

THE Nation.

Last March the Commission on Wartime Contracting gave Congress its evaluation of the State Department's ability to take over in Iraq after the Army's scheduled departure at the end of 2011. The report's title alone, "Iraq—A Forgotten Mission?," suggests the prognosis isn't good, a warning amplified by Peter Van Buren's account of the misguided method to the State's madness, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People* (Metropolitan; \$25). A Foreign Service officer for more than twenty years, Van Buren had no experience in the Middle East when he signed up in 2009 to lead Provincial Reconstruction Teams embedded on two US military bases. As he tells it, the State Department, scuttling around in the shadow of the military's wealth and clout, is operating according to a kind of pauper's logic, playing at luxury by squandering taxpayer's cash on soft-power projects that run the gamut from the unconsidered to the spectacularly dumb.

There are the beekeeping kits purchased for widows before anyone bothers to wonder whether the widows are interested in keeping bees; the Internet connection supplied to schools that lack furniture and electricity; the multimillion-dollar chicken-processing plant that never opens because the "market research" claiming Iraqis would pay premium for fresh halal chicken has been invented for press releases. On the afternoon a few "Embassy war tourists" stop by the poultry plant for a jaunt outside the Green Zone, state stirs the Potemkin operations into the semblance of functionality by shelling out for chickens no locals can afford. When it comes to photo opportunities, lunch, apparently, is on the house. "We dined well," Van Buren quips, "and, as a bonus, consumed the evidence of our fraud."

Despite the risks of such frankness for Van Buren—he is currently the subject of a State Department investigation—he writes with the sardonic candor of a man too intent on recounting the absurdities he has witnessed to worry about what he has to lose. *We Meant Well* has none of the polish or reportorial expertise of the classics in the Iraq-disaster genre like Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006) and Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (2006), and its slapdash scouring of facts and figures seems more indebted to Wikipedia-style research than to reporting. The virtue of the telling is, of all things, its hilarity, the politically incorrect, pop-inflected gallows humor exposing the litany of bumbles through the damning lens of farce. "It is like I am standing naked in a room with a big hat on my head," Van Buren quotes an Iraqi as saying. "Everyone comes in and puts flowers and ribbons on my hat, but no one seems to notice that I am naked." If the image suggests a tea party held at Abu Ghraib, it may prove as representative of the flippancy and ineptness of a State Department-run Iraq as the photos of torture were of an earlier phase of a shapeless, unnecessary war.