

BOOKS

[*Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Thomas E. Ricks, The Penguin Press, 482 pages]

Worse Than A Crime

By Wayne Merry

SOMETIMES ONE CAN judge a book by its cover. Certainly Thomas Ricks lets you know where he stands in his title. However, a word of warning: anyone seeking a *Fahrenheit 9/11*-style mockery of U.S. policy should look elsewhere. There is no gloating or patronizing in these pages. Indeed, for any patriotic American, Ricks provides a deeply painful reading experience.

This book is a chronicle of waste on a fantastic scale: waste of American blood and treasure, of whatever social cohesion and security the peoples of Iraq enjoyed, and of real opportunities for on-the-ground success in post-Saddam Iraq. Ricks—a two-decade military-affairs reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and now the *Washington Post*—covers the Iraq adventure from conception to the present. Much of his material is in the public record—his notes are quite candid about use of open sources—but is greatly enriched by the wealth of his contacts, whose trenchant comments reflect the frustration of dedicated public servants let down by their civilian policymakers and, too often, senior commanders.

Ricks can be almost overly fair and balanced. He finds occasion to say positive things about most of the authors of our war policy, perhaps to avoid the demonizing that marks political discourse on Iraq (and is so characteristic of the neocons themselves). Having written often and with much sympathy over the years about the American military, Ricks is unsparing of the generals. He docu-

ments how these officers—all the product of Vietnam—deliberately forgot the lessons of counter-insurgency warfare learned at such cost in Indochina and so wasted critical months responding to the growing insurgency in post-Saddam Iraq.

Like Ricks, I feel deep regard and affection for my counterparts in uniform, but it is hard not to acknowledge his case against officers who behaved as if post-conflict chaos were new in warfare and who repeated all the blunders of previous failed counter-insurgency campaigns by other armies in other wars. The American armed forces had rebuilt themselves after Vietnam into the finest operational instrument this country has ever fielded in peacetime but chose to ignore the potential of asymmetric insurgency warfare against which their skills and weapons would be of little use. Lessons jettisoned by generals cost many a broken trooper.

Comparison is inevitable between *Fiasco* and *Cobra II*, the recently published account of the invasion of Iraq by Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor. The two works are not parallel, as *Cobra II* concludes with the fall of Baghdad, only a third of the way into Ricks's account. Each book has its merits and both are extremely well-sourced from within the military. Ricks is more comprehensive and much more readable for average civilians, as he avoids the perva-

Cobra II explains more of the lengthy planning phase and the doctrinal disputes that led Defense Secretary Rumsfeld deliberately to under-resource U.S. forces going into Iraq. This is the most astonishing of all the policy failures of the war. Ever since Grant, the American way of war has been more or less industrial, to win with resources. We are a society that prefers to spill money rather than blood—at least, American blood. While our forces were under-resourced in the opening months of Korea and after Pearl Harbor, this was a product of policy failure. Uniquely in our history, in Iraq our war effort was under-resourced as a result of policy choice. Even more than the fundamental misconceptions that took this country into Iraq, the decision to shortchange our troops warrants a full congressional investigation of the type that sought responsibility for the disaster at Pearl Harbor.

Second, Gordon and Trainor correctly identify the greatest intelligence failure of the war, greater than the cock-up on WMD: underestimating the scale and ferocity of the *fedayeen* irregular combatants who attacked American troops from almost the first day. The *fedayeen* attacks not only slowed the ground campaign but were a harbinger of things to come after the proclamation of "Mission Accomplished." Ricks describes the ensuing insurgency extremely well but

THIS BOOK IS A CHRONICLE OF WASTE: WASTE OF AMERICAN BLOOD AND TREASURE, OF WHATEVER SOCIAL COHESION AND SECURITY THE PEOPLES OF IRAQ ENJOYED, AND OF REAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ON-THE-GROUND SUCCESS.

sive mil-speak and jargon burdening *Cobra II*. That book cries out for a glossary and organizational charts. After all, there are many in this great land who, through no particular fault of their own, may not know the relationship of an RCT to an MEF or be aware that a regiment in the Marine Corps is not the same as one in the Army.

Cobra II examines two key issues in greater depth than does *Fiasco*. First,

gives only passing attention to the earlier and ominous experience with irregular warfare on the road to Baghdad.

Fiasco is, nonetheless, essential reading. It can be difficult to recall just how many and varied have been the failures of American policy in Iraq, so a clearly written history of the war to date helps keep current failures in proper perspective.

