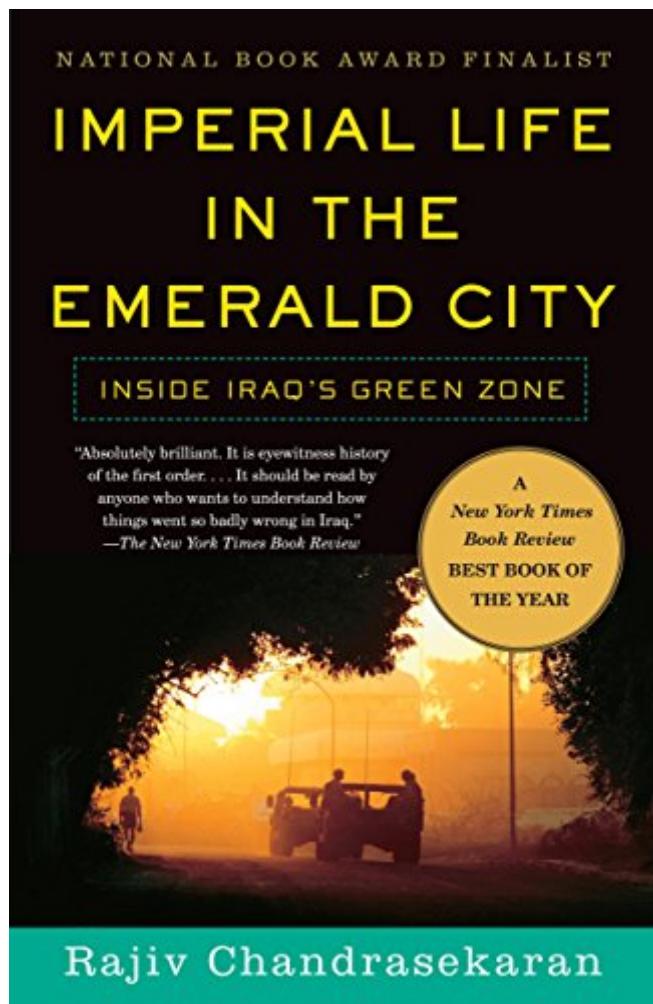


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Imperial Life In The Emerald City



Synopsis

A National Book Award Finalist and New York Times BestsellerThe Green Zone, Baghdad, Iraq, 2003: in this walled-off compound of swimming pools and luxurious amenities, Paul Bremer and his Coalition Provisional Authority set out to fashion a new, democratic Iraq. Staffed by idealistic aides chosen primarily for their views on issues such as abortion and capital punishment, the CPA spent the crucial first year of occupation pursuing goals that had little to do with the immediate needs of a postwar nation: flat taxes instead of electricity and deregulated health care instead of emergency medical supplies. In this acclaimed firsthand account, the former Baghdad bureau chief of The Washington Post gives us an intimate portrait of life inside this Oz-like bubble, which continued unaffected by the growing mayhem outside. This is a quietly devastating tale of imperial folly, and the definitive history of those early days when things went irrevocably wrong in Iraq.

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Customer Reviews

This is the definitive take on the US occupation of Iraq and everything that went wrong. Chronicling the lead up to the invasion to the hand over of sovereignty in June 2004 it shows how intelligent people with the best of intentions created such a mess. The main take away is how officials were chosen for political connections and ideological purity rather than their qualifications. Time and again Middle East hands and Arabic speakers are passed over for trusted conservatives. There's a lot of good stuff in this book about the occupation was run and how it went so wrong. And a lot of lessons for people in government today.

Rajiv Chandrasekaran is with the Washington Post; he has spent time in both Afghanistan and Iraq since the American missions in both places. His experiences in Iraq as well as his interviews with those in Iraq during the time of the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority, under the control of Paul Bremer) and the precursor organization (under Jay Garner) provide important bases for this work. The picture is not pretty, and ties in with arguments advanced by other books on Iraq written of late. First, as readers already know, there was no real plan for after the war. The book makes it clear that much of the redevelopment of Iraq was ad hoc. Since no one understood how much in tatters the electrical grid was, there was no real preparation for dealing with the degraded system. And the end result was that infrastructure was worse after the war as compared with before. And the CPA was unable to do much to restore power and make the system work better. Second, many of the "leaders" selected by the CPA were chosen for their political connections. For instance, very young (twenty something) people who had built IOUs from the Administration for, for instance, working in the Bush election campaign, were selected to head units for which they had no expertise at all. Sometimes, seasoned administrators were pushed aside, occasionally because they were not gung ho enough politically. Third, the CPA was fairly clueless about what was happening on the ground in Iraq. They were slow to pick up on the insurgency, for example. It took them some time to understand the importance of the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. They became landlocked in the "Green Zone," as conditions worsened outside. The book begins with a quotation from T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia), who said in 1917: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them." The book indicates the number of times when Iraqis were given secondary status to Americans, whether in running organizations or on political decision-making. One important neoconservative, on reflection of his experiences in Iraq, became most disillusioned. He commented to the author: "I'm a neoconservative who's been mugged by reality (page 5)." What began as an easy military victory turned into a quagmire. As the American involvement moved from

liberation to occupation, things began to disintegrate. As one Iraqi told the author (page 290): "The biggest mistake of the occupation was the occupation itself." All in all, one of the more powerful books about the American incursion into Iraq; it is also one of the best descriptions of the CPA's reign in Iraq. It triangulates strongly with other volumes.

This book was recommended by when I bought "Hubris" (which I have yet to read) and I thought, well, why not. My dad had already read this and urged me to read it since we've been talking about Iraq and the war. I picked it up last week and was unable to put it down. It wasn't like anything I thought it would be ~~ it wasn't dry and badly reported. It was very informative and I got the feeling that it was a rather unbiased viewpoint ~~ more like a reporting from a reporter who tried to report what he saw and heard, not what he feels or thinks. (No matter how hard a reporter tries, sometimes, you can still get a sense of what he's thinking as he's writing.) Chandrasekaran is a good story-teller ~~ not as a fictional writer, but as a writer who observed the going-ons in the Green Zone and who interviewed hundreds of people who lived in the Green Zone. He showed the ambitions and hopes of those who came to Iraq to rebuild it. He showed the disappointments, the downfalls of those who worked there. Even more dangerously, he showed the incompetence of the Americans who worked in the Green Zone as they lived in a bubble removed from the realities of what the Iraq people were facing every single day. He provided the history of the Iraq people under the Saddam regime. Chandrasekaran is an excellent reporter who interviewed just about everyone from Bremer himself to the taxi cab driver. His book is chock full of information written in such a way that everything flows from one page to another that I just couldn't put the book down. The spotlight reviewer Robert D. Steele sums up the book so well that really, I cannot write a review like his. All I know is that when I picked up this book, I was still clueless about what went on in Iraq. Now I am intrigued and saddened by the mess that is still on-going there. I am also even more disillusioned with the current administration than I was before. And I am following up this book with reading Gwynn Dyer's book "Future Tense" which explains even more the dire situation in Iraq. If you are looking to be informed on the situation in Iraq, I highly recommend reading Chandrasekaran's book as he is a writer to read. I never knew half of what was going on and now, it's too dangerous to be ignorant of what is going on in the world. 6-5-07

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