Fiasco is a masterful reckoning with the planning and execution of the American military invasion and occupation of Iraq through mid-2006, now with a postscript on recent developments. Ricks draws on the exclusive cooperation of an extraordinary number of American personnel, including more than one hundred senior officers, and access to more than 30,000 pages of official documents, many of them never before made public. Tragically, it is an undeniable account—explosive, shocking, and authoritative—of unsurpassed tactical success combined with unsurpassed strategic failure that indicts some of America’s most powerful and honored civilian and military leaders.

Amazon.com Review

Fiasco is a more strongly worded title than you might expect a seasoned military reporter such as Thomas E. Ricks to use, accustomed as he is to the even-handed style of daily newspaper journalism. But Ricks, the Pentagon
correspondent for the *Washington Post* and the author of the acclaimed account of Marine Corps boot camp, *Making the Corps* (released in a 10th anniversary edition to accompany the paperback release of *Fiasco*), has written a thorough and devastating history of the war in Iraq from the planning stages through the continued insurgency in early 2006, and he does not shy away from naming those he finds responsible. His tragic story is divided in two. The first part—the runup to the war and the invasion in 2003—is familiar from books like *Cobra II* and *Plan of Attack*, although Ricks uses his many military sources to portray an officer class that was far more skeptical of the war beforehand than generally reported. But the heart of his book is the second half, beginning in August 2003, when, as he writes, the war really began, with the bombing of the Jordanian embassy and the emergence of the insurgency. His strongest critique is that the U.S. military failed to anticipate—and then failed to recognize—the insurgency, and tried to fight it with conventional methods that only fanned its flames. What makes his portrait particularly damning are the dozens of military sources—most of them on record—who join in his critique, and the thousands of pages of internal documents he uses to make his case for a war poorly planned and bravely but blindly fought.

The paperback edition of *Fiasco* includes a new postscript in which Ricks looks back on the year since the book's release, a year in which the intensity and frequency of attacks on American soldiers only increased and in which Ricks's challenging account became accepted as conventional wisdom, with many of the dissident officers in his story given the reins of leadership, although Ricks still finds the prospects for the conflict grim. -- Tom Nissley

**A Fiasco, a Year Later**

With the paperback release of Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco*, a year after the book became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller and an influential force in transforming the public perception (and the perception within the military and the civilian government as well) of the war in Iraq, we asked Ricks in the questions below to look back on the book and the year of conflict that have followed. On our page for the hardcover edition of *Fiasco* you can see our earlier Q&A with Ricks, and you can also see two lists he prepared for Amazon customers: his choices for the 10 books for understanding Iraq that aren't about Iraq, a collection of studies of counterinsurgency warfare that became surprisingly popular last year as soldiers and civilians tried to understand the nature of the new conflict, and, as a glimpse into his writing process, a playlist of the music he listened to while writing and researching the book.

**Amazon.com:** When we spoke with you a year ago, you said that you thought you were done going back to Baghdad. But that dateline is still showing up in your reports. How have things changed in the city over the past year?

**Thomas E. Ricks:** Yes, I had promised my wife that I wouldn’t go back. Iraq was taking a toll on both of us—I think my trips of four to six weeks were harder on her than on me.

But I found I couldn’t stay away. The Iraq war is the most important event of our time, I think, and will remain a major news story for years to come. And I felt like everything I had done for the last 15 years—from deployments I covered to books and military manuals I’d read (and written)—had prepared me to cover this event better than most reporters. So I made a deal with my wife that I would go back to Iraq but would no longer do the riskiest things, such as go on combat patrols or on convoys. I used to have a rule that I would only take the risks necessary to “get the story.” Now I don’t take even those risks if I can see them, even if that means missing part of a story. Also, I try to keep my trips much shorter.

How is Baghdad different? It is still a chaotic mess. But it doesn’t feel quite as Hobbesian as it did in early 2006. That said, it also feels a bit like a pause—with the so-called “surge,” Uncle Sam has put all his chips on the table, and the other players are waiting a bit to see how that plays out.

**Amazon.com:** One of the remarkable things over the past year for a reader of *Fiasco* has been how much of what
your book recommends has, apparently, been taken to heart by the military and civilian leadership. As you write in
your new postscript to the paperback edition, the war has been "turned over to the dissidents." General David
Petraeus, who was one of the first to put classic counterinsurgency tactics to use in Iraq, is now the top American
commander there, and he has surrounded himself with others with similar views. What was that transformation like
on the inside?

Ricks: I was really struck when I was out in Baghdad two months ago at how different the American military felt. I
used to hate going into the Green Zone because of all the unreal happy talk I'd hear. It was a relief to leave the place,
even if being outside it (and contrary to popular myth, most reporters do live outside it) was more dangerous.

