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The Unraveling: High Hopes And Missed Opportunities In Iraq



Synopsis

One of the New York Times[™] 100 Notable Books of 2015
One of Financial Times[™] Books of the Year, 2015
A New York Times Editors[™] Choice
A New Statesman [UK] Essential Book of the Year 2015
A Times [UK] Book of the Year 2015
Shortlisted for the 2015 Samuel Johnson Prize for Nonfiction
Shortlisted for the 2016 Orwell Prize
When Emma Sky volunteered to help rebuild Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, she had little idea what she was getting in to. Her assignment was only supposed to last three months. She went on to serve there longer than any other senior military or diplomatic figure, giving her an unrivaled perspective of the entire conflict. As the representative of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Kirkuk in 2003 and then the political advisor to US General Odierno from 2007–2010, Sky was valued for her knowledge of the region and her outspoken voice. She became a tireless witness to American efforts to transform a country traumatized by decades of war, sanctions, and brutal dictatorship; to insurgencies and civil war; to the planning and implementation of the surge and the subsequent drawdown of US troops; to the corrupt political elites who used sectarianism to mobilize support; and to the takeover of a third of the country by the Islamic State. With sharp detail and tremendous empathy, Sky provides unique insights into the US military as well as the complexities, diversity, and evolution of Iraqi society. The Unraveling is an intimate insider's portrait of how and why the Iraq adventure failed and contains a unique analysis of the course of the war. Highlighting how nothing that happened in Iraq after 2003 was inevitable, Sky exposes the failures of the policies of both Republicans and Democrats, and the lessons that must be learned about the limitations of power.

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Customer Reviews

'The Unraveling' is a up-close and personal account of U.S. and U.K. involvement in Iraq and especially Kirkuk after the death of Saddam. The author, Emma Sky, had much experience in the Middle East as a humanist with refugees in Palestine and elsewhere before her 'temporary' assignment to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) by the U.K. Her temporary assignment of 3 months became a decade long stay because she provided the compassion needed to deal with the Iraqis; compassion that the CPA and U.K. and U.S. military forces knew they all lacked. Sky says in her Acknowledgements that it was hard for her to know what to leave out of 'The Unraveling', but, in fact, she has included more history, character development, and previously unknown conversations than any other book on Iraq in the 21st Century that I have read or reviewed. Her Preface and Prologue are 'required reading' before beginning Chapter 1: To the Land of Two Rivers. The Preface gives the 'take-home' messages of our involvement in Iraq: the limitations of external actors in foreign lands; how victims become persecutors; about mistaken beliefs in shared goals; how the Islamic State rose to power; how knowing the people is as important to nation builders as knowing your enemy is to military forces. The Prologue is her retelling of her 2011 interview with the Chilcot Inquiry, the U.K. summing-up of what went right and wrong with the U.K.'s presence in Iraq during the first decade of the 21st Century. It is clear to me that the author has written this book as a thank-you to all of those external actors in the CPA or military and internal actors in Iraq who did their very best to bring a better life to Iraq and Iraqis after the fall of Saddam.

Much has been written about Iraq, and whether good or bad, the writing has been more of the same: political analyses, journalistic accounts, attempts at an objective and meticulous understanding of a labile and violent era of Iraq's history that continues to unfold... This book, in my opinion, represents one of the freshest perspectives on the conflict because it is written by an individual who has been in the thick of it, an astute and humane eyewitness to the "unraveling". Emma Sky is fearless in her assessments, worthy of great respect in her commitment to Iraq and the Iraqis, and truly inspiring in making the best out of an insane situation where the future governorate coordinator of Kirkuk lands in Basra and is left to her own devices by her civilian bosses. The book is written with humor and compassion and I can only imagine Ms. Sky's feelings at the fate of Iraq after all the unimaginable sacrifices made by Iraqis and their friends. This memoir best captures the dangerously unpopular belief that "nothing that happened in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003 was preordained. And there was nothing inevitable about the way the story unfolded." It also highlights the dangers of assigning those who neither know nor care

about the Middle East to key positions in this and similar conflicts. Because the decisions of one or several key individuals do matter, as this memoir shows. Ignorant and indifferent decisions did unravel years of hard work and set Iraq back by decades. Emma's story is one of tireless commitment and the will to do good in this world (for the cynics among us: not impossible).

An amazing and powerful read. The author, Emma Sky, a British civilian, who volunteered to help with Iraq reconstruction in 2003, and wound up serving as a senior adviser to theater commander, U.S. General Raymond Odierno from 2007-2010. This is her personal account of her time in Iraq covering the personalities she dealt with; the United States, the U.K.'s, and Iraq's political players, the military, the Middle East, and how we eventually lost what could have been saved. If you served in Iraq, you will feel as if you are walking beside her as she recounts her time in Iraq. Emma's emotion for the people who tried to make Iraq better and her love for the Iraqi people come through the pages. Her personal sacrifice, giving the best years of her life to Iraq are noble. One wonders what would have become of Iraq if we had senior U.S. politicians with the same focus and desire to make it a success. I appreciate how she gives further insight to the characters popularly portrayed in the media, such as Jerry Bremer. The Coalition rolled into Iraq woefully unprepared for what awaited after the military mission. It almost reads like a fable. How could we have been so blind and ignorant? Overall, the U.S. political players did not act with malice regarding Iraq. The consulate Iraqi Shi'a puppet master, empowered by the United States and then Iraqi Shi'a, managed to further de-Baathification, which eventually ignited the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian war. We needed more people like Emma in that phase of the war and less gun slingers? I often wonder if we had the number of forces General Shinseki recommended, (500K), would we have had the proper security environment to let the political process begin and grow? Maybe.

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