A Better Basra: Searching for Strategy and Sanity in Iraq

By Caroline Jaine

Reviewed by Ian Shields

There have been plenty of books written about the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath, but these have been predominantly about the military aspects of the campaign and the role of servicemen in the aftermath of the fighting; many indeed being written by service personnel of all ranks. Add to this some books by (senior) diplomats detailing their involvement and thoughts, plenty of references in the memoires of various politicians, and finally the odd academic tome and you have a pretty good view of the literature. This short book, about the experiences of one woman in a relatively lowly Foreign and Commonwealth Office appointment, offers a very different insight. Caroline Jaine, a mother of three, volunteered to serve in Basra and this is the story of the 100 days she spent there.

The book deserves reading for three reasons: First, it highlights the totally inadequate preparation we offer non-military personnel deploying to a conflict zone, whether immediately after the fighting or during the post-conflict reconstruction phase. Second, it shows how important both these civilian experts and the media are to attempts at building or re0building a civil society. Third, but most important, it demonstrates the gulf of understanding between the military and civilian worlds, when both sides are meant to be pulling together: As a damning analysis of a "comprehensive" or "joined-up approach" it takes some beating. The book's critique of this lack of understanding of the real task in Basra, the frictions between the military and the civilians that bedevilled progress and the poor view of the politicians – brought on by their own behaviour and lack of understanding – are the more effective because they are understated and implied.

There are two personal themes that run throughout the book. First, Caroline's undoubted bravery, although she takes great pains to underplay this, emphasise her lack of bravery, and play up her naivety. Yet she is, clearly, very brave – the picture on the front cover is (albeit tongue-in-cheek) testament to this, and opening up her inner thoughts in the fashion that she has further underlines this point. Second, this book has the theme of strategy, or – more accurately – the devastating impact that a lack of strategy has on a project such as rebuilding

Iraqi civil society, running throughout it; indeed, it is one of the two themes of the book's sub-title.

Those who have an interest in strategy, in post-conflict reconstruction (or, to use a military term, Phase IV operations), a comprehensive or joined-up, approach, practioners or theoreticians of conflict resolution would all benefit from reading this book. It is sad that the book has not been published by a major publishing house, but it is readily available via a certain (major) on-line book retailer. Finally, read A Better Basra if you just want to read a very human story and read, in well-written prose, how one ordinary mother thought she could make a difference, and the sacrifices she made trying to do so.