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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)



Synopsis

A Kirkus Reviews Best Nonfiction of 2011 title From a State Department insider, the first account of our blundering efforts to rebuild Iraq—a shocking and rollicking true-life tale of Americans abroad Charged 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 cafés on bombed-out streets without water or electricity? According to Peter Van Buren, 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 surge—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. Darkly funny while deadly serious, *We Meant Well* is a tragicomic voyage of ineptitude and corruption that leaves its writer—and readers—appalled and disillusioned but wiser.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Peter Van Buren gets kudos for taking the time to compose his thoughts and put them into a memoir that points out the "Dilbert zone" policies of the State Department in Iraq. With over 20 years battling "Iron Rice Bowl" bureaucrats both inside the foreign service and out, it's not hard to see why the tone of the book sounds so cynical. With Van Buren's sharp court jester wit, the State Department should be grateful that they have one of their own who is willing to speak truth to power. The throne to the Secretary of State is for the most part unaccountable to the American public that it is supposed to serve. Challenge the State Department on their policies, and their bureaucrats very quickly find ways to stonewall and escape scrutiny. Too many people inside the State Department are willing to look the other way knowing that the consequences are practically non-existent. There are of course some very good people who work for the Department but the politics that govern the pecking order makes it very difficult for people to do the right thing. Cross the wrong person and they can make things very difficult for you. With so much at stake personally, most people just decide to abandon their sense of integrity, which unfortunately leads to a deterioration of organizational values that inevitably permeates the organization's culture. Changing the culture of an organization like the State Department is next to impossible. Change, if it comes at all, happens very slowly. What ends up happening, however, is that the more they try to change things, the more they revert to the way things originally were. Van Buren himself is far from perfect but his book does illustrate the dysfunction that is the reality of America's premier foreign service conglomerate.

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