
Books in Review

Order of Battle

War and Decision:
Inside the Pentagon at the
Dawn of the War on Terrorism

by Douglas Feith

Harper: 688 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by
Victor Davis Hanson

“**T**he stupidest f—ing guy on the planet” is how General Tommy Franks, the head of U.S. Central Command, summed up Douglas Feith, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy in the Pentagon from July 2001 until his resignation in August 2005. Franks was cruder than most, but Feith was under almost continuously hostile scrutiny and controversy throughout his tenure. As the third-highest ranking civilian official in Donald Rumsfeld’s wartime Pentagon, he oversaw the Defense Department’s relations with foreign governments

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON *is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. His “Rethinking Iraq: Nothing Succeeds Like Success” appeared in the April COMMENTARY.*

at a time of unprecedented anti-Americanism abroad. More important, he headed both the Office of Special Plans, charged with analyzing prewar intelligence reports on the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, and, subsequently, the Pentagon groups that would eventually coalesce into the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, which oversaw much of the early rebuilding of postwar Iraq.

Of course, many other policymakers in the Bush administration came in for their share of contumely after the lightning-fast victory of April 2003 turned into the long slog of the occupation and the rise of the Iraqi insurgency. But no one was quite so vilified as the Harvard- and Georgetown-educated Feith. He was variously charged with advocating torture, undermining the Geneva Convention, fronting for Israel’s Likud party, and sexing up the intelligence to exaggerate Saddam Hussein’s links with al Qaeda—not to mention sheer incompetence in failing to foresee the problems of the occupation.

Since 2005, journalists including Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Michael Gordon, George Packer, Thomas

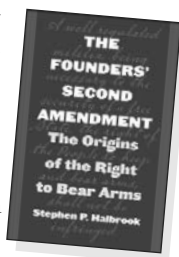
Ricks, Bernard Trainor, and Bob Woodward have published scathing accounts of administration policy. According to much of their common narrative, neoconservatives like Feith distorted prewar intelligence, brainwashing or tricking others into undertaking a unilateral, preemptive, and unnecessary war. They then subverted the postwar occupation by disbanding the Iraqi army, sending too few American troops, and ignoring the principled warnings of patriots like Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage, Generals Eric Shinseki and Anthony Zinni, and a host of former advisers to George Bush, Sr. The result was the loss of thousands of lives and a trillion dollars in a struggle that has left us less safe and the Iraqis worse off, and whose only solution is summary withdrawal.

Agreeing with a great deal of this critique, army officers like Franks, and civilian officials such as FBI director George Tenet and Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, have claimed that others, not they, were the real culprits for the botched operations and occupation. And once again at the

STEPHEN P. HALBROOK

The Founders' Second Amendment

The first book-length account of the origins of the right to bear arms, based on the Founders' own statements as revealed in newspapers, correspondence, debates, and resolutions. It could not be timelier. "First-rate work, utterly convincing. This is a solid and important work."—FORREST McDONALD. An Independent Institute Book.



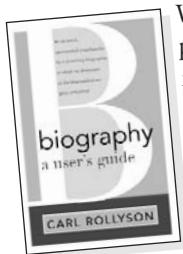
CARL ROLLYSON

Biography: A User's Guide

Written by a practicing biographer, this eccentric, opinionated encyclopedia leaves no dimension of the biographical art

untouched, from A to Z.

"Erudite, mischievous, irresistible, and endlessly stimulating."—ROGER LEWIS. "A master class in the virtues and vices of its subject."—MARY S. MILLAR.



Just published



Ivan R. Dee, Publisher

www.ivanrdee.com

Chicago • A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group

At your bookseller, or order toll-free 1-800-462-6420 with a major credit card.

center of the indictments has been Feith, the bespectacled neocon who is said to have imperiously nitpicked, second-guessed, and hobbled the more experienced men of action.

In *War and Decision*, Feith offers a dispassionate counterresponse—the first, one can only hope, of others to follow from Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and George W. Bush. Feith is not interested in getting even, but rather in systematically exploring the accuracy of the entire pessimistic narrative that has grown up about Iraq. Although he does not question every detail, he subjects enough of the narrative to cross-examination to show that it is largely a myth. His tools are understated irony and extensive documentation—some 600 footnotes and dozens of reprinted documents. These bring forcefully to view what the Bush administration was actually thinking in the days, weeks, and months after 9/11.

