

A Worthy War Critic

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George Packer.

The Assassins' Gate.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 480 pages. \$26.00

The war in Iraq has broken down familiar political categories and overturned typical foreign policy priorities. Both right and left have struggled to adjust, but they have met with unequal success.

The right's adjustment began with President Bush's nationally televised speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001. It accelerated with the national and international debate over Iraq in 2002, the lightning removal of Saddam from power, and the painful, protracted reconstruction. Indeed, it was for the most part conservatives in America, led by the president, who championed the idea that it is in the U.S. national interest to reach out into the world to promote democracy and spread freedom. Meanwhile, it was progressives by and large who preferred to leave Iraq's totalitarian dictator in power and who, after his removal, continued to dwell on the cultural and religious differences that impede liberal and democratic principles from taking root in Muslim Arab soil.

To be sure, the president accomplished one of the greatest reversals of course in American political history: A candidate who forcefully eschewed nation-building has, as president, launched the most ambitious nation-building program ever undertaken by the United States. After the September 11 attacks, he began to lay out the argument for a dramatic refocusing of American foreign policy in a series of high-profile speeches. These helped generate a spirited debate among conservatives — realists, neoconservatives, and isolationists — on the grounds and the wisdom of the president's Iraq policy. In the meantime, a party that in the 1990s had insisted on America's moral obligation to engage in nation-building — and which, in the Balkans and elsewhere, had acquired valuable experience during that decade in the practice of it — has undergone a transformation of its own. Spurred by the inflammatory language of filmmaker Michael Moore, former presidential candidate and now dnc chairman Howard Dean, and the 3.3 million-member-strong MoveOn.org crowd, the left has largely foregone serious criticism of Operation Iraqi Freedom in favor of cheap shots, sanctimonious grandstanding, and systematic obfuscation.

Thus, George Packer's well-researched, intelligent, and heartfelt book on the actors and ideas that propelled America to invade Iraq — and, in his view, caused the reconstruction to go disastrously astray — is welcome. A man of the progressive left, Packer is a serious journalist and a talented writer. In an effort to understand the causes and consequences of the war, he has pursued large questions, immersed himself in small details, and, in covering the

reconstruction of Iraq, repeatedly put himself in harm's way. His ambitious book is the high-water mark of progressive criticism of the war. Its virtues and vices are therefore of keen interest.

For starters, Packer covers an impressive range of the persons, opinions, and institutions that played a role in the events culminating in Operation Iraqi Freedom. His book is informed by conversations, spanning a decade, with his friend Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi-born intellectual who came to the United States as a young man in the 1960s. In the early 1990s, Makiya began writing from the progressive left on the need to remove Saddam and establish democracy in Iraq. In the run-up to the war, he won the ear of the president and the vice president and assured them face-to-face in the Oval Office that Iraqis would “greet the troops with sweets and flowers.” The book also draws upon interviews with former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and foreign policy analyst Robert Kagan, going well beyond the pervasive caricatures to present reasonably sympathetic portraits of the thinking of neoconservative hawks. It follows the interagency war between Colin Powell's Department of State and Donald Rumsfeld's Department of Defense, in which not only final victory but all the battles seem to have been won by dod. It goes inside the Defense Department, examining the Office of Special Plans — secretly set up in September 2002 under the supervision of Undersecretary for Policy Douglas Feith — which was assigned special responsibility for postwar planning in Iraq and appears to have been woefully unprepared for the challenges presented by the coalition's swift victory. It relates the well-meaning but inept efforts of retired general Jay Garner, head of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (orha), who, along with a band of fishing buddies and fellow retired generals, was assigned initial responsibility for managing Iraq after the fall of Saddam but was given next to no instructions from Washington and a pathetic budget. Within weeks of their arrival in Baghdad, Garner and company were on their way home, replaced by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer.

In addition, Packer's book rivetingly chronicles the four trips he made to post-Saddam Iraq on assignment for the New Yorker. Among other adventures, he viewed the operations of the Coalition Provisional Authority through the eyes of Drew Erdmann, a thirtysomething Harvard history Ph.D. who was sent to Iraq on the strength of his dissertation on the aftermath of war in the twentieth century and became Iraq's de facto acting minister of higher education. Packer received a guided tour of the dilapidated Al-Rashad long-term psychiatric hospital on the eastern edge of Baghdad — from which 600 severely disabled patients had been released during postwar looting — from the hospital's chief psychiatrist, Dr. Baher Butti, who was born Christian, raised secular, and quit the Baath party only upon the arrival of the Americans. Packer circulated among actresses, poets, painters, and professors at the Hiwar Gallery, a café in a “die-hard Baathist” northern district of Baghdad. He got to know the Shiite Sheikh Emad al-Din al-Awadi, who had been captured and tortured in the late 1970s for political activism and then sent to a special internal ward in Abu Ghraib,

where he was imprisoned for seven and a half years. In April 2003, the sheikh's followers rescued carloads of documents recording the detainment and abuse of prisoners by Saddam's security police.

