

No End In Sight: An establishment view of what went wrong

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Written and directed by Charles Ferguson

No End in Sight, the documentary by Charles Ferguson, opens and closes with a montage of images of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. From early, warm greetings of American troops by some Iraqis, through the consequent demolition of the country and many of its people, the descent into chaos is presented as a time-lapse sequence of mounting despair.

Ferguson, a former Brookings Institution fellow and co-founder of a software firm, is a liberal establishment figure who believes that the war in Iraq has gone horribly wrong. He makes clear in interviews that his purpose in making the film, which he financed himself, is to point out the mistakes made by the Bush administration, so that future administrations can carry out interventions more effectively.

Ferguson told the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “Unfortunately, it’s too late for Iraq. ... But this is not the last time America is going to go to war. This is not the last time where there will be a debate about what to do about a failed state or a dictator. I hope people come away with the understanding that war is sometimes necessary. And if you go to war, you’re going to have to do it very carefully and with humility.”

That being said, *No End in Sight*’s director goes about his work intelligently. He weaves news conferences and interviews with key players (those who were willing to talk with him) to reconstruct a time line of events in a comprehensible manner.

Ferguson presents a picture of almost breathtaking US shortsightedness. An even more catastrophic situation could only have been created, one gets the sense, if those involved had been actively working to bring about such a result. As it is, the willful incompetence and the disregarding of experts and eyewitnesses as to the conditions on the ground have

helped create hellish conditions for an Iraqi population already rendered weak by over a decade of a lethal embargo and economic isolation.

Time and again, Ferguson notes, surprise decisions were made from Washington to be carried out by those in the field. Such decisions included the disbanding of the Iraqi army—whose former members were armed and knew where to procure further weapons (great caches of which were left unguarded). This took place in the midst of negotiations with the leaders of the army, which was beginning to prove its usefulness to the US in reining in some of the disorder. For the Americans, this decision proved especially damaging. This effectively deprived approximately 100,000 people of their livelihoods, starving their families and encouraging them to join the resistance.

Although this is not new territory, as much the same documentation can be found in *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (Rajiv Chandrasekaran, Alfred Knopf, 2006) and other such books, Ferguson makes good use of his materials and successfully personalizes this war.

Most effective are the sections in which he directly questions the active players. The level of unpreparedness in the run-up to the war is astonishing. Ambassador Barbara Bodine, in charge of Baghdad in the spring of 2003, states that there was not so much as a telephone when she arrived in the Iraqi capital as head of the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. Her group spent the first weeks gathering such things as chairs for their office and trying to find the whereabouts of anyone who might have a clue as to the running of the place. Her situation was not atypical.

It is also revealed that at the time of George W. Bush’s “Bring it on” speech (July 2, 2003, almost four months after the invasion), only one in eight US Humvees were equipped with armor. Ferguson

introduces us to a number of veterans of the war, disabled by being caught in their Humvees by IEDs. They share not only their own stories, but provide insight into what was occurring on the front lines.

The casual disregard of Bush and his administration (including Congress) for the people they were sending into combat is breathtaking. We are treated to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's infamous answer to a soldier's question as to why there was no armor and soldiers had to scrounge in landfills for extra metal to retrofit their Humvees, "You fight a war with the army you have."

No End in Sight raises the issue of private contractors from two points of view. Again, indicating his own view of things, Ferguson first discusses the actual cost of the mercenaries as opposed to their efficiency; he also considers their overall behavior. Since the director's concern is to indicate how such a war might be properly conducted, he shows us images of a fort built by local workers (being paid enough to support their families, and thereby given less reason to join the resistance) under the direction of US troops. Their fort cost approximately \$200,000 and was completed in about six months. The film contrasts to this a fort being built by contractors, which cost ten times more and was uncompleted. In either case, it should be noted, the colonialist character of the occupation remains the same.

We also see more troubling images in a home movie made by a group of contractors in an armored vehicle. As they drive along a popular street, they level their guns and fire at anyone who follows them, amid whoops, racial slurs and loud country-and-western music. To them, it seems, this is nothing more than a playground. They are held neither to international nor military law, having been given a free pass to create mayhem.

Within definite limits, *No End in Sight* provides a starting point for understanding the disastrous character of Bush administration policy. Its simple layout and the almost hands-off interviewing style give a balanced picture of what has happened and why. Officials are condemned by the contradiction between their words and reality. Ferguson presents much valuable and harrowing material. His notion that such a neo-colonial adventure could be done 'properly' is what needs to be rejected.



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