



War Front to Store Front: Americans Rebuilding Trust and Hope in Nations Under Fire

By Paul Brinkley
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Like most junior officers, I prefer my professional military education (PME) action packed and relevant to my immediate Military Occupational Specialty. With that predilection, I assumed that *War Front to Store Front* would be a slog. I thought I should be spending my time reading stories of lieutenants leading understrength platoons on hills surrounded by ruthless enemies, lone aviators on important missions, or the memoirs of a salty and sage veteran of Vietnam or Okinawa.

Perusing the dust jacket, the first few pages, and the black and white pictures, this book appears to be the story of middle-aged businessmen, contractors, and bureaucrats. Indeed, in the first chapter, the author speaks of his high-powered career in Silicon Valley and outsourcing jobs to the Third World. I assumed the book would be about a Washington,

DC-concocted, acronym-rebuilding industry, not warfighting.

In spite of my biases, Paul Brinkley's story of the Task Force for Business and Stability Operations (TFBSO) has all the trappings of the books dominating professional reading lists. It is about leadership. It is about a small team of idealistic professionals given a mission in an alien and austere environment. It is a story of a man fighting an incompetent bureaucracy and his own self-doubt. Throughout the book, we are brought into the war rooms of Generals David Petraeus, Raymond Odierno, and Stanley McChrystal. The reader is a fly on the wall during meetings with President George W. Bush and Hamid Karzai and Defense Secretary Robert Gates. In short, *War Front to Store Front* is an entertaining account that moves.

I was too young or else in college for the Iraq War. Like many Servicemembers of my era, most of what I know about Iraq comes from books, the news, and discussions with veterans. Much of my previous reading details the fiasco of disbanding the Iraqi army and purging Ba'athists from the Iraqi civil service.

War Front to Store Front highlights a lesser known but equally shortsighted postinvasion mistake: the dismantling of the Iraqi economy. After the invasion and in the name of economic "shock therapy," the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) seized funds from state-owned enterprises, removed tariffs on imports, and relied on American contractors for much of the work of rebuilding Iraq. Once healthy but now capital-starved state-owned industries closed. Thousands of Iraqis were unemployed or saw their wages slashed. Discouraged and unable to provide for their families, they had no one to blame but the Americans. The CPA's economic edicts frame the work and frustrations of the TFBSO for much of the book.

In spite of focusing on this mistake, *War Front to Store Front* avoids the habit of many books on Iraq and Afghanistan—dwelling on the blunders of a handful of leaders without offering solutions. Brinkley provides an optimistic look at how American business can be

a supporting effort of American foreign policy. An appendix includes a list of the TBSFO accomplishments ranging from opening training academies for farmers and management, to facilitating trips to Iraq for Google and YouTube executives, to helping rebuild gas pipelines in Afghanistan. An entire chapter is dedicated to practical solutions on how the United States can improve postconflict reconstruction and foreign aid. Unlike many authors writing about a mistake, Brinkley offers thorough and even analysis along with remedies.

After every war, Americans hear a litany of "never agains." It is assumed after the Iraq War that America will never again commit to a large-scale invasion and occupation. A cursory glance through U.S. history reveals that such guarantees are myopic. The only way to adapt in spite of drawdowns and other circumstances is for military and civilian leaders to take their professional reading seriously and be receptive to history's lessons. Brinkley's book is not your average PME text. It is, however, an important addition to the volumes written on the Iraq War.

Aside from war, this book shows how America can be a force for good in the world. The path is not exclusively through overthrowing genocidal regimes or forcing elections or passing out pallets of Meals Ready to Eat and candy, but rather by rebuilding industry—with strong industry come jobs, along with the self-respect of a paycheck. This self-respect cannot be quantified but it can destroy an insurgency. Who better to teach the gospel of capitalism than an American businessman wearing penny loafers and holding an issue of *Forbes*? JFQ

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