

part of the mainstream debate over how the United States should withdraw. It should be.

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Michael R. Gordon and Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor. *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007.

On an increasingly crowded shelf of books dealing with the ongoing Iraq War, *Cobra II* deserves a prominent place as the most authoritative military history to date of the initial U.S. invasion of Iraq. A joint effort by *New York Times* military correspondent Michael Gordon and retired Marine Corps Lieutenant General Bernard Trainor, the book is the product of years of painstaking research, extensive fieldwork, hundreds of participant interviews, access to still-classified U.S. government documents, and even the direct embedding of one of its authors within the U.S. military for five months during the war.

Cobra II is an epic 600-page work that divides into three distinct sections. The first one-third of the book covers the war-planning period, which began in the immediate wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 when the George W. Bush administration began to contemplate seriously war against Iraq, and continues up to the initiation of that war on March 21, 2003. The second section, which spans the next 300 or so pages, is a historical reconstruction of the Cobra II military campaign, which began with an inauspicious attempt by U.S. stealth bombers to strike a compound outside Baghdad (Dora Farms) that intelligence sources mistakenly believed was housing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and ended with the conquest of the Iraqi capital by U.S. Army and Marine ground forces less than one month later. The final section covers the tumultuous period from the fall of Baghdad through the summer of 2003, during which the American occupation faltered and the Iraqi insurgency began to smolder. A brief afterword to the paperback edition summarizes developments in Iraq through mid-2006.

The overarching theme conveyed in *Cobra II* is that U.S. victory in Iraq was ultimately thwarted not by Saddam Hussein and his relatively weak armed forces, but rather by the Defense Department's own senior leadership. In the book's concluding chapter, Gordon and Trainor

approvingly cite the shared opinion of multiple participants in the conflict that a historic opportunity existed after the conquest of Baghdad to consolidate the initial military victory, stanch the still nascent Sunni-led insurgency, and ensure Iraq's successful reconstruction. Instead, however, the authors argue that this historic opportunity was squandered through a sequence of disastrous decisions rendered from the very outset of the war-planning process by the most senior civilian officials of the Department of Defense, particularly Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and by Cobra II's commanding officer, General Tommy Franks, the head of Central Command.

Rumsfeld is characterized by the authors as a merciless bureaucratic infighter who was a fanatical advocate of "defense transformation," the controversial notion that cutting-edge technological innovations afforded the United States such an enormous advantage in war-fighting that its large lumbering land army had become obsolete. Consequently, in the prolonged lead-up to the invasion, Rumsfeld exerted unrelenting pressure on Franks to scale back dramatically the troop commitment to the operation, from the 500,000 envisioned by Franks' predecessor to less than 150,000. Further, Rumsfeld deftly outmaneuvered Colin Powell's State Department to acquire predominant control over the postwar administration of Iraq, but proceeded to neglect this task under the pretense that much of this burden would be immediately delegated to the Iraqis themselves. As a result of these efforts, the occupation of Iraq foundered on the shoals of a hopelessly overstretched occupation force unable to impose order and a poorly prepared post-conflict reconstruction effort that was rapidly overwhelmed by the demands of its anointed tasks.

Although most informed readers will be unsurprised by this characterization, Gordon and Trainor supplement the conventional wisdom with a mountain of new evidence. For instance, they note that in early 2003, Rumsfeld's steadfast reluctance to share details of the war-plan with the rest of the National Security Council forced council staff members to slip into the Pentagon inconspicuously in order to covertly obtain crucial planning documents to bring back to the White House.

Importantly, however, Gordon and Trainor implicitly reject the notion that Rumsfeld was unmovable. They discuss his early 2001 attempt to fire the director of the Pentagon Joint Staff, which incurred the wrath of the outgoing Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Hugh Shelton, who proceeded to burst uninvited into Rumsfeld's office and threaten to personally resign if the Rumsfeld went ahead with the

firing. On this and at least one other occasion when Shelton held firm against Rumsfeld, it was the latter, not the former, that capitulated. When Shelton's tenure as chairman ended, Rumsfeld replaced him with the more submissive Air Force General Richard Myers, who boasted of sharing a "mind meld" (53) with his new boss.

Most of the rest of the blame for the outcome of the invasion is cast by the authors on General Franks, who not only submitted to Rumsfeld's pressure to reduce the troop commitment to the war, but also generally comes across as stubborn, boorish, vain, and intellectually ill-equipped for the massive undertaking over which he presided. For example, Franks provided his enthusiastic blessing to a war-plan that was based on a set of unavoidable contradictions. Most egregiously, the plan's call for a slimmed-down invasion force rendered impossible its overarching aim of seizing Iraq's alleged stores of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) located throughout the country in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of terrorists. Then, despite mounting evidence that the main threat to U.S. forces was the paramilitary Fedayeen organization and not the Iraqi army, Franks stubbornly refused to adjust the war-plan to accommodate this development. Finally, during the pivotal months following the seizure of Baghdad, Franks rapidly lost interest in the intervention due to his professed eagerness to retire and negotiate a multimillion-dollar book deal for his memoirs.

The book's foremost strength is its meticulously rendered depiction of the Cobra II operation, upon which it will be difficult for future military historians to improve. Although the narrative is somewhat difficult for the nonspecialist to follow, it contains many riveting and gut-wrenching passages that brilliantly capture the hellish reality of war. This ground-level view of the campaign demonstrates beyond doubt the tremendous valor, ingenuity, and adaptability of the U.S. combat soldiers as they fought their way north from Kuwait, and serves to compound the reader's indignation at the fecklessness of their highest leaders.

The authors' prodigious research also sheds light on numerous puzzles surrounding the origins of the invasion. For example, they indicate that Saddam's reluctance to comply fully with United Nations weapons inspections in early 2003 in spite of the absence of Iraqi WMDs was the product of his desire to continue deterring what he viewed as the more proximate threats posed by Iran and Iraq's own Shia population through a delicate strategy that one of his military commanders dubbed "deterrence by doubt" (74). They also reveal that the U.S. satellite photographs and communications intercepts which Secretary of State

Powell presented at the U.N. Security Council in his now infamous February 2003 speech attempting to persuade that body of Iraq's ongoing illegal WMD activities had in actuality captured conscientious Iraqi efforts to scrub suspected WMD sites of all remaining vestiges of Iraq's old pre-Gulf War program.

Remarkably for a work of contemporaneous history, *Cobra II* contains few significant weaknesses. One of these is its near total neglect of the thoughts and actions of the single most important figure in the war, the president of the United States. President Bush (not to mention Vice President Richard Cheney) only makes a few marginal appearances in the story, which likely reflects more the authors' lack of White House access during their research than it does the actual extent of Bush's involvement. Also, the final section of the book, which discusses the months immediately following the conquest of Baghdad, is arguably the most important one, since it is during this phase that the authors claim the United States lost a pivotal opportunity to strangle the insurgency in its cradle and consolidate its initial military victory. However, by comparison with the previous sections dealing with the prewar planning and the invasion itself, this section feels rushed and somewhat less methodical.

In summary, since Gordon and Trainor's work only fully lives up to the first of the two claims of its subtitle, *The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, a comprehensive understanding of the U.S. occupation of Iraq cannot be gleaned from it. However, by so magnificently surveying the origins and initial stages of the war, the authors have not only greatly enhanced our understanding of the events of that period but also set a high standard for the necessary sequel(s).

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James Fallows. *Blind into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.

Dahr Jamail. *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*. Chicago: Haymarket, 2007.

By now the U.S. intervention in Iraq has drawn strong criticisms from all but the most unwavering jingoists. Prominent intellectuals, journalists,

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