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William R. Nester. *Haunted Victory: The American Crusade to Destroy Saddam and Impose Democracy on Iraq*. Washington: Potomac Books, 2012. Pp. xiii, 161. ISBN 978-1-59797-944-3.

Review by Edmund F. Byrne, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (ebyrne@iupui.edu).

A prolific writer on diverse war-related topics, William Nester (St. John's Univ.) in *Haunted Victory* focuses on the ideology and advertising for and profiteering from the Iraq War. That is, he is not concerned with military maneuvers but with the financial logistics of selling the war to Congressional purse-string openers and selectively distributing their largesse. Other writers have already examined this aspect of the Iraq War; why another book? Because, writes Nester, his is the first that “comprehensively unveils the moral dilemmas that entangled the Bush administration and the American public through each stage of planning, selling, fighting, and ending the war” (xiii). What it explicitly unveils, however, are not moral dilemmas but disagreements over marketing and management strategy between true believers and doubting non-believers both inside and outside the White House. *Haunted Victory* is a well written account of this aspect of the war: though neither definitive nor exhaustive, it resolutely focuses on the wheeling and dealing whereby the George W. Bush administration secured and disbursed practically unlimited funding for its war of choice.

To tell this still ongoing story, Nester relies heavily on print media, especially the *New York Times*. He does cite some government documents, but less for information than to illustrate how the Bush administration ignored and manipulated intelligence and planning to further its martial agenda. For his first priority is expose the various methods of administration conservatives who sought to invade and occupy Iraq. These included at the top of the list whatever pretense was saleable, be it the purported danger posed by WMDs or by the long-supported Saddam Hussein.

With regard to facts and figures, Nester's account of decisions and their ensuing consequences is generally accurate. However, his clear and trenchant narrative inverts the cause-effect relationships behind the “crusade” of his subtitle. This word choice (somewhat ironic, given its early use and retraction by President Bush) reflects the author's conviction that conservatives in the administration orchestrated the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Other policy proponents in the administration were realists or humanitarians, but “the fear mongering by conservatives from the White House, Congress, and mass media drowned [them] out and sharply shifted public opinion” (27).

In other words, because they were more passionate about, even obsessed with, promoting war, determined conservatives outflanked moderates in and beyond the administration who voiced concerns about longer-term consequences of going to war. Their concerted advertising blitzkrieg, Nester maintains, was ideological, devised by zealots obsessed with ousting Saddam Hussein (7). Conservatives formed the “ideological spearhead” (8) of “a massive concerted effort to convince the public” through a “deafening drumbeat for war” (23). Their “machinations and deceptions” (19) were evidence of “ideological zeal and blindness” (83). Key manifestations of this modus operandi included: the Valerie Plame Wilson outing (138-39); the total disregard of the Pentagon and defense industries for the CIA/State Department Future of Iraq Project's two-thousand-page “blueprint for developing Iraq from mass poverty and oppression into prosperity and democracy” (71-72, 74); the abolition of Iraq's organized police and military organizations (75-76); and the administration-authorized human rights violations at Abu Ghraib and other prisons for “enemy combatants.” But Nester's diagnosis that these decisions were made out of emotional excess is simplistic.

The book's structure is parabolic, opening with the preparatory garnering of support (“The Obsession”); peaking with the invasion and short-term arrangements (“Shock and Awe”); and closing with long-term bad consequences of the invaders' occupation policies and practices (“Cataclysms”). Less smoothly integrated

are Nester's interspersed criticisms, which are as close as he comes to fulfilling his promise of "unveiling moral dilemmas." His critiques address strategic ineptitude, loss of life on both sides, and budgetary excesses and waste (129; chap. 15 *passim*), at the core of which lurked "a spoils system of crony capitalism and massive tax cuts for the rich" (140). Taken as a whole, this national calamity stemmed from "disastrous policies that severely damaged American security, power, wealth, and honor" (117, 126).

At the apex of his narrative, Nester modulates the severity of his overall appraisal: "Militarily, the war was a dazzling success.... The strategy of simultaneously launching air and ground assaults was brilliantly conceived and executed" (68, citing the *Times*). Later, we read that the "surge" in military personnel was "a stunning success" (120). But he does not elaborate on this assessment or anywhere justify the word "victory" in his book's title. Indeed, his priority is to castigate the conservative crusaders for their hubris and incompetent planning, preparation, and execution of the war. Presumably, he is referring to the post-invasion, occupation phase of operations. Whence, the choice of "haunted" as qualifier. But "Pyrrhic" would better serve. For, as Nester details, the product of the coalition's intentions went from bad to worse: very little destroyed infrastructure was protected or repaired (except for oil equipment), for reasons ranging from corruption to incompetence and a failure to attract international support. The occupiers' ignorance of and indifference to religious and ethnic divides in Iraq led them to purge Ba'athists from military and security forces, ensuring widespread unemployment and an intractable insurgency. (A telling addendum to Nester's account: the heavily funded business contractors employed very few Iraqis.)

The Iraqi constitution approved in October 2005 yielded "a political system with a relatively weak national government and significant powers devolved to regions, ethnic groups, and religious sects" (86). Elections empowered the previously suppressed pro-Iranian Shiite majority, fueling ethnic conflict. Western nation building exacerbated sectarian tensions, fomented pro-Iranian and anti-American sentiment, and completely undermined the comparatively inexpensive prewar policy of "triple containment," whereby the United Nations and the United States coordinated containment of Saddam Hussain, who dampened Islamism in both Iraq and Iran (3, 8, 50, 87).

