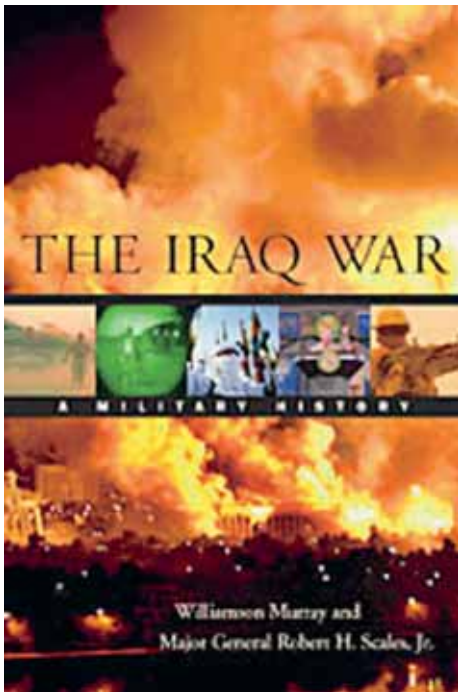

The Iraq War: A Military History

By Williamson Murray and Maj Gen Robert H Scales Jr.

Publisher: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, USA
ISBN: 0674012801
Price: £16.95 (368 pages, hardcover)

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The Iraq War hit the streets while many of the coalition troops who fought the war were still overseas, patrolling the streets of Baghdad and Basra. A well-documented book including color

photos and maps, it provides analysis of the major combat phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the short but successful battle against the armies of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003. Although the study stands as a worthwhile contribution to the field of military history, it is important to examine the book critically in the context of the continuing global war on terrorism.

Initially, I regarded *The Iraq War's* 'lessons learned', written 3,000 miles removed from a battlefield still warm, with some skepticism. I paused several times at unsupported assertions or editorializing that seemed to go beyond historical reporting. But this 'quick look' at the war has some merit. Noted author John Lewis Gaddis describes its value well when he writes that it is "presumptuous" to speculate "so soon after the event, but it's also necessary. For although the accuracy of historical writing diminishes as it approaches the present — because perspectives are shorter and there are fewer sources to work with than in treatments of the more distant past — the relevance of such writing increases" (emphasis in original) (*Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004], 5).

The authors bring credibility to The Iraq War. Well known in military history circles, Williamson Murray is a professor at the Army War College. An extensively published historian trained at Yale, he wrote a significant portion of the *Gulf War Air Power Survey* (Washington, DC: Department of the Air Force, 1993) over a decade ago. General Scales, formerly commandant of the Army War College and now retired, headed the US Army's Desert Storm Study Project and authored *Certain Victory: The United States Army in the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, Inc, 1994), the official US Army account of its performance in the Gulf War, originally published by the Office of the Chief of Staff, US Army, 1993. He too is well published and appears frequently on the academic and lecture circuits in Washington, DC.

Among the first of many analyses of Iraqi Freedom, this book provides a strong recounting of what one war fighter I know calls the 'major muscle movements' of the battle. However, it is not a comprehensive examination of an integrated joint coalition campaign, and it is not in the same league as the Gulf War Air Power Survey, researched by a dedicated analytical team and published in several volumes about a year after Operation Desert Storm — the first Gulf War. In fact, perhaps a more accurate subtitle for *The Iraq War* might have been *A Soldier's Perspective instead of A Military History*.

In the prologue, devoted to Desert Storm, the authors assert that the "aerial assault was an exercise in overkill and lasted far too long" (p 13) — an interesting suggestion for which they provide no evidence. Such a statement illustrates the book's greatest failing: lack of depth and balance regarding joint air and space power. Indeed, the analysis seems very two-dimensional and 'surface-centric'.

As readers move forward to the 2003 conflict in Iraq, they will find that the analysis of the joint air component's planning and execution is thin. According to Murray and Scales, "For all the talk of effects-based operations [EBO] and operational net assessment, the failure to understand the enemy where he lives — his culture, his values, his political system — quickly leads up a dark path where any assumption will do" (pp 182–83). The authors do not seem to weigh Iraqi Freedom as a battle in the greater war on terror or credit the coalition campaign in Iraq with involving allies, several US government agencies other than the Defense Department and, effectively, all of our instruments of national power. They miss an opportunity to delve into the interesting and extensive red teaming and war gaming conducted by US Central Command, by the Air Staff's Checkmate directorate, by the Air Force Studies and Analyses Agency, and by the US Navy and Army — among others — between 1991 and 2004.

The Iraq War also overlooks some tremendous advancements made in warfare since Desert Storm: the progression of air and space power theory, the promulgation of EBO doctrine to the joint community, the rise of new space organizations and capabilities, huge improvements in communications and command and control (C2), and improved mastery of the operational level of war at the combined air and space operations center. The authors do mention C2 and

upgrades to unmanned aerial vehicles, but they pigeonhole them to some extent as air-component improvements rather than assess their effect on the support of surface warriors.

