

intelligence in public media

The Achilles Trap Saddam Hussein, the CIA, and the Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq

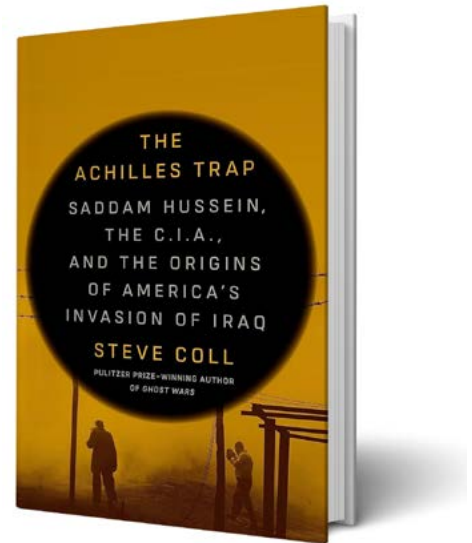
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Published By Penguin Press, 2024

Print Pages 556

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For a quarter century, two-time Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and academic Steve Coll has been among the most astute observers and chroniclers of US foreign policy and intelligence history. He is the author of several excellent works, including books on the influence of oil giant ExxonMobil, US relations with South Asia, and the bin Ladin family. *Ghost Wars* (2004), in particular, is among the finest studies of a discrete US foreign policy issue written this century, if not the very best. Ostensibly about CIA and its role in Afghanistan in 1980–2001 and the early hunt for Usama bin Ladin—CIA provided Coll with access to serving officers for oral histories—*Ghost Wars* captured far more than that. In richly detailed and riveting vignettes as varied as the evolution of US relations with Saudi Arabia to the

background of former CIA Director George Tenet's rise to prominence, Coll's research and nuanced writing were exemplary. For these reasons, it remains a must-read for students of US national security and intelligence history.

In 2018, Coll published *Directorate S*, chronicling the CIA's conflict with al-Qa'ida in Afghanistan and Pakistan and US relations with both countries from 9/11 to 2016. While sweeping in scope and impressive in its own right, *Directorate S* lacked some of the punch of its predecessor. *Ghost Wars* explained, years later, how 9/11 came about and benefited greatly from the passage of time; *Directorate S* told a story that was, at the time of publication, still very much unfolding and about which, after nearly two decades of war, we had all grown weary.

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With his latest offering, *The Achilles Trap: Saddam Hussein, the CIA, and the Origins of America's Invasion of Iraq*, Coll again is working with the benefit of years of hindsight and moderated emotions and writing about a subject that very much needs a comprehensive accounting. And, once again, he has risen to the occasion. *The Achilles Trap*—an allusion to the mythical Achilles' vulnerability despite his seeming invincibility—is another tour de force and might be the definitive work on the matter for years to come.

While careful to examine factors at play in both Washington and Baghdad, at the center of this new book is Coll's extensive research and trenchant analysis of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Many others have analyzed the inner workings and motivations of the George W. Bush administration during this time, but only Coll has done so in combination with those of the Iraqi leader. Drawing from interviews with US officials, former intelligence analysts, and regional experts as well as some 2,000 hours of recordings of Saddam's sensitive government meetings made available after his fall, the author meticulously retells the dictator's story from his earliest days to his execution. As one reviewer put it so well, "People love to imagine that world affairs are a game of chess" whereby leaders make decisions based on a solid understanding of the other players and both sides' national self-interests.^a Coll reminds us, however, that decisionmakers are people, too, with sometimes fatal flaws that lead them to make horrendous choices.

To sum up, Coll argues convincingly that delusions across several US administrations and from Baghdad made all but inevitable the ensuing clash. In his telling, after initially agreeing to accept intelligence support from the Reagan administration during the early years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), Saddam felt betrayed when he learned—along with the rest of the world, in 1986—of the secret US sale of arms to his enemy Iran during the Iran-Contra scandal. Already inclined to view the world through anti-Zionist conspiracy theories, Saddam decided after that episode that the United States could not be trusted and began entertaining delusions of leading the Arab world against

a. Noreen Malone, "Is America All-Knowing and All-Powerful? Yes, Thought Saddam Hussein," *New York Times*, March 28, 2024.

both Israel and the United States. In addition, Reagan's failure to hold Saddam to account for his genocidal gassing of Iraqi Kurds in 1988 led the Iraqi leader to believe the US government would not take strong action against him and possibly empower revolutionary Iran in the process. Those delusions contributed to his decisions to invade neighboring Kuwait in 1990, to attempt to assassinate former President Bush in 1993, and start down the path of his eventual destruction.

