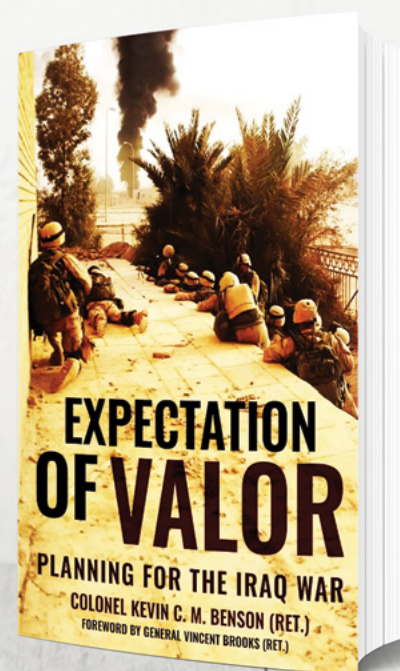


Expectation of Valor

Planning for the Iraq War

Kevin C. M. Benson, Casemate, 2024, 272 pages



Dr. William Shane Story

Expectation of Valor: Planning for the Iraq War has an underlying theme that Kevin Benson never fully grasps. After wrestling with the problem for days, I finally realized that it reminded me of an old movie. In *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), Paul Newman plays the title character, a petty criminal serving time on a Florida prison’s chain gang. He repeatedly escapes, is recaptured, and punished. After capturing Luke yet again, a brutal prison captain beats him with a truncheon, sending Luke tumbling into a ditch. In a southern drawl, the captain then explains to the other prisoners, “What we’ve got here is ... failure to communicate. Some men you just can’t reach.”¹ For all his experience and military education, the Iraq campaign left Benson endlessly frustrated with communication failures at all levels—institutionally, interpersonally, and doctrinally. It was as if policy and strategy were talking past one another; knowing that the cost was being paid in blood and treasure was a never-ending beating.

Expectation of Valor is not a history of the invasion. Instead, it is Benson’s effort to reckon with a past that he still cannot comprehend, even as he sets out to refute criticism that the Army did not plan Phase IV (Stabilization) of the campaign, the aftermath of the invasion. Benson produced *Expectation of Valor*

by transposing notes he wrote from June 2002 to June 2003 while serving as the chief of plans (C-5) in the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) in Kuwait. He used contemporaneous emails and briefings to expand on details. There is little indication of secondary research. Benson makes it difficult for readers to understand how his experiences fit into a larger narrative of the war because he does not mention any well-known events as signposts, such as the Thunder Runs into Baghdad on 5 and 7 April 2003. The result is a deeply personal but narrow perspective, one that emphasizes everything that Benson wrote in his daily journal about Phase IV planning. Prospective readers need to already have a good understanding of the planning, execution, and aftermath of the invasion and the role the CFLCC headquarters played in the campaign to fully grasp *Expectation of Valor’s* significance and limitations.

Those who do pick up Benson’s narrative will learn a few more details about frustrations in the planning process, the difficulties surrounding deployment schedules, and extensive travel for planning conferences. So-called “snowflakes”—endless requests for arcane information and pseudo guidance framed as vague questions from the secretary of defense—consumed

incredible amounts of staff work and were the bane of Benson's existence. As a planner, his focus was not on tactics or battles being waged in the moment, but on coordinating solutions for operational-level problems, especially the flow of forces, Phase IV, redeploying forces, and building the Phase IV coalition.

Because *Expectation of Valor* is such a personalized account, every page reflects how Benson sees himself and how he perceives his relationship to others. A 1977 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, Benson is self-confident, proud of being a School for Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) planner, and disappointed that he was not selected for brigade command. After general officers, Benson assumes SAMS graduates are the smartest people in the room. He considers himself one of Gen. Tommy Franks's approved performers while also acknowledging Franks's inexplicable habit of blackballing colonels on his staff—not to mention members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—on whose effectiveness and support his own command's success depends. Lt. Gen. David McKiernan commanded CFLCC during the invasion of Iraq, but Benson struggled to coordinate planning concerns with McKiernan at critical moments. He also felt flummoxed by Terry Moran, a contracted special assistant to McKiernan who played an informal but outsized role in the command group.

