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Thomas B. Ricks, *Fiasco: The Military Adventure in Iraq*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Pp. xiv, 482. ISBN 159420103X.

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In *Fiasco: The Military Adventure in Iraq*, *Washington Post* reporter Thomas E. Ricks uses the certainty of a Pulitzer Prize winner to pass judgment on President George W. Bush's administration for bringing on the Iraq War and then promptly losing it. In the end, Ricks determines that America's best chance for claiming success is interminable occupation and insurrection in Iraq and its worst nightmare a modern-day Saladin riding out of an apocalyptic flame to settle an unsatisfied twelfth-century Muslim score with weapons of mass destruction. Somewhere in the middle is defeat and disgrace.

Ricks uses *Fiasco's* 439 pages to mount wickedly precise attacks on the Bush administration's conduct of the Iraqi war. The book follows his thirty-month campaign of hard shots at Mr. Bush in the *Washington Post* for his reluctance to admit there is a rampaging insurgency in Iraq. Ultimately Ricks takes his best shot and the elephant still gets away, leaving this reader wondering how an entire presidential administration could be so stupid, unless there was some far more sinister plot lurking in the murk at Foggy Bottom.

In *Fiasco's* chaotic world, the clueless generals in the five-sided Puzzle Palace get hijacked early on by an oily gang of Republican elitists with an agenda suspiciously similar to that of a previous administration. At the top of the conspirators' list is the destruction of Saddam Hussein's despotic regime in Iraq; standing in their way a handful of sage generals.

Under the mesmerizing influence of ultra-conservative Defense Department hardliners Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld rids the Pentagon of the high command's recalcitrant generals and replaces them with mediocre officers. In *Fiasco's* twisted world, it makes perfect sense: something has to be done to rein in the reluctant generals and getting rid of the best of them is the way to go.

In spite of cautiously reasoned advice from the remaining baleful generals and prescient colonels, Mr. Bush launches his inadequate legions into Iraq. In six weeks the campaign is nearly over, Iraq is deemed free. Confidence reigns for about six months. Then the administration's wild optimism is dampened by the discovery that Operation Iraqi Freedom has triggered a war between theocracies that has been alternately simmering and boiling for centuries.

Led by the deaf, dumb, and blind, the entire effort falters. In less than a year, the inept Coalition Provisional Authority Bush created to rule Iraq is trapped inside an impenetrable green zone in the middle of Baghdad, watching its instant empire crumble under the guns of merciless Muslim martyrs. Ricks uses the situation to thoroughly baste the Bush administration over the giant smoking holes that used to be Iraq.

*Fiasco* might have earned more credibility with some readers had Ricks consulted with military analysts like Andy Bacevich, the military scholar Robert M. Citino recently called a "bulldog" thinker in this journal (2006.07.01). In *The New American Militarism*, Bace-

vich determines that the rest of the world hates the United States simply because most people reject “the notion of perpetual American dominance.” Bacevich’s reasoned explanation might have rung a bell if Ricks had stepped outside his own polarized view for another opinion.

*Fiasco* charges that everything bad in Baghdad is symptomatic of American imperialism—badly disguised as inept adventurism—conducted by an army of sycophants. Saying this may not be a stretch in many mouths, but Ricks’s supporting “evidence” is often wild or presumptuous speculation. Throughout his book, Ricks assumes the enemy is simply reacting to American ineptitude without a plan of its own. Nowhere does he credit the cunning and diabolical inventiveness of the Islamic fundamentalists who blew up high-value American targets all over the world for twenty years before Bush intervened. Arguing about linkage between Saddam’s Iraq and the “Global War on Terror” at this juncture will not settle the question whether that intervention was the right decision or not. It is all part of Bush’s war. In the meantime, Ricks never makes clear whether he is warning the reader that the conclusions he draws in *Fiasco* could materialize or agonizing over the fact that they already have.

Ricks is always kinder and gentler to those who agree with him, but he stays on target with everyone nonetheless. The book is based on hundreds of interviews with major and minor witnesses who apparently—and often complicitously—participated in a sinister scheme to bushwhack Saddam Hussein’s regime with a lethal dose of Joint Direct Attack Munitions before introducing democracy. Thirteen years ago, a Croatian diplomat characterized American foreign policy as “bomb now, think later.” Ricks validates that assessment with pointed and precisely choreographed testimony.

