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Matt Gallagher, *Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2010. Pp. 310. ISBN 978-0-306-81967-4.

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Recent years have seen countless memoirs of authors who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. While some have been sensationalistic or of questionable accuracy, others, such as Nathaniel Fick's *One Bullet Away*,¹ provide invaluable resources for both scholars and the general public. Matt Gallagher's *Kaboom*, a day-to-day account of a small-unit leader in Iraq, belongs in the latter category. The author, a lanky twenty-something from Reno, Nevada, was commissioned as an armored cavalry officer in 2005. In late 2007, he began a fifteen-month deployment in the greater Baghdad region, first as a platoon commander with the 2-14 Cavalry and later as a targeting officer in the 1-27 Infantry Battalion. After leaving the Army in 2009, he wrote *Kaboom* based on material first published in his controversial blog of the same name, which his superiors had forced him to shut down midway through his deployment.² Gallagher's attention to detail, engaging prose, and critical view of the US war effort make this book a must read for those who would better understand America's recent counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns.

Several aspects of Gallagher's work are striking. First and foremost, he offers a remarkably detailed account of his unit's experiences during its COIN operations. The juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy, so typical of all military life, is apparent throughout. Thus, we read of US and Iraqi casualties, the devastating impact of "Dear John" letters, and the extreme poverty of local residents in his area of responsibility. But, on the lighter side, he shares his embarrassing attempts to grow a mustache, the practical jokes and kidding among his soldiers, and a story about a suspected improvised explosive device (IED) that turned out to be an unspooled Bon Jovi cassette tape.

While Gallagher certainly captures the boredom, frustration, and exhaustion of war, what really shine through are moments of camaraderie and humor. In this, his work recalls many others, for example, that of Guadalcanal veteran Sid Phillips who chose to highlight "humor and nonsense, as much as patriotism and courage" in his account of his service in World War II.³ Such humor and nonsense are too often neglected by professional historians and outside observers, uncomfortable with depicting armed conflict as anything less than serious. In relating the many emotions he felt in the course of his tour in so personal and honest a manner, Gallagher provides a more complete record of the war as actually experienced by those who fought it.

Kaboom also well conveys "the never-ending layers of grey" that typify a COIN campaign (13). Such operations lead to one confusing situation and/or complex realization after another. For example, Gallagher came to recognize that many insurgents, rather than the epitome of evil, were just poor teenagers emplacing IEDs to feed their families; that large American bases complete with Burger Kings, twenty-four-hour electricity, and softball leagues were situated only a few miles from Iraqi neighborhoods where inhabitants were reduced to eating road kill; that destructive raids carried out with heavy-handed tactics by special operations personnel in his area of responsibility ruined his carefully cultivated relations with the locals; and that the challenges of being a senior representative of the US government in a distressed Iraqi neighborhood far exceeded his ability to overcome them.

1. Subtitle: *The Making of a Marine Officer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).

2. See Ernesto Londoño, "Silent Posting," *Washington Post* (24 July 2008) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1130.htm> and Jessica Estepa, "Army Tells Soldier to End Blog from Iraq," *Army Times* (3 August 2008) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1131.htm>.

3. *You'll be Sor-ree!: A Guadalcanal Marine Remembers the Pacific War* (Denver: Valor Studios, 2010) preface.

The book also underscores the frustratingly intractable nature of the Iraqi insurgency and of insurgents' motivations, which "varied from tribe to tribe, neighborhood to neighborhood, and person to person" (17). What held true in one specific place and time was irrelevant the next town over or a few months later. As a Marine who served in Iraq at roughly the same time as Gallagher, I can attest to the truth of his account of the routinely baffling character of the war. "After dedicating myself to the counterinsurgency effort for a full fifteen months, I knew only enough to know that anyone who said he or she definitely knew the answer to the Iraq impasse was full of s**t" (292). Many veterans will agree with this assessment.

For a war memoir, *Kaboom* contains very little about actual combat. Readers seeking stories of gunfights between soldiers and insurgents will be disappointed, but this seemingly odd omission is a further testament to Gallagher's honesty. COIN campaigns are not flashy: they often resemble police or social work more than conventional military operations. For every gunfight, raid, or IED incident, there are ten meetings with local officials and other similarly "non-kinetic" events. This is the true picture of the Iraq war as experienced on the ground in 2008.

Gallagher repeatedly turns a critical eye on the Army and its bureaucracy, presenting his own frustrations as typical among junior leaders in COIN environments. He constantly perceives a sharp disconnect between the war he trained for and the one he actually fought. He and his peers had been schooled in "decentralized warfare" in which "small units like sections and platoons and troops functioned as nigh-independent entities" and "struck like a swarm of killer bees." Unfortunately, the Army he served with was more a "lumbering elephant," whose "strength and power had [had] its time and place," but, since World War II, had become increasingly irrelevant. In Gallagher's opinion, the only way to achieve success in the unconventional conflicts of the twenty-first century is by "letting loose the initiative of junior officers and NCOs, who solved their own local problem sets" (175).

The main obstacle facing creative and dynamic junior officers in Iraq is an "institutional middle management more interested in career progression than leading soldiers and who wanted yes-men in their ranks more than they did independent thinkers" (142). Gallagher perceives a "generational gap within the officer corps" and a case of "brains" versus "bureaucrats" (201, 272). He challenges his superiors to move beyond Cold War tactics and techniques and to recognize that large-scale conventional conflicts between nation-states are things of the past. But Gallagher doubts the Army's ability to adapt. He is also reserved about the effect he and his peers had on the organization's culture: "we certainly were no swarm of killer bees," but "if nothing else, we made our elephant cut some of its excess lumbering weight" (179).

Although Gallagher's criticisms are valid, he too neatly sorts participants into heroes and villains based largely on age, rank, and assignment. In this, too, *Kaboom* is similar to other war memoirs in which rear area personnel receive the bulk of the criticism. While higher echelon and support personnel do often reside at more comfortable bases and appear overly concerned with minutia such as PowerPoint slides and precisely quantifying data, many perform functions vital to the war effort and would much prefer to be "outside the wire" if given the opportunity. At the same time, enlisted men and junior officers serving on the frontlines sometimes make mistakes; these, however, do not receive much attention in *Kaboom*. Thus, unlike his superiors, Gallagher's subordinates emerge relatively unscathed in his account. His soldiers rarely fail to perform up to his expectations. His laudable concern and affection for his men sometimes blinds him both to their limitations and to the positive contributions of men in other units. Though his indictments of his superiors have merit, one wishes he had taken a critical approach to the Army in its entirety.

Lastly, Gallagher's call for American civilians to be more engaged politically is refreshing and admirable. One of his prime targets is the "continued resounding American apathy" toward the Iraq and Afghanistan wars: "Agree or disagree with the war, I don't care—just give a f**k. Be able to find Basra on a map, know that the Tigris isn't some sort of unholy crossbreed found at the San Diego Zoo, try to figure out the difference between a Sunni and a Shia even if it complexes and perfuses the mind beyond repair" (126–27). That is, Americans must not simply sit back and blame policymakers. A well-informed and engaged citizenry is indispensable to sound foreign policy. For those willing to accept this call to action, *Kaboom* is a great starting place.