

**COBRA II: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE INVASION AND
OCCUPATION OF IRAQ¹**REVIEWED BY MAJOR DANIEL J. SENNOTT²

*A journey through the war's hidden history demonstrates why American and allied forces are still at risk in a war the president declared all but won on May 1, 2003.*³

I. Introduction

Through primary-source documents and contemporaneous interviews, Michael Gordon and General (GEN) (Retired) Bernard Trainor provide a thought-provoking look into one of the most contentious and defining events of our time: the war in Iraq. The authors' main thesis, notably that "[t]here is a direct link between the way the Iraq war was planned and the bitter insurgency the American-led coalition subsequently confronted,"⁴ is developed through a detailed look at the "foreign policy strategy, generalship, and fighting" of this polarizing conflict.⁵ But the authors go beyond the oft-repeated mantras of the war's many critics, providing an interesting study of the background to the conflict, the personalities behind the plan, and even a lesson in Army values.

As fascinating as it is, however, *Cobra II* does possess a significant flaw. Although the authors promise from the outset a "contemporary history of the entire conflict with all of its complexity,"⁶ by the epilogue, the reader is left wondering if history, like revenge, is a dish best served cold.⁷ The authors have endeavored to write a definitive history of the

¹ MICHAEL R. GORDON & BERNARD E. TRAINOR, *COBRA II: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE INVASION AND OCCUPATION OF IRAQ* (2006).

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³ GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at xxxii.

⁴ *Id.* at 498.

⁵ *Id.* at xxxi.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Although the original source of this phrase is unclear, some attribute it to Pierre Choderlos de LaClos, who wrote it in his book *Les Liasons Dangereuses* in 1782. See The Phrase Finder, *Revenge is a Dish Best Served Cold*, http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/9/messages/813.html (last visited Apr. 9, 2007).

war before it has ended, an account so close in time to the actual events that the authors are unable to draw on much of the newly-emerging information available on the conflict.⁸ In addition, the authors' version of history is decidedly one-sided and limited. This is due in large part to their sources: Soldiers who were interviewed immediately after their return from the war, while their prejudices were still on the surface. Finally, the book is tainted by the authors' own biases. Gordon, who was an embedded reporter with the 3rd Infantry Division during the war, tends to favor certain units and Soldiers over others.

This review provides an overview of the book, then analyzes some of the lessons that can be drawn from the stories recited in it, and finally identifies some of the flaws contained in the book. While *Cobra II* provides a previously unpublished glimpse into the preparation for the war in Iraq, as this review will point out, it is not a definitive history. What the authors do provide, however, is an edgy snapshot of the conflict through the eyes of those who fought it.

II. Transformation: The "Official Ideology"

The authors use the negotiations and debates surrounding the plan to liberate Iraq, code-named *Cobra II*, as a showcase for the various characters involved in that plan. Namely, the authors describe GEN Tommy Franks, commander of the U.S. Army Central Command (CENTCOM), as the aggressive but anti-intellectual general who oversaw the war. Lieutenant General (LTG) David McKiernan, the Coalition Forces Land Component Commander during the war, is the "taciturn and unflappable"⁹ officer who was responsible for coordinating the highly successful push to Baghdad. These two officers are pitted against an enemy force controlled by Saddam Hussein, a paranoid

⁸ The book was written without the benefit of two important documents relating to pre-war intelligence. Both of these reports are definitive resources on the intelligence community's actions prior to the war. See SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE, 109TH CONG., REPORT ON POSTWAR FINDINGS ABOUT IRAQ'S WMD PROGRAMS AND LINKS TO TERRORISM AND HOW THEY COMPARE WITH PREWAR ASSESSMENTS (2006), available at <http://intelligence.senate.gov/phaseiiaccuracy.pdf> [hereinafter POSTWAR FINDINGS]; SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE, 109TH CONG., REPORT ON THE USE BY THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY OF INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE IRAQI NATIONAL CONGRESS, (2006), available at <http://intelligence.senate.gov/phaseiiiinc.pdf>.

