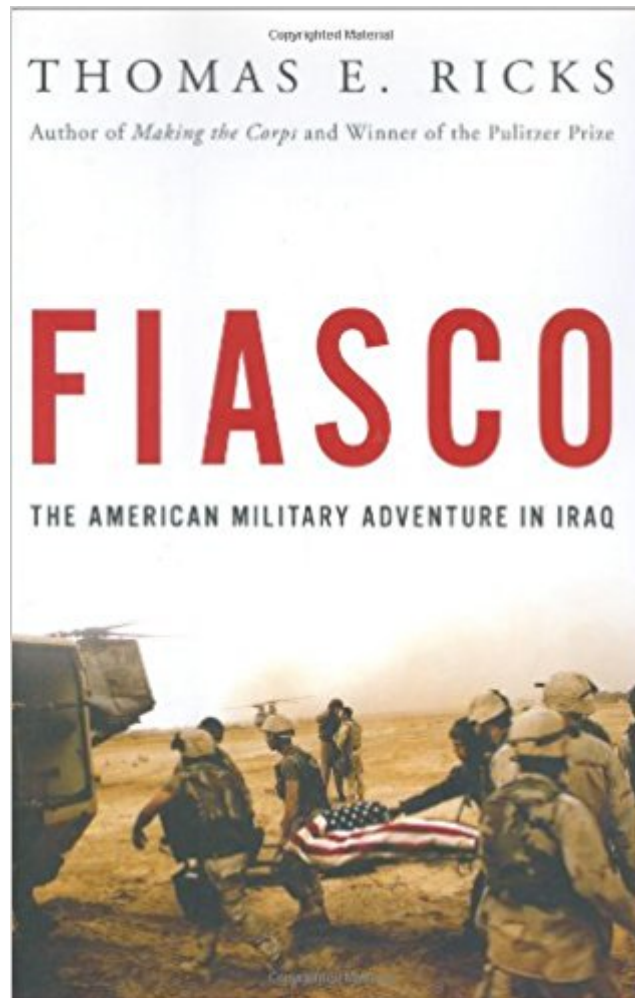




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# **Fiasco: The American Military Adventure In Iraq**



## Synopsis

The definitive military chronicle of the Iraq war and a searing judgment on the strategic blindness with which America has conducted it, drawing on the accounts of senior military officers giving voice to their anger for the first time. Pulitzer Prize-winning Washington Post senior Pentagon correspondent Thomas E. Ricks's *Fiasco* is masterful and explosive reckoning with the planning and execution of the American military invasion and occupation of Iraq, based on the unprecedented candor of key participants. The American military is a tightly sealed community, and few outsiders have reason to know that a great many senior officers view the Iraq war with incredulity and dismay. But many officers have shared their anger with renowned military reporter Thomas E. Ricks, and in *Fiasco*, Ricks combines these astonishing on-the-record military accounts with his own extraordinary on-the-ground reportage to create a spellbinding account of an epic disaster. As many in the military publicly acknowledge here for the first time, the guerrilla insurgency that exploded several months after Saddam's fall was not foreordained. In fact, to a shocking degree, it was created by the folly of the war's architects. But the officers who did raise their voices against the miscalculations, shortsightedness, and general failure of the war effort were generally crushed, their careers often ended. A willful blindness gripped political and military leaders, and dissent was not tolerated. There are a number of heroes in *Fiasco*-inspiring leaders from the highest levels of the Army and Marine hierarchies to the men and women whose skill and bravery led to battlefield success in towns from Fallujah to Tall Afar-but again and again, strategic incoherence rendered tactical success meaningless. There was never any question that the U.S. military would topple Saddam Hussein, but as *Fiasco* shows there was also never any real thought about what would come next. This blindness has ensured the Iraq war a place in history as nothing less than a fiasco. Fair, vivid, and devastating, *Fiasco* is a book whose tragic verdict feels definitive.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 496 pages

Publisher: Penguin Press HC, The (July 25, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 159420103X

ISBN-13: 978-1594201035

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.6 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.8 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 442 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #468,539 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #172 in Books > History > Middle East > Iraq #454 in Books > History > Military > Iraq War #4776 in Books > History > Military > United States

