



2008.07.04

Jonathan Steele, *Defeat: Why America and Britain Lost Iraq*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008. Pp. 294. ISBN 978-1-84511-629-3.

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Jonathan Steele's answer to his title's "why" is simply that they lost Iraq because they occupied it. Never mind the many mistakes described in books with titles like *Fiasco*, *Squandered Victory*, *Losing Iraq*, among others. For Steele, "The occupation was flawed from the start ... it could not have succeeded. The central problem was not that Americans made mistakes. The occupation itself was the mistake" (1-2). Having made that bold assertion, the author proceeds for nine chapters to explain why he sees that the occupation was doomed and, more interestingly, why America and Britain did not.

Steele, the senior reporter on international affairs for the *Manchester Guardian*, has been to Iraq eight times during the current war. Since the 1960s he has covered conflicts in Europe, Africa, and Asia as well as serving as bureau chief for the *Guardian* in Washington and Moscow. Winner of several journalism awards in Britain and America, he has also published half a dozen books on international politics.¹ His broad experience, his easy access to officials, and his penchant for talking to ordinary Iraqis make his a voice to be considered.

The first point Steele makes is that the occupation could not have succeeded. He generalizes that "Occupations are inherently humiliating A foreign army ... needs to leave within weeks, or at most, months. Otherwise, suspicions will quickly grow that the foreigners' real aims are imperial"; since "the only exception to this rule in modern times ... the western occupations of Germany and Japan" (2) are unique, each in its own way, "comparisons are absurd" (147). He specifies that the occupation of "a Muslim country in the heart of the Middle East" was particularly likely to fail in the case of Iraq because "British colonisers invaded [that] country ... and assumed total control in 1918.... So Bush and Blair were launching their attacks on a nation that was unlikely to welcome being taken over again" (3).

Steele's second point is that America's and Britain's leaders did not understand the inevitability of their occupation's failure and that they proceeded, as James Fallows titled his 2006 book, *Blind into Baghdad*. Here Steele is on firmer ground in dealing with Prime Minister Blair than with President Bush. His chapter on Blair reveals that the prime minister never asked for advice from the Foreign Office, held no parliamentary hearings on Iraq, and ignored a cautionary letter from fifty-two retired British diplomats predicting "that the occupation of Iraq ... would meet serious and stubborn resistance" (159). Blair, Steele concludes, "was set on going to war on Bush's side under any circumstances" and so made Britain's "biggest foreign policy blunder ... since Suez" (160-1).

The key disappointment of the book is its failure to explain President Bush's apparent

¹ E.g., *Inside East Germany: The State That Came In from the Cold* (NY: Urizen, 1977), *Soviet Power: The Kremlin's Foreign Policy—Brezhnev to Chernenko*, rev. ed. (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

change from an initial policy of leaving Iraq “within weeks, or at most months,” as Steele would have recommended, to an indefinite occupation that has now lasted for years. Steele is certainly not alone in this failure, but his explanations are unoriginal: ignorance of Iraq’s history; underestimation of both Islamist and nationalist resistance to Western dominance; disregard for public opinion expressed by Iraqis, Americans, and America’s allies; and pressure by neoconservatives both inside and outside the administration for a long-term American presence in the Middle East. All of these may be true, but they do not tell why the statements about a brief occupation by senior officers like General Tommy Franks of Central Command and Lieutenant General Jay Garner of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance quickly turned out to be wrong.

Steele concludes that “the exact trajectory of what happened ... could not have been predicted... [but] the day on which Bush decided to have an occupation was the day he ensured defeat” (6) and quotes the Iraqi-American academic, Kanan Makiya (Brandeis University), in declaring that “The first and biggest American error was the idea of going for an occupation” (245). Many may say that “conditions on the ground” have so improved that Steele’s defeat is now approaching victory, and that his next book will be titled *Victory: How America and Britain Won Iraq*. We’ll see.