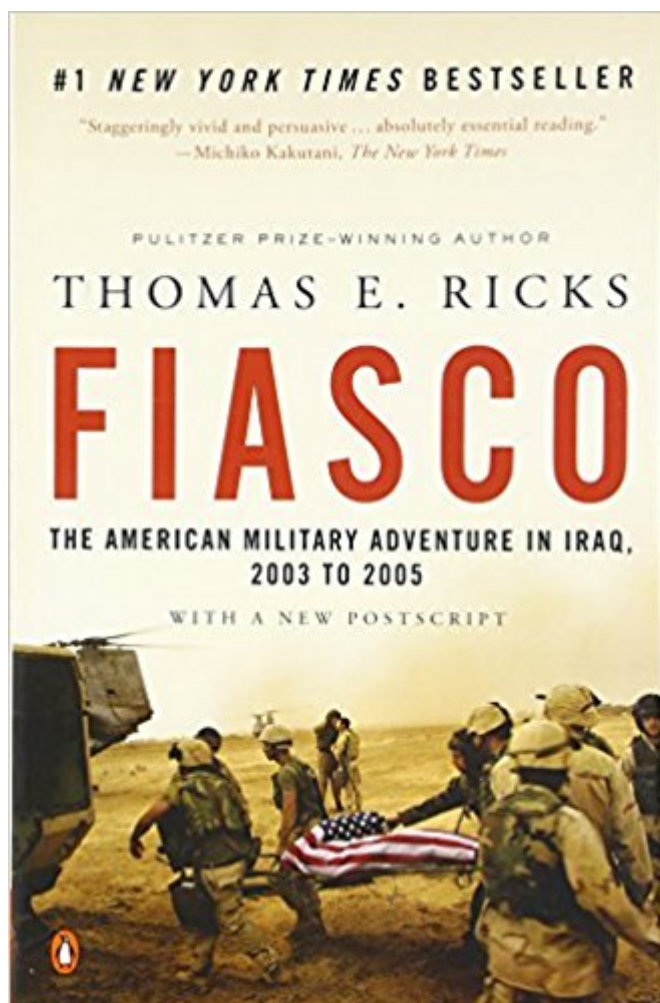


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# Fiasco: The American Military Adventure In Iraq, 2003 To 2005



## Synopsis

Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize  
One of the Washington Post Book World's 10 Best Books of the Year  
One of Time's 10 Best Books of the Year  
USA Today's Nonfiction Book of the Year  
A New York Times Notable Book  
The definitive account of the American military's tragic experience in Iraq  
Fiasco is a masterful reckoning with the planning and execution of the American military invasion and occupation of Iraq through mid-2006, now with a postscript on recent developments. Ricks draws on the exclusive cooperation of an extraordinary number of American personnel, including more than one hundred senior officers, and access to more than 30,000 pages of official documents, many of them never before made public. Tragically, it is an undeniable account "explosive, shocking, and authoritative" of unsurpassed tactical success combined with unsurpassed strategic failure that indicts some of America's most powerful and honored civilian and military leaders.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Fiasco is a more strongly worded title than you might expect a seasoned military reporter such as Thomas E. Ricks to use, accustomed as he is to the even-handed style of daily newspaper journalism. But Ricks, the Pentagon correspondent for the Washington Post and the author of the acclaimed account of Marine Corps boot camp, Making the Corps (released in a 10th anniversary edition to accompany the paperback release of Fiasco), has written a thorough and devastating history of the war in Iraq from the planning stages through the continued insurgency in early 2006, and he does not shy away from naming those he finds responsible. His tragic story is divided in two.

The first part--the runup to the war and the invasion in 2003--is familiar from books like *Cobra II* and *Plan of Attack*, although Ricks uses his many military sources to portray an officer class that was far more skeptical of the war beforehand than generally reported. But the heart of his book is the second half, beginning in August 2003, when, as he writes, the war really began, with the bombing of the Jordanian embassy and the emergence of the insurgency. His strongest critique is that the U.S. military failed to anticipate--and then failed to recognize--the insurgency, and tried to fight it with conventional methods that only fanned its flames. What makes his portrait particularly damning are the dozens of military sources--most of them on record--who join in his critique, and the thousands of pages of internal documents he uses to make his case for a war poorly planned and bravely but blindly fought. The paperback edition of *Fiasco* includes a new postscript in which Ricks looks back on the year since the book's release, a year in which the intensity and frequency of attacks on American soldiers only increased and in which Ricks's challenging account became accepted as conventional wisdom, with many of the dissident officers in his story given the reins of leadership, although Ricks still finds the prospects for the conflict grim. --Tom Nissley

**A Fiasco, a Year Later**

With the paperback release of Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco*, a year after the book became a #1 New York Times bestseller and an influential force in transforming the public perception (and the perception within the military and the civilian government as well) of the war in Iraq, we asked Ricks in the questions below to look back on the book and the year of conflict that have followed. On our page for the hardcover edition of *Fiasco* you can see our earlier Q&A with Ricks, and you can also see two lists he prepared for customers: his choices for the 10 books for understanding Iraq that aren't about Iraq, a collection of studies of counterinsurgency warfare that became surprisingly popular last year as soldiers and civilians tried to understand the nature of the new conflict, and, as a glimpse into his writing process, a playlist of the music he listened to while writing and researching the book.