## Customer Reviews

Fiasco is a more strongly worded title than you might expect a seasoned military reporter such as Thomas E. Ricks to use, accustomed as he is to the even-handed style of daily newspaper journalism. But Ricks, the Pentagon correspondent for the Washington Post and the author of the acclaimed account of Marine Corps boot camp, *Making the Corps*, has written a thorough and devastating history of the war in Iraq from the planning stages through the continued insurgency in early 2006, and he does not shy away from naming those he finds responsible. His tragic story is divided in two. The first part--the runup to the war and the invasion in 2003--is familiar from books like *Cobra II* and *Plan of Attack*, although Ricks uses his many military sources to portray an officer class that was far more skeptical of the war beforehand than generally reported. But the heart of his book is the second half, beginning in August 2003, when, as he writes, the war really began, with the bombing of the Jordanian embassy and the emergence of the insurgency. His strongest critique is that the U.S. military failed to anticipate--and then failed to recognize--the insurgency, and tried to fight it with conventional methods that only fanned its flames. What makes his portrait particularly damning are the dozens of military sources--most of them on record--who join in his critique, and the thousands of pages of internal documents he uses to make his case for a war poorly planned and bravely but blindly fought. --Tom Nissley *Making a Fiasco* Thomas Ricks spent five tours in Iraq during the war, reporting for the Washington Post and researching and writing *Fiasco*. Like many of the officers he most admires, when he wanted to understand what was happening as American troops encountered stronger and longer-lived resistance to the occupation than expected, he turned to recent and classic accounts of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, from the U.S. occupation of the Philippines through the lessons of Vietnam, and he reports on his favorites for us in his list of the 10 books for understanding Iraq that aren't about Iraq. You can also get a glimpse into his writing process with a much different list he has prepared for us: the music he listened to while writing and researching the book, from Stevie Wonder and Joni Mitchell to Ryan Adams and Josh Ritter. And he took the time to answer a few questions about *Fiasco*: .com: As military correspondent for the Post, you have made five trips to Iraq over the last four years. How has it changed over that time? Thomas E. Ricks: It has been markedly worse each time, in terms of security. On my first trip, in April-May 2003, we would walk out on the streets of Baghdad at night,

albeit with caution. Even on my second trip, in the summer of 2003, I would feel comfortable hopping in a car and driving 100 miles north from Baghdad to Tikrit. To do either of those things now would be suicidal. In January and February of this year, Baghdad felt worse to me Mogadishu did when I was there in 1993 or Sarajevo did when I was there a few years later. It appeared to me that there was no security, except what you provided for yourself with armed men and careful planning. One Army major described the city to me as being in "the pure Hobbesian state" in which everybody is fighting everybody. By the way, contrary to what I see asserted occasionally, most reporters don't live in the Green Zone, the walled-off area in central Baghdad that is the headquarters of the American effort in Iraq. Reporters live out in the city, and I think generally have a better feel for what is going on than do people living in the Zone or on big American military bases. In the area of Baghdad I stayed in, I constantly heard gunfire and explosions. Yet an American colonel told me that my neighborhood was deemed "secure." I think that really meant that U.S. troops could drive through it while heavily armed--say, with a .50 caliber machine gun atop a Humvee--and usually not be attacked. I worry that what the Americans measure are threats to U.S. troops and the killings of Iraqis. That neglects a huge spectrum of other significant activities--rapes, robberies, kidnappings, acts of extortion, and, most importantly, acts of violent intimidation.

.com: You cite many strategic errors in the planning and execution of the war, but perhaps the central one is that the U.S. military leadership failed to recognize that they were fighting an insurgency, and their methods of fighting in fact helped to create that insurgency. Can you explain those methods, and their effects? Ricks: The U.S. military that went into Iraq in 2003 was the best military in the world for fighting another military. But it was woefully unprepared for the task at hand. For example, U.S. military culture believes in bringing overwhelming force to bear. Yet classic counterinsurgency doctrine calls for using only the minimal amount of force necessary to get the job done. U.S. soldiers and their commanders, untrained and unschooled in the difficult art of counterinsurgency, tended to improvise. So in the summer of 2003, some soldiers in Baghdad decided that the best way to deter looters was to make them cry--and they sometimes did this by threatening to shoot the children of looters, and even conducting mock executions. More broadly, the Army in the fall of 2003 fell back on what it knew how to do, which was conduct large-scale "cordon-and-sweep" operations. These missions scarfed up thousands of Iraqis, most of them fence-sitting neutrals, and detained them. U.S. military intelligence officials later concluded that 85% of those detained were of no intelligence value. The detention experience frequently was humiliating for Iraqis, a violation of another key counterinsurgency principle: Treat your prisoners well. (Your readers who want to know more about this should read a terrific little book by David Galula titled *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and*

