The 2003 invasion of Iraq was strikingly successful in achieving its initial objectives. Attacking a numerically superior force, the U.S.-led coalition not only managed to remove Saddam Hussein’s regime in Baghdad, but did so with surprisingly few casualties in about three weeks. However, that early battlefield success has not translated into the achievement of the United States’ strategic aims in Iraq, and this problem colors all discussions on the conduct of the invasion. The cascade of failures that kick-started the insurgency during the transition from invasion to occupation had its roots in decisions made before and during the invasion itself, and the effects of those decisions were magnified by failures by senior military and civilian leaders to respond appropriately to the post-invasion chaos.

_Cobra II_ is the chronicle of a war plan: how a talented senior commander and his staff created it; how brave American and allied service members executed it; and how senior leaders ultimately mismanaged and failed to adapt it to reflect post-invasion reality. It is an even-handed and convincing account focused on the question of how the war’s planning and execution set the conditions for the insurgency that followed. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, authors of a praiseworthy account of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, have written what is so far the best account of the military planning and execution of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The book does not provide a new and deeper analysis of the interagency process or political maneuvering that brought about the war; rather, for the most part it presents its “inside story” from the point of view of one of the key players in the military chain of command. Michael Gordon observed the war as a reporter embedded with the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), which was led by the allied ground force commander,
U.S. Army Lieutenant General David McKiernan. *Cobra II* implicitly presents General McKiernan as something of an unsung hero; it portrays him as the highest ranking individual to get things mostly right. It was McKiernan and his staff who developed the invasion campaign plan, and it was primarily the civilian and military leadership above McKiernan that made counterproductive changes, according to the authors. The chief advantage of this approach is that observing from the CFLCC level gives the reader views of both Central Command (Centcom) and the Department of Defense from below, and of the ground forces participating in the invasion from above.

The authors’ proximity to McKiernan may have lent him and his staff a shield of sympathy, but it is difficult to point to any overt examples of bias. The principal way in which the authors’ vantage point seems to have made a difference is in their focus on the U.S. ground invasion; it receives more attention than other aspects of the war, including the air offensive or the British contribution in Southern Iraq. Despite these gaps, *Cobra II* offers an account of the ground war that is both well written and wide ranging. The engagements at Ambush Alley in Nasiriyah, the 11th Attack Helicopter Regiment’s disastrous attack near Karbala, and the Thunder Runs into Baghdad are among the better known battles of the invasion; they receive appropriate attention along with numerous others. Although the book’s stated purpose is to lay out how the insurgency came about, the bulk of the text is an account of the engagements in the war.

Despite having been named for a famous historical operation—Cobra was the codename for Patton’s 1944 breakout from Normandy—Operation Cobra II was quite audacious when compared with past American offensives. It was designed around the goal of seizing Baghdad as quickly as possible, having correctly identified the capital as the center of gravity for the regime. It abandoned the lengthy air campaign and large troop deployment of the first Persian Gulf War, opting instead for an early start of the ground campaign, and it aimed to surprise the enemy by attacking before the entire planned ground force was deployed. The argument for haste was based on the desire to minimize the regime’s opportunity to employ chemical or biological weapons, as well as to limit the damage that Iraqis could cause should they decide to employ a “scorched earth” strategy, destroying their own infrastructure to slow the American advance. Moreover, it reflected the view of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other advocates of the Revolution in Military Affairs that the future belongs to small, flexible, swift-moving forces supported by a network of sensors and long-range precision weapons.
The invasion plan was naturally based upon the best intelligence available, which suggested several critical findings: that Iraq had as many as 950 weapons of mass destruction sites; that Iraqi civilians would likely welcome the invasion; and that Iraqi military units would capitulate wholesale and be available to the coalition for security purposes during the campaign. Since these findings turned out to be unfounded, it is worth examining how well the plan was designed to cope with surprises. Some elements of the plan were problematic. For example, had a thousand prohibited weapons sites in fact existed, not nearly enough troops were present to secure them all. In addition, the belief that Iraqi units would switch sides in sufficient numbers directly conflicts with the parts of the war plan designed to tear the Iraqi military apart at its seams—notably, these latter measures seem to have been successful, although the Iraqi military was never a tightly knit organization.

Gordon and Trainor dwell upon the question of troop numbers at length, and it is among the most important elements of the book. The different versions of the plans proposed for the invasion are gauged in terms of troop strength, and it is indeed eye-opening to read the range of troop levels proposed: they start as low as 18,000, increasing over time as more troops would be transported to the region, and rising to as high as 250,000 at the time of invasion, which took place after a very brief air campaign. Pre-existing plans drawn up under former Centcom commander General Anthony Zinni had called for 380,000 to stabilize Iraq in the event of regime collapse. The plan that was eventually adopted was one drawn up by McKiernan and his staff and was closer to the high-end troop projections; it planned for a force to start at about 145,000 troops and grow to 275,000 during the operation.