There is a new realism in the U.S. military. In May, I was getting a briefing from one official in the Green Zone and I
thought, "Wow, not only does this briefing strike me as accurate, it also is better said than I could do." That feeling
was a real change from the old days.

The other thing that struck me was the number of copies I saw of Fiasco as I knocked around Iraq. When I started
writing it, the title was controversial. Now generals say things to me like, "Got it, understand it, agree with it." I am
told that the Army War College is making the book required reading this fall.

Amazon.com: And what are its prospects at this late date?

Ricks: The question remains, Is it too little too late? It took the U.S. military four years to get the strategy right in
Iraq--that is, to understand that their goal should be to protect the people. By that time, the American people and the
Iraqi people both had lost a lot of patience. (And by that time, the Iraq war had lasted longer than American
participation in World War II.) Also, it isn't clear that we have enough troops to really implement this new strategy
of protecting the people. In some parts of Baghdad where U.S. troops now have outposts, the streets are quieter. Yet
we're seeing more violence on the outskirts of Baghdad. And the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk make me nervous. I am
keeping an eye on them this summer and fall.

The thing to watch in Iraq is whether we see more tribes making common cause with the U.S. and the Iraqi
government. How long will it last? And what does it mean in the long term for Iraq? Is it the beginning of a major
change, or just a prelude to a big civil war?

Amazon.com: You've been a student of the culture of the military for years. How has the war affected the state of the
American military: the redeployments, the state of Guard and Reserves troops and the regular Army and Marines,
and the relationship to civilian leadership?

Ricks: I think there is general agreement that there is a huge strain on the military. Essentially, one percent of the
nation--soldiers and their families--is carrying the burden. We are now sending soldiers back for their third year-
long tours. We've never tried to fight a lengthy ground war overseas with an all-volunteer force. Nor have we ever
tried to occupy an Arab country.

What the long-term effect is on the military will depend in part on how the war ends for us, and for Iraq. But I think
it isn't going to be good. Today I was talking to a retired officer and asked him what he was hearing from his friends
in Iraq about troop morale. "It's broken," he said. Meanwhile, he said, soldiers he knows who are back home from Iraq
"wonder why they were there." Not everyone is as morose as this officer, but the trend isn't good.

Amazon.com: You quote Gen. Anthony Zinni in your postscript as saying the U.S. is "drifting toward containment"
in Iraq. What does containment of what likely remain a very hot conflict look like? You've written in your
postscript and elsewhere that you think we are only in act III of a Shakespearean tragedy. I wouldn't describe
Shakespeare's fifth acts as particularly well contained.
Ricks: I agree with you. Containment would mean some sort of stepping back from the war, probably beginning by halving the American military presence. You’d probably still have U.S. troops inside Iraq, but disengaged from daily fighting. Their goals would be negative ones: prevent genocide, prevent al Qaeda from being able to operate in Iraq, and prevent the war from spreading to outside Iraq. (This was laid out well in a recent study by James Miller and Shawn Brimley, readable at http://www.cnas.org/en/cms/?368.)

Containment probably would be a messy and demoralizing mission. No one signs up in the U.S. military to stand by as innocents are slaughtered in nearby cities. Yet that might be the case if we did indeed move to this stance and a full-blown civil war (or a couple) ensued. And there surely would be refugees from such fighting. Either they would go to neighboring countries, and perhaps destabilize them, or we would set up “refugee catchment” areas, as another study, by the Brookings Institute, proposed. The open-ended task of guarding those new refugee camps likely would fall to U.S. troops.

The more you look at Iraq, the more worrisome it gets. As I noted in the new postscript in the paperback edition, many strategic experts I talk to believe that the consequences of the Iraq war are going to be worse for the United States than was the fallout from the Vietnam War.

Amazon.com: A year and a half is a long time, but let’s say that we have a Democratic president in January 2009: President Clinton, or Gore, or Obama. What prospect would a change in administration have for a new strategic opening? Or would the new president likely wind up like Nixon in Vietnam, owning a war he or she didn’t begin?

Ricks: Not such a long time. President Bush has made his major decisions on Iraq. Troop levels are going to have to come down next year, because we don’t have replacements on the shelf. So the three big questions for the U.S. government are going to be: How many troops will be withdrawn, what will be the mission of those who remain, and how long will they stay? Those questions are going to be answered by the next president, not this one.

My gut feeling is the latter: I think we are going to have troops in Iraq through 2009, and probably for a few years beyond that. Indeed, I wouldn’t be surprised if U.S. troops were there in 15 years. But as I say in Fiasco, that’s kind of a best-case scenario.

Product Description

Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize
One of the Washington Post Book Worlds 10 Best Books of the Year
One of Time’s 10 Best Books of the Year
USA Today’s Nonfiction Book of the Year
A New York Times Notable Book

The definitive account of the American military’s tragic experience in Iraq

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