Practice.) Not every unit was ineffective or counterproductive. I was struck at how successful the 101st Airborne was in Mosul in 2003-04. And some units showed remarkable improvement--the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment had a mediocre first tour of duty in Iraq, but when it went back in 2005 for a second tour, it did extremely well. Col. H.R. McMaster, the regimental commander (and author of a very good book about the Vietnam War, *Dereliction of Duty*) told his troops that, "Every time you disrespect an Iraqi, you are working for the enemy." I was especially struck by how his regiment handled its prisoners--it even had a program called "Ask the Customer" that quizzed detainees when they were released about whether they felt treated well. This recognized the lesson of past wars that the best way to end an insurgency is to get its leaders to put down their guns and enter the political system, and to get the rank-and-file to desert or switch sides. But it will be harder to discuss the sewage system with the new mayor next year if your troops beat him in his cell when he was your prisoner last year. .com: But today's military leadership was formed in Vietnam, when all of those lessons of counterinsurgency were supposedly learned before. Why didn't that experience translate into a preparation for the current conflict? Ricks: Military experts, such as Andrew Krepinevich (*The Army and Vietnam*) and Lt. Col. John Nagl (*Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*) say that after that war ended, the Army washed its hands of the entire experience and essentially concluded that it was never going to do anything like that again. It was almost as if the very word "counterinsurgency" was banned from official Army discourse. In Iraq, there was a tiny minority of American soldiers early on who understood how to win the occupation. These generally were civil affairs officers and other Special Forces types. But their wisdom often was disregarded. "What you are seeing here is an unconventional war being fought conventionally," one Special Forces lieutenant colonel glumly commented one day in Baghdad. .com: You've been writing about the military for the Post and the Wall Street Journal for years now, and *Fiasco* is built from the testimony of a remarkable array of sources up and down the chain of command, some off the record but many more on the record. Can you talk about your sources? Is this level of public criticism of a war from within the militaryprecedented?? Ricks: Yeah, reporting the book was a pretty emotional experience. Even having covered this war as it unfolded, I was taken aback by the rage that some officers felt toward the Bush Administration, and especially toward Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. And also toward Paul Wolfowitz, who was then the no. 2 guy at the Pentagon. I think the rage is probably like what the military felt about Robert McNamara during the Vietnam War. What is unprecedented, I think, is that many officers had doubts about the wisdom of invading Iraq, especially in the way we did it. The emotions also hit me pretty hard at times, especially when I was writing my chapter 13, about how widespread abuse was by American soldiers in 2003-04, often

because they hadn't been trained for the mission they faced. I have spent more than 15 years covering the military. I tend to like and admire these people. So when I learned about a 4th Infantry Division soldier shooting an unarmed, handcuffed Iraqi detainee in the stomach, and the investigating MPs saying the soldier should be charged with homicide, and instead the commander simply discharged the soldier from the Army--well, that bothered me. Another thing that struck me with sources was the mountain of information that was available. I read over 30,000 pages of documents for this book. At the end of one interview a guy gave me a CD-ROM with every e-mail he had sent to Ambassador Bremer, who ran the civilian end of the first year of the occupation. Other people showed me diaries, unit logs, official briefings, and such. Also the ACLU did a great job of obtaining and releasing piles of official U.S. military documents related to abuse--so I could see the time stamp on an e-mail in which an intelligence officer stated that "the gloves are coming off" in interrogations, and one soldier recommended blows to the chest while another wrote back recommending low-level electrocution. Unfortunately the Army wouldn't release the details of citations for valorous acts by soldiers, which means that the Pentagon made it easier for me to learn about the sins of soldiers than about their acts of bravery. The Marine Corps did give me those "narratives" that support the bestowing of medals, which I really appreciated. Those documents really brought home to me the fierceness of the two Battles of Fallujah, in April and November 2004--probably the toughest fighting American troops have seen since Hue and Khe Sanh in the Vietnam War.

