

Jeffrey Record. Dark Victory: America's Second War Against Iraq. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004.

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This is a wide-ranging critique of the 2003 Iraq War. Its focus is primarily on the forces leading up to the war and on its consequences, rather than being an analysis of the fighting itself. The chief conclusion is that the war “was not only unnecessary but also damaging to long-term U.S. political interests in the world,” on the grounds that Iraq posed no danger to the U.S. that justified the war, that the U.S. was unprepared to deal with the aftermath, and that it had negative consequences for the “war on terrorism” (pp. xiv-xv). In this, the book does not really break new ground or present substantially new arguments, but it does provide a valuable, well-organized and well-argued summary and analysis of various claims and arguments both for and against the war. The sources are generally newspaper, magazine and academic articles, and secondary books, but at 21 pages the bibliography is an impressive compilation of these materials.

The coverage of the book begins with the outcome of the 1991 war and the failure of the coalition to press on to change the regime and thus to remove the strategic threat posed by the Saddam Hussein regime. While critical of some elements leading to this, Record also acknowledges the arguments for not exceeding the UN mandate for the conflict. He notes the problems resulting from a lack of consideration of the post-war situation – a foreshadowing of 2003, perhaps – based on the expectation that Saddam Hussein would shortly fall, yet failing to assist groups that might oppose him. The problematic sanctions regime is also noted, though so is the ultimate success in dealing with Iraq’s WMD programs.

From this point, the focus is on the thinking and the arguments leading up to the 2003 war and to its consequences. Record presents a strong attack on a number of fronts: the content and the developing influence of neo-conservative thinking in the G.W. Bush administration,

especially following September 11, 2001, the broad challenges of the Bush Doctrine with its apparent emphasis on preventive war, the attempt to link Al-Qaeda and Iraq (and more generally to link “rogue states” and non-state terrorists) with respect to weapons of mass destruction especially, the ambitious multiple American war aims – some stated and some unstated – and the use of analogies to Munich, Vietnam and the occupation of Japan, and the consideration or lack of it given to postwar planning and circumstances. A chapter does address the war itself, but the main emphasis even here is less on the fighting as such than on the planning leading up to it, the WMD justification offered and the intelligence failures on which it was based, and the connection to war aims. The final chapter derives seven conclusions in addition to the book’s main one. All of these would be quite familiar to mainstream critics of the war. It is worth noting, however, that with regard to the “war on terror,” Record accepts the contention that non-state terrorists (as opposed to “rogue states”) seeking weapons of mass destruction are likely undeterrable, and argues (p. 143) that “against al-Qaeda or any other nondeterrable terrorist enemy that has already attacked the United States, a war of extermination, including preemptive and preventive military action, is morally justified and strategically imperative.”

Not surprisingly, a critique of neo-conservative thinking provides a linking feature among many of Record’s arguments. This, of course, has far broader implications than simply the war itself. The neo-conservative connection to concepts of “American exceptionalism” and an apparent unwillingness to consider that assessments of U.S. power and actions, which may reasonably vary rather than being inherently and obviously benevolent and morally legitimate, seems to blind this strain of thought to a full appreciation either of the world in general or the specific circumstances of and implications following U.S. policy actions. Another aspect of this, he argues (p. 48), is the achievement of “moral clarity but ... unintentionally ... at the expense of

intellectual and strategic clarity.” The consequences for intra-Alliance relations, confronting additional threats, and the development of a viable new multilateral institutional structure for the world are both considerable and depressing.

Supporters of the war and of the larger current direction of American policy will find this book to be fundamentally and almost unremittingly hostile. Its basic contention that the previous Iraqi regime was both deterrable and containable, while apparently sustained by that regime’s prior record and by the post-war failure to find a WMD arsenal, may constitute a weak point, in its own right and in a larger sense. In the larger sense, Record does not attempt any significant speculations about alternative futures, how things might have gone absent the war. Given both the focus of the study and the dangers of hypotheticals, this is reasonable, but it lays the author open to the easy counter, “What would you have done?”

In the specific instance of the claim that Iraq was both deterrable and containable, a more strongly developed case for both would distract us from the main focus of the study but would be highly desirable in supporting its implied alternative. Deterrence, we know from studies of both success and failure, is not a straightforward thing. In this case, would successful deterrence have required explicit American guarantees, even backed up by a continuing and significant American presence? Although scarcely worse than the current situation, would there have been policy costs for this course of action? As for “containing” Iraq’s WMD programs, even as we acknowledge the effectiveness of the inspections regime applied to Iraq under UN Security Council Resolution 687 (1991), the continuation of the associated sanctions regime and the sustainability of an effective post-sanctions system of Ongoing Monitoring and Verification should at least be addressed. Similarly, the sustainability of UNMOVIC and the second IAEA inspections effort without very great American pressure could be challenged. If the continuation of effective

controls over Iraqi oil exports, finances, imports and internal activities could be legitimate objects of concern, the case for containment is accordingly weakened in at least the longer run.

On the other hand, opponents of the war will have to realize that this is not simply a broad-brush exercise in the condemnation of all things American. This is a study very much in what seems to be a “realist” vein – based, that is, upon considerations of interest and power, but not in a narrow, misleading Melian-dialogue sense. Broader critics of the war and of American policy may thus find much in here, in specifics, that they will take comfort from, but the author’s refusal to move into the realms of larger attacks on, and more conspiratorial accounts of, U.S. actions, sets this study apart and gives it its overriding value as a reasoned examination still well within the prevailing wisdom of the more moderate opposition.

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