

"We Meant Well ♦ How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People" van Buren, P New York: Metropolitan Books (2001) ISBN 9780805094367 HB, DW; x, 273p; Contents, Notes, Acknowledgements, Biography. \$25
Reviewed by James Spencer
We Meant Well is an unauthorised account of US reconstruction efforts in Iraq. Unauthorised both because (although offered the manuscript) DoS did not address the draft within the allowed timeframe, and because it is most certainly not the picture that the US Government would like to see presented to the world as it withdraws from Iraq. Although We Meant Well contains little of substance not already available in SIGIR's reports, van Buren adds depth and colour to previously dry prose, and thus brings the whole sorry saga vividly to life.
There are now a plethora of memoirs by US politicians on the shelves (although their historical accuracy is debated). Various soldiers have written "gritty" accounts of Iraq, and many journalists have written commentaries (of varying depth.) However, few members of the Department of State - excluded from reconstruction planning, then relied on for delivery - have put their thoughts to paper. As such, We Meant Well fills an important gap in the published record. It is also unusual because (with the exception of Mowle's "Hope Is Not a Plan") there are very few accounts from the middle ranks: the managers, rather than the senior directors or the junior implementers.
van Buren is a veteran US Foreign Service Officer, who has probably concluded that he has reached his career ceiling, and thus has the luxury of telling the truth and speaking his mind: ♦ A dangerous combination. He is an acute observer, and writes well ♦ not just accurately but vividly: Sights and sounds, smells and tastes, textures and emotions, habits and processes, even the cadence of speech (p.152) are reproduced in graphic detail. As an outsider living within the military at close quarters, van Buren also observes the soldiery closely, in a detached way - making for slightly uncomfortable reading by his subjects and their comrades in arms.
As well as his anthropological musings, van Buren is also a clear-sighted analyst of the reconstruction effort (or rather the re-branding effort), unsparing in his criticism of professional failures (including his own), although marginally more sympathetic towards human failings. For above all, this is a narration of epic waste and strategic incompetence. This incompetence is all-pervading: From poor recruitment (initially ideological, then unskilled), through to multiple tasking agencies (p.9), to ever-changing, Washington-driven targets (p.149), and the often-overlooked careerism (p.250 etc). The waste results mostly from an unwillingness (or inability) to account for projects properly ♦ thus (in eerie reflection of the .com bubble) success was measured not by effect, but by the burn rate. (Later contracting of professional reconstruction companies has greatly increased efficiency and effectiveness.)
We Meant Well is less a narrative, and more a series of self-contained vignettes. From the immediacy of the scenes, the text probably began as e-mails home, which have now been edited and expanded. The early chapters are often absurd, and darkly humorous (at least, if their subject were not so wasteful). Later scenes continue to be broadly humorous, but in some places are full of pathos - dark, but without the salving humour.
In an otherwise interesting book, there are a few inaccuracies and quibbles. As an American, van Buren uses many cultural references which break the flow of the writing for foreigners while they are researched: VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars), 4-H Club etc. The impetus behind the Surge was not in 2005 (p.6), but in late 2006 after the congressional elections. The US sought to "emulate the Colonial British" (p.86); yet the initial British invasion of Ottoman Iraq was as incompetent as the US invasion: Townsend receiving the vaguest of strategic direction, and governance of a newly-conquered tribal Mesopotamia was attempted using the same caste-based system that had been used on long-pacified India. "Duftar" is not a

new slang word (p.160) but the Arabic for "note book", applied to a stack of dollars; General Order No 1 did not ban alcohol for fear of offending Muslims (p.172), rather for US disciplinary purposes. Throughout, references are scant, and poorly cited; and many names, details and timings have been altered or obscured, limiting its use as an academic reference.

This is a sardonic book which lays bare a serious subject. van Buren makes no bones about disliking the Bush Administration's ideology, but is as caustic about the failings of his own, formerly loved, service. As a warts and all account of the limits of the Chicago Doctrine, this contains some useful thoughts for any future reconstructions (although van Buren suggests that Iraq owes more to previous failures unlearnt.)

Recommended.

James Spencer is a retired infantry commander who served in Iraq in several roles. He is a strategic analyst on political, security and trade issues of the Middle East and North Africa and a specialist on Yemen.