.com: In the last section of the book, you project a variety of possible scenarios for the next 10 years in the Middle East, mostly grim ones, and just in the past two weeks the sudden violence between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon is leading to talk of a wider regional conflict. Where do you think those events are leading us? Ricks: We are really in unexplored territory. We are carrying out the first-ever U.S. occupation of an Arab nation. This is also almost the first time we have engaged in sustained combat ground war with an all-volunteer force. (I think the suppression of the Philippines insurrection might count as a small precedent.) Even more significantly, I think the Bush Administration doesn't really like "stability" in the Middle East. In its view, "stability" has been the goal of previous administrations, but pursuing it led to 9/11. It is not the goal, it is the target. So they are for rolling the dice, both in Iraq and in Lebanon. I think the big worry is those wars spilling over borders. Fasten your seat belts.

The main points of this hard-hitting indictment of the Iraq war have been made before, but seldom with such compelling specificity. In dovetailing critiques of the civilian and military leadership, Washington Post Pentagon correspondent Ricks (*Making the Corps*) contends that, under

Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Feith, the Pentagon concocted "the worst war plan in American history," with insufficient troops and no thought for the invasion's aftermath. Thus, an under-manned, unprepared U.S. military stood by as chaos and insurgency took root, then responded with heavy-handed tactics that brutalized and alienated Iraqis. Based on extensive interviews with American soldiers and officers as well as first-hand reportage, Ricks's detailed, unsparing account of the occupation paints a woeful panorama of reckless firepower, mass arrests, humiliating home invasions, hostage-taking and abuse of detainees. It holds individual commanders to account, from top generals Tommy Franks and Ricardo Sanchez on down. The author's conviction that a proper hearts-and-minds counter-insurgency strategy might have salvaged the debacle is perhaps naive, and pays too little heed to the intractable ethnic conflicts underlying what is by now a full-blown civil war. Still, Ricks's solid reporting, deep knowledge of the American military and willingness to name names make this perhaps the most complete, incisive analysis yet of the Iraq quagmire.

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As a linguist who knows personally some of the U.S. commanders in this book and also translated for them, I can say that FIASCO is one of the best books written on Iraq. I am very shocked to discover that after the destruction of Iraq and the waste of American tax payers money by Paul Bremer, he is not hold accountable by the American and the Iraqi governments. Paul Bremer must put on trial of what he did in Iraq costing American lives. [nninoss.com](http://nninoss.com)

Well researched & very well written (couldn't put it down). I served in the Army as a Combat Engineer for 10 years, but was living as a civilian when Iraq "happened." Even at the time of buildup to war, I was suspicious - something just didn't feel right. Mr. Ricks put his finger right on the reasons why - as amazingly disgusting as they are. More than anything I've read (even Bob Woodward), Fiasco helps explain how and why wars should never be fought based on presumption and biases; the cost is just too high, especially if we were wrong - which in this case I believe the U.S. definitively was. While things look better today than nearly 10 years ago, we should not forget these lessons. Even with the successes in the latter part of the Iraq war (ala Petraeus and the "surge"), they came after too long fighting the "last war." The most interesting thing about this book was understanding the characters through their actions and words - especially at both the senior civilian and army officer levels, right on down to the soldier in the field. Mr. Ricks simply did a fascinating job of understanding what motivated (and constrained) all of these real people, a few of

which I'd known in my career. Every military officer should read this book, if only for awareness of how they can best influence and lead the "next war" that they're asked to fight.

Excellent history and analysis of the 2003 Iraq war. Political hubris and meddling resulting in a long and unsuccessful expenditure of national treasure and blood.

