
Ending the Neverending War

**The Forever War: Dispatches
from the War on Terror**

by Dexter Filkins

Knopf, 2008, 368 pages.

**Tell Me How This Ends:
General David Petraeus and the
Search for a Way Out of Iraq**

by Linda Robinson

Public Affairs, 2008, 416 pages.

**The War Within: A Secret White
House History 2006-2008**

by Bob Woodward

Simon & Schuster, 2008, 512 pages.

Reviewed by John Nagl

When the insurgency began in Iraq in the late summer of 2003, the United States Army was caught unprepared. Until then, it had been designed, trained, and equipped to win conventional wars, and was without doubt peerless in that arena. But it was not ready for an enemy who understood that it had no hope

of defeating the United States on a conventional battlefield, and therefore chose to wage war against it from the shadows.

Yet over the five years that followed, in one of history's most remarkable examples of adaptation under fire, the United States Army learned to conduct a surprisingly successful counterinsurgency campaign. Three new books, each by a prominent journalist, tell the story of that dramatic change, two from on the ground in Iraq and one from the corridors of Washington. Viewing the conflict from their different perspectives provides important insights into a war that America was losing badly only two years ago, and now looks to have turned around. It also suggests something about how America is likely to fight the war in Afghanistan under President Obama, and offers broader lessons about the nature of warfare in the twenty-first century.

Wars are barely controlled chaos, marked by incongruity and insanity. This bedlam that is combat

is a recurring motif in Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War: Dispatches from the War on Terror*. Filkins, who writes about desperate and dangerous places for the *New York Times*, offers a series of vignettes that show the human side of war; the small deeds that make up the depth and breadth of tragedy and survival. Having lived in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, he recounts scenes of public mutilations and executions in a Kabul soccer stadium. Despite the horrors of its Taliban government, however, he became fond of the country, coming to "adore the place, for its beauty and its perversions, for the generosity of its people in the face of the madness." Filkins also saw the results of the September 11 terrorist attacks in Manhattan, and offers a strikingly resigned perspective on those cataclysmic events, noting that "in the Third World, this kind of thing happened every day."

But *The Forever War* is mostly about Iraq. Filkins spent more than three years there, watching as an impressive initial invasion turned to dust in the mouths of American soldiers who had been given no plan for the occupation that followed. It all began to go downhill early on in the campaign. Looters, unconstrained by the legal authority that it is the responsibility of any occupying power to provide, destroyed the very fabric

of Iraqi society, literally removing the window frames and electric cables from buildings like the former British headquarters that housed my own battalion in late 2003.

The vice-chief of staff of the army at the time was General Jack Keane, a Vietnam veteran who knew something about counterinsurgency, and knew also that the United States Army was not ready for this fight. In 2006, when the failures of America's Iraq policy had become visible to all, he personally took responsibility for the army's unpreparedness, noting that, "We put an army on the battlefield that I had been a part of for thirty-seven years. It doesn't have any doctrine, nor was it educated and trained, to deal with an insurgency.... After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision." Far too many of my friends, both American and Iraqi, paid for this bad decision in blood.

I watched the invasion from my quarters in Fort Riley, Kansas, publicly proclaiming my desire to be a part of the fight, privately—if guiltily—grateful for the time with my wife and young son as my friends fought their way into Baghdad. Assurances that the troops would be

home by Christmas meant that my tank battalion resumed training for a conventional war even as a nascent insurgency was growing in al-Anbar province. My battalion was engaged in simulated tank-on-tank combat in the steamy Kansas August of 2003 when we were ordered to change direction and prepare for counterinsurgency operations in Iraq. Even then, counterinsurgency was not a word we were allowed to use in public. Our enemies were officially “dead-enders” and “former regime elements,” not Iraqi Sunnis opposed to our presence and embittered by our too often heavy-handed occupation.

Just six weeks after the abrupt cancellation of our exercise, my task force of eight hundred soldiers found itself in al-Anbar province with responsibility for the troubled Sunni Triangle between Ramadi and Fallujah. Our sector, centered on the dusty town of Khalidiyah, was home to some 60,000 souls, almost exclusively Sunnis. Perhaps 0.5 percent of them were committed to killing me and my soldiers. As near as we could tell, this amounted to about three hundred dedicated insurgents. We killed or captured twice that number over the course of the next year, but the insurgency only grew stronger. Filkins writes that in the first year of the war “the Americans were making

enemies faster than they could kill them.” My personal experience supports that harsh conclusion.

