

## Foreword

Iraq was a huge blow to Britain's moral and international standing. It changed, probably permanently, the relationship between this country's people and their leaders. But, less widely understood, it was also a military humiliation for the UK. In the debacle that was Operation Telic, one group of individuals - Britain's military leadership -- got off too lightly.

For years, the top brass has been essentially exempt from the kind of criticism dished out to other public servants. The failings of Iraq are customarily blamed on conniving politicians or cheese-paring bureaucrats. Such people are not blameless, of course; but Tim Ripley's important book uses large quantities of previously unreported evidence to show why the blame must be more widely shared.

His is a nuanced portrait. It includes many accounts of good, even superb soldiering. It describes the frustrations felt by those on the ground at decisions from Whitehall, and tells the true, more complicated and fascinating story of Britain's failure to take on the Mahdi Army militia in Basra.

But it makes clear, too, that many of the British Army's problems were self-inflicted. Senior commanders complacently underestimated the task. They failed to learn from their mistakes. And towards their political masters they seemed to act like "military toadies," in the striking phrase of one general quoted by Ripley, lacking the courage to speak truth to power about their real operational needs.

Iraq, as Tim Ripley points out, is the war that everyone wants to forget. Many of the units which fought the hardest have been denied even battle honours.

The Ministry of Defence made strenuous efforts to obstruct the author's researches - always an excellent sign that you are on to something. But as we witness the West's response, or lack of it, to events in Syria and now Ukraine, Iraq is starting to look like a war we cannot avoid remembering.

It is starting to look like the misconceived, ill-executed operations of Iraq and in Afghanistan have caused a strategic watershed in the West, where political and public will to deal with egregious violations of international norms simply no longer exists.

That is the real importance of this book. If we are to recover the confidence to stand up for civilised values, we must understand the truth about how we failed to do so in Iraq.

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