If Benson thought strategic communications were difficult, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made them impossible by refusing to know things he did not want to know, especially anything for which he might be held accountable. Rumsfeld's leadership style consisted of hypercritical questioning and deliberate inscrutability. It all amounted to command by confusion. Benson experienced this before the invasion when the secretary of defense tore up the war plan's extremely tight deployment schedule, seriously jeopardizing war preparations. Benson was aghast that Rumsfeld had so little regard for the physical challenges of mobilizing, training, and deploying forces thousands of miles for war.² Rumsfeld, for his part, complained on 20 January 2003 that

I have been very unhappy in recent weeks and months" [because the mobilization requests] have not been disaggregated, have not taken into full account the sensitivities involved. ... People in the Reserves and Guard have jobs ... they prefer not to get jerked around and called up two or three or four

months before they're needed and then found they're not needed and sent back home with a "sorry about that."³

Months after the war, Rumsfeld gave a different explanation for micromanaging the force flow. He claimed, "The fact that it [I] took the deployment process and disaggregated it to support the diplomacy was never understood out there, and I didn't want to say that's what we were doing so we sat here and took the hit."⁴ Rumsfeld offered yet another explanation in his autobiography, claiming that he had discarded the deployment schedule to better coordinate "military and diplomatic pressure" on Iraq.⁵ How one improves coordination by sowing confusion is a mystery. One Rumsfeld advisor saw political calculation in his every move, "a very classic Rumsfeld" technique "to avoid leaving his fingerprints on decisions."⁶

Abundant evidence bears out the assessment, and Rumsfeld's civilian subordinates followed his example. On 19 May 2003, Benson briefed Walter Slocombe, the under secretary of defense for policy, on CFLCC's efforts to reassemble the regular Iraqi army to relieve coalition forces of security responsibilities. This was all the more important due to heavy pressure from Washington and Central Command to withdraw American troops from Iraq within just a few months. When Benson finished reviewing the challenges the command was working to overcome, he asked whether CFLCC "was still acting in accord with policy?" Slocombe simply answered "Got it, thanks for the briefing Colonel," and again declined to answer when Benson repeated the question.⁷ Through the rest of May and into June, Benson marveled at the strategic contradiction: Ambassador L. Paul Bremer had "banned Ba'athists from returning to the government and disbanded the Iraqi Army, and ... General Franks wanted us to get 3ID [3rd Infantry Division] out of theater by the end of June." The only thing left undecided was whether anyone was going to secure Iraq.⁸ It was of a piece with a pattern set by video-teleconferences with the secretary of defense in which "we

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talked around topics” because the secretary hated being confronted with issues he could not sidestep.⁹

Benson offers important firsthand observations to historians of the Iraq war. The most obvious is that the war did not end with the fall of the regime in April 2003. That corrects a mistake made in the Army’s first history of Operation Iraqi Freedom, which defined Saddam Hussein’s fall as a decisive victory and therefore the end of the war.¹⁰ As Benson noted with a hint of sarcasm on 19 April, “War is over in the US/UK, but the campaign is not over” because fighting was continuing, the enemy was evolving, and the coalition had still not completed most of its critical tasks or secured Baghdad or the country.¹¹ He also took a skeptical view of a rapid study of the campaign completed by Joint Forces Command, believing that “quick” looks “tended to form opinions based on the euphoria or gloom of the moment.”¹²

A second issue, relatively minor, concerns intelligence analysis. The most comprehensive Army history of the Iraq war, one initiated by Gen. Raymond Odierno when he was the chief of staff of the Army, faults American forces in Iraq in the spring and summer of 2003 for being so focused on templating conventional enemy forces that they could not adjust to the unconventional threats coalition forces faced after the regime collapsed. According to this history, “They were not used to gathering information on the tribal and other informal networks that were emerging in the aftermath of regime collapse” and hence were stuck in the past, searching endlessly for Saddam’s Republican Guard divisions long after they had disappeared from the battlefield.¹³ Benson hardly mentions intelligence assessments of Iraq’s conventional forces during the invasion, but he details the rapid accumulation of other threats and the burgeoning political environment and factionalism that consumed Iraq after Saddam’s fall. He was only passing along what was being reported in intelligence channels, so it is clear intelligence analysts were scrambling to accumulate and make sense of new data sources—discerning new political and enemy networks—as rapidly as possible. Benson asks, for example,

whether the first suicide bomber in Baghdad on 11 April is “a harbinger of things to come.”¹⁴ Everything that follows in Benson’s account confirms that it was, and intelligence assessments were not blind to what was happening.

Readers should draw an additional lesson from *Expectation of Valor* on the practice of writing. The Harding Project is a U.S. Army chief of staff initiative to reinvigorate professional military writing, and this book demonstrates why that effort is needed. The manuscript suffers from editorial shortcomings that detract from its value. Page after page includes the confirmation that the author was “keeping people informed” about planning updates, but what begins as a marker of diligence soon feels redundant. Likewise, *Expectation of Valor* states a score of times that post-Saddam Iraq “continued to simmer” even as conditions clearly evolved. Finally, pages 194–195 list sixteen bullet points, the last eight of which simply duplicate the first eight—an error the editor should have caught.¹⁵ Readers can learn a great deal from Benson’s account, but the editorial team owed the author and his audience a more rigorous review. Proofreading, reading aloud, and eliminating repetition are fundamental principles of good writing and good editing.

