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David Finkel, *The Good Soldiers*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. Pp. 287.
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The conduct of war has changed utterly in the twenty years since the Berlin Wall came down, and much the same is true of war reporting. Forget the Internet, satellite uplinks, digital photography, and lightweight video cameras—the real revolution was the decision by the U.S. military to embed reporters in its combat units. First the Marines, then the Air Force, and finally the Army opened up to journalists, who had been kept out of the loop since the Vietnam War, which many in the military thought was lost because of reporter bias. The new policy burst upon us during the run-and-gun to Baghdad in the spring of 2003, and it has produced some of the best war prose and video in journalistic history.

Now one of those “embeds” has given us a magnificent look at the 2007 troop surge and the strategic changes that transformed the Iraq War from a long-running calamity into something beginning to look like success. David Finkel is a fifty-something staff writer for the *Washington Post*. Having won several journalism prizes over his career, including a Pulitzer in 2006,¹ he has now published his first book, and it is a masterpiece.

The story begins in February 2007 at Fort Riley, Kansas, as Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Kauzlarich forms up his battalion to deploy to Iraq. In the Old Army, a battalion seldom mustered more than 500 men, but the New Army has pumped up the size and menace of smaller units even as it got rid of larger ones. (No longer do we hear of corps or armies, and even the division is beginning to seem an endangered species.) The 2/16—Second Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment—comprised 802 men when it made the jump from snowy Kansas to hot, stinking Sadr City, a suburb in eastern Baghdad. Finkel describes their hejira thus, in his loose, almost hip-hop prose: “A bus to a plane. A plane to another plane. Another plane after that to some helicopters, and at last they arrived at the place where they were to spend the next year, which wasn’t the Green Zone, with its paved roads and diplomats and palaces, and wasn’t one of the big army bases that members of Congress would corkscrew into just long enough to marvel at the Taco Bell before corkscrewing out” (16).

The 2/16 had reached what the Army oxymoronically calls a Forward Operating Base. When I was a reporter in the early years of the Vietnam War, an FOB was indeed an outpost with few or no amenities, set down in the heart of “Indian country,” as we called anything outside the major towns. Forty-five years on, an FOB is more likely to have a Taco Bell than not, plus air conditioning, Internet access, laundry pickup, and all the other comforts of a modern military establishment. So while Col. Kauzlarich’s headquarters stayed put, most of his troops were expected to move farther out, each company of 150 men to its own lonely station. “An essential part of the surge’s counter-insurgency strategy involved moving soldiers off of FOBs and into smaller, less imposing command outposts, or COPs, that would be set up in the middle of [Iraqi] neighborhoods” (45).

Bravo Company was assigned to an abandoned spaghetti factory, which turned out to have a cesspool in the cellar. Worse, there was a human body in the cesspool, whom the Americans nicknamed “Bob” for his habit of floating to the surface and then disappearing. Nobody volunteered to remove Bob, or even to suggest how it might be done—an impasse that was fortuitously solved by the insurgents of Sadr City, who blew up the spaghetti factory before Bravo Company could move in.

1. In the category of “explanatory reporting,” specifically “for his ambitious, clear-eyed case study of the United States government’s attempt to bring democracy to Yemen” <www.miwsr.com/rd/0919.htm>.

Finkel doesn't seem to notice the discrepancy, but even at their combat outposts the Americans are almost entirely separated from the residents of Sadr City. Whatever happened to the military's counter-insurgency manual, written in large part by the same General David Petraeus who commanded the 2007 surge?² For all the hours Finkel must have spent with Col. Kauzlarich and his second-in-command, Major Brent Cummings, never do we see the officers poring over the pages of Field Manual 3-24. Indeed, the 2/16 seems to violate the manual's precepts every day. Instead of living "amongst the people" in the counter-insurgency tradition, the troops manage to turn a command outpost into another Little America, albeit more primitive than that occupied by the officers at headquarters: "Cots stretched from one end [of the building] to the other. Generators chugged away so there was electricity. There was a working kitchen, a row of new portable toilets, and gun nests on the roof behind camouflaged netting. The whole thing was enclosed in a solid perimeter of high blast walls..." (58-59).

Wrong, all wrong!—especially the blast walls. I don't wish danger upon any American soldier, but these men are recreating Fort Apache, not engaging in counterinsurgency. Posing the book's most poignant question, Col. Kauzlarich asks in a "Peace FM" radio broadcast: "So what makes no sense is why a Shi'a-based militia is trying to destroy the Coalition forces that are trying to aid the Shi'a people?" (78). Maj. Cummings puts it more bluntly: "I'm offering peace and a shit-free life, and you want to fight me?" (151). What neither officer seems to understand is the most fundamental principal of FM 3-24: A counter-insurgent must be embedded in the population, much as Finkel was embedded in the 2/16. He can't corkscrew in and out, like a U.S. senator visiting the FOB.

But that's not how it works in Sadr City: the Americans leave their hardscrabble forts only in convoys of up-armored Humvees, along designated routes with names like "Predators" and "Berm," through neighborhoods from which nearly half the locals have fled (59). Small wonder that Humvees are blown up, and that the vast majority of the wounds suffered by the men of 2/16 are inflicted by roadside bombs, rather than bullets from the insurgent's iconic rifle, the tough, reliable, Russian-designed AK-47.

