

War and occupation in Iraq

The fog of war

Before history repeats itself, it must be investigated. The invasion and occupation of Iraq, according to nine recent books, can be described as a string of conscious and politically guided mistakes – with disastrous consequences.

By **Bart Tromp**

Four years ago the United States invaded Iraq because Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction were a direct and immediate threat to US security. From a military point of view, the war was to be a demonstration of 'network centric warfare', a new form of waging war, made possible by the 'revolution in military affairs' (RMA). Once freed from the regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraq would transform itself into a political democracy and would thereby become a model for the rest of the Middle East.

The expectations with which the US started the war were not realized. Iraq is now the most unstable country in the Middle East, and also the principal breeding ground for Islamic terrorism. Out of the many books on this subject that have been published since 2003, which are conspicuous for their thoroughness, nine are discussed in this article. Not only do these books map out precisely what has gone wrong, but with their analytical approach they also offer explanations as to why this has happened. The authors have relied on fieldwork, discussions with decision makers and other parties and documents involved. This is a form of contemporary historiography that can only be improved upon and supplemented when in due time (government) archives become accessible.

In *State of Denial*, Bob Woodward gives the best and most disconcerting overview of the decision-making process in Washington in relation to this war. Although right from the inauguration of George Bush Jr as the 43rd US president there was discussion of the possibility of war against Iraq, the decision to do so only came after the attacks of 11 September 2001. A memorandum, *The Delta of Terrorism*, by Christopher Demuth, president of the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think-tank, was influential in this respect. It stated that with '9/11' the United States 'was in for a two-generation battle with radical Islam'. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were at the centre of the problem but they could not be tackled, and neither could Iran. However, the Iraq of Saddam Hussein was weak and vulnerable. That is where the attack should be opened.

For Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, the war served to demonstrate the aptness of his view that thanks to RMA a small armed force, equipped with high-quality technology, could win a war in a short time with minimal loss of life (on the US side), and could then quickly withdraw. That is why the invasion force was reduced to about 150,000 combatants.

But the invasion plan did not take into account any factor other than the defeat of the regular Iraqi army, which was concentrated around Baghdad. Only a few weeks before the war, a few hundred of these untrained soldiers were ordered to search the 946 locations where, according to the intelligence services, 'weapons of mass destruction' could be found. If such weapons had indeed been there, this unit would have been completely powerless to place them under American supervision in time. However, Saddam Hussein had not had such weapons for a long time, as he informed his top generals, to their consternation, in 2002. Until then, the latter had had every confidence that an American attack could be repelled with chemical weapons. The dictator had in fact failed to counter the claims about the existence of such weapons, not only to frighten off the arch-enemy Iran, but primarily to ensure his position of power in Iraq.

