

HUBRIS: THE INSIDE STORY OF SPIN, SCANDAL, AND THE SELLING OF THE IRAQ WAR¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR GEOFFREY S. DEWEESE²

*“Did they mislead us, or did they simply get it wrong?
Whatever the answer is, it is not a good answer.”³*

Hubris: The Inside Story of Spin, Scandal, and the Selling of the Iraq War is an engaging, yet sobering account of how the Bush administration used weak, faulty, and erroneous intelligence to sell the case for the Iraq War. The main goal of the book by journalists Michael Isikoff⁴ and David Corn⁵ is to demonstrate that the quality of the intelligence did not matter to the administration. As they state it, “Bush and his aides were looking for intelligence not to guide their policy on Iraq, but to market it. The intelligence would be the basis not for launching a war but for selling it.”⁶

Aside from its value as a national after action review, *Hubris* provides leaders with an important lesson in the dangers of evaluating facts only in light of whether they support a preconceived result. However, *Hubris* falters by not providing a more complete context for its own positions. This review will focus first on these failures before turning back to the lessons learned from Isikoff and Corn’s account.

Hubris asserts that the Iraq War was a “faith-based war—predicated on certain ideological and geopolitical views.”⁷ The authors owe the reader a balanced analysis of what those views were, as well as the

¹ MICHAEL ISIKOFF & DAVID CORN, *HUBRIS: THE INSIDE STORY OF SPIN, SCANDAL AND THE SELLING OF THE IRAQ WAR* (2006).

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³ ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note, 1 at 328 (quoting Sen. Jay Rockefeller).

⁴ Michael Isikoff is an investigative correspondent for *Newsweek* magazine. His last book was *Uncovering Clinton: A Reporter’s Story* (1999), recounting his work in exposing the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the Clinton administration. See Meet Newsweek, http://www.msnbc.com/m/nw/nwinfo_isikoff.asp (last visited Jan. 23, 2008).

⁵ David Corn is the Washington editor of *The Nation* magazine. His last book was *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception* (2003). See DavidCorn.com, <http://www.davidcorn.com/author.php> (last visited Jan. 23, 2008).

⁶ ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 16.

⁷ *Id.*

historical and contemporary context for their development. Unfortunately, what little historical background Isikoff and Corn provide is not developed and put into context. For instance, the authors note that “Saddam’s military ambition had been effectively constrained by the problematic but still-in-place sanctions imposed after the first Gulf War and by the previous UN weapons inspections,”⁸ but they do not touch on why the sanctions were problematic or why weapons inspections were still going on over a decade after the first Gulf War.

Isikoff and Corn do not discuss the creation of the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq and the continued efforts to patrol these areas with American air power.⁹ There is no mention made of the military strikes of Operation Desert Fox in 1998.¹⁰ This engagement, consisting of four nights of aerial and naval attacks with bombs and cruise missiles, was a direct result of Iraq’s ongoing defiance of UN-mandated weapons inspections.¹¹ Finally, there is no serious examination of the massive human rights violations in Iraq and their effect on the decision to oust Saddam, other than passing mention that Saddam “had gassed his enemies in the 1980s”¹² and that inspectors found mass graves after the invasion.¹³

In addition to glossing over the historical background to the conflict, the authors fail to address meaningful contemporaneous events fully. This failure is apparent in the authors’ discussion of David Kay, one of the UN weapons inspectors who had aggressively attempted to enforce the inspections in the early 1990s.¹⁴ Kay and his team had been able to verify through inspections that Iraq had been trying to develop a nuclear bomb prior to the first Gulf War, though they had to endure a standoff with armed Iraqi soldiers who attempted to confiscate the evidence.¹⁵ The documents he eventually got out of Iraq proved that the Iraqi government had lied about the extent of their program.¹⁶ According to Isikoff and Corn, in 2002 Kay briefed national Democratic leaders that

⁸ *Id.* at 26.

⁹ See THOMAS E. RICKS, *FIASCO: THE AMERICAN MILITARY ADVENTURE IN IRAQ 12–15* (2006).

¹⁰ See *id.* at 18–19.

¹¹ See *id.*

¹² ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 17.

¹³ See *id.* at 221.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 126.

¹⁵ See *id.*

¹⁶ See *id.*

[T]he U.S. government couldn't really trust the Iraqis to come clean. . . . The only guaranteed way of disarming Saddam, and making sure he never got a nuclear bomb, was regime change. . . . Anything else, including relying on UN inspections, would entail risk and might not be sufficiently effective.¹⁷

Kay was not alone in believing that Iraq was not cooperating with inspections. After the UN Security Council passed a resolution in November 2002 which gave Iraq a final chance to cooperate with inspections and fully disarm,¹⁸ Iraq submitted a reply that chief UN Inspector Hans Blix called “not enough to create confidence.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, *Hubris* provides no examination as to why Blix felt that way.