As for the United States, Coll lays blame across four presidencies, starting with Reagan, whose embrace of Saddam as a counter to Iran followed by his secret dealings with Tehran thoroughly confused and confounded the Iraqi leader. George H.W. Bush, for his part, is described as trying to reassure Saddam of US support right up to the latter's invasion of Kuwait, only to wage war on him, enact crippling sanctions, and impose an international weapons-inspection regime after Saddam's defeat. The Clinton administration—with public acknowledgment by members of Congress—continued a “covert” action program begun by Bush designed to foment a coup against Saddam, but provided sparse resources for the effort and ignored those who argued that it had virtually no chance of success. Additionally, Coll illustrates effectively that Clinton understood that he should hold direct dialogue with Saddam's regime to better understand its intentions regarding its WMD programs, but that Clinton demurred for fear of being accused of weakness by his political opponents. (475) Most significantly, by running a covert action against Saddam at the same time that the US government and international inspectors were pressing him to be transparent about his WMD program, Coll argues that Clinton—and his successor—deluded themselves that Saddam could ever convince them that he was genuinely dismantling his programs.

Unintended consequences abound in Coll's telling of the Iraq covert action, with one highly unfortunate result being the empowerment of an individual he described as “talented, ambitious, and ruthlessly deceptive,” Iraqi opposition leader Ahmad Chalabi, for a time a favorite of certain senior US officials who was “destined to alter the courses of Iraqi and American history.” (268) Over several pages, Coll provides a detailed case for the prosecution against the

duplicious Chalabi, one which future national security decisionmakers would be wise to read and remember. With the US government so openly seeking to oust Saddam, as well, the Iraqi leader and his inner circle viewed international weapons inspectors as being part of a larger effort to remove him from power, resulting in varying degrees of cooperation and behaviors by Saddam's henchmen that inspectors and analysts interpreted as part of a WMD cover-up. Coll provides cautionary words about not just this covert action, but covert action itself as a tool of policy, citing no less an authority than former CIA Deputy Director for Operations Tom Twetten. “If you can execute foreign policy without it, that's preferable,” Twetten said, because of such unintended consequences. (267) Another former CIA operations officer, Dave Manners, made a similar point in more colorful language, stating “A half-assed covert action was worse than none at all.” (303)

Addressing the US intelligence failure regarding Iraq WMDs, Coll argues convincingly that while the US Intelligence Community clearly got it wrong, because of the unique circumstances in Iraq there was probably no way for it to have done otherwise. For example, he illustrates that even members of Saddam's inner circle did not know or believe that he had destroyed the WMD programs just months before the US invasion. Likewise, because the US IC had dramatically underestimated facets of the WMD program before learning their true size and scope following the 1991 Gulf War, US intelligence analysts and collectors alike were determined not to undersell those programs a second time. Lastly, Coll reminds readers that basically no experienced outside observers of Iraqi politics believed in 2003 that Saddam had destroyed his programs and that to have argued otherwise would have required evidence that was simply not available absent deep penetration of every aspect of Saddam's highly compartmented regime.

While many mistakes of analysis and collection were made during this episode, Coll demonstrates that Saddam had complied with the expectations of the international community but that he was unable or unwilling to convince us—or even his own lieutenants—of that fact because of his history of hiding his programs, the excessive secrecy of his regime, and his

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misguided belief that the US government knew he had destroyed the weapons and sought his destruction anyway.

The Achilles Trap is not without flaws, but they are mostly minor. Writing about contemporary events—years before most relevant documentation will be released to the public—Coll once again relies heavily on oral histories. While understandable, it is also fraught with the possibility of bad memories, score-settling, personal bias, and limited scope, issues which may have informed some of the storylines Coll pursues. However, he rarely if ever makes claims based on one or two sources, and having conducted more than 100 interviews, he usually had sufficient material to draw from. Also, in an effort to describe the repressive and violent Iraqi regime and provide context for how its operation contributed to its failure to convince weapons inspectors that it had destroyed WMDs, Coll probably spends too much time describing the lives and circumstances of a handful of individual Iraqi scientists. Again, this is a small criticism, as their stories are important but probably did not require the number of pages dedicated to them.

Coll's book—as in Melvyn Leffler's *Confronting Saddam Hussein* (see Michael J. Ard's review in *Studies in Intelligence* 67, No. 3, September 2023)—concludes the George W. Bush administration did not inten-

tionally mislead the American public but rather exaggerated available evidence about Iraqi WMD and Baghdad's ties to al-Qa'ida and engaged in "unabashed fearmongering." (449) In seconding his point, another reviewer argued that had Coll written *The Achilles Trap* in 2002, "his career might have ended," because Coll would have been labeled an apologist for Saddam for depicting the dictator as an onerous and deeply flawed human being, but not a caricature.^a I find no fault with that analysis and it speaks volumes that the book's reviews—across media outlets of vastly different political bents—have been universally positive. If you do not remember those days, trust me, people did not or could not think straight about the relative threat that Saddam represented.

At a time when journalists are regularly criticized as lacking impartiality or accused of partisanship, it is important to give credit where it is due. With *The Achilles Trap*, Steve Coll proves once again that it is possible to be both critical and fair, even when writing about the murky, ethically challenging worlds of intelligence and national security. Intelligence professionals—especially analysts, operations officers, and their managers—diplomats, warfighters, policymakers, and all others who seek to understand the ways in which our country became embroiled in a war in Iraq should give *The Achilles Trap* permanent space on their bookshelves. ■

a. Spencer Ackerman, "Steve Coll's Latest Shows Saddam Hussein's Practical Side," *Washington Post*, February 27, 2024.