



Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America's Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy

By Michael J. Mazarr

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Reviewed by Andrew J. Forney

Horror movies build fear through a series of formulaic events. A young couple drives into the dark woods, or a teenager, home alone, descends into a dimly lit cellar. No one ever checks behind the door—we all know what is coming next, but the outcome still scares us because, by knowing, tension has built. Sure, there may be a few jump scares, but for the most part we are not really surprised. We continue to watch, enthralled and unable to look away.

For a generation of national security professionals and military officers, reading about the run-up to the Iraq War can feel like watching a bureaucratic horror movie. After almost two decades, we know what is lurking behind the faulty assumptions, and reading ever more quickly, page after page, we wonder if this time the toxic brew of naivete and

hubris will not lead us down the tortured path that we know in our rational minds it will. Closing our books about that war—and Michael Mazarr's *Leap of Faith* is among the very best volumes—we almost want to scold ourselves: We fell for the same tricks, and we ended at the same frustrating place.

So why do we read these books? You might as well ask why we watch horror movies. Beyond providing entertainment and the thrill of being scared, horror movies wrestle with those things we do not like to talk about: fear, loneliness, and despair. For those who experienced the Iraq War, be they Soldiers, civilian professionals, or politicians, there remains a desire to understand similar, complex issues. From biased executive decisionmaking processes, through an over-militarization of foreign policy, to a national accounting for the events spawned by the American intervention in Iraq, Mazarr explores them all in *Leap of Faith*, confronting difficult subjects with an eye toward explanation. And, unlike many other books that share the “Modern Warfare” shelf at the bookstore, this volume reflects a more fulsome use of first-person accounts, not only from declassified materials but also from dozens of interviews with individuals who were there. Mazarr invested hundreds of hours gathering the day-to-day essence of the run-up to the war, and it shows. No other work on the early decision to go to war in Iraq benefits from a deeper bench of personal reflections.

These interviews and anecdotes outline the contours of a bipartisan National security momentum, defined by the pairing of a deep messianic tradition in American foreign policy with a driving belief in untrammelled American exceptionalism that defined the post-Cold War era. Mazarr shows how this momentum generated, gradually, its own certainty, one that framed global events into a Manichean “good vs. evil” bipolarity. The attacks on 9/11 catalyzed these beliefs, cementing the “us vs. them” predilections present in many senior leaders' minds. A generational bias against Iraq, practiced by multiple Presidents and both political parties, allowed for a feat of near

prestidigitation: the shift of focus from Afghanistan to Iraq within days of the attacks in New York and Washington, DC.

In the process, avenues of discourse and dissent became closed off or were assumed away, leaving few means to “off-ramp” from a future war against Saddam Hussein and Baghdad. Behind this intellectual force, Mazarr further details the bureaucratic machinations that turned ideas into reality. Here he pulls no punches, heaping blame on then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and former Vice President Dick Cheney—not only for their policy biases and predilection toward military force but also, more important, for the way they managed the bureaucratic infighting to widen their fiefdoms within the interagency community, often for no other reason than to increase their political sway. Just as with the boogeyman under the bed, we as an audience know these biases are there, but fully seeing the implications they had, and how they absolutely subverted the National security process, remains disconcerting, nonetheless.

By adding recently declassified British accounts of the internal debates regarding the war, and the minutes from interrogations of senior Iraqi leaders (to include Saddam himself), *Leap of Faith* places what had been a decidedly American narrative in an international context. The disbelief, in both London and Baghdad, about the unchecked American drive toward war resonates throughout the book. As Mazarr points out, the United Kingdom had taken steps to account for its support and involvement in the Iraq War, something that he believes the United States still must do. Only by executing a formal accounting of the decisions that led to war in 2003, as per the British model, can we better understand the implications of the war on American politics, foreign policy, media, and society.