Further, Isikoff and Corn devote scant attention to the positive results from the search for weapons of mass destruction that occurred after the invasion, merely noting evidence showed that “[c]learly, Iraq had been working on prohibited missiles.”²⁰ While having prohibited missiles may not pose the same threat as having weapons of mass destruction, the fact that Iraq was hiding prohibited weapons of any type demonstrates the degree of obstruction the inspectors encountered in Iraq. Unfortunately, *Hubris* does not fully explore these factors, leaving the reader to wonder to what degree Iraq's lack of cooperation in the inspections program supported and informed the view of those who felt war was necessary.

Had the authors provided a more detailed analysis of the historical and contemporary context for the war, they would have been in a better position to evaluate the basis for the “ideological and geopolitical views”²¹ of those who supported the war. Yet they fail in this respect as well. This is apparent in the book's discussion of three key figures—President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *See id.* at 158.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 163.

²⁰ *Id.* at 309.

²¹ *See supra* note 6 and accompanying text.

On 1 May 2002, President Bush was speaking with two aides when one of them told the President that a reporter at that day's press conference had asked about possible reasons to go to war with Iraq.²² Isikoff and Corn relate that the President "grew grim and determined—steely."²³ The President is quoted as asking the aide, "Did you tell her I don't like motherf[***]ers who gas their own people? . . . Did you tell her I don't like assholes who lie to the world? . . . Did you tell her I'm going to kick his sorry motherf[***]ing ass all over the Mideast?"²⁴ According to the book's dust jacket, the President's "angry, expletive-laden outbursts at Saddam Hussein drove administrative decision making."²⁵ Isikoff and Corn argue that on that day, the President had already determined the nation needed to go to war and he was concerned about demonstrating "moral clarity" and "strong and decisive leadership" in order to "stand[] tall against an evil tyrant."²⁶ Unfortunately, they fail to follow up and explain what led the President to feel so strongly about the need to remove Saddam Hussein from power.

Similarly, the authors zero in on Vice President Cheney's personal involvement in reviewing intelligence²⁷ and claim that the Vice President had "long standing and firm views on Saddam Hussein that went back to when he had served as secretary of defense during the first Persian Gulf War."²⁸ Yet again, they provide no analysis or explanations as to why the Vice President felt war was necessary other than to simply state, "Cheney seemed obsessed with Iraq. He was sure that Saddam was a grave threat to the United States. . . ."²⁹

The assertion that Vice President Cheney's views on Iraq were either long standing or firm is not borne out when examining other sources. In his book *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, author Thomas E. Ricks quotes then-Secretary of Defense Cheney as stating shortly after the Persian Gulf War, "[T]he idea of going into Baghdad . . . or trying to topple the regime wasn't anything I was enthusiastic about."³⁰ According to Ricks, the former Secretary of Defense did not

²² See ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 1–2.

²³ *Id.* at 3.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at front, inside dust cover flap.

²⁶ *Id.* at 20.

²⁷ See *id.* at 3–4.

²⁸ *Id.* at 4.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ RICKS, *supra* note 9, at 6.

seem overly concerned about Saddam Hussein's continued threat: "Saddam is just one more irritant, but there's a long list of irritants in that part of the world."³¹ The failure of *Hubris* to examine how Cheney's views changed, and why, is a significant detriment to any thorough examination of the motivations of those who supported war in Iraq.

The closest Isikoff and Corn come to examining why the members of the Bush Administration believed war with Iraq was necessary is in their look at the influence of a "rumpled-looking,"³² "oddball and offbeat academic"³³ named Laurie Mylroie.³⁴ Mylroie advocated a theory that "Saddam was the mastermind behind much of the world's terrorism."³⁵ Isikoff and Corn contend that Mylroie's theories greatly influenced Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who they maintain was "enamored of Mylroie's anti-Saddam work."³⁶ *Hubris* addresses a chapter to discount Mylroie as a conspiracy theorist,³⁷ yet its theory that her work was a foundation for the pro-war beliefs of Wolfowitz and others comes across as hyperbole.

In looking at the genesis of Wolfowitz's views, Ricks provides another, more plausible explanation.³⁸ In 1991, Wolfowitz was Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and was the senior-most official in the first President Bush's administration to advocate for intervention in support of Shiite minorities in post-Gulf War Iraq.³⁹ American forces pulled back from Iraq and stood by as Saddam's forces killed thousands of Shiites who had begun an uprising originally supported by the United States.⁴⁰ The United States turned instead to a policy of containment and established no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq, while leaving

³¹ *Id.* at 6–7.

³² ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 67.

³³ *Id.* at 75.

³⁴ According to the biography posted on the website LaurieMylroie.com, Mylroie has a doctorate in government from Harvard and has taught at Harvard and the Naval War College in addition to publishing books and articles relating to Iraq and Saddam Hussein. It does not state where she currently is employed. See LaurieMylroie.com, <http://www.lauriemylroie.com/> (last visited Jan. 23, 2008). According to Isikoff and Corn, she was also a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in 2001. See ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 67. She is no longer listed as a fellow or scholar with the AEI on their website. See <http://www.aei.org> (last visited on Jan. 23, 2008).

³⁵ ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 66.

³⁶ *Id.* at 66–67.

³⁷ See *id.* at 67.

³⁸ See RICKS, *supra* note 9, *passim*.

³⁹ See *id.* at 6.

⁴⁰ See *id.*

Saddam in power.⁴¹ Wolfowitz opposed the policy of containment, which he believed “was profoundly immoral, like standing by and trying to contain Hitler’s Germany.”⁴² While Wolfowitz may have been receptive to someone like Mylroie, Ricks, unlike Isikoff and Corn, actually explains *why* he may have held such views to begin with. Once put into context, Wolfowitz’s support for the second Iraq war becomes more understandable.

The authors devote chapters to the investigation of why and how clandestine CIA operative Valerie Plame’s identity was leaked to the press.⁴³ Isikoff and Corn connect this to the war because Plame’s husband, former ambassador Joe Wilson, had become a vocal critic of the administration after the war.⁴⁴ He had accused the administration of lying about intelligence, specifically intelligence that indicated Iraq was attempting to obtain uranium from Niger—a claim that Wilson had personally investigated for the CIA and found lacking.⁴⁵ While interesting, this aspect of the book is a rabbit trail leading away from the critical issue of the use of intelligence before the war. Isikoff and Corn would have crafted a better and more powerful book had they used these chapters to establish more fully the context for the war and the reasons for the strongly-held beliefs of its supporters. Nonetheless, a wealth of otherwise interesting and well-researched material makes *Hubris* a worthy read.

Isikoff and Corn cite twelve examples of the misuse of intelligence to justify the war.⁴⁶ Without a doubt, the United States failed regarding pre-war intelligence. In June 2003, after the invasion was over, David Kay, the former weapons inspector who had been so sure of the dangers Iraq posed,⁴⁷ agreed to lead the search for the missing weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁸ In January 2004, shortly after leaving that post, Kay testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee: “We were almost all

⁴¹ See *id.* at 12.

⁴² *Id.* at 16. Ricks notes that Wolfowitz “lost most of his Polish extended family in the Holocaust,” which clearly impacted his views on this matter. *Id.*

⁴³ See generally ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 255–79 (Chapter 14, *Seven Days in July*); 317–43 (Chapter 17, *The Investigation Begins*).

⁴⁴ See *id.* at 252–54; see also *id.* at 344–68 (Chapter 18, *The Prosecutor versus the Press*); 369–98 (Chapter 19, *The Final Showdown*).

⁴⁵ See *id.*

⁴⁶ See *id.* at 209.

⁴⁷ See *supra* note 16 and accompanying text.

⁴⁸ See ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 233.

wrong—and I certainly include myself here.”⁴⁹ The next month President Bush established an independent commission to examine the intelligence failures relating to Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction programs.⁵⁰ The commission’s conclusion, released in March 2005, stated that “the Intelligence Community was dead wrong in almost all of its pre-war judgments about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. This was a major intelligence failure.”⁵¹

The President’s commission, however, was not charged with examining how policymakers used the intelligence provided.⁵² *Hubris* stands out by providing this background. Further, it imparts to military leaders an important lesson on the danger of only seeking intelligence and information that supports their preferred actions and discounting anything that does not support such actions.

On 1 October 2002, the CIA delivered a national intelligence estimate (NIE) to Congress.⁵³ This NIE, as Isikoff and Corn put it, “came to symbolize the entire WMD foul-up.”⁵⁴ It included “some points with scary specifics”⁵⁵—Iraq had tons of chemical weapons, had unmanned aerial vehicles designed to deliver biological weapons, and was attempting to buy uranium for nuclear weapon production.⁵⁶ While the NIE did include some dissenting views, it strongly supported the view that Iraq was a serious threat.⁵⁷ Isikoff and Corn concede that two investigations “would later conclude there had been no ‘political pressure’ from the White House to alter the intelligence community’s conclusions”;⁵⁸ however, they essentially maintain that this conclusion ignores the reality of how political pressure worked. They point to the

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 348.