Packer also observed the work of the cpa at Saddam's former Republican palace where, in the summer of 2003, "a twenty-five year-old oversaw the creation of the Baghdad stock market, and another twenty-five year-old, from the Office of Special Plans, helped to write the interim constitution while filling out his law school application." He accompanied high-minded, determined, 29-year-old Captain John Prior and Charlie Company on a mission to Zarafaniya, an impoverished Shiite suburb of Baghdad, to get the open-sewage sludge line flowing. He met a 28-year-old Iraqi computer programmer named Aseel, who wore a veil to protect herself from the fundamentalists but revealed to Packer her determination to take advantage of her newfound freedom, thanks to the Americans, and to leave Iraq and see the world. In the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk, he discussed with Kurds the justice of their determination to expel Iraqi Arabs whom Saddam had imposed on them as part of his plan of forced Arabization. Back in the United States, Packer tracked down the family of Private Kurt Frosheiser, who enlisted in the army in January 2003 at age 22 and was killed in action in November. Packer got to know Kurt's bereft father Chris as he struggled to make sense of his son's death, and they engaged in a lengthy email correspondence about the meaning of the war and how the country ought to be led. And Packer returned to Iraq in January 2005, journeying to the southern Iraqi city of Basra to observe the historic elections and finding there a disturbing consolidation of power among Shiites with ties to Iranian Islamists.

Packer claims that his is "mainly a book of reporting." This is somewhat misleading. The reporting is beautifully done — rich in detail, keenly observed, smartly written — and placed in the service of an argument about the aims and execution of the war in Iraq. Packer writes as an engaged citizen who cares deeply about American responsibility and the fate of the Iraqi people. During the run-up to the invasion, he was, as he himself puts it, an "ambivalently prowar liberal." Although he repeatedly suggests that the Bush administration hyped wmd fears — and despite serious doubts about the ability of the architects of the war to pull off the enormous undertaking — he was powerfully drawn to the humanitarian and nation-building arguments for removing Saddam put forward by his friend Kanan Makiya. So Packer bit the bullet: "The administration's war was not my war — it was rushed, dishonest, unforgivably partisan, and destructive of alliances — but objecting to the authors and their methods didn't seem reason enough to stand in the way."

Indeed, as late as July 2003, on the eve of his first visit to postwar Iraq, Packer reveals that he still hoped to find there "the political and cultural flowering post-Saddam Iraq might produce." Instead, he discovered political disorder, a rotting physical infrastructure, broken spirits, and fanaticism. Most of all, though, he seems to have found a Coalition Provisional Authority overwhelmed by its lack of resources and local knowledge and not even remotely up to the task of bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq. Meanwhile, back home in the United States, Packer ruefully observes, "From the prewar period through the invasion into

the occupation and insurgency, an ascendant triumphalist right and a weakened, querulous left took more interest and pleasure in the others' defeats than in the condition of Iraq and Iraqis. In this country, Iraq was almost always about winning the argument." Yet despite his genuine distaste for the knee-jerk progressive scorn for the war, the difficulties and costs of regime change in Iraq impelled Packer to become an opponent of it. And an opponent as well of those who conceived it and carried it out. In fact, his book serves as a brief against neoconservative ideas, against the manner in which Bush took the country to war, and, most emphatically, against the administration's management of the reconstruction.

Still, Packer avoids the mistakes of many critics. He sees clearly that life under Saddam was a nightmare for the vast majority of Iraqis. He feels deep in his bones the true progressive's resolve to fight tyrants and to promote democracy. And he knows full well that the insurgents who have killed thousands of Iraqi citizens are not freedom fighters but vicious terrorists making war in the name of a totalitarian interpretation of Islam in unholy alliance with Sunni Baathist thugs struggling to hold on to the power to oppress Shiites and Kurds. Nevertheless, Packer reaches conclusions about Iraq that converge with the American progressives' conventional wisdom: Neoconservatives, led by Paul Wolfowitz, himself subject to a "messianic impulse," took advantage of a gullible president and hijacked American foreign policy, recklessly pushing America into an unnecessary war without a plan to deal with the predictable chaos that would ensue.