⁹ GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at 75.

dictator who was out of touch with the reality of his inevitable defeat.¹⁰ And finally, looming over the entire cast of characters is then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. He is portrayed as an authoritarian who is determined to transform the cumbersome “legacy”¹¹ military created during the Cold War into a “leaner, more lethal force.”¹² Eager to prove that the transformation was viable, Secretary Rumsfeld used the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as the test bed for what became his “official ideology.”¹³

The authors take issue with Secretary Rumsfeld’s ideology of “transformation,” arguing that the seeds of the insurgency were sown in the initial days of the war when U.S. forces, operating with limited resources, bypassed several key cities on their way to Baghdad. In their effort to conduct the war “on the cheap,” the administration jettisoned the Powell doctrine of “overwhelming force” in favor of a smaller “transformation” force with a goal of flexibility and maneuverability.¹⁴ But, in their effort to make the Army more flexible, the Department of Defense (DOD) actually eliminated many of the resources that allow a force to quickly react to an ever-changing enemy. This shortfall in resources, combined with intelligence failures at all levels,¹⁵ made for significant challenges. Although conventional wisdom and U.S. intelligence suggested that forces would meet with minimal resistance in Southern Iraq, the Marines and Army experienced protracted battles in the southern cities of Samawah and Nasiriyah.¹⁶ This intelligence failure

¹⁰ See, e.g., *id.* at 121. The authors rely heavily on a then-classified report by Joint Forces Command that used interviews of captured Iraqi officials to reconstruct the Iraqi war planning process. This report was subsequently released by the Joint Forces Command on 24 March 2006. KEVIN M. WOODS ET AL., U.S. JOINT FORCES COMMAND, IRAQI PERSPECTIVES PROJECT: A VIEW OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM FROM SADDAM’S SENIOR LEADERSHIP (2006), available at <http://www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2006/ipp.pdf>. See Kevin Woods, et al., *Saddam’s Delusions: The View from the Inside*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, May-June 2006, at 2 (providing a fascinating discussion of the findings of the report).

¹¹ GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at 8.

¹² *Id.* at 3.

¹³ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁴ See, e.g., *id.*

¹⁵ See, e.g., GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at 203 (“In the wake of the CIA’s poor showing in the opening days of the war, Army and Marine field commanders’ faith in the agency was shaken.”). See *Postwar Findings*, *supra* note 7 (providing a more complete discussion of the CIA pre-war intelligence failures).

¹⁶ GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at 216, 255. A captured Iraqi officer revealed during interrogation that “his men had been apprehensive about facing U.S. forces, but when they ambushed the wayward 507th [Maintenance] Company, they thought they had

soon led to a leadership failure, as the DOD was unable to adapt to the changing battlefield. For instance, after Baghdad fell earlier than anticipated, many believed that an additional U.S. Army division “would have assisted greatly with the initial occupation.”¹⁷ Instead, the United States had insufficient troops to provide security and basic services, thus exposing a “chink in the victor’s armor” that could be exploited by insurgents.¹⁸ Had Secretary Rumsfeld adhered to the Powell doctrine, the authors argue, the insurgents may never have been able to gain a foothold.

III. Application to Current Issues

Aside from the evident application to the ongoing battle in Iraq, *Cobra II* highlights other contemporary issues that continue to be a source of debate among the military. The authors tackle a recurring problem in time of war: how much civilian involvement is too much? As one officer explained, the military often prefers limited civilian involvement: “give the military the task, give the military what you would like to see them do, and then let them come up with [the solution].”¹⁹ But Secretary Rumsfeld openly quarreled with what he coined “the Pentagon establishment,” reportedly joking that “the Army’s problems could be solved by lining up fifty of its generals in the Pentagon and gunning them down.”²⁰ In a less extreme way, he does address this perceived problem by cutting the Joint Chiefs of Staff out of the war-planning process and working directly with the like-minded combatant commander, GEN Franks.²¹ The authors argue that the Secretary’s unrelenting micro-management of the war, along with his refusal to heed advice on increased troop requirements, caused the United States’ woeful unpreparedness to fight a post-war insurgency. For his part, GEN Franks would not challenge the troop reductions because of his desire to please the Secretary and his desire to replicate

won the first round in the American attempt to take their city and were encouraged to keep up their resistance.” *Id.* at 254. Iraqi forces attacked the 507th and captured Private First Class Jessica Lynch and several others. *Id.* at 240.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 496.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 506.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 4.

