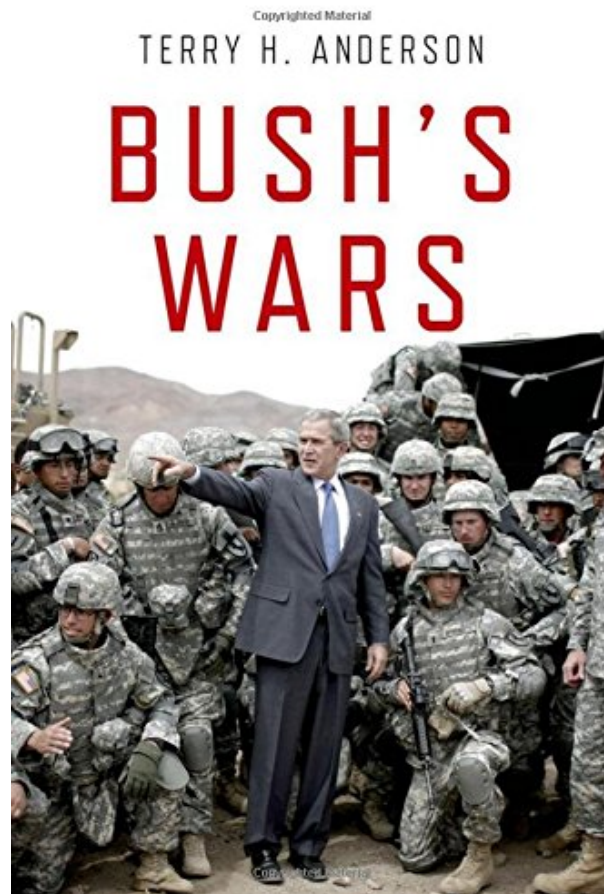


# BUSH'S WARS BY TERRY H. ANDERSON



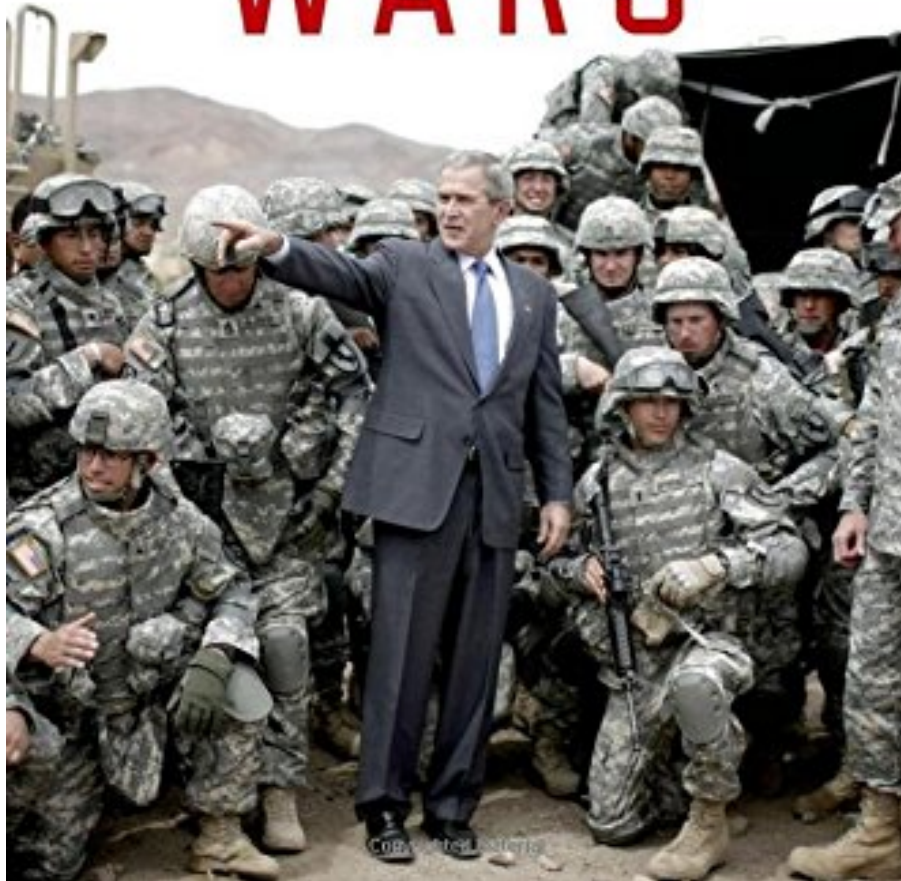
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## Review

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From journalistic accounts like *Fiasco* and *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* to insider memoirs like *Jawbreaker* and *Three Cups of Tea*, the books about America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could fill a library. But each explores a narrow slice of a whole: two wars launched by a single president as part of a single foreign policy. Now noted historian Terry H. Anderson examines them together, in a single comprehensive overview.