The insurgent has all day to build his explosive device, which often enough consists of a U.S. Army artillery shell, and all night to emplace it, while Bravo Company is sleeping behind those blast walls. The locals who might have warned the Americans have fled or are too frightened to speak—and anyhow, how to warn the alien soldiers in their Humvees, encased in Kevlar helmets and body armor, their eyes remote behind protective glasses? Much safer to let the insurgent line up his buried bomb with a convenient lamp-post—it will serve as his sighting mark—and run a trigger wire to a building where he can doze until the Humvees venture out in the morning. Usually it's the second or third vehicle that gets hoisted. Not this time:

It had come from the left, where someone had stood watching while holding a trigger and had pressed it a tenth of a second too early or a tenth of a second too late, because the main charge ... passed through the small gap in between Kauzlarich's Humvee and the one in front of it. And though there were flat tires and cracked windows and a few holes here and there from secondary effects of the explosion, all of the soldiers were okay, except for the shaking, and blinking, and headaches, and anger that began to rise in their throats (60).

It's not clear whether the reporter shared Col. Kauzlarich's brush with death. Against the tradition of combat memoirs, he chooses to keep himself out of the action, so that *The Good Soldiers* sometimes reads more like a novel than a reporter's journal, with Finkel as the omniscient narrator. Of the battalion's fifteen months in Iraq, he is with it for a bit more than half the time. "The book also contains some scenes for which I wasn't present," he explains in an afterword. "In those instances, the details ... used in the book were verified through internal army reports, photographs, videos, after-the-fact observation [by the writer], and interviews with as many participants as conditions would permit" (285).

Some chapters are expanded versions of dispatches sent to the *Washington Post* from Baghdad, and these we can reasonably conclude describe events Finkel witnessed firsthand. Among the most affecting is the story of Izzy the interpreter (an assumed name, for fear of the death sentence imposed on Iraqis who

2. Field Manual 3-24: *Counterinsurgency* (Washington: HQ, Dept of the Army, 2006) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0920.htm>.

worked with the Americans) and his daughter.³ The family was at home when a “monstrous explosion” destroyed their apartment house, killed twenty-five, wounded hundreds, and drove a shard of glass into the little girl’s skull. As an Iraqi, she had no right to treatment by U.S. Army doctors, but an older sister had been born in New York City, and Maj. Cummings used this lucky circumstance to lever the injured girl into the FOB’s hospital, never saying outright which of the children was the American citizen. “Man,” says the major when the glass is safely extracted and the little girl can smile at her family, “I haven’t felt this good since I got to this hellhole” (157).

Each chapter bears a specific date and is introduced with a roughly contemporaneous quote from George W. Bush. The one introducing Izzy’s trauma is unexceptionable: “In Iraq, our campaign to provide security for the Iraqi people has been difficult and dangerous, but it is achieving results” (October 22, 2007); but some may be read as ironic: “We’re kicking ass” (September 4, 2007), or presidential: “this situation needed to be dealt with, and now it’s being dealt with” (March 28, 2008). This determined neutrality—ambiguity, if you prefer—goes far to explain why *The Good Soldiers* is being so widely celebrated in venues like *Daily Kos* (“searing, unembellished and unforgettable”)⁴ and *Fortune* (“the most honest, most painful, and most brilliantly rendered account of modern war I’ve ever read”).⁵ It may also explain the silence from conservative organs like the *National Review* and *Weekly Standard*. How could anyone be so churlish as to criticize of a book about brave Americans, doing their job in near-impossible circumstances?

I myself have a couple complaints about the book. The first is Finkel’s obsessive dwelling on the trauma suffered by the killed and wounded soldiers. Fourteen men of 2/16 are killed during the fifteen months of their deployment—about one a month. To our post-modern sensibilities, this is no doubt a tragedy, but, compared to the battles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it hardly ranks as combat at all. In June 1944, on the height-of-land above Omaha Beach, the much smaller 2nd Ranger Battalion lost eighty-one men killed in two days. In October 1967, near the Ông Thanh River, an even smaller battalion (the 2/28th “Black Lions,” really no more than a reinforced company) lost fifty-nine men killed in a single afternoon.

Then, too, *The Good Soldiers* seldom features the small triumphs and pervasive good humor of military life. I enjoyed Finkel’s account of the Soldier of the Month competition, in which a contender is summarily dismissed because he has pre-emptively taken the sterile covers off his field bandage (hard to accomplish when your fingers are wet with blood). And of course the day when the 2/16 prepares for a visit from Gen. Petraeus: “There were muffins, cookies, and fresh fruit, all arranged on a table covered with a green hospital bedsheet. ‘It’s brand new,’ a soldier assured Kauzlarich. ‘We got it from Supply this morning.’ There was an urn of fresh coffee and a bowl of iced drinks, which Kauzlarich noticed didn’t contain Diet Coke. ‘That’s all he drinks,’ he said, always the master of detail, and a soldier hustled off to find Diet Coke” (125). My heart is gladdened to learn that the New Army resembles the Old in some respects. Military life isn’t necessarily fun (certainly not if you get hit) but it is very often funny, and that’s too often missing from this chronicle of the 2/16 in Sadr City.

These cavils apart, *The Good Soldiers* is more than a splendid account of men in combat. It will stand as the classic book about an extremely challenging war.

3. *Washington Post* (27 Jul 2007) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0921.htm>.

4. On 13 Sep 2009 <www.miwsr.com/rd/0922.htm>.

5. On 29 Sep 2009 <www.miwsr.com/rd/0923.htm>.