²⁰ *Id.* at 8. *But cf.* Andrew Bacevich et al., *Rummy and His Generals*, ARMED FORCES J., June 2006, at 36 (arguing that the tension between civil and military authorities has existed for many years, and is not necessarily attributable to Secretary Rumsfeld).

²¹ *Id.* at 5.

the highly successful combat operations in Afghanistan.²² As a result, the final operations plan left ground commanders with 140,000 Soldiers—230,000 less than the original plan.²³

Although their criticism may be justified, the authors fail to acknowledge the necessary role of politics in war. As counterinsurgency expert David Galula points out, “no operation can be strictly military or political, if only because they each have psychological effects that alter the over-all situation for better or for worse.”²⁴ To successfully fight the enemy, the political power must be heavily involved in planning all aspects of the war, particularly the post-war phase. Although many now argue the current insurgency should be fought by the military without political interference, such bifurcation misses the essence of counterinsurgency warfare. In fact, “the armed forces are but one of the many instruments of the counterinsurgent, and what is better than the political power to harness the nonmilitary instrument, to see that appropriations come at the right time to consolidate the military work, that political and social reforms follow through?”²⁵ As a result, the political power must play the lead role in war making, while simultaneously respecting the expertise of the military in planning war.

As the nation debates whether or not it is appropriate for retired and active duty officers to criticize their leadership, *Cobra II* also illustrates the importance of the Army value of personal courage: demonstrating the moral courage to do the right thing.²⁶ The book is replete with senior officers, both retired and active duty, who are now willing to offer their condemnation of the war plan. However, many of these officers had the opportunity to lodge their objections or address the deficiencies in the plan as it was being developed, but opted not to do so. First, LTG Greg Newbold, the Chief Operations Officer for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recounted how during one planning session with Secretary Rumsfeld, the Secretary was frustrated with the large number of troops proposed for the operation. Lieutenant General Newbold later recalled that his “regret is that at the time I did not say, ‘Mr. Secretary, if you try to put a number on a mission like this you may cause enormous mistakes,’ . . . I was the

²² See, e.g., *id.* at 29.

²³ *Id.* at 28, 168.

²⁴ DAVID GALULA, COUNTERINSURGENCY WARFARE THEORY AND PRACTICE 88 (Hailer Pub. 2005) (1964).

²⁵ *Id.* at 89.

²⁶ Corps of Discovery, United States Army, The Seven Army Values, http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/LC/The%20Mission/the_seven_army_values.htm (last visited Apr. 9, 2007).

junior military guy in the room, but I regret not saying it.”²⁷ Lieutenant General Newbold’s disappointment with his failure to address a fatal flaw in the plan illustrates the importance of consistently showing the moral courage to voice one’s concerns.²⁸

In addition, GEN Zinni, the predecessor to GEN Franks at CENTCOM, recalled that OPLAN 1003-98, the initial plan for a potential invasion of Iraq, was created and refined throughout Zinni’s tenure as CENTCOM commander from 1997-2000. According to the authors, however, it was clear even then that “[t]here was a gaping hole in the occupation annex of the plan.”²⁹ General Zinni directed a war game to test the overall plan but failed to refine the post-war phase. In *Cobra II*, GEN Zinni attributed the failure to Franks, his subordinate at the time. “If I had to point to one person who was deeply involved in 1003-98 it was Tommy Franks.”³⁰ However, in his own book, *The Battle for Peace*,³¹ GEN Zinni portrayed the original plan as complete, and blames Secretary Rumsfeld for changing it at the last minute. He states, “I knew that plan and the ten years of planning and assessment that had gone into it It not only took into account defeating Iraq’s military forces, it took into account the aftermath.”³² Regardless of which version is accurate, it is clear that the post-war phase was a major weakness of the plan from its infancy. Lieutenant General Newbold’s failure to express his misgivings on the war plan and GEN Zinni’s failure to insist on a workable post-war plan demonstrate the decision-making difficulties encountered by even the highest levels of military leadership. These difficulties, however, reinforce the need for leaders at all levels to demonstrate the personal courage to disagree with their superiors and correct faulty assumptions as they are identified.