To illustrate what went wrong and why, Filkins uses the story of Lieutenant Colonel Nate Sassaman, then commander of an American battalion in the Fourth Infantry Division. During his conversations with Filkins, Sassaman confirms the analysis of General Keane when he complains that, “We are doing a lot of missions that we didn’t train for... Sometimes I wish there were more people who knew more about nation-building.” With little idea of what else to do, Sassaman simply does what he knows how to do best, telling Filkins, “We are going to inflict extreme violence” in Samarra.

It should come as no surprise that “extreme violence” didn’t solve the problems of a country torn by ethnic conflicts and shattered by the tyranny of a Baathist regime that would not release the bodies of political prisoners until a family member had paid for the bullet used to execute them. American mistakes early on didn’t help. The decision to disband the Iraqi Army, for instance, was among the worst of a series of errors. When the decision came down, a friend of mine had been working with an Iraqi division commander who had 10,000 soldiers ready to provide security on the streets. My

friend had to tell him that the unit was being disbanded on Coalition Provisional Authority head L. Paul Bremer's orders; the Iraqi general replied, "You know that this means that I will be fighting you tomorrow."

Poor decisions like these, taken during that bungled first year of the war, broke Iraq and fueled the Sunni insurgency. For the next two and a half years, American strategy focused on handing over control of the country to a hurriedly regenerated and predominantly Shi'ia army and police force incapable of dealing with the ghostlike insurgents. The Shi'ia police force returned to what it knew: the manic violence of the Saddam era, using household implements to torture Sunnis suspected of being terrorists. The Sunnis, for their part, adopted equally brutal tactics. Filkins details the differences between the sects' murder methods: "Electric drills were a Shi'ite obsession. When you found a guy with drill marks in his legs, he was almost certainly a Sunni, and he was almost certainly killed by a Shi'ite. The Sunnis preferred to behead, or to kill themselves while killing others. By and large, the Shi'ites didn't behead, didn't blow themselves up. The derangements were mutually exclusive."

Filkins finally left Iraq in the summer of 2006, when the killing was at its worst and the chaos had reached a level that was simply unbearable. It is hard to overstate the impact of war on those who have lived through it, and hard for them to relate to those who have not seen what they have. Filkins's sad words ring true to those who left much of what was decent and hopeful about themselves on the streets of Mesopotamia: "And then I got back to the world, and the weddings and the picnics were the same as everything had been in Iraq, silent and slow and heavy and dead. Your dreams come alive, though, when you come home. Your days may die, but your dreams explode."

At this point, the focus of the story moves to Washington, where I was serving dead days in the Pentagon and confronting exploding dreams at night. Across the Potomac, the White House was slowly beginning to recognize that its strategy of hastily handing over control to the Iraqis, rather than providing sufficient forces to protect the local population, was failing. How that belated recognition came about is the subject of Bob Woodward's *The War Within: A Secret White House History 2006-2008*.

A typical Woodward epic, *The War Within* is sourced by often anonymous but always highly placed insiders. Perhaps because of the shellacking the White House received in Woodward's previous book on the Iraq War, *State of Denial*, this time around the reporter's on-the-record sources include national security adviser Stephen Hadley and the president himself, who comes across as maddeningly disconnected from the policy decisions for which he was responsible. "Sure would be nice if this got better," he tells secretary of state Condoleezza Rice at one point, apparently unaware of the fact that the direction of the Iraq War rested on his shoulders. Woodward describes an administration that "lacked a process to examine consequences, alternatives, and motives," led by "[a] president so certain, so action-oriented, so hero-worshipped by his national security adviser" that he "almost couldn't be halted." This deeply dysfunctional organization took years longer than it should have to recognize that the war was being lost and a new strategy was required.

Although prematurely transferring security responsibilities to unprepared Iraqi forces still remained official policy, another strategy was now being discussed in Washington, called "Clear, Hold, and Build." First

publicly articulated by secretary of state Rice before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in October 2005, it recognized that simply removing insurgents from an area was insufficient unless forces were left behind to hold what had been cleared and then build a functioning government and economy within that security bubble. This strategy requires a lot of boots on the ground. According to most counterinsurgency theorists, there have to be twenty to twenty-five soldiers for every thousand civilians in order for it to work. Implementing "Clear, Hold, and Build" would entail the deployment of tens of thousands of additional troops to Iraq.