Excellent book. Well written and clear on the civilian and military fiasco that was the invasion of Iraq by the USA in 2003. The reasons to invade were both based on lies and the preemptive attack doctrine of the Bush administration a diplomatic disaster. This book provides the background to the invasion and details the failures in strategic planning before and after. It ends before the successful surge. It clearly explains the failure to plan for after the invasion, to provide clear leadership from the top down. The dilute from the beginning. References: Yugoslavia 1941 Germany makes an unprovoked attack on Yugoslavia because a regime unfavorable to Germany takes over the Government. Yugoslavia falls in the Month of May. The insurgency in Yugoslavia that follows until 1945 ties up almost 40 Axis divisions. Yugoslavia fell in 7 days . The capital surrendered to 6 German soldiers. George Bush; "Preemptive attack doctrine allows the USA to attack any country presenting a clear and present danger to the USA before they actually attack us." For example, cutting of our supply of oil and rare earth metals would be a clear danger to the USA and justify a preemptive surprise attack on the nation that did so. Like when we cut off Japan's supply of oil and steel in 1941 the Bush Doctrine justifies Pearl Harbor? Read the book

Excellent read, definitely recommended for anyone into the Iraq war and definitely recommend the sequel "The Gamble" by Thomas E. Ricks. Both books provide extensive information to why the United States failed in Iraq and what could've been different.

Douglas Feith was the Under Secretary for Policy in the Department of Defense. He couldn't believe the intelligence reports he was receiving so he decided he would make up his own intelligence that fit his views. Part of his views came from Ahmed Chalabi the Iraqi expatriate who ultimately lost all credibility. Feith was heavily involved in post war planning and he didn't want to hear from experts who had developed scenarios that indicated a long U.S. presence in Iraq. He didn't want to hear worst case scenarios. The plan he liked best was the in and out of Iraqi in a couple of months scenario. This was the beginning of the Fiasco described in this book. The army was prepared only



to reach Baghdad. Anyone who thought there would be problems after that was muffled. Author Ricks's book is mostly concerned with our military exploits in Iraq. He feels strongly that Generals Franks and Sanchez were not up to the job. When L. Paul Bremer arrived on the scene to start up the Coalition Provisional Authority things didn't get better. When someone started talking to Bremer about his experiences with insurgency fighting in Viet Nam, Bremer told him he didn't want to hear about Viet Nam. French author Col. Roger Trinquier's book on the war in Algeria was known and read at the Fort Leavenworth's School of Advanced Military Studies. It could reasonably be considered to be a bible on insurgency warfare yet its recommendations were all but ignored. The basic concept to be learned from past experience is that an occupying force must live among the people in order to gain their support. If you have their support then they will not aid the insurgents. Easy prescription for success? Yes, but it was rarely followed. The military live there in air-conditioned encampments with all the comforts of home. Shoot first and ask questions later was often the policy. Marine Major General James Mattis thoroughly believed in the "live with them" approach, and when he was assigned to the Fallujah area he had trained his troops to be part of the population. When he took over he was quickly ordered to conduct a major insurgency campaign involving going house to house through the whole city to root out the enemy. His protests about this approach went unheeded. He then engaged in battle, and when he was close to achieving victory he was ordered to back down. He protested again, and again was not listened to. Fallujah was once again a terrorist stronghold. Well you get the idea. The upshot of this tale is that nothing was planned for. No one wanted to hear from anyone with dissenting views. When General Garner was appointed to head up the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance he found a gentleman named Tom Warrick who exhibited an extraordinary expertise in Iraqi affairs. Shortly after he was hired VP Cheney passed down the word to have him fired. Warrick's views did not coincide with those of the administration. Another amazing thing about this book is the recounting of the childish rivalry between the State Department and the Pentagon. I sure wish someday people in the Administration could act like grown ups. Ricks interviewed numerous people, and fills the book with quotations. When he seems a bit hard on someone he often quotes people with a different point of view. This is an amazing book that often reads like a thriller. It is difficult for me to understand how anyone could read this book, and not realize that things went horribly wrong in our invasion of Iraq. Some other reviewers have nit picked at things in the book, but seem to not see the forest for the trees. As Ricks is mostly concerned with military operations he doesn't dwell much on the civil administration other than to castigate Bremer from time to time. I am currently reading "Imperial Life in the Emerald City" by Rajiv Chandrasekaran which is mainly concerned with civil affairs. These two books together

cover much of the whole Iraqi affair. I might mention too that where the Emerald City book overlaps Fiasco there is a high degree of accord between the two. A must read book.

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