

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and
Chapters

University of Nebraska Press

2017

Tough Sell

Tom Basile

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples>

Basile, Tom, "Tough Sell" (2017). *University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters*. 396.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/unpresssamples/396>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Nebraska Press at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Nebraska Press -- Sample Books and Chapters by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

TOUGH SELL

[Buy the Book](#)

TOUGH

[Buy the Book](#)



SELL

Fighting the Media War in Iraq

TOM BASILE

Foreword by John R. Bolton

Potomac Books | *An imprint of the University of Nebraska Press*

[Buy the Book](#)

© 2017 by Tom Basile. Foreword © 2017 by the Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska.

All rights reserved. Potomac Books is an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press. Manufactured in the United States of America.



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Basile, Tom, 1975– author. | Bolton, John R., writer of foreword.

Title: Tough sell: fighting the media war in Iraq / Tom Basile; foreword by John R. Bolton.

Description: Lincoln, Nebraska: Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016032572 (print) | LCCN 2016053430 (ebook)

ISBN 9781612349008 (cloth: alk. paper)

ISBN 9781612349077 (epub)

ISBN 9781612349084 (mobi)

ISBN 9781612349091 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: War on Terrorism, 2001–2009—Personal narratives. | War on Terrorism, 2001–2009, in mass media. | Coalition Provisional Authority.

Classification: LCC HV6432 .B375 2017 (print) | LCC HV6432 (ebook) | DDC 956.7044/31 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016032572>

Set in Lyon Text by John Klopping.

For Sgt. Joseph T. Basile, USMC,
who by example gave me the discipline
to embrace a sense of duty.

For all those, both military and civilian,
who sacrifice to protect America from
terrorism.

For my wife and children.
May they live in an America that
is free and free from fear.

CONTENTS

Foreword	ix
List of Abbreviations	xii
Introduction	1
Parachuting	9
In the Shadow of the Tyrant	31
Learning Curve	53
The Face of Evil	75
The Civilian and the Soldier	101
Social Mecca	117
Driving the Message	135
New Voices	165
What Bleeds Leads	187
Disconnect	209
Reality Check	231
Burnt Orange	249
Unfinished	269
Epilogue	285
Index	293

FOREWORD

AMBASSADOR JOHN R. BOLTON

Those who define today's "conventional wisdom" in Washington would have us believe that the second U.S.-Iraqi war was a failure. So pervasive is this mindset that, as a presidential candidate, even Jeb Bush, former president George W. Bush's own brother, fled in horror from the prospect of defending the 2003 decision to invade Iraq and overthrow Saddam Hussein. And from this conventional wisdom about Iraq, supplemented by cherry-picked data from public-opinion polls, flows the further conventional wisdom that, in the years ahead, the American public will simply not abide similar U.S. national-security policies.

Notwithstanding its pervasiveness, this conventional wisdom about Iraq is wrong. It is wrong in its factual description of what actually happened in Iraq, wrong about the appropriate conclusions to draw from that experience, wrong about American public opinion (and correspondingly wrong about how to shape that opinion), and wrong about the international policies necessary to protect American citizens and interests in a time of growing uncertainty and indeed growing chaos.

This is not to say that mistakes—indeed, serious mistakes—were not made in Iraq both before and after the invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

Of course there were mistakes, large and small, primarily the assessment of Iraq's capabilities in weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Without rearguing this issue, which has and will fill volumes for years to come, Saddam's WMD threat was not well explained before the invasion. Neither was it understood well, let alone explained well, once the evidence available failed to meet the expectations raised before

the conflict. Unfortunately for sensible national-security analysis, the WMD-related errors about Iraq became public contemporaneously with post-invasion mistakes (often only seen in 20/20 hindsight) that came to dominate the ongoing international, mass-media news coverage of events on the ground in Iraq.

What is perhaps most disturbing about today's conventional wisdom is the careless, intellectually sloppy, and often flatly disingenuous way that mistakes made after Saddam's fall have been used to attack the initial policy decision to oust him. In fact, many post-invasion circumstances were neither inevitable nor even reasonably foreseeable before military hostilities began. There is simply no basis in historical causality to assert that everything that happened following the successful removal of Saddam was dictated by the initial decision. To make that point, as the conventional wisdom does, is to contend that the entire course of events in Iraq (and the broader Middle East) flowed solely and unalterably from the 2003 decision to remove Saddam. The conventional wisdom must also posit that, absent the U.S. military action, life in Iraq would have continued essentially unchanged from what it was before 2003. Neither assumption is accurate or even reasonable.

