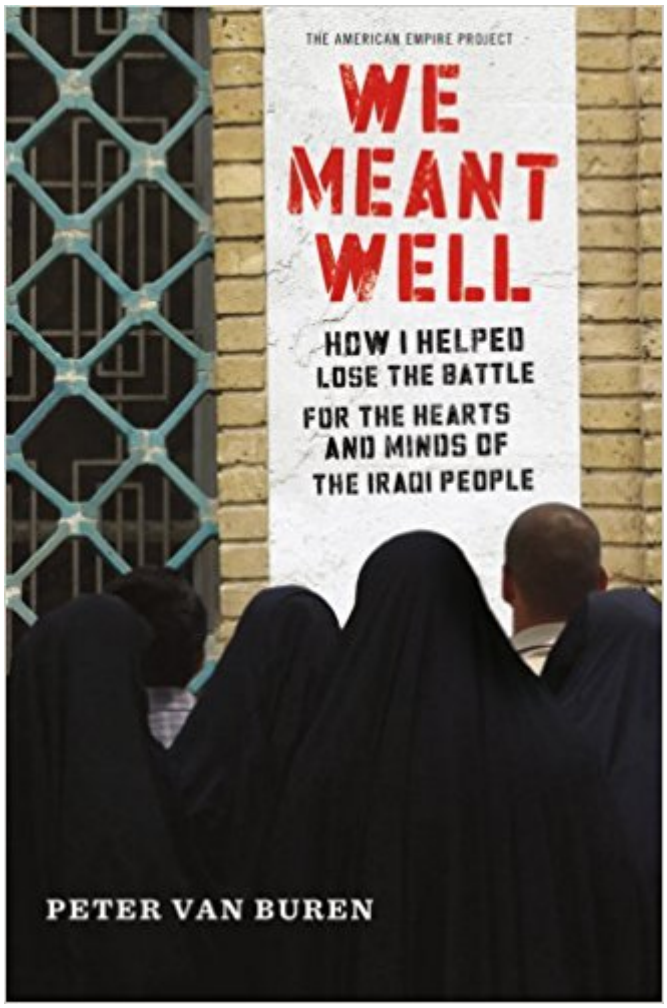
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We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose The Battle For The Hearts And Minds Of The Iraqi People (American Empire Project)



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Synopsis

"One diplomat’s darkly humorous and ultimately scathing assault on just about everything the military and State Department have doneÃ¢â ¬â ¢or tried to doÃ¢â ¬â ¢since the invasion of Iraq. The title says it all."Ã¢â ¬â ¢The New York TimesCharged with rebuilding Iraq, would you spend taxpayer money on a sports mural in Baghdad’s most dangerous neighborhood to promote reconciliation through art? How about an isolated milk factory that cannot get its milk to market? Or a pastry class training women to open cafÃƒÂ©s on bombed-out streets that lack water and electricity?As Peter Van Buren shows, we bought all these projects and more in the most expensive hearts-and-minds campaign since the Marshall Plan. We Meant Well is his eyewitness account of the civilian side of the surgeÃ¢â ¬â ¢that surreal and bollixed attempt to defeat terrorism and win over Iraqis by reconstructing the world we had just destroyed. Leading a State Department Provincial Reconstruction Team on its quixotic mission, Van Buren details, with laser-like irony, his yearlong encounter with pointless projects, bureaucratic fumbling, overwhelmed soldiers, and oblivious administrators secluded in the world’s largest embassy, who fail to realize that you can’t rebuild a country without first picking up the trash.A work of "scathing, gallows humor" (The Boston Globe), We Meant Well is a tragicomic voyage of ineptitude and corruption that leaves its writerÃ¢â ¬â ¢and readersÃ¢â ¬â ¢appalled and disillusioned, but wiser.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“One diplomat’s darkly humorous and ultimately scathing assault on just about everything the military and the State Department have done -- or tried to do -- since the invasion of Iraq. The title says it all.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Steven Myers, New York TimesÃ¢â ¬Å“In this shocking and darkly hilarious exposÃƒÂ© of the reconstruction of post-Saddam Iraq, former State Department team leader Van Buren describes the tragicomedy that has been American efforts at nation building, marked by bizarre decisions and wrongheaded prioritiesÃ¢â ¬Â¦ "We made things in Iraq look the way we wanted them to look," Van Buren writes. With lyrical prose and biting wit, this book reveals the devastating arrogance of imperial ambition and folly.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)Ã¢â ¬Å“One of the rare, completely satisfying results of the expensive debacle in Iraq.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)Ã¢â ¬Å“I’ve read just about every memoir out of Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade, military or otherwise, and this stands as one of the best -- certainly one of the most self-aware and best written.Ã¢â ¬Â•
Ã¢â ¬â ¢WashingtonianÃ¢â ¬Å“Long after the self-serving memoirs of people named Bush, Rice, and Rumsfeld are consigned to some landfill, this unsparing and very funny chronicle will remain on the short list of books essential to understanding America’s Iraq War. Here is nation-building as it looks from the inside--waste, folly, and sheer silliness included.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Andrew J. Bacevich, author of Washington Rules: America’s Path to Permanent WarÃ¢â ¬Å“The road to Hell is paved with taxpayer dollars in Peter Van Buren’s account of a misspent year rebuilding Iraq. Abrasive, honest and funny, We Meant Well is an insider’s account of life behind blast walls at the height of the surge.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Nathan Hodge, author of Armed Humanitarians: The Rise of the Nation BuildersÃ¢â ¬Å“If Joseph Heller’s war began in 2004 instead of 1944, this would be the book entitled Catch-22. Once I picked up We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People (available September 27), I could not put the book down. I could not believe so much that appears to be fictional satire could instead relate actual events...Very highly recommended.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Seattle-Post IntelligencerÃ¢â ¬Å“We Meant Well is a must-read, first-hand account of our disastrous occupation of Iraq. Its lively writing style will appeal to a wide audience.Ã¢â ¬Â• Ã¢â ¬â ¢Ron Paul, M.D., Member of Congress

