

# First Drafts of History-- New Releases on the Iraq War

*Intelligence in Recent Public Literature*

Reviewed by Michael Warner

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Marc Kusnetz, with William M. Arkin, Montgomery Meigs, and Neal Shapiro. ***Operation Iraqi Freedom: 22 Historic Days in Words and Pictures***. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 2003. 238 pages.

Karl Zinsmeister. ***Boots on the Ground: A Month with the 82nd Airborne in the Battle for Iraq***. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2003. 213 pages.

Williamson Murray and Robert H. Scales, Jr. ***The Iraq War: A Military History***. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2003. 312 pages, maps, notes, index.

Anthony H. Cordesman. ***The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons***. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 572 pages, maps, notes.

Bing West and Ray L. Smith. ***The March Up: Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division***. New York, NY: Bantam, 2003. 303 pages, maps, notes, index.

Barely a year in the past, the war in Iraq already has many chroniclers. For the combatants, it was nasty, brutish, and short, holding moments of high drama, pathos, and almost cosmic irony. For authors and journalists

"embedded" with the troops, it offered unprecedented access to the front lines. With today's computerized publishing industry becoming almost as agile as a modern military force, it is no surprise that the war can even now be studied in some detail by specialists and lay readers alike in more books to date than any one reviewer can keep up with.

The central objective of the coalition's military campaign in Iraq was toppling Saddam's regime. Coalition commanders needed to hit his "center of gravity" in order to end Baathist rule without inciting a bloodbath, tearing apart the fragile bonds that united his foes, or providing incentive for his neighbors to join the fray. The result was a bold gamble: using just enough combat power to break Saddam's war machine, while sparing the surrounding population and infrastructure. How was this actually done?

Answering that question demands a similarly tricky balancing act. The main problem is the unavailability of source documents and access to key leaders. Although scores of newspaper stories and articles by veterans--in journals like *Field Artillery*--have examined episodes in the war, it is still too early to write a true military history. The challenge in writing a book under these circumstances is sorting through mountains of disconnected data for the nuggets that can be molded into a coherent and insightful story.

The books that explain the Iraq War do an uneven job of mining those nuggets. Their authors perforce rely on media reports and their own observations, supplemented with post-war interviews and commentaries. Their prose often has a "stream of consciousness" feel, being in some cases based on contemporaneous notes taken day by day

Indeed, the overall picture of the coalition war effort is sometimes hazy even in the best of the books reviewed here. The decision to go to war is only obliquely treated, and nowhere examined in detail. And the Iraqi side of the conflict is barely glimpsed in the background. Several of these books, moreover, show signs of haste, with more than the usual quota of typographical glitches and incorrect dates. Four of the five end roughly at the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, making only vague and ominous rumblings about "what followed." Longer reflection and deeper research will inevitably strengthen, modify, or even reverse some of the conclusions reached by these authors.

# A Closer Look

With all these caveats, however, the authors collectively accomplish a great deal. NBC News has produced a readable and nicely illustrated introduction to the conflict, *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. For a brief summary of the war's events and drama, this volume is hard to beat--in no small part because it includes a DVD containing battle footage and businesslike narration by news anchor Tom Brokaw. Both the narration and the print version perhaps overemphasize the triumphs and sacrifices of the embedded NBC reporters, cameramen, and producers--there was a war being fought, after all--but that in itself helps to remind the reader that this conflict was waged in the media as well as on the battlefield.

Karl Zinsmeister's *Boots on the Ground* is similar. Zinsmeister edits *American Enterprise* for the American Enterprise Institute and volunteered to travel with the 82d Airborne Division, which early in the war was being held in reserve for an assault on Baghdad International Airport. The paratroopers ended up clearing the southern city of Samawah instead, and Zinsmeister emerged from the fray with a fast-paced story of urban fighting and some gripping combat photos. His book is a travelogue with no index or maps--and some gratuitous political asides--but his zest for reporting the war's human dimension captures several revealing vignettes, such as the commanders' deliberations before ordering a missile strike on a meeting of Baath Party leaders spotted by "the CIA" (the strike took place, but apparently missed the VIPs).

For more analytical depth and historical context, Williamson Murray and Robert Scates' *The Iraq War: A Military History* makes a valiant effort to present a comprehensive and objective view of the conflict and its implications. The authors are well qualified to do so. Gen. Scates has run the Army War College and commented on military affairs for television. Murray, a professional historian at the Institute for Defense Analyses, has authored several thoughtful essays on air power. Both men have written previously on the performance of the US military in Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

Murray and Scates offer a clear and readable text (well supplemented by photos and maps) that covers all phases of the war effort. They tell us relatively little about decisions made in Washington and London, or even at Central Command Forward in Doha, Qatar, but they nevertheless present some thoughtful observations in a chapter entitled "Military and

Political Implications." Their basic insight is that hard training and careful planning pay off, often in unforeseen ways. This lesson is not news to the American and British militaries, and the authors wisely avoid presenting it as a revelation. Instead, they describe the myriad improvements since Desert Storm that collectively built into staffs and combat units the adaptability to win.