For the Airman or joint officer who studies this book, the lessons learned, outlined in the 'Air Campaign' chapter, testify to some of the common misperceptions about air and space power. Murray and Scales correctly describe the C2 capabilities used by the coalition to tie together sensors and shooters as 'particularly impressive' (p 182), acknowledge the devastating psychological effect of airpower on Iraqi combatants (p 180), and characterize the coalition's limited human-intelligence capability in Iraq as a shortcoming. Certainly, those opinions and observations are balanced and defensible. Unfortunately, by emphasizing isolated details, taken out of context, the authors tend to miss the larger strategic picture (and virtually everything in modern warfare is strategic).

One particular assertion, based on a false assumption, may proceed from a lack of detailed information — understandably difficult to come by a scant few weeks after the war. Specifically, Murray and Scales write that "there is considerable irony here, because most military theorists of the 1920s and 1930s posited that air power was a weapon that should attack exclusively the morale of the enemy" (p 179). That statement, of course, is not exactly true. Giulio Douhet's vision of huge formations of bombers crushing cities (and even using chemical weapons) to create terror and defeat the enemy's morale peaked with Billy Mitchell — and largely faded with him. The rationale was that causing numerous casualties up front would curb the number of deaths in the long run by forcing the adversary to back down. Flaws with Douhet lie in the laws of war, in the moral repugnance toward the idea of killing innocents intentionally, and in anticipating the weakness of a populace under aerial siege. The resolve of the British during the zeppelin raids of World War I and then again during the Battle of Britain serves as an example. US Army Air Corps strategists were watching and learning.
By the 1930s the Air Corps Tactical School, located at Maxwell Field, Alabama, began promulgating strategic bombardment and the industrial-web theory, thus presenting a more nuanced vision of airpower. Daylight precision bombardment became the goal, but the lack of adequate technology made such doctrine difficult and costly to execute effectively, resulting in the firebombing and destruction of cities even though the aiming points for most US bombardment missions in World War II were military or dual-use targets. Obviously, by today's standards the collateral damage may have been unacceptable, but Ploesti and Operation Overlord serve as good examples of industrial-target sets designed to stall military operations — not just kill civilians, as some assert. Others might disagree with US nuclear motives, citing escalation in the Pacific theater, firebombing raids, and nuclear-bomb attacks, but even then, the mass killing of civilians was not the goal of the Army Air Corps — and never has been the Air Force's goal, even in the Cold War.

EBO, criticized by the authors, is now a widely embraced joint operational concept. Finally, modern technologies allow joint air and space power to realize the dream of the early Air Corps theorists. Planners apply information-age strategies and strenuously attempt to minimize direct civilian casualties. We even attempt to minimize *inconveniences* for civilians as we try to achieve specific effects that link directly to strategic objectives. There is no 'considerable irony', as the authors suggest, that the coalition did not flatten Baghdad or kill powerless people in a futile attempt to coerce a tyrant (p 179). Although the US military may need to reorganize in the area of postwar planning, campaign planners deliberately selected or spared targets during Iraqi Freedom to set the conditions to win the peace following major combat. An ethical military culture has created a philosophy that exploits precision capabilities and takes advantage of technological and organizational improvements, as well as the revolution in military affairs, to reduce the need for brute force and avoid long-term devastation. This stance is intrinsically linked to post-conflict planning.

The authors also fail to address the fact that our joint air and space capabilities — particularly speed, power, and precision — have redefined mass, a historic principle of warfare, while

retaining the moral high ground. We don't always need tens of thousands of troops to take an airfield, fort, or village; in fact, air and space power, assisted by special forces, was certainly effective in Afghanistan and western Iraq. Airpower planners realize — and smart joint officers recognize —that although technology will never make war antiseptic, collateral damage can and should be reduced as much as practical.

Overall, *The Iraq War* is worth reading. Although well-read Airmen may be troubled by several points, the book is thought provoking and provides a solid background of surface-force movements in Iraqi Freedom — hopefully the last large ground campaign we'll see for a few years. The authors' remark about the implications of the Iraq war deserves one final comment: "Cultural and geopolitical complexities will make the securing of Iraq far more of a challenge than virtually anyone had foreseen before the conflict began" (p 254). If they believe that the 'securing of Iraq' began in 1990, I might agree. If they refer only to the major combat operation that began in 2003, I have to say, 'Absolutely not true'. I don't know of any planner of any rank — joint, interagency, and air — who said that capturing Saddam and fixing Iraq would be easy. Without a doubt, joint and air planners considered many scenarios that are worse than the reality we face today. Perhaps the latest war in Iraq provides a lesson to planners at all levels that the 'best case' might present significantly different challenges than the 'worst case' we usually anticipate.