Although one is fiction and the other nonfiction, *Cool Hand Luke* and *Expectation of Valor* both follow the narrative arc known as the hero’s journey. Luke begins as a drunk, petty criminal and a veteran with a Silver Star who counters callous cruelty with defiance to the end. Luke’s refusal to submit to institutional brutality becomes his final, transcendent act. Benson’s struggle is not with sadistic prison guards, but with an institution paralyzed by ambiguity, contradictions, and silence. Benson planned, warned, and informed—only to watch those efforts brushed aside or lost in a fog of strategic incoherence. If Benson expected battlefield valor to give meaning to the campaign—or to redeem its planning—what he found instead was a descent into improvisation, indecision, and mounting disorder. The hero’s journey does not always lead home. ■

Notes

1. “Failure to Communicate,” *Cool Hand Luke*, directed by Stuart Rosenberg (Warner Bros., 1967).

2. Kevin C. M. Benson, *Expectation of Valor: Planning for the Iraq War* (Casemate, 2024), 5.

3. Donald Rumsfeld, remarks to the Reserve Officers Association 2003 Mid-Winter Conference and 18th Annual Military Exposition, Washington, DC, 20 January 2003, <https://www.hsdl.org/c/view?docid=1874>.

4. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (Simon & Schuster, 2004), 233.

5. Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (Penguin, 2012), 439.

6. Bradley Graham, *By His Own Rules: The Ambitions, Success, and Ultimate Failures of Donald Rumsfeld* (Public Affairs, 2009), 437.

7. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 200.

8. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 213.

9. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 135.

10. Gregory Fontenot, David Tohn, and E. J. Degen, *On Point: The U.S. Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004). The last pages of *On Point* acknowledged the war was not over, but this hardly countered the dominant theme established throughout *On Point* that the war was over.

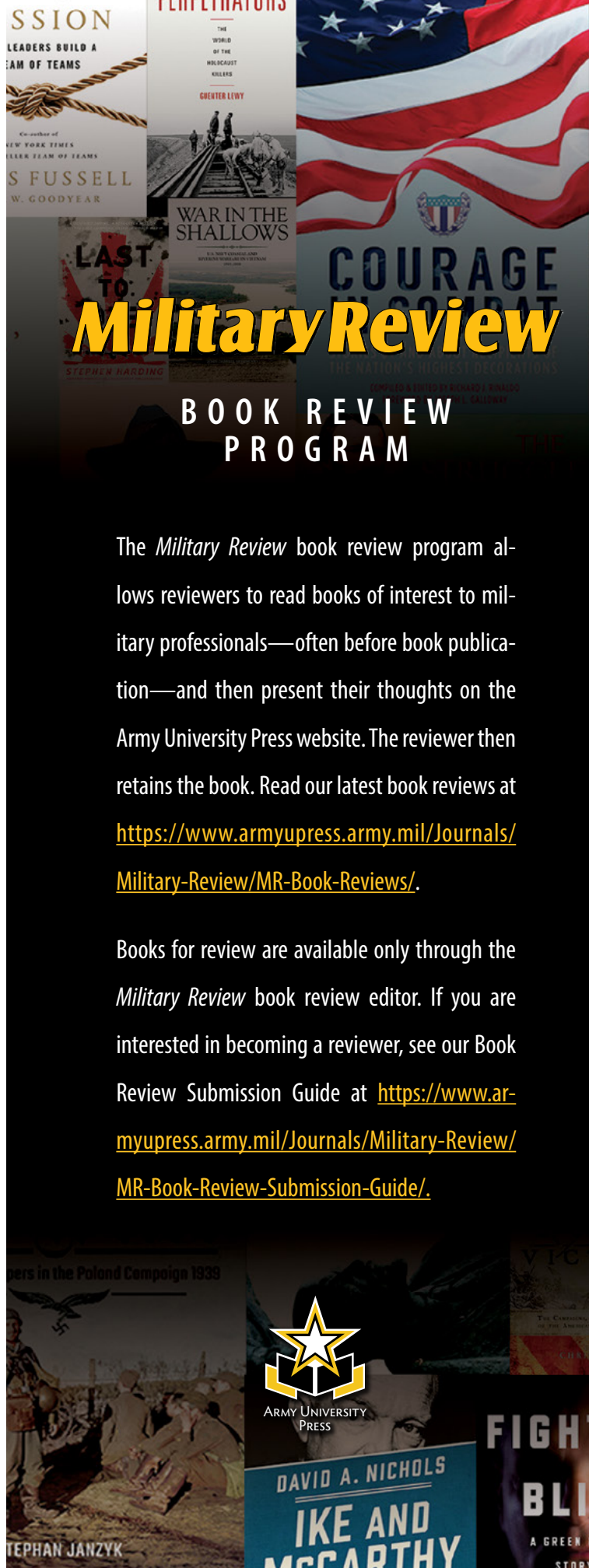
11. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 150.

12. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 228.

13. Joel Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, eds., *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1, *Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War, 2003–2006* (Army War College Press, 2019), 179.

14. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 134.

15. Benson, *Expectation of Valor*, 194–95.



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