Anthony H. Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies has given us *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons*, the most comprehensive look at the war's details and implications among the works reviewed here. Indeed, his book is more of an encyclopedia than a unified study. Cordesman has published trenchant commentary on several recent wars, but this volume was produced too swiftly for him to deploy his full analytical talents. Its lack of an index, moreover, limits its usefulness as a reference work. Indeed, he almost apologizes in introducing this book, listing a score of "key areas where insufficient data present major problems for analysis."<sup>1</sup>

Cordesman nonetheless does good service in gathering so much information between two covers. He has an eye for both the important facts and the larger context, and his is the only work of the five reviewed here to reflect on the intelligence aspects of the conflict and on the events of "Phase IV," the fight to suppress Saddam's insurgency and stabilize Iraq. He covers almost every debate about the war that made it into the press, from whether the Iraqis employed Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles (he's not sure) to whether the intelligence on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction was "politicized" (he says it was). This is a book for specialists in military and intelligence history, and its conclusions deserve consideration by later authors writing on the war as the documentation emerges and the principals make their accounts available.

*The March Up*, by Bing West and Ray L. Smith, has the highest literary polish of the books published to date. Its title alludes to Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the Athenian general's account of his army fighting its way through the Persian Empire in 401 BC and beating seemingly countless foes along the way. This book is a reflection on the nature of war and the tides of history, and a well-told story in its own right.

West and Smith are Marine veterans of Vietnam--Smith eventually retired as a major general, while West was an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan Administration. With these credentials, the Corps let them tag along with the 1st Marine Division through the heartland of Iraq. They

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drove in a liberated Nissan Pathfinder just behind the tanks, so close that the muzzle blast from an Abrams' main gun cracked their windshield. The Marines they rode with, like Xenophon's hoplites (men with "sturdy legs who eat less grass than a horse"), ultimately prevailed by virtue of superior training, equipment, stamina, and leadership. West and Smith resist the temptation to ascribe this result to some inherent Western superiority over Oriental despotism, but they might not mind if their readers concluded that free citizens fight harder and better than the conscripts of a tyrant or even his enforcers in black ninja suits.

## **The Role of Intelligence**

All of the books reviewed here note, in one way or another, that Saddam's regime fought its last war rather poorly. The Iraqi regular army was not a factor, and the once-vaunted Republican Guard divisions--the heart of Iraqi power in 1991--were brave but dilapidated by 2003. Instead, Saddam and his sons sent their most fanatical followers to charge American tanks in "technical vehicles"--pick-up trucks with machine guns mounted on their beds.

Coalition commanders and intelligence officers discovered to their surprise that Saddam's regime was perhaps not more resilient than expected, but resilient in a different way than they had thought. Baath power depended less on the Republican Guard than on face-to-face intimidation of Iraqis. Thus the coalition's "main effort"--the fast, armored spearheads of the US Army and Marines--turned out to be supporting elements that enabled coalition forces to conduct the urban battles that they had hoped to avoid. In the end, the professionalization of coalition forces made those urban battles mercifully easier than expected. Each of the books here sheds light on how the commanders resigned themselves to urban fighting, and why they were justly confident that their troops could innovate and persevere and ultimately win.

Leadership was a vital factor in this result, and good intelligence was crucial to that leadership. Although each of the authors mentions "intelligence," none sheds much light on the topic. Often they use "CIA" as shorthand for intelligence, neither differentiating agencies and "INTS" from one another, nor rumors from facts. Indeed, many of the passages on

analysis and operations are distorted, misinformed, or otherwise unreliable.

The reality of intelligence in these books is like oxygen--all pervading, but invisible. What these authors mostly missed is that the coalition that launched Operation Iraqi Freedom consumed intelligence inputs on a vast and unprecedented scale in order to know and to "shape" the battlefield. That intelligence had its flaws is an important topic that historians will some day discuss in detail. Even the best intelligence is by its nature incomplete, uncertain, and hesitant. Nevertheless, intelligence analyses and operations gave coalition commanders the confidence to put their forces in places like Baghdad, Basrah, and Nasiriyah, and gave them the chance to win once they adapted to Saddam's shifting tactics.

### **Footnote**

1. Cordesman, p. 8

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