As the record adduced by Feith clearly demonstrates, neither he nor Rumsfeld advocated a preemptive war for democracy. Feith was more interested in simply removing dictators like the Taliban and Saddam Hussein from power before they or their surrogates could trump the horrors of 9/11, while Rumsfeld was almost obsessive in his anxiety over mounting costs, unforeseen battlefield complications, and occupations with no predetermined end. Far from wanting an imperial American presence in Iraq, Pentagon officials wished to transfer sovereignty to the Iraqis as quickly as possible—unlike their counterparts in the State Department, and unlike Paul Bremer, whose quest for the perfect constitutional government got in the way of implementing an interim governing body that would have been good enough.

Powell and Armitage—as the record also demonstrates—were neither critics nor supporters of the war, but had carefully situated themselves to be for it if it worked,

and against it if it did not. Their studied triangulation meant that when things went well they were never enthusiastic advocates of the policies they were charged with overseeing, while when things turned bad they were ready to provide off-the-record quotes and background information to the growing chorus of antiwar critics.

As for the intelligence about Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction, that came from the CIA, and it happened to coincide with the assessment of every pertinent foreign intelligence agency as well, including that of France. (This, quite apart from the fact that the CIA was a hotbed of political and ideological partisans with little sympathy for the Bush administration and less for its decision to go to war.) Arguments over proper troop levels were left largely to top generals. Franks adjudicated the size of the invading forces. He never requested additional troops, and summarily quit his command six weeks after the victory, just as the insurgency began.

WHAT THEN were the administration's mistakes? Feith lists several. In his view, it was wrong to make Saddam's arsenals into the main *casus belli*, especially since Congress had listed several other justifications for war that could have easily been given pride of place. Although there was prewar planning aplenty, in the euphoria that followed the three-week walkover of Saddam it was either poorly implemented—too many diverse agencies—or hijacked by the State Department and the often maverick Bremer. Among particular lapses, Feith lists Bremer's failure to turn control over to Iraqi officials early enough and waiting too long to create an Iraqi security force.

It was Defense Department personnel who, Feith writes, had been largely responsible for the inspired American efforts against the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. Had they

been listened to, they might have mitigated at least some of the unfolding difficulties in Iraq. Richard Meyers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was hardly the weak facilitator he was sometimes portrayed as being. Donald Rumsfeld pressed his underlings too hard, but not as hard as he worked himself. His tragedy lay not in any failure to anticipate the mess of 2004-06—in fact, he uncannily forecast almost every mishap of the “long hard slog”—but his inability to convince the President or the State Department of the mounting dangers and his crippling worry that committing more troops would stretch U.S. forces too thinly elsewhere.

THERE IS much to be said about each of these points, and others one might name (like the debate over incorporating anti-Baathist “externals”—i.e., Iraqis who had fled Saddam’s regime—into the postwar government). Perhaps the first thing to be noted in assessing Feith’s version, however, is that even today we still do not have the final verdict on Iraq. The costly occupation/reconstruction seems one endless and bitter disappointment when set against the brilliant three-week removal of Saddam; but, on a longer-term view, if we defeat and humiliate al Qaeda in Iraq and ensure the stability of a constitutional government, even this will appear in retrospect to have been not so disastrous after all.

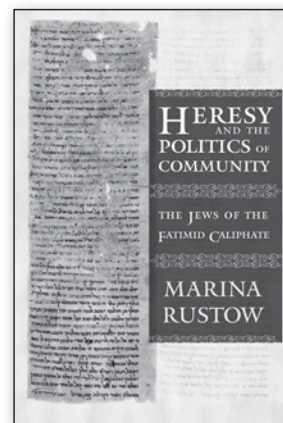
Similarly, it is worth bearing in mind that the choices facing Feith and others were usually of the bad-vs.-worse variety; there were no good ones. Should we cleanse the Iraqi government of Baathists who had blood on their hands, or retain valuable civil servants no matter their previous record or potential security risk? Such choices were predicated ultimately on the military situation: had we crushed the insurgency in its first few weeks, going with the worse of two bad alternatives would probably not have proved so catastrophic.