Packer does not lay all the blame for the woes of reconstruction at the feet of the neoconservatives. He also thinks that in making the Pentagon responsible for postwar Iraq the president made a calamitous bureaucratic decision. According to Packer, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, no part of whose long career prepared him for the task, was not on board for the nation-building program. In fact, there can be little doubt that the war's architects failed to plan adequately for the aftermath of major combat operations. Some of them, the record will show, were irresponsibly confident about the ease with which an impoverished and dispirited people would assume the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Some unwisely pinned their hopes for a new Iraq on the suave Shiite Ahmad Chalabi and his small band of Iraqi National Congress exiles. Some did not appreciate the obvious limits of their knowledge about Iraqi politics, Arabic, and Islam. And just about all lacked expertise in nation-building, a task most of them came to late and only gradually in response to the September 11 attacks.

But how much of this mishandling and misjudgment can be traced to neoconservative ideas? Packer would say the decisive part of it. In truth, however, America's blunders in Iraq are more readily traceable to the failure of the Bush administration to adhere to neoconservative ideas. For neoconservatism is not only a school of thought about foreign policy and war that stresses America's national interest in promoting freedom and democracy abroad. It is also a school of thought about domestic policy and constitutional government. It can be traced back to the moment in 1965 when then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued his seminal report on the breakdown of the black family. Since that time,

neoconservatives have done more than any others on the American scene to champion the idea that democracy depends on culture; that all policies — especially those dreamed up by well-intentioned Beltway and campus intellectuals remote from the facts on the ground — have unintended consequences; and that government must be energetic in securing the conditions for liberty and equality, as well as careful not to overreach and suffocate liberty by trying to manage all things. Certainly neoconservative ideas counseled more respect for the enormous challenges of establishing freedom and equality in Iraq than was evident in the planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

But what of Packer's more general indictment? Even with the acknowledged foul-ups, has American policy overall in Iraq been a catastrophe, as Packer flirts with concluding? The most one can reasonably say, even from the progressive point of view, two-and-half years after the liberation of Baghdad, is that the jury is still out.

Consider some rather weighty facts: Saddam's Iraq no longer controls "dozens of wmd-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment that Iraq concealed from the United Nations during the inspections that began in late 2002" that chief weapons inspector David Kay uncovered in the summer of 2003. Saddam's Iraq no longer makes a mockery of international law and the Security Council by openly defying 17 resolutions, dating back to 1991, calling on him to discontinue his wmd programs and fully disclose the steps his country had taken to disarm. Saddam's Iraq no longer takes the lives of 60,000 children a year, according to unicef estimates, and 21,000 to 35,000 lives a year, according to more conservative estimates, by diverting Oil-for-Food money to the purchase of palaces and the funding of troops and weapons. And Saddam's Iraq no longer imposes bloodthirsty totalitarian rule over 25 million Iraqis. Instead, Iraqis have asserted their sovereignty, with 8 million citizens — 60 percent of the electorate — voting in national elections last January; and, despite serious obstacles, proceeding with the drafting and ratification of a constitution grounded in the consent of the governed, committed to the protection of individual rights, and recognizing Islam as "a" and not "the" source of law.

To be sure, the bloody insurgency persists, the difficult debate over the constitution may collapse, and even civil war cannot be ruled out. And the sunny scenarios that Vice President Cheney and others in the administration forecast have not come to pass. Yet those sunny scenarios turn out to be closer to the truth than the grim pre-war predictions of Iraqis using chemical weapons in battle against coalition forces; chemical-tipped Scud missile attacks on Israel; a million refugees destabilizing regimes throughout the region; tens of thousands dead in urban hand-to-hand combat; and hundreds of oil wells set on fire.

In the final pages of his book, Packer describes a conversation back in Cambridge in March 2005 with an older and wiser Kanan Makiya. The long-time progressive champion of democracy in Iraq had journeyed to there and back several times since liberation. While working to establish a headquarters in the center of Baghdad for the Iraq Memory Foundation, devoted to collecting Iraqi documents testifying to Saddam's savageries, Makiya

had the opportunity to watch close-up as postwar Iraq failed to live up to his democratic dreams for it. What Makiya had learned, writes Packer, “is the complexity of Iraq both under Saddam and since. Ideas required this deep human knowledge. Culpability was often gray and vague. People did things for the most complicated reasons, and politics was too narrow to explain and judge them all; true understanding required Makiya’s real love, literature.”

At its best, the journalism that George Packer practices — steeped in ideas, attuned to personalities and institutions, hating tyranny and loving justice — reflects his old friend’s war-forged wisdom. Where Packer’s journalism falls short, as it does in several critical ways, it is owing to a failure to live up to its own exacting standards. And where it misses the mark, it lapses into mistakes characteristic of contemporary progressives’ standard criticism of the war.

First, Packer’s reporting from Iraq dwells on the negative. War is hell, and the reconstruction of Iraq, which is part of the larger war against Islamic extremism, has had its hellish side. Thanks to Packer’s book, we are better able to confront our mistakes in Iraq, our losses, and the suffering of the Iraqi people. But he invites us to do this in isolation from the larger picture, and therefore he leaves us ultimately misinformed. His book provides scarcely a glimpse of the scope of the coalition’s successes in improving the quality of life in Iraq.

Such information is not hard to come by. Indeed, in May 2004, Australian blogger Arthur Chrenkoff began compiling “Good News from Iraq,” based on information he culled from the Worldwide Web (<http://chrenkoff.blogspot.com>). You would not learn it from Packer’s book, but by late spring 2004, one year after the liberation of Baghdad, 16 of the biggest cities in Iraq had elected city councils; 51 million Baath-free textbooks had been put into circulation; 20,000 contractors were in the country doing business; the Iraqi Central Bank had been established; the Iraqi authorities had taken full control over their oil resources; the first commercial airport in the Kurdish section of Iraq was nearing completion; and most services and infrastructure had been restored to prewar levels. By summer 2004, after the cpa had transferred sovereignty to the Iraqis, 278 new newspapers had appeared, 273 more than the state-controlled newspapers that had existed under Saddam Hussein; enrollment for first-year college students had risen from 60,000 in the last year of Saddam’s regime to 90,000; the overall number of telephones, including cell phones, had grown 46 percent since before the war; 15 private radio stations had opened; and the Iraqi bond market had opened, complementing the new and expanding Iraqi stock market.

By fall 2004, as the Iraqi Election Commission, with the aid of UN experts, began preparation for January elections, state workers were enjoying salaries that had skyrocketed in the 18 months since the fall of Saddam, increasing in many cases more than a hundredfold; work proceeded on the upgrading of Iraqi railways, beginning with the three main stations at Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the center and Basra in the south; 12,000 teachers and administrators who had been members of the Baath party had been fired, while USAID trained 33,000 high school teachers and rehabilitated 2,500 classrooms; Baghdad enjoyed a surge in

property values, and the heavy demand for construction required cement factories to work around the clock; and over 750,000 Iraqis had participated in the “Democracy Dialogue Activities” of usaid’s “Local Governance Program.” By the time Iraqis voted on January 30, 2005, Iraqi Kurdistan was bustling and prosperous; thousands of reconstruction programs — involving water, sewage, and irrigation systems, electricity lines and power plants, highways, railroads, and airports, clinics and hospitals, and the educational infrastructure system from grade school through university and including adult civic education — were in motion, supported by U.S. armed forces as well as relief organizations from America and other nations.

The point is not to switch the focus from bad news to good, but to put both in the balance — to see, as Packer lauds his friend Makiya for coming to see, the complexity of Iraq.

Second, Packer exploits the personal suffering of soldiers’ relatives to call into question the wisdom of the war. This is particularly evident in his lengthy chapter on the struggle of Chris Frosheiser to come to grips with the meaning of his son Kurt’s death. Packer’s treatment of Frosheiser is subtle and humane. But grieving parents are the last people to whom one should turn for reasoned judgment about the morality of the war in Iraq or for sober analysis of its geopolitical justifications. Moreover, by telling only of Chris Frosheiser’s grief, Packer suggests that Kurt’s father is representative of soldiers’ parents. Yet according to an August ap-Ipsos poll, “People with friends or relatives serving in Iraq are more likely than others to have a positive view of a generally unpopular war.”

Third, despite an interest in the intellectual roots of Islamic extremism, Packer grows strangely disengaged as the reconstruction unfolds from the war’s larger historical and strategic circumstances. He says in the Prologue that he “first went to Iraq, and then kept going back, because I wanted to see past the abstractions to what the war meant in people’s lives.” In this Packer has succeeded spectacularly. But in response to the tendency of war planners to traffic in grand strategy and bloodless abstraction, one can overcompensate. Packer does this by allowing the suffering he rightly chronicles to cloud the strategic context he wrongly neglects. He does not deny that many of the difficulties of Iraqi reconstruction derive from Saddam’s destruction of the Iraqi economy and assault on the spirit of the Iraqi people. He does not deny that Saddam would have made the situation all the more desperate had the U.S. maintained a strategy of containment. He does not deny the president’s proposition that 50 years of coddling autocrats in the Middle East has brought neither peace nor stability. And he does not deny that we are engaged in a worldwide struggle against Islamic extremism that could well last a generation or more. But neither does he explore viable alternatives to Operation Iraqi Freedom or to the promotion of democracy in the wider Middle East.

Packer’s book offers much to argue with and also much to admire — which makes his the sort of progressive voice seldom heard in recent years and of which the country is sorely in need.

