



Donald P. Wright, Timothy R. Reese. *On Point II: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, May 2003-January 2005: Transition to the New Campaign.* Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008. xviii + 696 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-16-078197-1.



Reviewed by Gian Gentile

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Commissioned by Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

A Starting Point

Writing âcurrent historyâ is not an easy task for historians because it involves delving into topics that are often loaded with domestic political implications. It also involves writing about people who are still active in the topic of the current history. Yet, it is very important for professional historians to bring their expertise to the field of current history, if for no other reason than to provide an important corrective to other accounts of the recent past by pundits, so-called experts, journalists, and bloggers of various shapes and sizes.

The war in Iraq is a perfect case in point. Already, a very misleading narrative has been created by memoirists, journalists, and others. That narrative goes like this: because of the U.S. Armyâs lack of counterinsurgency doctrine and preparation prior to the start of the war it fumbled at counterinsurgency after the fall of Baghdad in spring 2003 until the end of 2006. But then, as a result of newly written counterinsurgency doctrine and inspired leadership, plus an additional five U.S. combat brigades that all entered into the mix in early 2007, Iraq and the American army were rescued. This flawed

narrative puts the U.S. Army and U.S. foreign policy on a trajectory toward more Iraqs and Afghanistans.

The interlocutors of this flawed narrative are legion. But a few examples of the texts, articles, and blog entries that have built the matrix-cum-metanarrative include Tom Ricksâs *Fiasco*, published in 2006 (and one can only assume Ricks will add more force to the matrix in his forthcoming *The Gamble* [2009]); Steve Collâs recent lengthy and gushing article in the *New Yorker* on General David H. Petraeus (âThe Generalâs Dilemma,â September 8, 2008); and Pete Mansoorâs, John Naglâs, and Fred Kaganâs numerous writings arguing that prior to the surge the U.S. Army just didnât âget it.â

Yet, a corrective is needed to these writings and the role that they have played in constructing this flawed narrative, a red-pill, so to speak, to jar folks out of the complacency of understanding created by the matrix.

A goodâno, excellentâstarting point to balance our understanding of the recent past in Iraq is the armyâs newly released history of the first eighteen months of the

war, *On Point II: Transition to the New Campaign*, written by Donald Wright and Timothy Reese. Both Wright and Reese are historians at the army's Combat Studies Institute (CSI) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Reese is an active-duty army colonel, and is currently serving as an advisor team leader for an Iraqi army division in Baghdad. Wright and Reese had the help of CSI's Contemporary Operations Study Team in writing the book.

On Point II is a meticulously researched work that relies on extensive use of primary documents such as unit reports, operational orders, logs, briefings, and letters, along with observations made in popular media by journalists and experts. The book begins in May 2003 after the American invasion to remove the Saddam regime, and ends in January 2005 with the first Iraqi elections. (*On Point II* is a follow-up history to the army's 2005 *On Point*, which covered the invasion and regime removal.) Reese and Wright cross many levels of command, and views, from the individual soldier to the highest political authority in Iraq. The picture presented to the reader is, thus, one of complexity, breadth, and nuance, written in a narrative style that is easily understood and followed. It is a must-read for historians, analysts, and others who are interested in developing a more balanced picture of the first eighteen months of the war in Iraq. (One assumes that more volumes will follow *On Point II* as the United States continues operations in Iraq).

Instead of using a strict chronological format, *On Point II*'s fourteen chapters are divided into five thematic parts. Part 1, "Setting the Stage," provides an overview of Operation Iraqi Freedom, along with a chapter on the army's historical legacy of counterinsurgency. The key chapter in part 1 is an exploration into the causes of the rising Sunni insurgency in 2003 and 2004, with some descriptions of early insurgent tactics, and the U.S. Army's quick adaptation to it. Part 2, "Transition to a New Campaign," shows how the army adapted its tactical and operational systems from major combat operations to what the book calls full-spectrum, nation-building operations. Quick adaptation to counterinsurgency and nation-building by army units across the board in Iraq and *not* hide-bound adherence to visions of fighting World War II all over again is a major point of part 2. Part 3, "Toward the Objective: Building a New Iraq," focuses on the army's efforts at reconstructing the Iraqi economy and infrastructure, the Iraqi security forces, and

Iraqi governance. Part 4, "Sustaining the Campaign," concentrates on the army's internal logistics operations. The conclusion to *On Point II* comments on the implications of the army's first eighteen months in Iraq and prospects for the future. The book also has an extensive number of charts, statistics, briefing slides, and excerpts from orders and plans that scholars and analysts looking for unclassified, primary material on army operations in Iraq will find useful.

As the authors point out, "transition" is a central organizing theme of *On Point II*—that is to say, army units (platoons, companies, battalions, brigades, and divisions) shifted from major combat operations to counterinsurgency and nation-building operations. And, after all was said and done, *On Point II* concludes that across the board for the first eighteen months in Iraq, the American army (even without a formal doctrine in counterinsurgency and nation-building operations) quickly made the transition, and by the end of 2003 was conducting "best practices" in these types of operations.

This is not a conclusion that fits the standard narrative put forward by the matrix. But, as *On Point II* makes clear, the U.S. Army actually adapted quickly and effectively to conditions in Iraq in 2003 and 2004. Contrary to the caricature created by books like Ricks's *Fiasco*, during the first eighteen months the army was not a knuckle-dragging, conventional-minded force wanting only to kick in doors in the Sunni Triangle as a surrogate for its true desire for fighting Normandy all over again in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Instead, *On Point II* argues the opposite: that a conventionally trained and minded army can quickly and effectively step in a different direction to engage in counterinsurgency and nation-building operations. Policymakers and soldiers considering the future organization and primary mission of the U.S. Army should pay attention to *On Point II*'s conclusions.

If there is one critical and overarching point of analysis that *On Point II* drives home throughout the book, it is that even good tactical units practicing good counterinsurgency tactics and nation-building operations cannot make up for failed policies and strategies.

On Point II is a very useful corrective to what has become conventional wisdom about the first eighteen months of the war. It is current history at its finest.

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