The authors give most of the credit for the plan to McKiernan and his staff, noting that former Centcom commander General Tommy Franks failed to mention in his memoir that his subordinate essentially designed the final plan. They also suggest that even after approving the plan, Rumsfeld “did not trust the generals to send the minimum force necessary to win and secure the peace,” and he therefore took a gatekeeper role on all military units. From the uniformed military’s point of view, Rumsfeld’s interference generated considerable friction and further complicated the already intricate task of deploying large numbers of troops, their equipment, and supplies. Ominously, even prior to the war, it was made clear that if the invasion succeeded quickly, the secretary would press to cut off the flow of further troops to Iraq.

The Iraq invasion was publicly portrayed as an opportunity to demonstrate the new way of warfare being developed as part of the Defense Department’s “Transformation” program. Cobra II offers several insights on this topic, al-
though not enough to get a complete picture. Precision-guided weapons and Special Operations Forces played important roles in the invasion, although the authors describe them somewhat poorly in comparison with their coverage of the conventional ground forces of the Army and Marines. What the authors do focus on, however, suggests the scale of the work yet to be done in this area.

Advocates of transforming the military into a smaller, more flexible, and lethal force have pointed to a potential revolution in surveillance and communications technology as a key enabler, but massive gaps existed in the reconnaissance information made available to ground commanders. Time and again throughout the ground invasion, U.S. forces triumphed less for “new” reasons and more because of their considerable edge in the more traditional components of military success—training, organization, logistics, and equipment. Confident in these advantages, particularly in the degree of protection afforded them by heavy armor and overwhelming firepower, U.S. units maneuvered with almost reckless audacity, even when provided with only limited information on enemy strength or positions. While the Iraqis were outmatched in direct combat, they still managed to secretly maneuver large units with unexpected success. Moreover, the Fedayeen paramilitary troops that seemed omnipresent during the invasion had been an unpleasant surprise to American commanders still hoping for only sporadic resistance in the predominantly Shiite cities of Southern Iraq.

Only a few closing chapters of *Cobra II* deal with the chaos of post-invasion Iraq. By the time Baghdad fell, several major problems in the set of assumptions underlying the war plan had emerged: no Iraqi units of any significant size had switched over to the coalition side; American planners had hoped for almost three times the number of allied troops; and Iraqi security forces and infrastructure were far more fragile than expected. The authors contend that rather than taking appropriate countermeasures, the coalition took a number of actions that made matters worse. Rumsfeld elected to cancel the deployment of an additional division of reinforcements, the Coalition Provisional Authority ordered the Iraqi Army to disband, and a series of personnel changes removed some of the most experienced people, including McKiernan and his staff, from the system. The displacement of Zalmay Khalilzad from a planned shared position with Bremer at the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority was similarly tragic, given the former’s demonstrated experience and knowledge in Iraq; the authors note Khalilzad himself was unaware that he had been dropped until minutes prior to the public announcement.
If the book has a principal weakness, it is that Gordon and Trainor strongly emphasize the importance of the number of troops in the theater of operations without making an adequate case for what difference more soldiers would have made. In their brief coverage of post invasion Iraq, they anecdotally paint a picture of a U.S. Army that had not prepared its forces for stability operations in any systematic way. The main reason that more troops would have been needed during the post-invasion period was not only the dearth of adequate security forces, but also because the U.S. military had tailored its training, organization, and equipment for combat, and it could count on fewer such “force multipliers” for so different a mission. The skills that allowed American troops to invade Iraq with so small a force mattered much less for maintaining control of Iraq once the stabilizing phase came about: hence, the need for greater numbers. On the other hand, a large number of troops ill-suited for stability operations may do more harm than good—ham-handed offensive tactics can and did do tremendous damage to relations between civilians and occupying military forces. The question of how much benefit additional troops would have had, and the extent to which it might have made a difference, goes unasked in this book.

Gordon and Trainor open their book with a quote from Clausewitz on the “first of all strategic questions”: establishing the kind of war that the statesman is embarking on, “neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something alien to its nature.” The authors believe that senior leaders never comprehended the nature of the conflict they entered, and that the few hedges against post-invasion anarchy that existed in the war plan were overwritten by the mistakes made in failing to adapt to conditions on the ground. The authors wrote Cobra II with an eye toward explaining the genesis of the insurgency. The result is a serious account of the invasion that will be a standard work for developing an understanding of the Iraq war and its ongoing consequences.