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Review Paper #3

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“*Imperial Life in the Emerald City*”

By Rajiv Chandrasekaran

Alfred A. Knopf, Publisher, New York, 2006

“*Who Lost Iraq?*”

By James Dobbins

Foreign Affairs, Sep/Oct 2007, Vol. 86 Issue 5, pp 61-74

“*Can America Nation-Build?*”

By James Brownlee

World Politics, January 2007, Vol. 59, pp 314-340

The Failure of the Iraqi Invasion

There were many different reasons why the Bush Administration made the decision to invade Iraq. Some of these reasons, such as the “War on Terrorism”, were overt. However, other reasons were covertly present, such as oil interests in the Middle East. Of course, the administration used the “hearts and minds” reasons to sway the citizens of the United States to embark on a mission that has failed in Iraq. To win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people was supposedly the administration’s goal in Iraq as well. However, as we have seen, the administration either failed at this goal or was never trying to achieve it. Critics of the Bush Administration are eager to label the US invasion of Iraq as a failure. However, the *reasons* for this failure are still highly contested. Is it a problem with policy, implementation or post-war planning? Furthermore, is it a problem with the specific case of Iraq, or is it a larger problem with the foreign policy of intervention in the United States? To answer these questions we have three authors: Rajiv Chandrasekaran, James Dobbins, and James Brownlee. Chandrasekaran’s book takes a look at the Green Zone and the bizarre presence of the Americans in Iraq. James Dobbins gives various American and Washington sources for the failure in his article, including leadership, institutions, and policies. Brownlee looks at nation-building and how it has changed since the United States first got involved in the international scene.

Chandrasekaran’s book is not about the life in Iraq but rather the life in the Green Zone, a Little America of sorts in Iraq. The “bubble” of the Green Zone creates an unreal juxtaposition next to the Red Zone, which is wrought with infrastructural problems and violence. The book goes into the details of the everyday life of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) workers in the Green Zone, honing in on Paul Bremer and his role in the occupation. The book becomes progressively darker as we see how the CPA functions and how it only creates the illusion of success. At first, Chandrasekaran paints the picture of the Emerald City and the CPA workers. These are the same workers who eventually begin to doubt the efficacy of the CPA in Iraq. Slowly, he reveals how the CPA is based on patronage to the Republican Party and not on a true desire to serve the Iraqi people. Chandrasekaran’s viewpoint is most definitely biased towards the Iraqis and his firsthand accounts and interviews are definitely carefully selected. However, his book gives a novel view of what life in the Green Zone is really like behind all the secrets and made-up feelings about the occupation.

In the last chapter of his book, Chandrasekaran shows that he is pessimistic about the outlasting effects of the occupation. When the CPA left, the US had already passed the stage where they could just pull out of Iraq and transfer sovereignty. Chandrasekaran believes that only solution to the situation in Iraq is to not have gone there in the first place. Though Iraq had its problems before the war, the US occupation seemed to exacerbate some of the problems. For example, he talks about the ethnic conflicts between Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites that were less prominent before the war. Ultimately, the US bit off more than they could chew and now they are paying for the repercussions. Though Chandrasekaran is right in saying that all the problems caused by the War in Iraq could have been solved by not going in the first place, there are some historical cases of “democracy-building”. Perhaps, invading was not the dilemma, but rather the problems began in the planning, researching, and implementing of the occupation. Brownlee and Dobbins address these problems.

Brownlee discusses nation-building and historical nation-building in his article. He gives a few exogenous reasons as to why the United States failed in Iraq. His argument is centered on the comparison of success in “building” Japan and Germany after World War II. Both of those countries had a developed infrastructure, bureaucracy, and constitutional tradition prior to the US involvement. Therefore, the United States had less work to do in order to ensure their intended results. This is not how Iraq was after the United States overthrew Saddam Hussein; Iraq had not even industrialized at that point. This was a tragic oversight of the Bush Administration and it eventually led to the lack of faith in the War in Iraq.

Brownlee also argues that the definition of nation-building has changed over time. Before, it was a process of integration and assimilation of a population into some sort of “state apparatus”. However, recently it has been viewed as “democracy-building”, a concept that Chandrasekaran also mentions. This idea of “democracy-building” is completely ethnocentric and ignorant of the wants and needs of the Iraqi people. Also like Chandrasekaran, Brownlee stresses how mainland security and safety should have been the main issues with which the Americans should have concerned themselves. He also points out that the United States should have planned the occupation with more diligence and should have expected a prolonged presence in Iraq instead of trying to speed up the process. Dobbins, like Brownlee, also critiques the poor planning of the War in Iraq and how it resulted in the unintended outcome.

Dobbins places the fault on various different sources. Dobbins sees multiple points of failure and a different source for each one. These different sources include leaders, institutions, and policies. Firstly, the problem with the leaders was that they were not open to dissenting viewpoints. Chandrasekaran points this out in his book too. The CPA hired only Republicans in the United States and removed anyone who could potentially present obstacles for their goals. The Bush Administration was too hasty in sending troops to Iraq that they did not take into account opposing viewpoints. Fostering debate, as Dobbins mentions, would have extended the time before invading Iraq, but may have yielded more positive results. Secondly, the institutions were at fault because they did not fulfill their duties of checks and balances, specifically Congress. Not to mention, the intelligence agencies made poor judgments about the existence of weapons of mass destruction. Dobbins says argues that the system of national security institutions needs to reorganize itself in order to make it more effective. Lastly, the policies of Washington are flawed and need to be reexamined, but Dobbins does think that there is some value in them. He thinks that in the past the same policies have more or less benefited the United States. However, in the case of the Middle East, the United States underestimated the dissent and difficulty they would encounter in nation-building in Iraq. In the end, Dobbins is hopeful that the mistake in Iraq will serve as an instigator of change for the leaders, institutions and policies of the United States.

The failure of the Iraq invasion can be explained by both endogenous and exogenous reasons. However, placing the blame on the latter is a much more compelling argument. Although Brownlee addresses a valid point in saying that Iraq did not have the proper infrastructure prior to the invasion, it is still the fault of the United States for being ignorant of that lack of infrastructure and its consequences for the occupation. Perhaps a detailed understanding of the Iraqi people, the culture, or the political tradition could have prevented the chaos and resentment of the invasion. The policy itself was flawed from the beginning because not enough pre-invasion research was done to determine the possible and likely outcomes. This implies that making policy should not have been the first step for the Bush Administration. Attempts to understand the intricacies of the Iraqi situation could have allowed Americans in Iraq to yield productive results. However, the occupation ended up being implemented poorly and was wrought with mistakes that could have been easily avoided with diligence and time. Therefore, all we have left is the post-war planning and we can only hope that the United States does not further exacerbate the problems in Iraq. Ultimately, the fault lies with the United States and its irrational need to intervene imperialistically in the developing world. The US has gotten lucky with nation-building in the past, but the world is slowly becoming multipolar and the United States is losing power. The failure in Iraq is a slap in the face to a nation that needs to start understanding the rest of the world, instead of wasting time on ethnocentric policies.