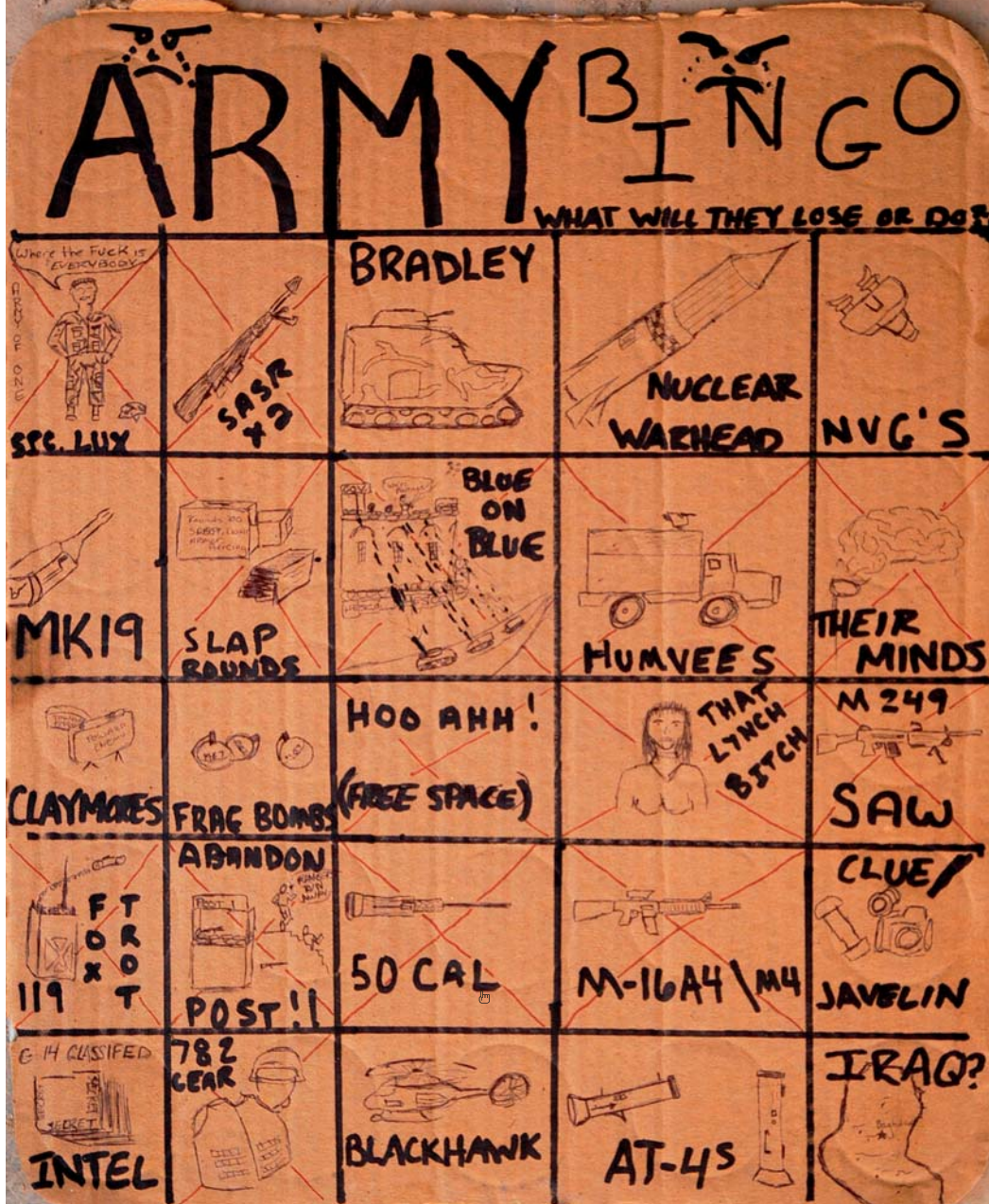
Friktion

In 1992, Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor (retired Marine General) published *The General's War*, which became the standard text on the Gulf War of 1991–1992. Their *Cobra II* is already the standard work on the invasion and the first stage of the occupation of Iraq. Three weeks after the start of the war, US troops had occupied Baghdad and there was an end to organized military resistance, a situation that later turned out to be temporary. But from the detailed analysis of Gordon and Trainor, it is evident that this war cannot in any way be regarded as a successful prototype of military conflicts won on the basis of the RMA model. The conflict evolved very differently from expectations. The enemy was not so much the Iraqi army, but consisted of disorderly fighters without uniforms, equipped with nothing more than machine guns and rocket launchers. RMA, high-grade technological weapons and communications systems, according to the protagonists, had the aim of making an end on the battlefield to what Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1830) in his famous book *Vom Kriege (On War)* called 'Friktion'. He describes this as what distinguishes real war from that which takes place on paper. The word 'Friktion' is nicely translated into English as 'the fog of war'. Well, during the US campaign in Iraq, it turned out that this fog was anything but dispelled by the American technology that should have blown it away. The three weeks of the advance on Baghdad indicated what could be anticipated afterwards. But nearly everyone seemed to be blind to it.