In any case, what is refreshingly and almost startlingly different about Feith’s account, in contrast to others, is that it provides a basis for disagreement. Feith does not rely on quotations from anonymous sources. Instead of the usual ploy of advancing pseudo-citations from “a senior Pentagon official” or “a high-ranking officer,” his footnotes refer to what actual people have said and have put their names to. Critics can fault his interpretation of the evidence, but at least they have a body of evidence over which to argue. In addition, Feith has provided a website (www.waranddecision.com) where readers can check his sources and ascertain for themselves the degree to which he has quoted fairly and argued honestly. All this is a huge vote in his favor.

IN LIGHT of this book’s virtues, it is somewhat regrettable that Feith does not address in detail the failure of the administration to apprise the American people adequately as to the difficulty of the task ahead or to counter the often untrue but sensational accusations of critics. That multi-agency failure constantly to set the record straight did terrible damage to the once-strong public support for the war. Administration officials might have explained over and over again what exactly were our choices after 9/11, what our aims were in Iraq, how the unexpected dilemmas of this war were materially no different from those of past wars, and how, even so, our blunders in Iraq nowhere approximated the scale of earlier disasters in Korea, in World War II, in World War I, or in the Civil War.

Early on, as Feith points out, administration officials stopped emphasizing the benefits—to the Iraqis, to us, to the world—of having Saddam gone from the scene, concentrating instead on the future advantages that would accrue from Iraqi democracy. This mixed message came at precisely the moment when the insurgency was growing,

**CORNELL
UNIVERSITY PRESS**



**HERESY AND THE
POLITICS OF COMMUNITY**
*The Jews of the
Fatimid Caliphate*
MARINA RUSTOW

“Beautifully written and brilliantly conceived. This book takes us to a time and a place in which there were many different visions of Judaism’s future, and it teaches us that this future emerged out of an infinitely richer dialogue than most of us thought possible. Rustow shows us how the jostling of many peoples has shaped our understanding of the history of rabbinic Judaism’s emergence.”

—David Nirenberg,
University of Chicago
392 PAGES | \$55.00 CLOTH
CONJUNCTIONS OF RELIGION AND
POWER IN THE MEDIEVAL PAST



www.cornellpress.cornell.edu

1-800-666-2211

and when security, not idealism, was the chief concern of the American people. The result was that our successful effort to remove a genocidal dictator in the heart of the ancient caliphate—followed by the establishment of a constitutional government where none had previously existed in the Arab world, by the routing of al Qaeda, and by the recruiting and training of thousands of Iraqi fighters, all at the cost of fewer lives than most single battles of World War II—could be written off as the worst blunder in our nation's history. It would be useful to have had not just Feith's general views of this matter but an anatomy of who in the administration was responsible for the lapse and why and how it was never rectified.

I HAVE mentioned the campaign of near-character assassination waged against Douglas Feith. The suppos-

edly unpardonable sins of which he has been accused—they amount to his being an unapologetic policy intellectual who could be haughty to his subordinates and colleagues and obsequious to his superiors—do nothing to obscure the fact that he served his country honorably in wartime and has written a candid and invaluable account of that service.

To no avail, it would seem. Recently, Georgetown University released Feith from teaching a class at its school of foreign service. A student paper at the university ran an editorial about his impending departure: "Feith can take his salary," it thundered, "and the further thousands he will no doubt earn from his memoir, and try to justify his failures somewhere else."

Here, however, is the final paragraph of the appendix to *War and Decision*:

With appreciation of the valor and sacrifice of the men and women of the U.S. armed forces, I have donated all of my revenues from this book to a charitable foundation that will use the funds exclusively for the benefit of veterans and their families.

This, too, needs to be entered into the record, and gratefully acknowledged.

We buy books, CDs, DVDs + LPs

Books and music should not be thrown away or sit idle in attics, basements or storage units.

New York-based Virama buys used books, music and movies.

We will find a new home for your used media, either at home or abroad. Somebody will again appreciate your collection.

We specialize in estates, libraries, and liquidations. We pay top prices within each category.

We donate items without resale value to the appropriate charity and provide you with a receipt for tax purposes. Our professional crew packs and removes even large inventories within hours.

VIRAMA

PLEASE RECYCLE YOUR MEDIA™

Call or e-mail us for an instant price quote. You will communicate with an experienced buyer who can answer all your questions.

212 505 3500 **kris@virama.com**