



Breaking Iraq: The Ten Mistakes That Broke Iraq by Ted Spain and Terry Turchie.

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Few would disagree that Iraq is broken—as a state and a national community, and as a foreign-policy project for the United States. Was this inevitable or a result of specific missteps by the architects of the American invasion and occupation in 2003? The authors of *Breaking Iraq* seek to answer that question in their thoughtful and revealing ground-level account. The book is essentially a memoir by Colonel Spain, who commanded the US Army's 18th Military Police Brigade in 2003-4. It centers on blunders made by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, Coalition Provisional Authority head L. Paul Bremer, and the warden of the prison at Abu Ghraib, Brig. Gen. Janis Karpinski, among others.

The authors' invaluable field experience is apparent throughout Spain's first-person narrative.¹ Ten chapter-length discussions identify critical mistakes through personal anecdotes and observations. The book is intended for a general readership interested in the causes of US failures in Iraq. Its core argument is that decision-makers in Washington and Iraq failed to anticipate the war's consequences as they made poor choices in its early months.

The authors begin with a familiar criticism—that military police units like Colonel Spain's were belatedly deployed to the war zone, wasted on low-priority missions like guard duty, and put under the command of combat units rather than integrated in a unified effort to stabilize Iraq. They then pinpoint mistakes made once hostilities commenced, singling out in particular General Sanchez, who commanded coalition ground forces, and General Karpinski, a reservist tapped to oversee Abu Ghraib, with infamous consequences in the form of torture and prisoner abuse. Though they admire several civilian and military leaders, including President George W. Bush and Gen. David Petraeus, they decry the strategic and operational failings of many others. Spain writes

When I think of the lost opportunities in Iraq during 2003, Lt. General Sanchez comes vividly to mind.... During the several weeks I served under him when Sanchez was the division commander, he was more interested in killing bad guys and not interested at all about [sic] standing up the Iraqi police or winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Ordering me to put an MP company in each of his five combat arms brigades over my strong objections resulted in them being seriously misused. (162)

Likewise, Spain portrays Karpinski as an inexperienced, incompetent leader who refused to take responsibility for her mistakes: "The tension was thick when Karpinski and I met for the first time in the foyer of my headquarters palace" (128). After recounting her angry, expletive-filled response to his actions, he comments "Had she been a male, I probably would have punched her first and talked later" (129). Spain castigates both Karpinski and Sanchez for putting their careers ahead of the mission, a leitmotif of his discussion of leadership shortcomings in Iraq.

The book has its shortcomings. The larger American failure in Iraq did not result from a succession of discrete errors, as Spain and Turchie imply. The whole US invasion was irredeemably flawed

1. Turchie, a former FBI deputy assistant director for counterterrorism, interviewed soldiers who served under Spain and contributes to the larger assessment of what went wrong in Iraq.

from the outset, quite apart the command-level errors the authors expose. At a minimum, avoiding one set of problems would have created others. For example, deploying more US troops, emphasizing police over combat units, keeping low- to mid-level Ba'athists in power, adopting a hearts-and-minds approach—all these would have presented their own pitfalls. It is unlikely, for instance, that the United States could have increased its invasion force without eliciting some form of rebellion on the path to democracy. Iraq's post-invasion troubles went beyond a lack of law and order. The authors offer no evidence that the United States could have prevented significant *political* upheaval by avoiding the errors they identify. No doubt, policy and operational mistakes contributed to Iraq's disintegration, but their wider implications are not self-evident.

The authors also disregard Iraq itself as a country. Though they are sympathetic to Iraqis, they assume a patronizing, quasi-colonialist attitude that put them at odds with a people who had a deeply rooted sense of national identity. In their discussions of the need for rule of law—a point well taken, given the tribulations of insurgency and civil war—they write as if the birthplace of Hammurabi's Code has known only petty despotism throughout its history. They comment that “Establishing law and order in Iraq under a system of justice and the rule of law was a far greater task. Intangible, invisible, and inviolable, many Iraqis didn't understand it and there were some who didn't want it” (75). Moreover, the presumed shortcomings of Iraqi culture are cited to explain all sorts of political dysfunction in the country. This attitude manifested itself in incidents of wartime bravado, as when Spain instructed his translator to tell a village cleric that he would “personally kill him” (60), if Iraqis pointed weapons at him or his men. Granted he was reacting to perceived threats in a war zone, but such intimidation was hardly likely to capture Iraqi hearts and minds.

These critiques aside, the book evinces an authentic and mildly self-critical tone rarely found in the memoirs of significant participants in high-profile global events. Dozens of personal accounts of the Iraq War are now available, many of them more polished and artfully written than this one. But they read like attempts at self-aggrandizement or reputation management. Spain, by contrast, expresses regret and takes some responsibility for specific American missteps on his watch, admitting he could have managed things better.

Another strength of the book is the distinctive vantage point of its authors. Even if Spain was not a top decision-maker in the Bush administration or the Pentagon's inner circle, his mid-level perspective helped bridge the gap between soldiers and generals, those on the ground and the leaders who put them there. Spain's first loyalty was to his troops, but his insights as a brigade commander add much to our understanding of the Iraq War.

On the other hand, Spain's middling position in the military hierarchy was also limiting, since his superiors and his subordinates might have seen the mistakes he identifies quite differently. Further, the evidence he adduces for his most provocative claims is mostly anecdotal and thinly documented. The endnotes cite a few other autobiographical accounts and news reports, but offer little that can be corroborated. In the absence of a bibliography or serious engagement with the relevant literature on his subject, academic or popular, we are too often expected simply to take Spain at his word. Besides this lack of scholarly rigor, the writing is rough and the narrative often meandering.²

Iraq specialists will welcome, if not like, this memoir. It deserves attention, particularly for the light it shines on military policing as a neglected dimension of the Iraq War and occupation. Larger debates remain unsettled, but this is to be expected. Iraq is, after all, still broken.

2. The typesetting is poor as well, rife with spacing-related typos and words distractingly run together.