Given such considerations, Nester's evaluation of the US government's Iraq War decision-making is on target, but only if one views it as he does: within a self-contained context where only the primary US political actors were relevant decision-makers. But this limited perspective falsifies the balance of power between politicians and the defense and security industries that were paid to provide matériel and personnel for the "crusade." After all, corporate operatives had for decades been transforming the federal government (regardless of controlling political party) into a compliant funder of their extensive list of very pricey projects. In light of the huge profits they reaped from the Iraq crusade, "cornucopian" should replace the title word "haunted."

Nester remains critically indecisive about the subservience of George W. Bush and his administration to corporate interests. But he does assert a quid pro quo relationship between military contractors and government officials mediated by the Republican Party (139-40), which involved "rewarding" contributors with unmonitored contracts to provide war-wagers' goods and services. These (often no-bid) contracts, which rose in value from \$207 billion in 2000 to \$500 billion in 2008, vastly overcompensated the winning contractors, who squandered at least half their munificent funding unproductively (88-90).

Focusing so narrowly on obsessed conservative politicians, Nester barely mentions that they were merely doing the bidding of corporate powerbrokers. In view of this fundamental reality, the basis of the government and media brainwashing program he describes was not the overwrought rhetoric of politicians running amok. It was, rather, a cool and carefully coordinated advertising campaign by the dutiful lackeys of powerful businessmen bent on making massive profits from every aspect of the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Nester misinterprets the cash-flow realities of the Iraq War because he concentrates too much on the actions of the George W. Bush administration. Apart from some notice of George H.W. Bush's dealings with Saddam's Iraq, he ignores the radical change in American military operations that began with the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 (Desert Storm). That conflict marked the beginning of the privatization of military ac-

tivities, originally as a response devised by Dick Cheney, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, et al. to the recruitment problems caused by abolition of the draft. Since then, first during the Bill Clinton administration and to an unprecedented extent under George W. Bush, privatization has continued to expand dramatically. Nester clearly outlines the extent to which privatized military organizations flourished during the Iraq occupation (chap. 15), but he fails to see that as part of the evolution of the military-industrial complex, wherein it had its roots, into an immense, self-sustaining, quasi-governmental entity. (This phenomenon has been the subject of a number of excellent recent studies.<sup>1</sup>) A typical symptom is the recent case of a Northrop Grumman lobbyist who received a \$500,000 bonus from his employer just weeks before going to work as a staffer of the US Congressional Armed Services Committee.<sup>2</sup> In short, Nester’s Iraq War exposé would have benefited from fuller attention to the fundamental economic reality that defense industry people “put huge amounts of money into encouraging the [Iraq and Afghanistan] wars.”<sup>3</sup>

Military histories rarely consider the matter of financing wars, especially long-ago wars. This option, however, is not available to Nester, who asserts up front that his book merits our attention precisely because it “comprehensively unveils the moral dilemmas” that the American government and people faced in every phase of the Iraq war. His often caustic commentary strongly implies that his tale is rife with moral issues and dilemmas. But his primary subject is not in fact the state of decision-makers’ consciences. Rather, he highlights just how Bush conservatives maneuvered their way past every attitudinal obstacle to their Iraq takeover project; the evasion of such obstacles did not pose moral dilemmas. The principals themselves had no qualms about their overarching goals, only about how to attain them and to proceed from one phase to the next in doing so. Cheney, Libby, Donald Rumsfeld, even Colin Powell were intellectually ill-equipped to think in terms of ethical questions. For decades in earlier administrations, they had espoused their objectives in a moral vacuum, based on their concept of an unbounded commander in chief. They assessed any expert opinion only in terms of a cost-benefit ratio determined unilaterally by their own selective calculus. Thus, for example, they construed US war casualties only as a public relations problem to be solved by banning photographs of killed combatants’ homeward bound caskets.

In conjuring up an awareness of moral quandaries in his protagonists, Nester is pursuing a chimera of his own making. But his well-written book does have the great virtue of stressing, if only indirectly, the urgent need for more refined military economics uncontaminated by the motives of a militaristic government.

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1. See, in general, Allison Stanger, *One Nation under Contract: The Outsourcing of American Power and the Future of Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2009). On private sector military-related businesses, war profiteering, and arms industry interactions with governments, see Stuart D. Brandes, *Warhogs: A History of War Profits in America* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1997); William D. Hartung, *Prophets of War: Lockheed Martin and the Making of the Military-Industrial Complex* (NY: Nation Books, 2011); Russ Baker, *Family of Secrets: The Bush Dynasty, America’s Invisible Government, and the Hidden History of the Last Fifty Years* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2009); James Carroll, *House of War: The Pentagon and the Disastrous Rise of American Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); and esp. Andrew Feinstein, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).

2. Lee Fang, “Exclusive: Northrop Grumman Awards Lobbyist \$500K Bonus Weeks before Becoming Low-Paid Congressional Staffer Shaping Military Policy,” *Republic Report* (11 Jun 2012) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1211.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1211.htm).

3. Feinstein (note 1 above) 431.