Learn more, read my blog and see photos from Iraq illustrating many of the episodes in the book at wemeantwell.com! --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I gather that Van Buren is persona non grata at State, now -- not entirely because of this book, but it cannot but have played a role in his departure. Mind you, it hardly sounds as though he’s eager to

stay. There are dispiriting scenes of Embassy and Green Zone isolation and delusion, and of the consistently short-sighted changing winds of fashionable ’rebuilding’ policy. As Richard Cheney said back in the days when he opposed the invasion of Iraq (before he became the war-hungry VP, Dick Cheney), "you break it, you bought it." Van Buren’s target, as I see it, is not individual State Department personnel, despite the fact that they come off quite badly here. He includes himself in the critique, however, of a blinkered and know-nothing approach with impossible goals. And it’s the goals -- policy set at the highest level of the then-US government -- that is in the firing line. Van Buren is notably generous to the soldiers and marines and others with military tasks to do; he shows, in fact, a degree of admiration for them doing impossible jobs in horrible circumstances. Anyway, if you want to know something about the underbelly of US policy aspirations, expressed at the level of press conferences and Presidential directives and back-slapping, but viewed from the mess and folly on the ground, you can’t go wrong with this book. I would recommend, as a companion piece and useful complement, Dexter Filkins’ The Forever War.

This is perhaps the best personal account I have read on what life was like outside the Green Zone for those of us on distant FOBs who weren’t involved in the daily grind and dangers of direct combat, but instead were faced with other challenges and "opportunities." Mr. Van Buren’s book is exceptionally well written, incisively accurate, wildly entertaining and witty, and full of first hand observations that brought back a lot of memories for me, mostly good. I had read that this book was the Catch 22 for the Iraq War, and while I can appreciate that comparison, this book is not satire - the descriptions are all spot-on. This alone makes the book stand out from the crowd of all other recent war tomes and sagas. Lastly, I would say that other than Rory Stewart’s "Prince of the Marshes" that detailed similar experiences from much earlier in the war and during the CPA regime, Van Buren has not only accurately portrayed the challenges of dealing with formal and informal host nation "leaders," but has provided a window into our own U.S. "whole of government" eccentricities and fiefdoms. I would recommend this book to any reader, but particularly to those young people just starting or considering a career in government service, in or out of uniform.

I do recommend this book, imperfect as it is, as a good first-person history of what I cannot help think will be seen as a tragic time in American history. My guess is that other similar books might have been written during earlier wars, but, aside from some important works of fiction, they never got published or have fallen to the wayside.Someone said that you should not write the history of a war until 10 years after it has ended. This may apply especially to those who were engaged in it,

since it allows some of the personal pain to heal and permits one to provide a more balanced view of events. That said, it is important for those who were not present to have memoirs like this one so that they can use it as a means of measuring other accounts set out later by those with a personal agenda of redefining the past.While this particular book is a good, and sometimes hilarious, account of what was seen and done in the presence of the author, it suffers from a lack of empathy in its attempt to get across its righteousness. The author explains how he was trapped by the machinery of the Foreign Service personnel system, through a combination of the carrot of cash and career advancement and the stick of being washed out or dead-ended, into spending a year in a PRT in Iraq. He wants us to see the unfair position he was placed in and how his only solution for the sake of his family and his own career, in which he had invested his life, was to continue to take the King's coin and do the King's bidding. Readers of the book who have not been in such a position might think it simple to choose to leave or to find another way to avoid the choice, but, in fact, the author's exposition about the pressures placed upon the Foreign Service at this time is true. His choice was a very human one, but regrettably for the quality of the book he fails to apply the same standard to others.A stronger editor might have helped by forcing the author to confront his own unwillingness or inability to see how everyone within the system was faced with the same pressures; that he was not alone. That everyone who took his path found themselves subject to the intolerant beast called war. If anything, the higher up in the chain of command, the greater the pressures that were exerted. People with longer careers than his, with more to lose, since they often had even fewer alternatives, were crushed or driven out. That this happened during the Vietnam War and in the living memory of many within the Foreign Service made it seem even more cruel, since it seemed so predictable as to cry out to be avoided. Unfortunately, the author seems to assign too much blame to his immediate supervisors, regardless of their merely having taken the same road that he took. He demands that they pay the price that he was unwilling to pay; they should have sacrificed their families and their careers to protect him and his. Had his righteousness been tempered with a little more compassion, this book could have been both an excellent source of wisdom as well as a good read.

Oh my word this book is fantastic. Whatever your politics, it is an enjoyable read of the US diplomacy efforts in Iraq told from a sardonic, poignant first person perspective. I appreciated Mr. VanBuren's candor on the topics he chose to cover. The essays read journalistic in style, if media could write with reduced political bias and spend enough time immersed in an area to have perspective. This book is a great overview if you ever wonder exactly WHAT our soldiers and

diplomats have been doing in Iraq all these years.

Brilliant. Depressing. Infuriating. Ridiculous. Surreal. Eye-opening. Sobering. Engaging. Perceptive. Frustrating. Compelling. Pointless. Essential.I was against the invasion of Iraq from the start, and like many other liberals I "knew" that occupation and "reconstruction" were going to be driven by commercial self-interest and neoconservative geopolitics. I was wrong. That may have been the goal, but very quickly it turned into a pointless and ineffectual game in which the only rule was "look successful". As the author concluded, assessment followed the kindergarten model: effort was more important than results.

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