To this end, Mazarr apportions blame for the mistakes made between 9/11 and the start of the war in March 2003. Such a step is less akin to preparing to adjudicate punishment and more a recognition that adjudicating accountability can lead to understanding and,

eventually, reckoning. And while he does hold Rumsfeld and Cheney chiefly responsible for the events that befell the United States before and after the start of the war, he also realizes that limiting the discussion to this timeframe does not fully address the scope of the tragedy. The mistake to invade Iraq, as Mazarr sees it, has many fathers: a national security process driven by consensus over debate, a foreign policy that under-resources diplomacy, a media swayed by jingoistic arguments for war, and many others. Mazarr struggles to find discernment, and its practice, in American society.

Leap of Faith deserves a place on the bookshelf of every leader in the joint force and the National security policy community, alongside *Cobra II*, *The Assassin's Gate*, *To Start a War*, and the U.S. Army's recent retrospective volumes on the conflict to round out a full appreciation of the Iraq War. What Mazarr provides, and most other books on this subject do not, are several policy recommendations intended to provide alternative perspectives on international crises to senior leaders, keep pathways for discourse open, and prevent the overstepping of bounds within the inter-agency community and its collaborative processes. Although not all suggestions may be implemented, they come from a logically sound place and deserve further consideration. Mazarr realizes the difference between a horror movie and foreign policy decisionmaking. Here we can talk to the audience.

Here we can say, "Don't go in there." JFQ

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The Black Banners (Declassified): How Torture Derailed the War on Terror After 9/11

By Ali Soufan, with Daniel Freedman
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Reviewed by Bryon Greenwald

This declassified/unredacted version of Ali Soufan's 2011 edition of *Black Banners* is a must-read for anyone interested in terrorism, the psychology of interrogation, bureaucratic politics, and the lessons of poor leadership. Soufan demonstrates how dysfunctional U.S. intelligence services were before and after 9/11. He also demolishes the argument for the enhanced interrogation—or torture techniques—authorized by the George W. Bush administration and championed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). *Black Banners* ranks with Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars* and Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower* as key sources for understanding al Qaeda.

Soufan presents a personal account of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s detective work that went into

uncovering attacks by al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Although the book is generally chronological, Soufan weaves a tight narrative and freely jumps forward or backward in time to connect key events. A Lebanese American fluent in Arabic, Soufan joined the FBI on a bet with his college fraternity brothers; the United States is lucky he did. As Lawrence Wright notes, "Unfortunately, we have only one Ali Soufan. Had American intelligence listened to him, 9/11 might never have happened."

On that subject, Soufan is unsparing. The CIA knew in January 2000 that al Qaeda operatives, including two eventual 9/11 hijackers, had met in Malaysia. The CIA stated that "they knew nothing" when the FBI asked about this meeting in November 2000, April 2001, and July 2001. The CIA did not notify the FBI, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, or the Department of State that those hijackers also possessed U.S. visas. Thus, these men were not on any watch lists. They entered the United States and used their real names to get driver's licenses, open bank accounts, and buy tickets for American Airlines Flight 77, the airliner they later crashed into the Pentagon.

After 9/11, the lack of team play continued, as the CIA exerted new Presidential authority to interrogate terrorism suspects. Unfortunately, the CIA had mothballed its interrogation program and, according to Soufan, had no institutional expertise. Instead, the agency hired two contractors, James Mitchell and John Jessen, who claimed they could get detainees to "talk" by applying an ever-increasing menu of harsh techniques. The CIA paid them \$81 million, although they had never previously interrogated anyone or met an Islamic radical. That the Department of Justice and the White House sanctioned these techniques, even after Soufan proved them ineffective, signaled how seriously 9/11 traumatized the American policy apparatus and drove it to search for easy, if wrong, answers.

In newly declassified chapters, Soufan provides evidence of this trauma. In March 2002, the CIA asked Soufan to assist in interrogating Abu Zubaydah, the first high-level detainee captured by