²⁷ GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at 4. Newbold eventually retired and was one of six generals to call for Rumsfeld’s resignation. See Lieutenant General Greg Newbold (Ret.), *Why Iraq Was a Mistake; A Military Insider Sounds Off Against the War and the “Zealots” Who Pushed It*, TIME, Apr. 17, 2006, at 42.

²⁸ As one author points out, “[t]he military leader who does not hesitate to say, ‘I’ve heard what you said, Mr. President, and I must say I don’t agree without you at all’ while standing in the Oval Office exemplifies . . . professionalism Where such frank advice is given, whether welcome or not, military professionalism is at its height.” James H. Baker, *A Normative Code for the Long War*, JOINT FORCES Q., 1st Quarter 2007, at 69, 71.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ GENERAL TONY ZINNI & TONY KOLTZ, *THE BATTLE FOR PEACE* (2006).

³² *Id.* at 27.

IV. The Weaknesses of *Cobra II*

The major flaw of *Cobra II* is that instead of a “contemporary history of the entire conflict,”³³ the book is actually a rather biased account, a flaw which acts to limit the scope of the work. First, the authors interviewed many of the characters immediately after the battles, when their accounts were colored by personality conflicts, grudges, and, in some cases, embarrassment. Rather than offering these recollections as one view of the war, the authors offer them as the basis for sweeping generalizations. For instance, the authors argue that a series of poor decisions, including rotating out experienced units immediately after major combat operations, led to the insurgency. As evidence, they rely on statements made by Major General (MG) Buff Blount, the Commander of 3rd Infantry Division. Major General Blount recalled that after the occupation of Baghdad, he asked LTG Sanchez, the senior commander in Iraq, for permission to stay in Iraq to exploit “the inroads his soldiers had made with the Iraqi population”³⁴ His request was denied. In retrospect, MG Blount felt that “[f]or a period of time we were perceived as and acted like liberators, but as more and more combat troops came, there was a shift to an occupation or fortress mentality.”³⁵ Blount, along with other commanders of the initial ground force, felt that new leadership and units flowing in after the main attack were not well-suited to the mission.

Major General Blount’s pride in his unit is not surprising given their exceptional work during major combat operations. However, his view is not without bias. In fact, in records relegated to *Cobra II*’s appendix, John Sawyers, the chief British diplomat in Iraq, partially blamed Blount’s unit for the insurgency. Sawyers viewed Blount’s Soldiers as too heavy-handed in their treatment of the occupation like a full-on war. The British diplomat reported to British officials in May 2003 that “3rd Inf Div are sticking to their heavy vehicles and combat gear, and are not inclined to learn new techniques.”³⁶ Although the truth may lie somewhere in the middle between Blount’s and Sawyers’ opinions, the *Cobra II* authors’ uneven treatment of these opinions illustrate the perils of making generalizations based on one view.

³³ GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at xxxi.

³⁴ *Id.* at 492.

³⁵ *Id.* at 495.

³⁶ *Id.* at 575.

The authors' personal biases also impair the book's credibility. Although the authors interviewed "hundreds of participants of all ranks," they overemphasize the role of certain people and units to the detriment of others, which a cursory glance of the acknowledgements confirms. Michael Gordon was a *New York Times* imbedded correspondent with 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division during the majority of major combat operations. He is thus understandably protective of the Soldiers he grew to know so well, and this favoritism is evident in his analysis. Although the authors spoke with Soldiers from numerous units, they dedicate a significant portion of the book to the actions of 2nd Brigade, while sacrificing detail on the major actions of other units.³⁷ In addition, the authors eagerly point out that "[s]ome government and military officials chose not to cooperate," including Secretary Rumsfeld, GEN Franks, and Vice President Cheney.³⁸ While it is not clear whether they would have received more favorable treatment from *Cobra II*'s authors had they cooperated, it does call into question whether personal opinion colored the authors' version of history.

