

[Nigel J. Ashton](#)

Book review: missions accomplished?: the United States and Iraq since World War I

Article (Published version)

Original citation:

Ashton, Nigel J. (2012) *Book review: missions accomplished?: the United States and Iraq since World War I*. [H-diplo roundtable review](#), XIII (26). pp. 6-11.

© 2012 [H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/44090/>

Available in LSE Research Online: June 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

Preparing a short, single volume study of a topic as controversial and complex as the contemporary history of American involvement in Iraq is a considerable challenge for any historian. In *Missions Accomplished?*, Peter Hahn has done an admirable job of setting the story of the 2003 American invasion of the country in longer term historical context. Hahn comes to this project with excellent credentials, as one of the foremost scholars of the contemporary American role in the Middle East. In earlier works such as *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961* Hahn has shown an ability to navigate the treacherous shoals of the contemporary history of the region in a dispassionate and scholarly fashion. The challenge of applying this approach to U.S. involvement in Iraq is arguably even greater than that posed by his earlier work studying U.S. engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. But, although Hahn does not eschew offering his judgement on the strengths and weaknesses of different phases of U.S. policy, he does so with due regard to historical context.

In his opening chapter looking at “Legacies of Empire,” Hahn resists the temptation to write the U.S. role in the country further back into history than is warranted by the evidence. U.S. interests in Iraq remained secondary to those of Britain until the 1958 revolution at least. Even after the revolution, as U.S. fears increased significantly about the possible advance of Soviet influence within the Cold War context, Eisenhower Administration officials continued to admit their relative lack of knowledge about Iraq. Pondering the possibility of some form of U.S. intervention during a National Security Council meeting on 15 January 1959, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles commented that “we were simply not sufficiently sophisticated to mix into this complicated situation...”¹ In comparison to the remarkable degree of hubris which marked much of the pre-invasion thinking of the Bush Administration during 2002-3, Dulles’s relative humility when faced with the complexities of Iraqi politics and culture is striking.

During the period between the fall of the monarchy in 1958 and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980, U.S. engagement with Iraq was no more than episodic. The Cold War provided the unifying thread to link up the junctures at which Washington took a more activist approach. So, as fears about the advance of Soviet influence in Iraq ebbed during 1960 so did the degree of attention devoted to the country. During 1961, the Kennedy Administration essentially stood on the sidelines as Britain took the lead in deploying troops to Kuwait to forestall a putative Iraqi threat to the independence of the emirate. (46-7) Thereafter, Hahn notes rightly that declassified documents offer no evidence of U.S. complicity in the Baathist coup which overthrew Iraq’s post-revolutionary leader Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1963. (48)

The first clear juncture at which significant U.S. interference in the internal affairs of Iraq took place came under the Nixon Administration in the early 1970s. Against the backdrop

¹ National Security Council, 393rd meeting, 15 January 1959, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-60, Vol. XIII*, pp.375-7.

of closer relations between the Baathist regime and the Soviet Union, which culminated in a Treaty of Friendship in 1972, and galvanized by the prompting of the Shah of Iran, President Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger approved a top secret CIA operation to support Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq through the provision of arms and economic aid. Ultimately, the rug was pulled from under the Kurdish rebels and the CIA operation by the Shah's unexpected decision to cut a deal over the disputed border along the Shatt al-Arab with Saddam Hussein, by this stage Iraq's Vice-President, during an OPEC summit in Algiers in March 1975. (58) But the foundation had been laid for subsequent U.S. involvement in Iraq.

It was the Iranian Revolution, coupled with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 which dramatically changed the strategic landscape for the United States in the Gulf. In the space of a year the Shah, on whom successive Administrations had relied as the 'policeman' of the Gulf in the wake of British withdrawal at the beginning of the decade, had been overthrown, while the Afghan invasion seemed to confirm longstanding fears about a potential Soviet drive to the south. Although the outbreak of war between Iran and Iraq in 1980 could be seen as serving U.S. purposes in helping to contain the new revolutionary regime in Tehran, Hahn is right to note that there is no firm evidence to support the Iranian contention that the Carter Administration encouraged Saddam Hussein, by this stage Iraq's President, to invade. (73)

In fact, new sources have become available since Hahn completed his manuscript to help us to judge the factors influencing Saddam's decision to invade Iran. As a result of the capture of Iraqi materials following the U.S. invasion of 2003, a large trove of documents and tapes has become available to scholars at the National Defense University (NDU). Coupled with the even larger collection of Baath Party materials which are stored at the Hoover Institution affiliated to Stanford University, these materials have the potential to give us a unique insight into the inner workings of Saddam's regime. A transcript of a conversation between Saddam and his inner circle in the final days before war broke out released by the NDU for a conference on the Iran-Iraq War at the Woodrow Wilson Center in October 2011 shows that calculations about the opportunity presented by Iranian military weakness loomed largest in Saddam's decision to invade. There is no suggestion he was acting on the basis of a "green light" from Washington.²