The Americans were still thinking entirely in terms of classical warfare, which involved finding the enemy's focal point and eliminating it. The enemy army and political centre comprise the focal point. According to these guidelines, the war, with the capture of Baghdad, had settled the argument.

But the literature about war has been in doubt for quite some

Bart Tromp is special professor of the theory and history of international relations at the University of Amsterdam and visiting senior fellow at the Netherlands Institute for International Relations, Clingendael. He is also a member of the peace and security committee of the Advisory Council on International Affairs.



A poster made by US Marines in Iraq showing the many things lost by the US Army, their traditional rivals, in the city of Ramadi (2004).

time about whether such wars do still occur. In the pioneering work *The Transformation of War*, Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld wrote in 1991 that modern-day military conflicts no longer fit into the pattern of more or less rational wars between states. In a more recent book, *The Utility of Force*, the retired British general, Rupert Smith also argues, partly on the basis of experiences in Iraq, that in this day and age military conflicts, which he calls 'industrial wars', are no longer appropriate. Such wars involve the military forces of one state conclusively defeating those of the other – the 'continuation of politics by other means', as famously defined by Clausewitz – but since the introduction of nuclear weapons, these wars have become impossible.

Instead, there are conflicts that Smith calls 'wars between people'. Whereas in the period of industrial wars, the civilian population was outside the actual battle, in 'wars between people' the population itself is the battlefield. Military power is only of any use there if it contributes to bringing the actual goal closer and if it is able to win the support, or at least the neutrality, of the civilian population. Before the war against Iraq, therefore, the strategic goal should have been defined as winning the agreement of the Iraqi population to a new regime. Nevertheless, this was assumed to be self-evident, as hardly any

preparations were made for the phase that would follow the military 'victory'. That is the most shocking in all these books – the US government had not only made no preparations, but had actually deliberately ignored all relevant advice and information.

Bush Jr and his people assumed in fact that after the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi state, without too many problems, would start to function under a new democratic administration. The export of oil would provide the revenues to cover the costs of the war and of rebuilding. The United States could then soon withdraw. What still remained to be done, the 'nation building' that was hated so much by the Bush administration, could be left to others, such as the United Nations. The latter would be glad to do that, thought Washington, once the US military had done the dirty work for them.

Within the first four weeks after the occupation of Baghdad, the US still managed to lose the war because they were not in a position to restore order, never mind maintain it; neither were they able to restore minimal public utilities such as water and electricity. General David Petraeus, then commander of the 101st Airborne Division, stated that it did not take long for the liberator to become an occupier – actually not much longer than those first four weeks. In *Fiasco*, Thomas Ricks maps out in detail how everything really went wrong after that, not once,

but again and again. In *The Assassins' Gate*, George Packer tells the same story but in a more personal and less analytical manner.

Failure

The entire project to liberate Iraq and to make a democracy of it was doomed to failure. The formation of stable democratic states in general is an exceptional historical process in which foreign intervention seldom works out favourably. In Iraq, three factors helped to guarantee that the process became a fiasco. The first was the chaos that was allowed to develop and later increase by the further dismantling of the Iraqi state, as a consequence of the decision of the American governor, Paul Bremer, to disband the army and to dismiss members of the Ba'ath party from government service.

The second factor was the quality of the organizations and of the US officials that were to restore order. The latter were selected largely on the basis of political loyalty. Activists for the re-election of President Bush Jr were given preference over officials with expert knowledge. In addition, no one stayed there for long. Six months, the normal tour of duty for a military unit, was exceptionally long for civilian personnel in Iraq. Thus, whatever had been built up in terms of knowledge and contacts within a few months was immediately lost.