.com: When we spoke with you a year ago, you said that you thought you were done going back to Baghdad. But that dateline is still showing up in your reports. How have things changed in the city over the past year?

Thomas E. Ricks: Yes, I had promised my wife that I wouldn't go back. Iraq was taking a toll on both of us--I think my trips of four to six weeks were harder on her than on me. But I found I couldn't stay away. The Iraq war is the most important event of our time, I think, and will remain a major news story for years to come. And I felt like everything I had done for the last 15 years--from deployments I'd covered to books and military manuals I'd read (and written)--had prepared me to cover this event better than most reporters. So I made a deal with my wife that I would go back to Iraq but would no longer do the riskiest things, such as go on combat patrols or on convoys. I used to have a rule that I would only

take the risks necessary to "get the story." Now I don't take even those risks if I can see them, even if that means missing part of a story. Also, I try to keep my trips much shorter. How is Baghdad different? It is still a chaotic mess. But it doesn't feel quite as Hobbesian as it did in early 2006. That said, it also feels a bit like a pause--with the so-called "surge," Uncle Sam has put all his chips on the table, and the other players are waiting a bit to see how that plays out. .com: One of the remarkable things over the past year for a reader of Fiasco has been how much of what your book recommends has, apparently, been taken to heart by the military and civilian leadership. As you write in your new postscript to the paperback edition, the war has been "turned over to the dissidents." General David Petraeus, who was one of the first to put classic counterinsurgency tactics to use in Iraq, is now the top American commander there, and he has surrounded himself with others with similar views. What was that transformation like on the inside? Ricks: I was really struck when I was out in Baghdad two months ago at how different the American military felt. I used to hate going into the Green Zone because of all the unreal happy talk I'd hear. It was a relief to leave the place, even if being outside it (and contrary to popular myth, most reporters do live outside it) was more dangerous. There is a new realism in the U.S. military. In May, I was getting a briefing from one official in the Green Zone and I thought, "Wow, not only does this briefing strike me as accurate, it also is better said than I could do." That feeling was a real change from the old days. The other thing that struck me was the number of copies I saw of Fiasco as I knocked around Iraq. When I started writing it, the title was controversial. Now generals say things to me like, "Got it, understand it, agree with it." I am told that the Army War College is making the book required reading this fall. .com: And what are its prospects at this late date? Ricks: The question remains, Is it too little too late? It took the U.S. military four years to get the strategy right in Iraq--that is, to understand that their goal should be to protect the people. By that time, the American people and the Iraqi people both had lost a lot of patience. (And by that time, the Iraq war had lasted longer than American participation in World War II.) Also, it isn't clear that we have enough troops to really implement this new strategy of protecting the people. In some parts of Baghdad where U.S. troops now have outposts, the streets are quieter. Yet we're seeing more violence on the outskirts of Baghdad. And the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk make me nervous. I am keeping an eye on them this summer and fall. The thing to watch in Iraq is whether we see more tribes making common cause with the U.S. and the Iraqi government. How long will it last? And what does it mean in the long term for Iraq? Is it the beginning of a major change, or just a prelude to a big civil war? .com: You've been a student of the culture of the military for years. How has the war affected the state of the American military: the redeployments, the state of Guard and Reserves troops and the regular Army