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush told advisor Karl Rove, "I am here for a reason, and this is how we're going to be judged." Anderson provides this judgment in this sweeping, authoritative account of Bush's War on Terror and his twin interventions. He begins with historical surveys of Iraq and Afghanistan known respectively as "the improbable country" and "the graveyard of empires," and he examines U.S. policies toward those and other nations in the Middle East from the 1970s to 2000s.

Then Anderson focuses on the Bush Administration, carrying us through such events as the terrorist's attacks of 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan and the siege of Tora Bora, the "Axis of Evil" speech, the invasion of Iraq and capture of Baghdad, and the eruption of insurgency in Iraq. He ranges from RPGs slamming into Abrams tanks to cabinet meetings, vividly portraying both soldiers in the field and such policymakers as Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice. Anderson describes the counter-insurgency strategy embodied by the "surge" in Iraq, and the simultaneous revival of the Taliban. He concludes with an assessment of the prosecution of the wars in the first years of Barack Obama's presidency.

Carefully researched and briskly narrated, *Bush's Wars* provides the single-volume, balanced history that we have been waiting for.

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23 of 25 people found the following review helpful.

There's less here than meets the eye

By Bryan Gibby

It is inevitable that we should ask some key questions about the wars George W. Bush unleashed after 9/11: what happened? how did it happen? why did it happen? Professor Terry Anderson, history department at Texas A&M, takes a crack at these questions with *Bush's Wars*. With a favorable review from *Foreign Affairs* magazine, an Oxford University publishing pedigree, and advance praise from George Herring and others, I decided to give it a chance.

I was being set up for disappointment. *Bush's Wars* weighs in at 240 pages, which is a bit lean for a story that spans ten years, three continents, and two major wars. The back matter, though, buoyed my enthusiasm: "provides a searing-and-persuasive critique..." and "the first comprehensive history" etc. On page ix, Professor Anderson writes that he "examines the [Bush] administration's approach toward terrorism, Afghanistan, and especially Iraq..." Fair enough; Iraq is certainly the defining feature of Bush's war on terror, and Anderson is true to his outline. Of the 200+ pages that deal with "the wars", just over 15 address Afghanistan directly - the remainder is consumed by Iraq.

*Bush's Wars* is divided into eight chapters: two are prelude or context; the next four deal with the run up to 9/11 and its aftermath (to include taking out the Taliban government in Afghanistan), the rush to war against Saddam Hussein, the initial military operations and occupation, and the concluding insurgency, civil war, and "surge" that established conditions for an American withdrawal and transfer to Iraqi control; the last two chapters serve as epilogue and concluding remarks.

There is much potential here to establish context and understanding - why did the U.S. go to war with Iraq in the spring of 2003? How did the military and political operations unfold? Why were they less successful than advertised or expected? Unfortunately, Anderson does not deal with these questions except in a superficial

and predictable way. The level of original analysis is disappointing. Rather, Anderson tends to rely on quotations to tell the story and do the heavy lifting. Quotations should be used to support the author's assessments and judgments, not substitute for them. For example, in the very last chapter, Anderson briefly surveys various causes ("influences" is probably a better term) of the Iraq war. This discussion is moderately interesting but too superficial and partisan to be analytically useful (it was the neo-cons). Most disappointing, though, was the failure to take on his most important question: Was the war "worth it?" Instead of rendering a historian's judgment, Anderson references some nebulous opinion polls and then quotes Secretary Gates's understated bombshell, "The problem with this war is that the premise on which we justified going to war proved not to be valid" (pages 233-234). That's it; time to move on to something else. After 230 pages, we know where the author stands, but he's shy about coming out and saying it. Bush's Wars is riddled with this technique of avoiding judgment (pages 101, 117, 195 are good examples).