For well or ill, the historical reality is that the U.S. government is good neither at empire-building nor at nation-building. (The government is often not good at nation-building at home either, but that's a debate for a different time.) The notion that some combination of the American political leadership, State and Defense Departments, USAID, and private contractors could re-create a fractured and despoiled country like Iraq was always fanciful. That job was always for the Iraqis themselves. What America did do successfully, up until Barack Obama's catastrophic decision to withdraw all U.S. forces in 2011, was provide a stabilizing and protective presence in Iraq so that Iraqis could make their own decisions. That they made a variety of serious mistakes after decades of crushing authoritarian rule should have surprised no one—except, of course, the mainstream American and international media, which seemed almost willfully determined to misunderstand and misreport what was actually happening in the country after Saddam's overthrow, as Tom Basile compellingly demonstrates in the pages that follow.

No one book, especially a personal memoir, can resolve these complex issues, but *Tough Sell* is a critical contribution to the literature of what actually happened in Iraq and more broadly in the region during the post-invasion years. These kinds of first-person narratives are essential for American decision-makers today and tomorrow to understand the fog of war they will encounter not only on the battlefield but also from the media, especially their own fellow countrymen. It is not a pretty sight. Any U.S. president contemplating a controversial, complex policy decision has to recognize that what the media will report will at best often be only coincidentally related to the reality that U.S. personnel on the ground—civilian and military—themselves experience.

Much of what follows is truly the nitty-gritty of post-conflict communications and media relations, but it must form an essential part of any politico-military strategy. Some will find it completely realistic, others will wonder at the ordinariness of it, but others will ask how anything so bizarre could exist outside of the pages of a novel. That is why *Tough Sell*'s narrative is so important. Until American policy-makers and analysts fully understand what it is like out at the tip of the spear, not only in military but also in political terms, there cannot be an adequate appreciation of the consequences of decisions made back in Washington.

Even experienced government hands, including many who were involved in some way in the broader events Tom Basile describes, will learn from this memoir. And let's hope the learning sticks until the next conflict.

ABBREVIATIONS

BIAP	Baghdad International Airport
CAC	City Advisory Council
CJTF7	Combined Joint Task Force 7
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CPIC	Coalition Press Information Center
DAC	District Advisory Council
FSO	Foreign Service Officer
ICDC	Iraqi Civil Defense Corps
ICE	Iraqi Currency Exchange
JOC	Joint Operations Center
KBR	Kellogg, Brown, and Root, a subsidiary of Halliburton
NAC	Neighborhood Advisory Council
NSC	National Security Council

TOUGH SELL

[Buy the Book](#)

INTRODUCTION

If policymakers do not effectively articulate policy, manage their message strategy, and counter misinformation, they soon will find themselves unable to execute policy. That places America and freedom at great risk.

All I could think was that I was going to die. It wasn't the first time, but I really wondered whether this was it as I clutched the bottom of my jump seat with both hands. As the countermeasures deployed, I watched the cargo lift off the deck and felt weightless during the plane's steep plunge toward the earth. I looked over at the lieutenant colonel seated next to me and he was white as a sheet. There was fear in his eyes. We had been fired upon. It all happened so quickly, but that incident stays with me. It remains a stark reminder that no matter what the politicians or headlines say, make no mistake, we are a nation at war.

It is a constant struggle between those who believe that government exists to provide a few with privilege and those who believe it is a mechanism to enhance the freedom of all individuals. It is a fight between those who use power to control absolutely the destinies of millions and those who seek to enhance the right of self-determination. It is a war between those who use ignorance as a tool to produce violence and those who bring the tolerance and empowerment that secure peace.

The current conflict with radicalism in the form of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, and dozens of other groups is a new world war against a lethal, unconventional enemy called Islamic extremism. No single movement or philosophy in the world today has the aim of killing more Americans, more Westerners, more Jews, more Christians, and certainly more Muslims than Islamic extremism. This

conflict wasn't born out of the imagination of a group of "neocons" huddled in the basement of some Washington-based think tank. It's real, and free nations (including the United States) are still fumbling in their efforts to counter the threat.

This global conflict, like all modern warfare, is waged with different resources. Territorial wars fought by militaries and nation-states are evolving into something more dangerous and more complex. For millennia, the causes of war and the strategies associated with it were defined within particular margins, involving a combination of resource and territorial acquisition aimed at the subjugation or oppression of conquered populations. I suggest that, for most people, this paradigm continues to drive perceptions of war. One nation invades another, plants its flag, rapes the land of resources, and controls the population until another nation or the indigenous people eject it.

What we witnessed in the rise of Al-Qaeda during the Clinton administration, and the decision-making of the United States in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (9/11) during the Bush years was a sharp departure from the usual war-making paradigm. In fact, we are still in a transitional phase regarding the way this country handles both its military and diplomatic strategy to account for this shift.

