

Cobra II

Michael R Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor
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This book deals with the April 2003 American invasion and occupation of Iraq. Its title comes from the code name of the military operation designed to drive toward Baghdad. The code name, in turn, was inspired by General George Patton's 1944 military operation *Cobra*, during which the Allied

forces broke out from Normandy to liberate France – hence *Cobra II*. Written in a journalistic and investigative style, it chronicles the developments and events leading to the Bush administration's decision to attack Iraq. Described as a war of "choice" rather than of "necessity" (p. xxxi), it swiftly defeated the Iraqi army and toppled Saddam Hussein's regime.

However, it was a failure insofar as it generated a virulent insurgency that the occupying American army could not suppress. This insurgency was an unexpected by-product of the program of "transformation" espoused by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. As part of President George W. Bush's vision of overhauling the American military, this program became a sort of "official ideology" (p. 8) and response to two main concerns: (1) the long time (six months) it took to plan and amass American forces during the lead-up to the 1992 Gulf War that had reversed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait (this length of time was considered to fall short of credible "superpower" projection), and (2) the American military's ability to fight two major wars simultaneously, which came to be known as the "two-war doctrine" (pp. 5 and 9). The problem with the second consideration was that it required large ground forces to implement the doctrine, at a time when the foreseen *transformation* sought to trim American forces in favor of high-tech space and precision weapons.

Rumsfeld's decision to send far fewer troops than the operation actually demanded was the first of a series of mistakes that has continued to haunt the Bush administration and its forces. Apparently, it also led to the Secretary of Defense eventually losing his job. The number of forces that could win the war was not sufficient to establish control over a country as big, diverse, and volatile as Iraq. The troops could not seal the long borders, through which arms and fighters could be smuggled in, nor could they overpower the growing and evolving insurgency. What made things worse was Civil Administrator Paul Bremer's policy of de-Baathification (p. 476) and decision to disband the Iraqi military, which put thousands of disenfranchised, and now unemployed, trained soldiers on the streets. Both Rumsfeld and Bremer produced what the authors termed a "security vacuum" (p. 485). High-tech weaponry also proved ineffective against guerilla tactics and their improvised low-tech armaments. In addition, American decision-makers as well as the forces they sent had expected a welcoming Iraqi population, especially among the Shi'ites in the south (p. 21). The United States, apparently, projected on the Iraqis their own wishes to be perceived as liberators (p. 50). Both their assumptions and wishes were proven erroneous.

The theory of military transformation, which proposes that near-perfect intelligence about the enemy forces' disposition and the instantaneous communication of such information, presumes to strip away the fog of war and ensure a decisive victory for a relatively small number of American troops. The theory, however, was proven to be not up to the challenge when tested on the Iraqi battlefield (p. 352). The authors frequently stress that the United States seemed to suffer from intelligence failure or, as they put it, "off base" intelligence at all levels (p. 336). Adding to the doctrine's shortcomings was its non-perception of any role for American troops in "nation-building" or any extended "peacekeeping" operations (p. 457). The idea, according to the Bush administration's related doctrine of *preemption*, was that the United States would "act unilaterally" with the expectation that swift victory and success, ensured by the program of transformation, would later on attract allies to share in the postwar burden (p. 470). Few allies, however, with the exception of the United Kingdom, were willing to establish an effective combat-related or even peacekeeping presence. The burden thus fell mainly on the insufficient American troops.

While the above constitutes the book's conceptualization of the American way of thinking as well as its associated problems, the authors also examine the Iraqi leadership's share of both (chapter 4), even if from an American-constructed perspective of Iraqi decision-making (p. 56). Based on top-secret interrogations of Saddam Hussein and his top aides, the authors indicate that the Iraqi leadership's priorities and calculations had not been clear to the Americans until then (p. 56). The top priority was to protect itself against internal threats, such as a possible Shi'ite rebellion or coup attempts. Thus it organized a Fedayeen counterinsurgency force that, ironically, would become the main insurgency confronting the American forces (p. 62). Second on the list of threats was Iran, and fighting a ground war against the United States was a "distant third" (p. 55).

According to Gordon and Trainor, these threat priorities caused the Iraqis to refrain from destroying bridges that the Americans would have to cross on their way to Baghdad. Saddam Hussein was more concerned about a Shi'ite uprising, which he prepared to crush by means of his loyal Republican Guard. For this purpose, he needed the bridges intact so he could rush his forces to the south. The Iraqi leadership had its doubts about the Americans launching a full-scale assault that would bring them to Baghdad. At the end of the day, however, a Shi'ite rebellion did not materialize, American troops rushed toward Baghdad using the undestroyed bridges, and the Fedayeen turned their fury against the invading forces. The fog of war proved immense.

Apart from the conceptual aspects, the rest of the book's twenty-four chapters simply provide an account of who said what to whom among American officials, the associated decision-making process, the evolution of the war plan against Iraq, and details of daily battles. For anyone interested in these aspects of the war, the book is a useful source and reference. However, it suffers from a measure of superficiality, particularly where it fails to link the entire episode to American global and strategic interests, intimating that the United States went to Iraq simply to accomplish a certain task and leave once it had been achieved. It also fails to discuss reports that the United States may have used some kind of unconventional weapons in the battle for Baghdad's airport. Such errors of omission tend to affect the book's quality.

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