There are other scholarly concerns. Documentation is unique...one may even say unsatisfactory. It is very difficult to establish precise citations and occasionally there is no citation for critical or potentially controversial statements. For example, Anderson informs us that Osama bin Laden "reached out to form alliances with some Shiites" (page 178). Really? An alliance with the ideological heretic? It strains credulity, but maybe it's possible. It would have been nice to see a footnote here. (As an aside, such an assertion begs the question: If OBL was willing to make a tactical alliance with Shiites, is it really so far out that al Qaeda would have made, eventually, common cause with the "secular" Saddam? Remember, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend"? This is an intriguing but unanswered question.) Documentation leads to questions about source material. Anderson for some reason relies almost entirely on contemporary news accounts, secondary sources, and self-serving memoirs of the kiss and tell variety. To emphasize the "it was the neo-cons who did it" narrative, much uncritical reliance is placed on the memories of CIA Director George Tenet, Coalition Forces Commander Ricardo Sanchez, and White House press secretary Scott McClellan. These are obviously well placed individual; they are teflon sources, though. Where are the documents, military and political? Wikileaks, anyone? Where are the interviews and oral histories? Where are the historian's follow-up questions to pin down the evidence a journalist or blogger may have overlooked, or let slip by with a wink and a nod? This does not make for a "comprehensive" or balanced history.

Other errors of fact and interpretation mar the work. The battle of Karbala occurred in 680 C.E., not 1680 (page 4), the Ottoman Empire didn't die at Versailles, but at Sevres a year later (page 7), there were no "Pakastanis" prior to 1948 (page 11), John Shalikashvili was not chairman of the joint chiefs of staff in 2003, nor was he forced to retire because of his opposition to the war (pages 110 & 125), CPA proconsul Bremer ordered Sadr's arrest for murder, not for "rebellion" (page 174), unmanned aerial vehicles - drones - are known as UAVs, not UVAs (page 182). Anderson also confuses types of IEDs, saying that EFPs from Iran were flipping over heavily armored Bradley fighting vehicles (page 207) [EFPs kill the passengers, leaving the vehicle relatively intact; the DBIED - deep buried IED - will flip armored vehicles. The former were used exclusively by Shiite militias; the latter, by Sunni insurgents.] A "COP" actually refers to a "combat outpost," not a "command post" as the author states (page 206).

Individually, these may be minor errors. But, the cascade of bad information that should have been caught in Oxford University Press's referee and editorial processes, if not in the original writing, suggest a degree of sloppiness or ignorance. At least, an Aggie Iraq war veteran could have read the manuscript and saved a lot of these mistakes. I couldn't help thinking of the thirteenth chime of the clock: wrong in and of itself, but also calling into question the previous twelve chimes.

My big problem with Bush's Wars is simple. Those on the political left will love it; those on the right will hate it, ironically for the same reason. There's nothing new here. Anderson reprises the same New York Times, Washington Post, Bob Woodward, Thomas Ricks, Helen Thomas narratives that any half-conscious

American already knows: the Bush Administration blew it. The American military also blew it, but for some reason, Anderson gives most military men and women a pass; it's all Bush's fault (and the neo-cons, of course).

A balanced and comprehensive history of the wars waged by George W. Bush is important to have. Unfortunately, Bush's Wars isn't it.

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Guide for the Perplexed

By G.X. Larson

Written by a professional historian, Bush's Wars is a relatively short (~240 pages) book about the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Fun fact: I was taught how to spell "Afghanistan" in the 5th grade -- presumably my teacher wanted the his students to know how to spell the name of the country that we had just invaded -- I am now in college.) Anderson begins the book with two chapters outlining the history of the two countries (mostly Iraq) as well as the history of American involvement in the region. After this it is full steam ahead. The verdict: if Anderson's account is anywhere near a representation of objective reality, then history and its stewards will not look upon Bush's wars fondly. Anderson skillfully blends direct quotations from members of the administration and from outside commentators with historical narrative and commentary. The result is a convincing account of the way the wars were sold and conducted; occurrences of doublespeak and -- I realize the semantics of this word are open to question, ahem -- lies are well documented, as are flat out gaffes like this one from the president in 2002: "Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place". I hope to read this book again in the near future, taking notes the second time. My only criticisms are that the endnotes are not formatted in a friendly fashion, and that the book is almost entirely about Iraq. Nevertheless, highly recommended.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Great Book

By Casey Hicks

I think that the title may seem misleading at first. I thought it would be about both Iraq and Afghanistan, but when I was reading it I noticed that Afghanistan was not mentioned very much. Bush's Wars is actually about Iraq and the Bush administration's political and domestic "war" to invade Iraq.

That being said, Anderson's book is eye opening. I actually found myself getting slightly angry reading it. Very great book if you want to understand the process that Bush underwent in order to invade Iraq.

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