and Marines, and the relationship to civilian leadership? Ricks: I think there is general agreement that there is a huge strain on the military. Essentially, one percent of the nation--soldiers and their families--is carrying the burden. We are now sending soldiers back for their third year-long tours. We've never tried to fight a lengthy ground war overseas with an all-volunteer force. Nor have we ever tried to occupy an Arab country. What the long-term effect is on the military will depend in part on how the war ends for us, and for Iraq. But I think it isn't going to be good. Today I was talking to a retired officer and asked him what he was hearing from his friends in Iraq about troop morale. "It's broken," he said. Meanwhile, he said, soldiers he knows who are back home from Iraq "wonder why they were there." Not everyone is as morose as this officer, but the trend isn't good. .com: You quote Gen. Anthony Zinni in your postscript as saying the U.S. is "drifting toward containment" in Iraq. What does containment of what will likely remain a very hot conflict look like? You've written in your postscript and elsewhere that you think we are only in act III of a Shakespearean tragedy. I wouldn't describe Shakespeare's fifth acts as particularly well contained. Ricks: I agree with you. Containment would mean some sort of stepping back from the war, probably beginning by halving the American military presence. You'd probably still have U.S. troops inside Iraq, but disengaged from daily fighting. Their goals would be negative ones: prevent genocide, prevent al Qaeda from being able to operate in Iraq, and prevent the war from spreading to outside Iraq. (This was laid out well in a recent study by James Miller and Shawn Brimley, readable at <http://www.cnas.org/en/cms/?368>.) Containment probably would be a messy and demoralizing mission. No one signs up in the U.S. military to stand by as innocents are slaughtered in nearby cities. Yet that might be the case if we did indeed move to this stance and a full-blown civil war (or a couple) ensued. And there surely would be refugees from such fighting. Either they would go to neighboring countries, and perhaps destabilize them, or we would set up "refugee catchment" areas, as another study, by the Brookings Institute, proposed. The open-ended task of guarding those new refugee camps likely would fall to U.S. troops. The more you look at Iraq, the more worrisome it gets. As I noted in the new postscript in the paperback edition, many strategic experts I talk to believe that the consequences of the Iraq war are going to be worse for the United States than was the fallout from the Vietnam War. .com: A year and a half is a long time, but let's say that we have a Democratic president in January 2009: President Clinton, or Gore, or Obama. What prospect would a change in administration have for a new strategic opening? Or would the new president likely wind up like Nixon in Vietnam, owning a war he or she didn't begin? Ricks: Not such a long time. President Bush has made his major decisions on Iraq. Troop levels are going to have to come down next year, because we don't have replacements on the shelf. So the three big questions

for the U.S. government are going to be: How many troops will be withdrawn, what will be the mission of those who remain, and how long will they stay? Those questions are going to be answered by the next president, not this one. My gut feeling is the latter: I think we are going to have troops in Iraq through 2009, and probably for a few years beyond that. Indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if U.S. troops were there in 15 years. But as I say in *Fiasco*, that's kind of a best-case scenario.

Starred Review. Lurie has that wonderful ability to disappear into the text. His voice is low and steady, with just enough variation to emphasize points, highlight irony and make every sentence eminently clear. You don't need a dramatic reading here--there's plenty of drama in this smoothly wrought abridgment. Ricks minutely examines each stage of the Iraq war through hundreds of interviews with senior and junior officers, and reviews of untold numbers of documents. The result is a portrait of tragedy he lays at the feet of an administration that went into Iraq to overthrow Hussein, but had no strategy to handle an occupation. Ricks exposes the failures emerging from civilian and military leadership's inability to plan beyond today. The U.S. military's disbanding of the former Iraqi army and civilian corps morphed into an insurgency when tens of thousands of angry, unemployed men were unable to feed their families. In a few areas, good leaders make friends with local religious and civilian leaders, but in most the administration's go-get-'em mentality creates more enemies. Simultaneous release with the Penguin Press hardcover (reviewed online). Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As a linguist who knows personally some of the U.S. commanders in this book and also translated for them, I can say that *FIASCO* is one of the best books written on Iraq. I am very shocked to discover that after the destruction of Iraq and the waste of American tax payers money by Paul Bremer, he is not hold accountable by the American and the Iraqi governments. Paul Bremer must put on trial of what he did in Iraq costing American lives. [nninoss.com](http://nninoss.com)

Well researched & very well written (couldn't put it down). I served in the Army as a Combat Engineer for 10 years, but was living as a civilian when Iraq "happened." Even at the time of buildup to war, I was suspicious - something just didn't feel right. Mr. Ricks put his finger right on the reasons why - as amazingly disgusting as they are. More than anything I've read (even Bob Woodward), *Fiasco* helps explain how and why wars should never be fought based on presumption

and biases; the cost is just too high, especially if we were wrong - which in this case I believe the U.S. definitively was. While things look better today than nearly 10 years ago, we should not forget these lessons. Even with the successes in the latter part of the Iraq war (ala Petraeus and the "surge"), they came after too long fighting the "last war." The most interesting thing about this book was understanding the characters through their actions and words - especially at both the senior civilian and army officer levels, right on down to the soldier in the field. Mr. Ricks simply did a fascinating job of understanding what motivated (and constrained) all of these real people, a few of which I'd known in my career. Every military officer should read this book, if only for awareness of how they can best influence and lead the "next war" that they're asked to fight.