But political loyalty and political connections also played a large role in the manner in which commissions for rebuilding, often without invitation to tender, were granted to business 'connections', particularly Halliburton, the company run by Dick Cheney before he became vice-president. In *Blood Money*, Christian Miller describes in detail how the major part of the billions intended for the reconstruction of Iraq ended up in the bank accounts of US businesses.

A third factor was also important: the ideological programme of the Bush administration, according to which government was always less efficient and less effective than the private sector. In Iraq this led to the outsourcing of all sorts of tasks, including those of the armed forces, to private organizations and firms. As no one could foresee the length of the American occupation, this led to organizational chaos, as well as to exorbitant prices. But it also resulted in attracting all sorts of dubious security firms that for sums many times higher than a GI's salary were carrying out semi-military duties, beyond the law and control.

Lack of insight

All of these books point out that the United States had not the slightest understanding of the Iraq that they were invading. That applied to the so-called 'weapons of mass destruction', the frame of mind of the Iraqi population, and the state of society and of the economy in general. The US policy on Iraq was (and to this day still is) based on a combination of lack of thought, lack of knowledge and arrogance.

None of these books, however, makes up for the lack of insight into Iraqi society. In the political commentaries on current events in Iraq we see exactly the same misapprehensions about 'centuries-old' ethnic and religious differences as those that were trotted out during the war in the former Yugoslavia. Iraq was once the most developed Arab state in the Middle East. The totalitarian regime of Saddam Hussein, however, completely undermined the Iraqi state. In the period after the Gulf War of 1991–1992, primarily thanks to UN sanctions, the state disintegrated even further. In order to survive, Iraqi civilians

were thrown back either on the patronage networks controlled by Saddam Hussein and his people, or on the tribal connections from which the comparatively large professional middle classes had certainly liberated themselves.

The US occupation, through its impotence to restore the state monopoly on violence, the tax system and the administration of justice, has strongly encouraged the existing fragmentation along tribal and religious lines. What is taking place now in Iraq can best be explained in terms of Thomas Hobbes' theory of the state. If there is no longer a state that can guarantee the minimum physical safety of its citizens, then they are forced to create other defence (and thus also attack) units, or to leave the country. In the meantime, a large section of the middle classes has already done that, while the sectarian fighting and expulsions are gradually propelling Iraq into a geographical three-way division.

Viewed from a distance, the American Iraq policy shows two fundamental shortcomings, whatever one thinks of the aims of the war. The first is that the US armed forces, in relation to equipment and training, as well as strategic and operational doctrine, have remained completely trapped in the concept of classical warfare, and the RMA reinforced this further by trusting that such a war could be determined by technology.

The second shortcoming is that 'regime change' is something quite different from 'nation building'. The Bush administration, with its distaste for the latter, displayed a lack of sociological insight and historical understanding, with disastrous consequences. In his *Empire and Superempire*, the British historian Bernard Porter suggests that the idea of 'regime change' as a short transitional period was based on a myth about the American Republic. According to this myth, the United States came into being with the uprising in 1776 and the state was completely 'finished' a few years later. In Iraq, the ideology of 'regime change' led to the notion that it was sufficient to eliminate Saddam Hussein. After that, a democracy would come into being in natural succession. The fog would lift and the American troops could go home. ■

-
- Bob Woodward (2006) *State of Denial*. Simon & Schuster.
 - Ron Suskind (2006) *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11*. Simon & Schuster.
 - Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor (2006) *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*. Pantheon Books.
 - Rupert Smith (2006) *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. Penguin.
 - Thomas E. Ricks (2006) *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*. Penguin.
 - George Packer (2006) *The Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
 - T. Christian Miller (2006) *Blood Money: Wasted Billions, Lost Lives, and Corporate Greed in Iraq*. Little, Brown.
 - Charles Tripp (2007) *Militias, vigilantes, death squads*, London Review of Books, 29(2), 25 January.
 - Bernard Porter (2006) *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World*. Yale University Press.

📖 A longer version of this article, with extensive notes and links, can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu.