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# — BOOK REVIEWS —

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## THE IRAQ WAR: A MILITARY HISTORY

By Williamson Murray and Major-General Robert H. Scales, Jr.  
(Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 312 pages.

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**Reviewed by: Major A.B. Godefroy CD, PhD.**

Within months of the United States of America declaring an end to major combat in Iraq, histories of the war began to appear on bookshelves around the world. The vast majority of these were either pictorial or popular in nature, and it seemed reasonable at the time, to expect that operationally oriented or academic histories would take longer to produce. Not so. In the summer of 2003, Dr. Williamson Murray and Major-General (ret'd) Robert H. Scales, Jr., both of the U.S. Army War College, endeavoured to complete what is surely among the first historical assessments of the war. Their book, *The Iraq War: A Military History*, provides a detailed yet admittedly incomplete operational narrative of the American invasion of Iraq that began on 20 March 2004 and ended just over three weeks later with the fall of Baghdad on April 9<sup>th</sup>.

This book is appealing to both general reader and student of military history alike. A very readable account at just over three hundred pages, *The Iraq War: A Military History*, includes detailed full colour maps of the theatre of operations as well as three sections of full colour photographs covering all aspects of the campaign. Detailed notes and data on all aircraft, ships, equipment and munitions employed by each side further support the narrative, and the fully indexed text allows easy reference to both units and actions.

Murray and Scales devote the first section of their work to discussing how Saddam Hussein became leader of Iraq and the nature of his political and military power. They make no attempt to hide the facts, whether by discussing American support for Hussein during the war against Iran in the 1980s, or the horrendous and brutal means with which he controlled his own Baath party, the military or Iraqis. What is obviously apparent to the reader is that no matter what opinion one might hold about the war, the despotic regime of Saddam Hussein presented a danger to the vital interests and security of the United States if not the entire Middle East. Hussein—a villain who murdered his own people, invaded his neighbours, bought 'martyrs' to bomb and terrorize his enemies and put bounties on United Nations inspectors—was in the process of privatizing war and exporting it to Europe and North America when the Americans made their move against Iraq. Although he may have no longer had weapons of mass destruction, he still had the means to arm thousands of suicide bombers and terrorists and had clearly stated his intent to attack the West with such asymmetrical forces. From the American perspective, these threats alone justified their need to remove Hussein from power.

The next section of the book is a broad yet insightful précis of the evolution of the American military since the end of the Vietnam War. Particular attention is paid to technological modernization as well as the evolution of joint doctrine from the origins of the "air-land battle" theory through to joint task force operations as we know them today. At this point the first of many lessons the book makes is presented. Using the *Goldwater-Nichols Act* of 1986 as a starting reference, the authors conclude that the U.S. armed services have displayed an increasing ability to fight jointly over the last two decades while not compromising the inherit

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strengths that each separate service possesses. The authors consider this a crucial ingredient of American tactical success in Iraq. Still, they also admit that, “the changeover is not yet complete, and in its underpinnings of doctrine and its intellectual depth the concept of joint operations remains immature. On the other hand, a completely joint force, such as the one that Canada has attempted to create, is not necessarily desirable—it could even lead to disaster.”<sup>1</sup> Not necessarily a backhanded compliment, the authors simply point out that joint operations cannot truly occur if the organizations that make up a joint task force are themselves not organized or streamlined. Essentially, they note that while Canada may have unified its military, it has nothing near to what the United States and Britain would consider a unified fighting force.

Still, the book notes that Americans and British forces faced many of their own challenges in Iraq. The ground commanders in the war were clearly disappointed at the lack of intelligence the U.S. had on their adversary. Major-General James Mattis, a veteran of Afghanistan and commander of the 1st Marine Division, noted that he encountered considerable frustration in understanding the enemy he confronted. “T.E. Lawrence had a better idea of the personality and capabilities of his Turkish adversaries in World War I, Mattis said, than he was ever able to get out of U.S. intelligence concerning the Iraqis.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the war, while intelligence certainly proved valuable, all of the land commanders agreed that human intelligence, “HUMINT,” and “ground truth” on Iraqi strengths and intent were often extremely lacking. This was especially the case with assessments of irregular units, secret police and Fedayeen militias packed with foreign fighters,<sup>3</sup> who it seemed to be the most difficult adversaries for American ground troops throughout the war.

The book does itself merit by detailing many of these tactical engagements, filling in many of the holes that received only loose official attention or media coverage during the war. As one reads through the narrative, many intense battles and firefights present themselves. Also one quickly learns just how superior the United States’ firepower was. When the infamous *shamal* (dust and rain storm) struck Iraq during the last week of March, the Iraqi forces believed that the inclement weather would provide protection from air strikes and allow them to mass for a defence against the Marines and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division. Unfortunately for Iraqi commanders, however, American technological prowess, particularly in remote sensing and precision-guided munitions (PGM), had advanced considerably since the Gulf War. As a result, U.S. aircraft were still able to deliver massive blows against Iraqi force concentrations during the *shamal*, in turn destroying a large portion of the enemy armoured forces facing the American ground advance.

Land forces also sported improved technologies. Artillery support remained constant as GPS assisted with directing fires for infantry attacks. Individual soldiers also carried GPS as well as improved thermal and night vision devices. This kit allowed them to “see” much farther during the *shamal* and provide a deadly response to attacks from Iraqi regulars and Fedayeen attempting to make use of the otherwise blinding conditions.

Though there was never really any speculation on the final outcome of the ground war, Murray and Scales bring to light many interesting and important facts that were missed by the instant generation media presentation played out to armchair generals and “military experts” back home. The authors openly criticize television sound-bite analysts who grossly overestimated Iraqi military effectiveness and often confused a complete lack of Iraqi command and control with operational and tactical flexibility and insane loyalty and enthusiasm for actual discipline and training. As battle revealed, neither Iraqi regular nor Fedayeen had any of these attributes when it mattered. As one American ground commander later noted, “Iraqi generals...couldn’t carry a bucket of rocks.”<sup>4</sup>

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Murray and Scales also point out some of the general misinterpretations of operational warfare seen in the media. When American forces paused to rest and re-supply after nearly six straight days of fighting, some of it in extreme weather conditions, news agencies in the West immediately speculated that the Americans had hit the wall. As scenes of fighting in and around An Nasiriyah appeared at home, a parade of talking heads quickly judged that it was the shape of things to come, and that Americans could expect a long, hard drawn out struggle in urban environments, especially if and when U.S. forces reached Baghdad. The book, however, clearly describes the flow of operational level warfare and how such pauses were a necessary part of the overall plan. In fact, resistance was often less than expected, and though some fierce firefights ensued, there were no such quagmires as so many “military experts” had predicted.

Pan-Arab cohesion was also not as solid as pre-war speculation led many to believe. Of those fundamentalists that were taken alive, many were reticent of their treatment by those they had come to assist. “It was madness,” a captured Fedayeen told British reporters. “We stayed at the front for five days with nothing to eat. I saw two dead bodies shot in the head by Iraqi soldiers. I went there to be martyr, not to be murdered by a brother. We went there to help them and all they did was shoot us in the back.”<sup>5</sup> Such comments were common amongst foreigners as their ill trained and poorly led groups were thrown at Americans with little real effect.

The media presence also had a huge impact as land forces struggled to deal with the ever-creative methods of their foes. One British officer commented that although he was not disconcerted very much with the fact that Iraqi soldiers often played dead, lured his soldiers in closer with white flags only to shoot them at point blank range, or even regularly employ civilians as human shields, he was concerned how BBC cameras and reporters would interpret what appeared to be his soldiers wandering the battlefield shooting what appeared to be already dead Iraqis.<sup>6</sup> The point Murray and Scales make here is that the reality of war is so far removed from most people in the West that it is often difficult to explain certain actions beyond what they appear to convey without a context. A similar example would be the reported enemy use of ambulances to transport weapons and ammunition or the employment of hospitals, shrines and schools as command posts, air defence sites or bunkers. The “rules of war” as they are understood in the West, the authors note, simply do not seem to apply to warfare in the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

Other lessons germane to students of tactics are also present. Throughout the war, land force commanders made liberal use of ad hoc formations to respond to various situations on the ground. Essentially, more often it was the obstacle or task, not doctrinal orders of battle that determined the force composition for any given mission. Whereas ten years ago American ground force units and organizations fought largely independently of one another, it was common in the 2003 Iraq War to see army soldiers and Marines fighting alongside one another. Non-traditional tasks were also assigned to those units best equipped to deal with them. Such was the case with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, where Major-General David Petraeus would test the limits of aerial manoeuvre in protecting the long lines of communication supporting the advance of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division.

Also painfully highlighted in this book was the lack of proper combat training and efficiency within American rear echelon forces. Stretched out, thinly guarded and under the constant threat of attack, troops supporting the lines of communications often paid dearly for their tactical mistakes. Ironically, the need to adequately train clerks and cooks to fight as infantry was identified long ago (or not so long ago) by generals such as Field Marshal William Slim, who

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while leading the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in Burma during the Second World War often remarked that the Japanese made little distinction between rifleman and pay clerk when they were busy overrunning your headquarters. American soldiers should have recognized that even in Iraq the front line was everywhere.

In addition to reflecting on the successes and failures of technology, the last section of this history attempts to put the post-war period in perspective. The authors rightly predict that although technology and superior firepower could win the hot war, it alone cannot win the peace. Just as in other American-led wars, winning the hearts and minds of Iraqis and helping them to build a new post-war democracy in the Middle East will prove the greatest challenge for American forces.

Although a very early and admittedly incomplete analysis, Scales and Murray are to be commended for their efforts. This book is a good read, provides plenty of thought for the land warrior and is a solid reference for the present. Only further academic studies will outshine it.

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### **About the author...**

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### **END NOTES**

1. Williamson and Scales, *The Iraq War*, 52.
2. *Ibid*, 116.
3. Captured Fedayeen militia included Syrians, Palestinians, Egyptians, and even the odd Chechen.
4. Williamson and Scales, *The Iraq War*, 126.
5. *Ibid*, 120.
6. *Ibid*, 149.

Discover the CIA history, mission, vision and values. Careers & Internships. The Iran-Iraq War's front matter explains that it is the last of three formally published works to appear as a result of this project,[3] although the Iraqi documents remain available for further research. These papers have already formed the basis of other revealing work on pre-2003 Iraq, including an examination published in this journal of the Saddam regime's understanding of the Iranian nuclear program.[4]. A comprehensive account of the Iran-Iraq War through the lens of the Iraqi regime and its senior military commanders. About the Author. Williamson Murray has just completed a two-year stint as a Minerva Fellow at the Naval War College and is at present serving as an adjunct professor at the Marine Corps University. He is also Emeritus of History at Ohio State University. At present he is a defense consultant and commentator on historical and military subjects in Washington, DC. He is co-editor of *The Making of Peace* (with Jim Lacey), *The Past as Prologue* (with Richard

Iraq War, conflict in Iraq (2003–11) that consisted of two phases: a conventionally fought war in March–April 2003, in which a combined force of troops primarily from the United States and Great Britain invaded Iraq and defeated Iraqi military forces, and a second phase consisting of a U.S.-led occupation of Iraq. Encyclopaedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree. See Article History. Alternative Titles: Operation Iraqi Freedom, Second Persian Gulf War. Iraq War, also called Second Persian Gulf War, (2003–11), conflict in Iraq that consisted of two phases.