The fortunes of war did, however, bring about a significant change in the U.S. stance towards Iraq. While the public posture of the Reagan Administration remained one of neutrality, from the early summer of 1982, as the war turned decisively against Iraq, the Administration moved covertly to bolster the Iraqi position. Battlefield intelligence was supplied to Iraq which helped it subsequently to thwart the Iranian onslaught. While the nature, extent, level of detail and channels of delivery used to provide this information remain shrouded in some uncertainty, its provision was indicative of the future course of U.S. policy towards the war.

² Conflict Records Research Center (CRRC) Record Number: SH-SHTP-D-000-847
<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/index.cfm?secID=179&pageID=4&type=section>

From November 1984 onwards, with the restoration of formal diplomatic relations which had been broken off in June 1967, the overt as well as covert position of the United States became increasingly sympathetic to Iraq. There were, of course, certain notorious exceptions to this rule, most notably in the shape of the Iran-Contra affair which came to light in November 1986.(79) Once again, the recently released files at the NDU shed some light on Saddam's private response to the news that the U.S. had been covertly supplying weapons to Iran. For Saddam, an incorrigible conspiracy theorist, Iran-Contra served as tangible proof of his view of the world: "This is nothing new. It is new in regards to their depravity, in the level of moral decay of the Americans and specifically their president. It is close to what we expected...."³ But, despite his apparent sangfroid, Iran-Contra served dramatically to reinforce Saddam's view of the U.S. as a fundamentally hostile, treacherous power.

One narrative technique which Hahn employs to good effect in this concise study is that of beginning each chapter with a tableau of a pivotal incident. The chapter on the Gulf crisis of 1990-1 begins with the ill-fated meeting between U. S. Ambassador April C. Glaspie and President Saddam Hussein on 25 July 1990, a week before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Glaspie, as Hahn acknowledges, was a trail-blazing diplomat, whose impeccable record of service had led her to be appointed as the first female U.S. Ambassador to an Arab country. Subsequently she was scapegoated for comments she made to Saddam during the meeting which could be read as implying no direct U.S. interest in how the Iraqi President chose to solve his dispute with Kuwait. Given that Saddam himself did not take the final decision to invade until as late as four days before the operation, the U.S. intelligence establishment could be forgiven to some degree for its failure to predict the invasion.⁴ But more generally, the strategy of seeking closer relations with Baghdad in order to moderate the regime's behavior, which was pursued during the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War and in its aftermath, seems to have failed spectacularly. One might, though, take issue with the tone of Hahn's description of the Administration's approach as being one of making friendly gestures to win Saddam's cooperation "with their vision of regional peace and stability."([93) Preserving the status quo has always been the goal of hegemonic powers. The status quo looked far less satisfactory when viewed from Baghdad. A more hard-headed characterization of the U.S. approach than that implied by the use of such terms would be in order here.

Hahn's treatment of the Bush Administration's response to the Iraqi invasion is generally sympathetic. Faced with Saddam's blatant breach of international law and the threat of further Iraqi aggression, a response was essential. The marshaling of an international coalition against Iraq, the shaping of U.S. domestic public opinion and finally the waging of a successful military operation to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait were all significant

³ CRRC Record Number: SH-SHTP-A-000-556
<http://www.ndu.edu/inss/index.cfm?secID=179&pageID=4&type=section>

⁴ F. G. Gause, 'Iraq's Decision to Go to War, 1980 and 1990', *Middle East Journal*, 56/1, 2002, pp. 53-4.

successes for the President. For Hahn, “Bush deserves acclaim... for his carefully measured response to the invasion of Kuwait.” (109) Likewise, despite subsequent controversy about the failure to overthrow Saddam at this juncture, Hahn rightly judges the president’s decision to halt operations after the liberation of Kuwait as having been “clearly reasonable and sound given the international context in early 1991.” (110)

The containment regime bequeathed by Bush to the Clinton Administration comprised international sanctions designed to prevent Saddam rebuilding his armed forces and his WMD capability, an international inspection regime designed to dismantle existing WMD programs, and a pair of no-fly zones covering northern and southern Iraq intended to help protect Kurdish and Shia opponents of the regime. While containment did not hold out the immediate prospect of the overthrow of the Saddam regime, it did avoid the awkward choices which might have resulted from military backing for the Kurdish and Shia rebellions against Saddam. The possible splintering of the Iraqi state held out the prospect of Turkish intervention in the north to contain the Kurdish “problem” and the advance of Iranian influence among Shia co-religionists in the south. Indeed, containing revolutionary Iran formed the second pillar of what came to be termed a “dual containment” strategy under Clinton. (119)

