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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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زبانهای اروپایی

BY CAROL POLSGROVE

17.09.2021

History's Light on the Dark Road Ahead



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During the days of the U.S.'s exit from Afghanistan, I have been inching through the U.S. Army's own massive history of *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*: a wide window on the ignorance and arrogance that has led the U.S. into one bloody quagmire after another.

Based on hundreds of documents and interviews, the two-volume history starts off with long *mea culpa*—an acknowledgment of the naiveté that led the U.S. into a chaotic and bloody occupation of the land where human civilization began.

The confessional drumbeat begins near the start, on p. 43, when, in the wake of 9/11, the military, at the direction of President George W. Bush, began forming its plan for regime change in Iraq.

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“In retrospect, the most significant aspect of the Iraq pre-invasion planning was not the shortage of troops or the lack of Phase IV planning, but rather the gaping holes in what the U.S. military knew about Iraq. This ignorance included Iraqi politics, society, and government—gaps that led the United States to make some deeply flawed assumptions about how the war was likely to unfold.”

As the Music Man famously remarked, “you gotta know the territory”—and the U.S. military and policy establishment didn’t.

UN sanctions imposed on Iraq in the wake of its 1990 Invasion of Kuwait had shaken the Iraqi economy; a failed 1991 uprising against Saddam had shaken the political and security landscape.

But U.S. officials’ view of that fractured landscape was blurred: “The dearth of information about Iraq’s social dynamics and internal turmoil since the 1991 Gulf war led the United States to misjudge Iraqi military activities and to formulate policies and plans at odds with the reality of a deeply segmented and traumatized Iraqi society.”

Fast forward to March 2003 when the invasion began. Though the regime fell in twenty days, “Coalition troops were unprepared for the utter dissolution of public order that followed. Within days of the regime collapse, Baghdad and other areas of Iraq descended into chaos.”

Iraqis—individually and in groups—were armed to the teeth. Government munitions were scattered across the country, providing firepower for political factions. Meanwhile, the collapse of the state meant there was no structure in place to keep water and hospitals running, lights on, and arrest lawbreakers.

As the U.S. and its coalition partners scrambled to provide these public services, Iraqis themselves began exacting retribution for Saddam’s rule: “Reprisal attacks against the former regime began almost immediately.” Iraqi death squads hunted down senior Sunni regime loyalists and other collaborators with the regime.

Coalition forces “soon found themselves dealing with disparate regions of a country whose society was imploding.” The coalition had created “a stateless theater of war with a civilian authority and a military command that were each woefully incapable of doing what was necessary to control the situation.”

Iraq had begun its descent into “full insurgency and civil war.”

That is where the story stands on p. 162, the point I had reached as a beleaguered U.S. President, in September of this year, 2021, struggled out of the ruins of another long war and occupation.

A full chronicle of the war in Afghanistan will be some time in coming, but this history of the Iraq war (published in 2019 and all but ignored by the U.S. media) opens a wide window on the decisions and organizational structures that lead the U.S. into wars that make bad situations worse.

The product of an army Operation Iraqi Freedom Study Group, *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War* is intended—as the preface states—both for army leaders who can learn lessons from it and for civilians, so they “can understand the Army’s experience in war.”

Its usefulness for us civilians is far broader than that: here is a dramatic account of how complex U.S. “democracy” really is – page after page of actions carried out in “our” name and presumably by “our” choice.

It is not the whole story: a note on sources in the end observes that although the report draws on hundreds of interviews, thousands more remain untapped. And although more than 30,000 pages of documents were unclassified for this history, the “vast database” from the U.S. military commands in Iraq remains “in disarray, with no clear prospect for cataloguing it and making it accessible to researchers in the near term.”

Meanwhile, we have this beginning: a history that sheds light not only on the past but also on the dark road ahead.

The U.S. Army in the Iraq War is available in print from online booksellers and [free here](#).

CounterPunch 16.09.2021