

“Fiasco, the American Military Adventure in Iraq.” Thomas E. Ricks. The Penguin Press, New York, New York. 2006

We now have a plethora of books about Iraq, Afghanistan, Bush Administration’ decision making processes as well as ideology, intelligence failures, internal propaganda, etc.

There are half a dozen in the market place so far with more every week as reporters finish their writing projects. These books are very useful to the general public in the process of creating an informed electorate, but in some cases are so richly sourced that historians will find them to be important starting points in scholarly research.

“Fiasco” is likely to serve that purpose. Ricks’ wide acquaintance with military people and his long pre-occupation with the psychology of warriors made it possible for him to dig as deeply as anyone could into what the war meant in terms of its impact on the “collective mind” of the American military as well as the terrible results of that mentality. “Fiasco” is a very rich book in terms of the detail that supports its judgments. Ricks spent a lot of time in Iraq absorbing the “feel” of disaster. He has captured it well.

Ricks describes in detail the ineptitude displayed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). He does that because this ineptitude formed the background for the actions or inactions of the collective military mindset that brought the catastrophe in Iraq that is still occurring there and which yet prevails in the American armed forces.

I suppose we must accept Paul Bremer's claim that it was his decision (and his alone) to disband the Iraqi security forces. He accepts the responsibility for this egregious error, so, why should we not? The standard argument by the pro-Bremer group is that the Iraqi armed forces had ceased to exist and that therefore, there were no security forces to disband or employ. What they mean by that is that there were no units to be found by the time the American forces captured Baghdad and that cantonments had been looted and abandoned across the country.

What this argument completely ignores is that armed forces are social groups. They are the functional equivalents of tribes. They are not just collections of weapons and men. In any reasonably coherent military force, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As Ricks' military interlocutors in Iraq saw clearly, the Iraqi forces still existed as bodies of trained and disciplined men even if they were dispersed. They could have been "weeded" at the top to remove politically unacceptable people. After that large numbers of men and officers might have been recalled to the colors where they could have been used to stabilize the country. The authors of another one of the books on Iraq discovered that only a small percentage of Iraqi military officers had ever been members of the Baath Party. It had been a national army, and not a party militia.

The decision to disband, supposedly made by Bremer, was the most important decision made in occupied Iraq. It may well have been the moment in which the war in Iraq was lost. The abrupt dismissal of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi soldiers drove many of them into the various Sunni

insurgent groups. It is not an accident that the insurgents possess a good capacity for the technical aspects of bomb making and the operational planning that enables them to survive, indeed, to prosper as our enemies.

In spite of Ricks' obvious disdain for the "children's crusade" that was the CPA, his central subject is really the poor job that the senior officers of the U.S. Army have done in Iraq. He has far fewer negative things to say about marine leadership and it seems that the greater flexibility and willingness to adapt displayed by the marines justify that.

Ricks' seems to find that the Army's generals have done poorly in Iraq. The evidence supports that judgment. There are several armies contained within the larger framework of the US Army. The largest of these by far is the combined arms; armor dominated "heavy structure" built to fight the major wars faced by the United States in the aftermath of World War II. These forces were created and maintained for almost two generations for the purpose of fighting massive "force on force" battles of attrition in Europe and Korea. Throughout that period it was clear that these forces would fight outnumbered and that a dogged and inflexible defense would be necessary to achieve any sort of success. Rigid discipline, careful adherence to orders and an unquestioning attitude are critical in such fighting. In response the heavy forces of the Army developed in that direction and the collective mentality of officers developed in that direction also. At the same time that this was occurring, there was also a "minor theme" in the Army that existed for the purpose of conducting guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency and the training of foreign troops in the field. US Army Special Forces (the Green Berets) were the major actors in this role. There were other groups as well

but they are not as well known. In Vietnam these two different “armies” fought in the same country, but, in essence, they fought two different wars. The “Heavies” fought the main force divisions and regiments of the North Vietnamese Army out in the woods where they seldom had anything to do with Vietnamese civilians. The “Greenies” and all the other “people’s war” fighters fought the Viet Cong, tried to build the villages up and trained local militias (good militias). When the war in Vietnam ended badly, the “Heavy” Army wanted nothing further to do with any of this and suppressed everything that could be suppressed that had anything to do with counterinsurgency. They actually destroyed the records in many cases. If it had not been for Congressional insistence on maintaining some capability against terrorism, The Green Berets would have ceased to exist.

As Ricks points out, the US Army entered Iraq in 2003 with no doctrine concerning counterinsurgency, no plans for dealing with insurgency and without leadership adaptable enough to perceive the continuing guerrilla war as it developed. At the same time, the minimal number of Special Operations Forces which had survived successive Army “purges” had been largely transformed into Counter-Terrorism Commandos. As a result the “Heavy Army” was asked to perform a task in nation building and counterinsurgency of which it was completely ignorant. The result lies before us, a sorry spectacle. Over the last three years, the “Heavy Army” has sought to learn how to fight such a war. The institutions of learning of the Army are now replete with “Institutes of Cultural Studies, “Urban Warfare Operations Laboratories” and the like and every grenadier is now expected to be respectful of Islam. As Ricks points out, this process of inventing the wheelbarrow is very slow. Along with all with the other parts of the Army, The “Greenies” are re-learning their proper trade.

As a pedagogical exercise this will probably succeed for both groups, because, as the president has said, “it is going to be long war.”