow. If we could topple that tyrant, if we could repeat the Afghan Agincourt along the banks of the

Tigris and the Euphrates, then we could accomplish a great deal. We could complete the task the Gulf War left unfinished. We could destroy whatever weapons of mass destruction Saddam might have accumulated since. We could end whatever support he was providing for terrorists beyond Iraq's borders, notably those who acted against Israel. We could liberate the Iraqi people. We could ensure an ample supply of inexpensive oil. We could set in motion a process that could undermine and ultimately remove reactionary regimes elsewhere in the Middle East, thereby eliminating the principal breeding ground for terrorism. And, as President Bush did say publicly in a powerful speech to the United Nations on September 12, 2002, we could save that organization from the irrelevance into which it would otherwise descend if its resolutions continued to be contemptuously disregarded. The attraction of this particular stone was the number of birds it could simultaneously kill.

Such unification of this dynamic breadth of appeal to neoconservative thought stands missing from the explanation advanced in *The Assassins' Gate*.¹⁵

Also largely absent from Packer's memoir is mention of the effort to locate WMD in Iraq, later known as the Iraq Survey Group. Packer's insight, however, into the unrest, looting, and instability of the months following major combat operations suggests a foundational point of inquiry: if coalition forces were unable to maintain basic law and order after the fall of the regime, is it reasonable to conclude that search efforts attempting to locate hidden weapons across a country the size of California proceeded as planned or with comprehensive effectiveness? Packer's silence in this regard is shared with a bookshelf of other Iraq war memoirs that ignore this lingering uncertainty.

On balance, Packer's masterwork of *The Assassins' Gate* captures unprecedented witness to the creation and execution of war in Iraq and offers admirably incisive and nonpartisan analysis. Packer expertly identifies many of the decisions that shifted-for better or worse-the conflict's trajectory and introduces readers to the consequential worldviews of actors such as Kanan Makiya and the Iraqi exile movement. Despite its length and detail, however, the book leaves readers hoping for future scholarship in areas of post-9/11 context, the neoconservative positive case for war, and the search for WMD. In a final analysis, Packer's success in recording the true nature of this war at all levels of analysis brings hope that mistakes paid for in blood will not be repeated.

References

1. Baker, Peter. (2006, October 5). "Just a Comma' Becomes Part of Iraq Debate." Washington Post, p. A19. [^return](#)
2. Packer, G. (2005). *The Assassins' Gate*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 87. [^return](#)
3. *Ibid.*, 120. [^return](#)
4. *Ibid.*, 190. [^return](#)
5. *Ibid.*, 242. [^return](#)
6. *Ibid.*, p. 46. [^return](#)
7. *Ibid.*, p. 83. [^return](#)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 177. [^return](#)
9. *Ibid.*, p. 178. [^return](#)
10. *Ibid.*, p. 227. [^return](#)
11. *Ibid.*, p. 45. [^return](#)
12. Friedman, G. (2004). *America's Secret War*. New York: Doubleday, 262. [^return](#)
13. Packer., G. (2005). p. 60. [^return](#)
14. *Ibid.*, p. 24. [^return](#)

15. Gaddis, J. L. (2004). *Surprise, Security and the American Experience*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 93-94. [^return](#)