While *Fiasco* is a rich volume, there are some significant omissions about

broader topics. There is very little in the book about the role of Israel in U.S. policy or about the impact on Turkey, where public suspicion and hostility toward America are now at horrendous levels, or on Iran and the neighboring Arab states. Ricks does not say much about how conflating Saddam with bin Laden has increased the terrorist problem we might have controlled. *Fiasco* stops short of assessing the impact of this adventure on other U.S. interests, including our traditional alliance relationships and the price of petroleum. Most absent in a book about the U.S. military is a better discussion of how much the Iraq adventure has devastated the wellness and capabilities of our fighting forces, especially the combat units of the Army, Marine Corps, Reserves, and National Guard. Missing entirely is reference to the shell-game funding of the war through supplemental appropriations four years into the conflict, as the Defense Department's regular budget pretends there is no war. These issues confirm the basic theme of the work,

that U.S. policymakers have been fundamentally wrong about Iraq and consistently dishonest about their errors.

On a key point of analysis, I simply disagree with Ricks. He says the invasion of Iraq "was based on perhaps the worst war plan in American history." Yes, the plan was damn poor, but we have seen worse. Three examples may suffice. My Bronze Medal for Bad War Planning goes to the Wilson administration, which had over two years to prepare an army and did not and then conducted a mobilization that remains the greatest litany of waste and mismanagement by the U.S. government in the 20th century. The Silver Medal goes to the Lincoln administration, which ignored the sage advice of Winfield Scott and proceeded with its On-to-Richmond campaign, a true fiasco, while Secretary of State Seward actually sought a war with Britain believing it would rally the South to the old colors. The Gold Medal goes to the Madison administration, which went to war with the British Empire virtually without an army or intent to create one, believing citizen militia more formidable than "mercenaries," and would have lacked a navy had Jefferson had his way. We then invaded Canada on the expectation of a cakewalk conquest with no effective resistance. It was fortunate indeed for the young Republic that Wellington refused command of the expeditionary force sent to settle our hash.

No, Washington's record of intelligence failure, faulty policy conception, and willful blindness to reality is more the norm than an exception when our country has gone to war. What makes Iraq special—and dreadful—is that the policy has not improved in over three years of contact with reality. Ricks shows how the armed forces on the ground have relearned many lessons the hard way, but the learning curve of our policy leadership remains flat. Previous administrations bungled their way into wars but then mostly pulled themselves together to serve the best interests of the country. The United States more than once recovered from initial blun-

ders to achieve extraordinary success. Only in Iraq is Washington's pursuit of folly so dogged. Even Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara demonstrated a limited capacity to learn. Not this crew.

Ricks completes his book by examining various options for the future. Unfortunately, his options all assume that American disengagement from the war would inevitably result in conditions worse than if we persevere. Although he does not say so explicitly, Ricks evidently believes we are stuck with and in Iraq for a long time to come, that we cannot walk away from our failures. I would have liked to see in *Fiasco* a fair assessment of what an Aiken option—declare victory and leave—would entail in probable broken crockery. The administration's nightmare scenarios about that option strike me as today's WMD scare.

There are, after all, massive risks and costs to staying in Iraq, with no guarantee of a better outcome than if we leave. There are ample reasons to disengage. First, American interests around the globe are so compromised by our policy in Iraq that even "success" there would come at an unacceptable cost everywhere else. Second, America is sufficiently robust to recover from acknowledgment of error and failure in Iraq. We abandoned the conquest of Canada and let South Vietnam go without long-term damage to our basic interests. Third, at this point we may not be capable of success in Iraq, and the fiasco Ricks describes so well is now irredeemable. Finally, the U.S. presence in Iraq feeds the multiple failures of our policy throughout the Middle East and Islamic world: with Iran, Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinians, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey, and beyond. Tom Ricks is dead right when he describes the U.S. adventure in Iraq as a "fiasco," but when I look at U.S. policy across the region that term seems entirely inadequate. ■

Wayne Merry is a former State Department and Pentagon official and a member of the Coalition for a Realistic Foreign Policy.

MOVING?

Changing your address?

Simply go to **The American Conservative** website, www.amconmag.com

Click "subscribe" and then click "address change."

To access your account make sure you have your *TAC* mailing label. You may also subscribe or renew online.