⁵⁰ *See id.* at 349 n.; *see also* Press Release, Office of the Press Secretary, Executive Order Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, Feb. 6, 2004, *available at* http://www.wmd.gov/exec_order.pdf (providing the text of the President’s executive order establishing the commission).

⁵¹ ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 382 (quoting the commission’s report). *See also* REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, THE COMMISSION ON THE INTELLIGENCE CAPABILITIES OF THE UNITED STATES REGARDING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION, Mar. 31, 2005, *available at* <http://www.wmd.gov/report/index.html>

⁵² *See* ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 383.

⁵³ *See id.* at 133.

⁵⁴ *See id.* at 134.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *See id.* at 133–34.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 135.

experience of one analyst who stated, “You were never told what to write. . . . But you knew what assessments administration officials would be receptive to—and what they would not be receptive to.”⁵⁹ Essentially, few analysts felt encouraged to defy the administration’s assumption. In the case of this analyst, when he voiced disagreement, he found himself bumped from trips and uninvited to meetings.⁶⁰

Another intelligence officer, Paul Pillar of the CIA, wrote about his similar conclusion in *Foreign Affairs* magazine.⁶¹ His sobering assessment was that “the Bush administration would frown on or ignore analysis that called into question a decision to go to war and welcome analysis that supported such a decision.”⁶² In Pillar’s view, “Intelligence analysts . . . felt a strong wind consistently blowing in one direction. The desire to bend with such a wind is natural and strong, even unconscious.”⁶³ Pillar’s view, endorsed by Isikoff and Corn, was that the NIE was a product of this environment. Specifically, they argue that this explains why the shaky claim that Iraq was trying to obtain uranium from Niger was included in the NIE even though the intelligence community had serious doubts about it.⁶⁴ They had “bent with the wind.”⁶⁵

Isikoff and Corn argue that by expecting certain results rather than seeking genuine analysis of the issues, the administration created an environment where analysts thought it was more important to support the administration’s views than to support the facts.⁶⁶ Their depiction of how flawed intelligence such as the NIE came to exist and be used provides a warning to leaders. By seeking a specific result and creating an environment that is not conducive to debate and disagreement, true analysis cannot occur. Ignoring facts that do not support a specific desired conclusion will lead to grave errors.

Despite its flaws, *Hubris* makes a powerful case that better leadership and a willingness to hear all sides of the issues could have

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 136 (quoting Bruce Hardcastle, Defense Intelligence Agency Analyst for Near East Affairs).

⁶⁰ *See id.*

⁶¹ *See id.*

⁶² *Id.* (quoting Pillar); see Paul Pillar, *Intelligence, Policy and the War in Iraq*, FOREIGN AFF., Mar./Apr. 2006, available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060301faessay85202-p0/paul-r-pillar/intelligence-policy-and-the-war-in-iraq.html>.

⁶³ ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 136.

⁶⁴ *See id.*; see also *supra* note 43 and accompanying text.

⁶⁵ ISIKOFF & CORN, *supra* note 1, at 133.

⁶⁶ *See id.* at 410–11.

fostered an intelligence environment that would not have failed so miserably in the lead up to the Iraq War. In the Army, virtually every position is subordinate to another, and there are many levels of leadership from the Chief of Staff down to a squad leader. Both leaders and subordinates must be mindful of the dangers of an environment where there is a tendency to “bend with the wind.” For the Judge Advocate, it is important to remember that our value to commanders is in providing honest advice. It may sometimes take personal courage to tell a commander, especially one who is in that Judge Advocate’s rating scheme, “No,” but ultimately if that is the right and legally sound answer, our honor demands no less.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ See, e.g., James B. Comey, *Intelligence Under the Law*, 10 GREEN BAG 2D 439 (2007). Mr. Comey served as Deputy Attorney General of the United States from 2003 to 2005. He states, “It is the job of a good lawyer to say ‘yes.’ It is as much the job of a good lawyer to say ‘no.’ ‘No’ is much, much harder. ‘No’ must be spoken into a storm of crisis, with loud voices all around, with lives hanging in the balance. ‘No’ is often the undoing of a career. And often, ‘no’ must be spoken in competition with the voices of other lawyers who do not have the courage to echo it.” *Id.* at 444.