The War Within narrates the struggle within the White House over the decision to adopt "Clear, Hold, and Build" and then deploy the necessary forces to bring it about. The same general Jack Keane who had bemoaned the lack of an army counterinsurgency doctrine prior to the invasion played a critical role in this debate. By now retired from the Army, Keane, in conjunction with former West Point history professor Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute, helped make the case for a new strategy in Iraq. The decisive moment came on December 11, 2006, when Keane, together with four other

experts, briefed president Bush in the Oval Office. He told the president, “One of the most important things we have learned is that security is a necessary precondition for political and economic progress.” In this vein, he advocated the commitment of five additional army brigades—some 30,000 troops—in order to provide that security to the Iraqi people.

Keane was up against powerful opponents at every stage of the game: the Pentagon, the joint chiefs of staff, and General George Casey, the American commander on the ground in Iraq, who stated on October 25, 2006, that “I still very strongly believe that we need to continue to reduce our forces as the Iraqis continue to improve, because we need to get out of their way.” Casey’s words were music to the ears of then-secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, who was convinced that America “had to take its hand off the bicycle seat” and let the Iraqis fend for themselves. However, Rumsfeld promised the president that he would resign if the Republicans lost control of the House of Representatives or the Senate in the 2006 midterm elections. As it turned out, they would lose both, although the president had already decided before Election Day to give the Pentagon over to Robert Gates. Bush told Woodward that, “new

people to implement the new strategy is an exclamation point on new strategy.” To push this thing forward in the right direction, Keane urged President Bush to select General David Petraeus to take command in Iraq and oversee the implementation of “Clear, Hold, and Build.” Recognizing that this was the last chance to get it right, Petraeus contradicted Bush’s assessment of the new strategy as a “double down.” Instead, he told the president, “This is all in.”

The man who took point on the new “all in” strategy is the subject of Linda Robinson’s *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq*. Then-major general Petraeus had commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, while I was watching on television from Fort Riley. The general, who had been a professor of mine at West Point some fifteen years before, was shadowed during the invasion by the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Rick Atkinson. More than once, in helicopters and aboard armored vehicles, Atkinson heard Petraeus say to himself, “Tell me how this ends.” Petraeus knew that the invasion was the easy part of the operation. The hard part would come once the dog caught the truck he was chasing.

After the invasion, Petraeus was put in charge of the occupation of northern Iraq. He quickly landed himself in hot water for getting in front of American foreign policy by opening border crossings and invigorating economic development in Mosul, Iraq's third-largest city. Even worse in the eyes of the powers that were, Petraeus vocally opposed the decision to disband the Iraqi Army in May 2003. After leaving Mosul and returning to the United States in February 2004, he barely had time to catch his breath before he was sent back to Iraq that June to lead the Multi-National Security Transition Command, tasked with recreating an all but nonexistent Iraqi Army. He earned praise for his performance, including a *Newsweek* cover story entitled, "Can This Man Save Iraq?" with the clear implication that the answer was probably yes. Seventeen months later, Petraeus was sent to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in what was widely seen as the unofficial exile of a general who was attracting more media attention than was good for him.

But it proved difficult to keep Petraeus in the background. He used his position as commander of the Combined Arms Center to push for the changes he felt were necessary to make the army more effective at conducting counterinsurgency

campaigns. His most important contribution was *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, published in 2006 and written in conjunction with the United States Marine Corps—and to which I was privileged to contribute. His influence on the doctrine was overwhelming. Conrad Crane, the editor-in-chief, sent Petraeus a chapter one Saturday night in the summer of 2006, when Iraq was on fire, only to have it returned with extensive edits the following morning. The horrific and worsening situation on the ground in Iraq demanded that kind of diligence. Ultimately, the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* advocated an approach very different from the one the United States was unsuccessfully trying to implement. To Petraeus, security was the *sine qua non* of success in counterinsurgency, and he insisted that if Iraqi forces were unable to provide it, Americans would have to do so—at least until the locals were ready to take matters into their own hands.

This was the approach Petraeus put into practice in Iraq. The popular name for it is "the Surge," but this is somewhat misleading; far more important than the number of additional troops deployed was the mission they were given, in accordance with the dictates of the new *Field Manual*:

secure the population first. A step in this direction was the creation of seventy-six Joint Security Stations throughout Baghdad, manned by American troops and their Iraqi Army and Police counterparts. American casualties rose as the army cleared neighborhoods controlled by insurgents, but the locals gained a higher level of security, and economic and political progress soon followed.