In the face of sanctions, international isolation, inspections and periodic military retribution, Saddam Hussein’s regime proved remarkably durable during the 1990s. Hahn argues that it was not until the final phase of his Administration that President Clinton turned towards more direct attempts to overthrow Saddam. He sees the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 as a watershed in this respect. However, direct presidential backing for attempts to overthrow Saddam pre-dates this juncture. During 1995-6, the CIA supported covert coup plans developed first by the Iraqi National Congress (INC) led by Ahmed Chalabi, and later, more significantly, by the Iraqi National Accord (INA) led by Iyad Allawi. In terms of the INA coup plans, it was the personal intervention of President Clinton during a meeting in the Oval Office in September 1995 which persuaded King Hussein of Jordan to allow his country to be used as the base for the operation.⁵

The final two chapters of Hahn’s book are devoted to the Bush Administration’s campaign to unseat Saddam Hussein between 2001-3, and the disastrous aftermath involving the occupation of Iraq between 2003-10. There is never a perfect time to choose to write about any historical event, but it is arguably unfortunate that Hahn has had to break off the tale before the more obvious cut off point presented by the withdrawal of American armed forces at the end of 2011. Nevertheless, he is able to cover the key events during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Looking back over U.S. policy towards Iraq during this period it is a struggle to decide which term best sums up the whole sorry tale. Hubris, duplicity, myopia and incompetence all spring to mind when considering the Bush Administration’s justification for the invasion and its planning for the aftermath. But beyond that, the dearth of strategic thinking when

⁵ N. J. Ashton, *King Hussein of Jordan: A Political Life* (2008), pp.341-2.

compared to almost any previous administration is quite striking. While George H. W. Bush and Clinton had both tried to frame policy towards Iraq within the broader framework of the balance of power in the Gulf, the George W. Bush Administration was afflicted by a form of Saddam tunnel vision. The emergence of Iraq in the wake of the American occupation as a Shia-dominated state in which revolutionary Iran exercises the key external influence represents the negation of the strategy pursued by every administration from Carter to Clinton.

In Hahn's view the abandonment of the earlier strategy of containment was a clear mistake. He writes that "the maintenance of the containment approach into the new century had a fair chance of preserving essential U.S. interests in the Middle East during the lifetime of Saddam Hussein at a small fraction of the costs incurred in the alternative approach implemented by Clinton's successor in the Oval Office." (132) While acknowledging the profound effect of the 9/11 attacks on the American psyche, Hahn criticises the Administration for its march to war with insufficient political planning and troop strength, and for ignoring experienced voices raised in warning such as those of James Baker and Brent Scowcroft. (161)

Hahn highlights the human toll of the ill-planned invasion by beginning his chapter on its aftermath with the tale of one soldier killed in action during the 2007 'surge' of U.S. forces in Iraq, which was designed to quell the raging insurgency that had overtaken the country from late 2003 onwards. He documents the neglect of post-invasion planning, the Administration's studied ignorance of the political and social conditions in Iraq and its initial reliance on the slippery figure of Ahmed Chalabi to provide local leadership. Whether or not there was a post-invasion window of opportunity to secure an orderly transition in Iraq remains a matter of debate. (169) But in the face of what Hahn terms "poor leadership" in Washington and "monumental shortcomings" on the ground in Baghdad the situation rapidly deteriorated as the death toll, both Iraqi and American, rocketed. (196)

Hahn does give President Bush some credit for finding a way "eventually to achieve a modicum of stability in Iraq" through the 'surge' of U.S. forces during 2007. (196) But otherwise, the balance sheet he presents is almost wholly negative. By the end of 2010, 4,300 American soldiers had been killed, 32,000 were wounded, 100,000 Iraqis (a conservative estimate) had died and two million were displaced. The war had drained \$1 trillion from the U.S. Treasury and contributed to a relative decline of the U.S.'s share of global gross domestic product between 2000-10 from 32% to 24%, "a rate of relative national economic decline surpassed in world history only by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991." (197) Furthermore, the Iraqi imbroglio diverted U.S. troops from the war in Afghanistan and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. It galvanized Islamic militants, extended Iranian influence in the Gulf and diverted U.S. attention from other key foreign policy challenges, especially the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also damaged considerably the international standing of the United States.

"Missions Accomplished?" makes an excellent starting point for students and other readers interested in understanding the roots of the United States' greatest foreign policy

misadventure of the post-war period. Perhaps, to make the irony of the title fuller, Hahn might have opted for the singular “Mission Accomplished?” to reflect the banner behind a beaming George W. Bush on the front cover of the book. But, in this, as in every other aspect of the book, Hahn is scrupulously concerned to maintain a fair historical balance.