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Book Review: We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People by Peter Van Buren

By Realist, BLOGCRITICS.ORG
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If Joseph Heller's war began in 2004 instead of 1944, this would be the book entitled *Catch-22*. Once I picked up *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People* (available September 27), I could not put the book down. I could not believe so much that appears to be fictional satire could instead relate actual events.

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Author Peter Van Buren, a career State Department Foreign Service Officer (FSO), could have been Heller's Yossarian, a traveller adrift in a sea of official insanity, whose survival depends on pretending it is all as it should be until he can escape. He relates tales of incredible hubris, inedible military rations, of status-seeking superiors and shady local grifters, corrupt "businessmen"

both native and contracted, of brass-polishing officers and resigned enlisted personnel. All of these people are assigned to distribute massive mounds of *Your Money* in a poorly-researched and badly-managed effort to convert Iraq from an ancient tribal culture into a clone of suburban America while mired in a war with cultural and religious overtones. Yet the most basic needs of the local people are completely ignored in the incompetent planning of some incredibly expensive community development projects intended to nation-build Iraq.

The FSOs justify all of this frantic activity to their superiors via fabricated reports (as directed and edited by their superiors) through claiming spectacular successes with projects intended to meet local needs; in reality, failures that even the local residents understand to be exercises in lavishly expensive foolishness. This is described in a project intended to both employ idle Iraqis and to improve security for patrols by removing trash from the streets. Each night, all of the removed trash would be returned to the streets for the next day's effort. No lasting results get produced, and no one ever follows up to see where all the money really went. The only requirement is that once a project is approved and funded, it must all be spent - quickly! There would be hell to pay if there was anything left unissued. Then the project is stamped completed and abandoned.

Reading about some of these projects, which Van Buren regularly examines in detail, I had to occasionally laugh out loud at this bravura performance of farce in real life, such as the trash collection project. The examples are legion. For instance, what good is spending millions of dollars for a milk processing facility in a desert region where cows cannot be productive as they are on Iowa farms, or for a frozen chicken slaughterhouse, in a region where electric service is spotty at best, and the product cannot be produced cheaper than foreign-imports cost? Yet both were done without any follow-up on either project. Then another plan is launched to produce clothing which Chinese imports undercut severely, or something else because some high-level mucky-muck is up for an Ambassadorship to some unnamed country and needs a successful

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nation-building economic project on his resume. Spending tens of thousands of dollars on translating American Classic books into Arabic and shipping them to Iraq only have them dumped behind the local school because no local Iraqi could read them and thus didn't want them. And so on. And so on.

Yet other times I had to restrain my disgust at the arrogance of those seeking to commit this Americanization on the Iraqis, for all they achieved was to make a bad situation much worse by showing serious disrespect to the sensibilities of the local population. Van Buren touches upon these, ranging from an ill-considered idea to get Iraqi women to dress more like American women to [the savage rape of an Iraqi girl](#) and the murder of her entire family, the most flagrant of the violations of Iraq that he had to confront while stationed there. It happened nearby, and could have provided the motive for a revenge killing of US personnel.

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