The authors' attempt to write a complete historical account of the war in Iraq is also thwarted by the fact that the conflict is not over. While that fact alone does not necessarily create a fatal flaw, recent history does not always make for accurate history. Even the authors have discovered that the truth can change over time. For instance, GEN Trainor was an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations during the initial push to Baghdad. In that capacity, he granted several interviews regarding his observations on the preparation and execution of the war. In an interview on 18 March 2003, when Trainor was asked to speculate on the upcoming fight, he predicted that "[t]here will be spotty resistance. . . . But the chances of heavy casualties are low on the scale of probability because I don't think the Iraqis are going to fight that hard."³⁹ On 10 April 2003, just days after troops entered Baghdad, Trainor stated: "This has been just an extraordinary military operation," and "[t]he speed

³⁷ For instance, almost an entire chapter is devoted to 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division's heroic "Thunder Runs." However, less than two pages are devoted to the 1st Brigade's Herculean efforts to take the Baghdad airport, and only one paragraph is written on the heroic actions of 1st Brigade's Sergeant First Class Paul Smith, the first Soldier to receive a Medal of Honor for Operation Iraqi Freedom. *Id.* at 359.

³⁸ *Id.* at 511.

³⁹ Interview by Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, Council on Foreign Relations, with Lieutenant General (Ret.) (U.S. Marine Corps) Bernard E. Trainor, Former Marine Corps General Bernard Trainor Worries About U.S. Force Level and Lack of a Northern Front in Advance of Iraq War, Council on Foreign Relations (Mar. 18, 2003), <http://www.cfr.org/publication/5721/>.

and flexibility of U.S. forces heading to Baghdad were enormously impressive.”⁴⁰ Co-author Michael Gordon was an embedded reporter in Iraq when Baghdad fell on 9 April 2003. In a *New York Times* article appearing the next day, Gordon opined that “[i]f there is a single reason for the allied success in toppling President Saddam Hussein’s government, it is the flexibility the American military demonstrated in carrying out its campaign.”⁴¹ However, three years later, Trainor and Gordon have changed their views, now arguing that the march to Baghdad was almost derailed by paramilitary groups who fought with more intensity than expected.⁴² This was an example, they argue, of how “Rumsfeld and his generals misread their foe”⁴³ In addition, the authors argue that one of the major failures of the war was the military leadership’s “failure to adapt to developments on the battlefield,”⁴⁴ an assertion which is similarly inconsistent with their previous declarations. While it is natural for reporters to change their views of the war with the passage of time and emergence of additional evidence, these inconsistencies do illustrate the dangers of writing about a war before it has ended.

V. Conclusion

Cobra II is a provocative and fascinating account of the planning and initial execution of the conflict in Iraq. The first-hand accounts and numerous sources reveal a cast of complex characters that show both exceptional resolve and surprising lapses in judgment. In addition, the lessons that can be drawn from the book are beneficial to all leaders. However, the book is not without its flaws. While the book is worth reading as a part of a larger study of the conflict, it should not be considered an authoritative history. It is but one version of a multifaceted and extraordinarily complex story. But taken as such, the book has earned its place in the ever-expanding library of critical thought on the conflict in Iraq.

⁴⁰ Interview by Bernard Gwertzman, Consulting Editor, Council on Foreign Relations, with Lieutenant General (Ret.) (U.S. Marine Corps) Bernard E. Trainor, Trainor Says Iraq War Rapidly Ending and Calls It an ‘Extraordinary Military Operation’ for Coalition Forces (Apr. 10, 2003), <http://www.cfr.org/publication/5839/>

⁴¹ Michael R. Gordon, *A Nation at War: The Plan; Speed and Flexibility*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 10, 2003, at A1.

⁴² GORDON & TRAINOR, *supra* note 1, at 258.

⁴³ *Id.* at 498.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 500.