Excellent history and analysis of the 2003 Iraq war. Political hubris and meddling resulting in a long and unsuccessful expenditure of national treasure and blood.

Excellent book. Well written and clear on the civilian and military fiasco that was the invasion of Iraq by the USA in 2003. The reasons to invade were both based on lies and the preemptive attack doctrine of the Bush administration a diplomatic disaster. This book provides the background to the invasion and details the failures in strategic planning before and after. It ends before the successful surge. It clearly explains the failure to plan for after the invasion, to provide clear leadership from the top down. The dilute from the beginning. References: Yugoslavia 1941 Germany makes an unprovoked attack on Yugoslavia because a regime unfavorable to Germany takes over the Government. Yugoslavia falls in the Month of May. The insurgency in Yugoslavia that follows until 1945 ties up almost 40 Axis divisions. Yugoslavia fell in 7 days . The capital surrendered to 6 German soldiers. George Bush; Preemptive attack doctrine allows the USA to attack any country presenting a clear and present danger to the USA before they actually attack us. For example, cutting of our supply of oil and rare earth metals would be a clear danger to the USA and justify a preemptive surprise attack on the nation that did so. Like when we cut off Japan's supply of oil and steel in 1941 the Bush Doctrine justifies Pearl Harbor? Read the book

Excellent read, definitely recommended for anyone into the Iraq war and definitely recommend the sequel "The Gamble" by Thomas E. Ricks. Both books provide extensive information to why the United States failed in Iraq and what could've been different.

Douglas Feith was the Under Secretary for Policy in the Department of Defense. He couldn't believe

the intelligence reports he was receiving so he decided he would make up his own intelligence that fit his views. Part of his views came from Ahmed Chalabi the Iraqi expatriate who ultimately lost all credibility. Feith was heavily involved in post war planning and he didn't want to hear from experts who had developed scenarios that indicated a long U.S. presence in Iraq. He didn't want to hear worst case scenarios. The plan he liked best was the in and out of Iraq in a couple of months scenario. This was the beginning of the Fiasco described in this book. The army was prepared only to reach Baghdad. Anyone who thought there would be problems after that was muffled. Author Ricks's book is mostly concerned with our military exploits in Iraq. He feels strongly that Generals Franks and Sanchez were not up to the job. When L. Paul Bremer arrived on the scene to start up the Coalition Provisional Authority things didn't get better. When someone started talking to Bremer about his experiences with insurgency fighting in Viet Nam, Bremer told him he didn't want to hear about Viet Nam. French author Col. Roger Trinquier's book on the war in Algeria was known and read at the Fort Leavenworth's School of Advanced Military Studies. It could reasonably be considered to be a bible on insurgency warfare yet its recommendations were all but ignored. The basic concept to be learned from past experience is that an occupying force must live among the people in order to gain their support. If you have their support then they will not aid the insurgents. Easy prescription for success? Yes, but it was rarely followed. The military live there in air-conditioned encampments with all the comforts of home. Shoot first and ask questions later was often the policy. Marine Major General James Mattis thoroughly believed in the "live with them" approach, and when he was assigned to the Fallujah area he had trained his troops to be part of the population. When he took over he was quickly ordered to conduct a major insurgency campaign involving going house to house through the whole city to root out the enemy. His protests about this approach went unheeded. He then engaged in battle, and when he was close to achieving victory he was ordered to back down. He protested again, and again was not listened to. Fallujah was once again a terrorist stronghold. Well you get the idea. The upshot of this tale is that nothing was planned for. No one wanted to hear from anyone with dissenting views. When General Garner was appointed to head up the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance he found a gentleman named Tom Warrick who exhibited an extraordinary expertise in Iraqi affairs. Shortly after he was hired VP Cheney passed down the word to have him fired. Warrick's views did not coincide with those of the administration. Another amazing thing about this book is the recounting of the childish rivalry between the State Department and the Pentagon. I sure wish someday people in the Administration could act like grown ups. Ricks interviewed numerous people, and fills the book with quotations. When he seems a bit hard on someone he often quotes people with a different point of view. This is



an amazing book that often reads like a thriller. It is difficult for me to understand how anyone could read this book, and not realize that things went horribly wrong in our invasion of Iraq. Some other reviewers have nit picked at things in the book, but seem to not see the forest for the trees. As Ricks is mostly concerned with military operations he doesn't dwell much on the civil administration other than to castigate Bremer from time to time. I am currently reading "Imperial Life in the Emerald City" by Rajiv Chandrasekaran which is mainly concerned with civil affairs. These two books together cover much of the whole Iraqi affair. I might mention too that where the Emerald City book overlaps Fiasco there is a high degree of accord between the two. A must read book.

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