If you prefer to mail your address change send your *TAC* label with your new address to:

The American Conservative
Subscription Department
P.O. Box 9030
Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9030

[*The Catholic Experience in America*, Joseph A. Varacalli, Greenwood Press, 339 pages]

What the Bishops Hath Wrought

By Thomas E. Woods Jr.

JOSEPH VARACALLI is very much an unsung hero of American Catholic intellectual life. For decades he has quietly labored on behalf of the church, producing in the process a mountain of important articles and book-length studies written from the point of view of the orthodox faith. Against all odds, Varacalli even managed to get a Center for Catholic Studies established at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York, where he has taught sociology for many years. He argued that if the college took its commitment to multiculturalism seriously, it needed to make all cultural perspectives, including Catholicism, available to its students. As we all know, that argument never works. But it worked, somehow, for the indefatigable Varacalli.

Varacalli's latest book, *The Catholic Experience in America*, begins with a brief history of the Catholic Church in the United States and then examines it in light of important sociological categories like race, sex, age, and region. Varacalli likewise covers the Eastern Catholic churches in America, as well as some of the ethnic traditions by which the Catholic faith has been mediated over the course of the American experience. In each case, Varacalli guides the reader effortlessly through the pertinent literature. He does not break much new ground here, but that is not the point of this useful book, which describes the Catholic experience in America from its origins to the present in light of the findings of the most important scholarly research.

Varacalli borrows the helpful term

"plausibility structure" from Peter Berger to refer to the necessary social and intellectual milieu that makes a particular religious tradition a vital factor in the lives of its adherents and inclines them to remain faithful to it. Berger doubted that such a thing could exist in the pluralistic United States, whose religious diversity he thought would inhibit the creation of such a milieu. Varacalli has elsewhere taken issue with Berger's view, arguing that the church itself can create this plausibility structure, even when the surrounding culture is indifferent or hostile, by means of the mutually supportive bodies that comprise its institutional life, including parishes, universities, media outlets, professional associations, and voluntary organizations.

Without this plausibility structure in place, the combined effect of non-Catholic and anti-Catholic influences on the Catholic population is bound to lead a good portion of them in the direction of those influences and away from

of the successful implementation of the strategy to construct a Catholic subculture," Varacalli observes, "America was on its way to becoming, if not a Catholic country, a country with a powerful and united Catholic presence."

This is not mere bravado: opponents of this growing Catholic influence, like Paul Blanshard, once spoke openly of the "Catholic problem"—that is, the rapidly increasing influence and numbers that the Catholic Church in America could boast. The baby boom was itself a good example of this increasingly important subsection of American society: Lutheran scholar Allan Carlson described that jump in American fertility rates as "largely a Roman Catholic event" rather than an undifferentiated or religiously homogeneous social phenomenon.

What happened that brought this enormously influential and spiritually and intellectually vibrant institution to the debilitated state in which we find it

WHAT BROUGHT THIS ENORMOUSLY INFLUENTIAL AND INTELLECTUALLY VIBRANT INSTITUTION TO THE DEBILITATED STATE IN WHICH WE FIND IT TODAY?

Catholicism. According to Varacalli, "Given the fact that most people in any society 'worship' and consider 'sacred' the key values of that society's central value system"—what Emile Durkheim called the "collective conscience" of society—"it should come as little surprise that most ... contemporary American Catholics are 'nominally Catholic,' with some other set of socializing agents more fundamentally shaping their worldview, character, personality, and social and personal priorities."

Varacalli will have no truck with those who believe that the demands of Catholic obedience require them to disparage the pre-Vatican II church for its alleged failings. Varacalli speaks of the pre-conciliar church with deep respect and affection, for it had laboriously built and maintained the very structure whose absence Varacalli and the present writer now lament. "Precisely because

today? The usual answer is that the acid of secular modernity ate away at traditional Catholic life—a view not without merit, but whose explanatory power is not as strong as it first appears.

For one thing, to some extent the American bishops' de facto abdication of authority over American life and culture during the 1960s itself contributed to the success of the very cultural revolution that is said to have damaged the church so badly. It is hard for Americans, especially younger ones, to imagine a world in which Catholics, and even some non-Catholics, actually cared what the American bishops had to say. Today, apart from the occasional perfunctory statement on abortion that keeps the noisier rank and file happy, the bishops are all but silent (when they aren't recommending leftist economics). When they do speak on a matter of importance, no one even knows about