Too bad *Fiasco*’s belabored conclusions become obvious so soon. A little intrigue would have been nice. After a litany of testimonials by self-immolating converts, Ricks offers a final gloomy scenario in which Saladin rides out of the twelfth century through apocalyptic fires to take on the current Mr. Bush in an ultimate nuclear duel to decide whose god is greater.

Even if Ricks has gilded the lily and the witnesses he depends on have seasoned their recollections with bile, *Fiasco* is a compelling indictment of every motive, purpose, and mission of the United States government in Iraq for the forty-two months it has been dropping our nation’s children and treasure into the cauldron there. Ricks doesn’t take prisoners.

The Vietnam War was the last time a controversy boiled over like the tempest cooking in the ancient Mesopotamian desert where Ricks is stirring the pot. His revelations become even more relevant with the publication of fellow Pulitzer Prize recipient and colleague Bob Woodward’s latest book, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not since the last Crusade has a dynamic duo argued so convincingly that the divisions between peoples and faiths are insurmountable. Both reporters have already conceded to the chimerical practitioners of Fourth Generation warfare now igniting World War III. Neither allows that some people still believe Americans are better than that. If their prognostications ultimately

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<sup>1</sup>New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

prove true, Bush's failures could be fatal to American foreign policy for generations to come.

In Ricks's world, those leading Mr. Bush into Iraq are a select committee that began its conspiracy in January 1998 when the Project for the New American Century Group called upon former President Bill Clinton for diplomacy by other means to incite regime change in Iraq. Ricks describes the assemblage as an "advocacy group" of Republican elitists led by the sinister Mr. Wolfowitz, a former Defense Department appointee in the elder Mr. Bush's Cabinet, a career military officer, and scholar who presumed to urge President Bill Clinton to take action in Iraq before America embarked on "a course of weakness and drift."

*Fiasco* identifies all the usual suspects. Bush's brigades of opponents will wallow in "I told you so" moments while they turn the pages. If Ricks were writing fiction instead of knee-jerk non-fiction, he couldn't have picked more poignant scenes to drive home his carefully honed attacks on Bush's Iraq policy. There is never any doubt he thinks the war is dumb, its execution grievously flawed, and the people charged with implementing its malformed strategies invariably stupid. But Ricks ultimately indicts a bad policy without explaining why it exists. One by one, he identifies and castigates the culprits. Through it all, the only thing on President Bush's mind is a dogged certainty that America needs to get rid of that Saddam fella before he gets hold of some of them "nuclear" bombs Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Wolfowitz are always worrying about.

To put a face on the enemy, Ricks goes to a Sunni-dominated neighborhood in Baghdad where he encounters Mohammed Abdullah, a wise Sunni man defiantly insisting in front of his neighbors that he will fight the Americans trampling his honor. Mr. Abdullah, in the best tradition of Ali Baba, remembers the invasion of Hulagu in 1258, when the grandson of Genghis Khan sacked the city and ended Iraq's glorious reign. There is "a hint of humiliation in his words," Ricks notes, apparently scribbling it all down.

Down the street at 11:30 a.m., it is 103 degrees in dangerous Sunnville as Ricks and his armed American patrol are creeping up on the Rami Institute of Autistic and Slow Learners. Under a spreading lime tree, the men decide to visit the unfortunate children. They leave their weapons outside the school in order not to alarm the little tykes. The soldiers linger for thirty minutes before leaving, well pleased with themselves. Ricks again manages to scribble it all down. It is a scene so sublime that one soldier decides it will end in the patrol leader's court-martial for being so dumb in front of a *Washington Post* reporter. Little do the soldiers know that Mohammed Abdullah's watching neighbors are having unkind, prurient thoughts. Only Ricks knows ... and records it all.

Despite his transparent efforts to demonize Mr. Bush and his advisors with disingenuous objectivity, Ricks's best pages resonate with apt (if overconfident) warnings big and small. Whether the reader believes Bush and his minions are well-intentioned idiots or the lackeys of a conniving elitist conspiracy, the reader only gets Hobson's choice. Ricks leaves no room for other conclusions.

*Fiasco* left this reader nearly convinced that the United States has a government out of control in a nation so complacent it can't see that its foreign policy is on an express train to doom. Despite Ricks's unabashed pessimism, *Fiasco* is a fascinating read and a remarkably

scary one as well. The reader will definitely go away with hackles in the air. Stephen King, eat your heart out!