Napoleon famously said, “All my generals are good. Give me ones who are lucky.” Petraeus was both good enough and lucky enough to take advantage of the “Sunni Awakening,” the decision of several Sunni tribes to switch sides and fight against the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida (AQI) with the support of American forces. This development, years in the making, marked a dramatic change in American policy, which had until then stubbornly ignored tribal power structures in favor of democratic processes for which Iraq was simply not ready. Petraeus had the wisdom to recognize this opportunity, and the courage to seize it.

In one of the best chapters of *Tell Me How This Ends*, Robinson describes how the Awakening extended from its origins in al-Anbar—Iraq’s Wild West—to Baghdad’s Ameriyah neighborhood, itself no rose garden. My West Point classmate Lieutenant

Colonel Dale Kuehl, who was commanding the First Battalion-Fifth Cavalry Regiment in the area, supported Sunni leader Abu Abid when he chose to turn against AQI in late May 2007. Adversaries became allies in a vivid illustration of the classic principle, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” A platoon leader described the overnight transformation with dramatic understatement: “It was weird,” he said. Petraeus, briefed on the plan, had two instructions: “Do not let our army stop you,” and “Do not let the Iraqi government stop you.” It’s been that kind of war.

Neither the United States Army nor the Iraqi government was able to stop what eventually became the Sons of Iraq militia, which spread like wildfire across the Sunni west and center of the country. The effective end of the Sunni insurgency and the implementation of Petraeus’s Joint Security Stations eliminated the need for the Shi’ia militias that had sprung up to defend their sect against their old enemies. In 2008, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki deployed the Iraqi Army to clear the militias from Basra and Sadr City. By the time Petraeus left Iraq in September of that year, the net result of his strategy was a decrease in violence by some 80 percent, with the lowest American casualty rates of the war.

Dexter Filkins was not in Iraq during the turnaround, but he returned there this past summer to report on developments. The situation on the ground had changed so much that he didn't recognize the place at first. I also returned to Iraq after a long absence at about the same time, and similarly struggled to comprehend the extraordinary reversal in Iraq's fortunes. Filkins's *New York Times* article, "Back in Iraq, Shattered by the Calm," published in September, helped me believe what I had seen with my own eyes but was simply unable to process, befuddled by the contrast between my memories of a destroyed society and the reality of one that was being reborn right in front of me.

Since then, the Iraqi government has accepted a Status of Forces Agreement that mandates the departure of all American troops from Iraqi cities by June 2009 and a full withdrawal by 2011. These deadlines are roughly the same as those proposed by Senator Barack Obama during his presidential campaign. Unfortunately, they are overly optimistic. Mosul remains a combat zone where American soldiers and Iraqi policemen engage in almost daily clashes with the remnants of al-Qaida, and there is little prospect that local security forces will be ca-

pable of handling the situation on their own within six months. The same holds true on a broader scale. The Iraqi Air Force, for instance, currently possesses no jet aircraft and will not be able to control its own airspace for the better part of a decade. But there is no doubt that the peak of American involvement in Iraq is past us, and the future of the country is far brighter than I could have imagined when I left al-Anbar in 2004, when al-Qaida controlled Fallujah, or than Dexter Filkins could have dreamed during the horrendous summer of 2006.

While these three books are all of high quality, pride of place must belong to Filkins. He provides the reader with a brilliant, vivid, and unflinchingly accurate impression of an Iraq torn asunder by ethnic hatreds and crippled by flawed American policy and strategy. Speaking as someone who lived through much of what he writes about, I think his book deserves a Pulitzer Prize. Bob Woodward's work is less intense, but it is also important and informative. It helps explain how years of inaction and dithering in Washington allowed the situation to deteriorate so badly under the leadership of a president who "spent three years in denial and then delegated a strategy review to his national security adviser." And

by painting a compelling portrait of the man who, through intelligence and sheer determination, turned a failing war around in the nick of time, Linda Robinson helps provide some hope for the reader exhausted by the missteps and tragedies of this war. Her book makes it hard to believe that Petraeus will fail to achieve the same kind of success in Afghanistan now that he has assumed responsibility for both wars as head of Central Command. Taken together, these three books provide extraordinary insight into a war that I have known all

too intimately. Understanding what has happened, and why, is a useful if incomplete palliative to my nightmares.

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