Gone are the days of the Cold War when mutually assured destruction kept the world in a state of relative stability. Today, we face different enemies around the world who are non-state actors and who call no set of boundaries home. The state aggressors are still there to be sure and, since the 1990s, many have assisted the growing and emboldened Islamic extremist movement through acts of commission and omission.

This more complex paradigm and the rise of pervasive digital media require governments to evolve also in the way they execute and articulate policy. Now more than ever it takes a broad assortment of people with wide-ranging specialties to execute effective wartime strategies. Now more than ever civilians are a critical component of winning a war on the battlefield and here at home. Our heroes in uniform are increasingly dependent on the expertise and sacrifice of civilians. Civilians are playing often unseen roles in the aftermath of conflict in everything from getting the lights back on and the phone lines up to

developing new government institutions and furthering democratic reforms. They also play key roles in articulating and defending policy in our age of digital media. Their contribution to the success of our foreign policy objectives diplomatically, politically, and militarily both at home and abroad was felt more distinctly during our engagement in Iraq than in any other mission in history.

It's been more than a decade since the United States-led coalition toppled Saddam Hussein. During those difficult years, we've seen all too clearly that warfare is now more than ever a blend of policy, politics, and the business of journalism. The challenges faced by the coalition were not merely between the terrorists and the U.S. military or insurgents and Iraqi forces. The coalition wasn't merely engaged in a fight to build a more tolerant, participatory society against incredible odds. It was also in a constant clash with forces that affected public perception about the mission. There are those who will dispute the existence and impact of these forces, but they were real and present. Serious, unbiased observers must agree that winning the war at home was vital to the success of the Iraq policy. We also must accept that our government was not sufficiently aggressive in defending its policy or combating that editorial filter. Certainly, anyone who doubts that the Western media utterly failed to present a balanced view of the mission to the detriment of the West's ability to fight terrorism is simply kidding themselves.

If policy makers do not effectively articulate policy, manage their message strategy, and counter misinformation, they soon will find themselves unable to execute policy. That places America and freedom at great risk.

It is vital for us to consider that, regardless of one's views on the Iraq War, we may very well engage in a mission like this again. Our ability to counter terrorism requires our active engagement and that requires our ability to sell and sustain policy. Within the context of this war against Islamic extremism, we will likely be forced to engage in extensive political, social, and economic reform in another country at some future time. That could involve an extended military obligation. It may not. Either way, it is important for us to examine the Iraq War both from an operational and communications standpoint to assist policymakers in the future. Our failure to win the media and commu-

nications war in Iraq has, even in just these last few years, adversely affected our response as a nation against ISIS and its affiliates.

This country cannot afford to be timid in the face of threats to its security and the values that keep us free. These pages recall my time as an advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq. More than merely being a chronicle about one person, a critique of the media's reporting, and an assessment of the Bush administration's home-front communications strategy, this writing is meant to serve as a tribute to civilians from the United States and other coalition nations who lent their talents to the cause of establishing an Iraq that was free. By way of my own experiences, it is meant to deliver the untold story of these ordinary people who, of their own accord, left the safety of everyday life to do extraordinary things for the Iraqi people. By and large, these men and women who served alongside our heroes in uniform deserve our respect, admiration, and appreciation for the risks they took, the price they paid, and the tireless efforts they made to protect America, the Iraqi people, and the world. Regardless of age or background, they made personal and professional sacrifices, placing themselves in harm's way to help the coalition achieve its goals.

For more than a decade, we've spent an enormous amount of time and energy debating whether we should have invaded Iraq in the first place. The more relevant question for discussion is, "What was the rationale for our policies that guided the aftermath of the initial military operation and led to the creation of the Coalition Provisional Authority?" From there, we need to assess fairly the decisions of those first fourteen months.

Once the decision was made to invade Iraq, we had three primary choices in terms of the direction of our policy in the aftermath. The United States and the coalition had three options:

1. Remove Saddam and simply leave the country. I believe that was a false choice;
2. Remove the leadership, then grab some general or expatriate and impose him as a new leader with absolute power—simply

replacing one tyrant for another. The moral or political argument fails there as well; or

3. Attempt to secure the country and build institutions that could support not what some have suggested was the goal—an American-style democracy—but rather a participatory, pluralistic, and tolerant government.

The Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq was developed to execute option three. This historic gathering of now often-maligned civilian and military personnel had the responsibility to establish a security and political framework that would accomplish this goal working together with the Iraqi population. The CPA and its advisors tackled this extraordinary task with great passion and commitment. They sacrificed much and their efforts went unnoticed as the security situation worsened due to the rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and sectarian violence. The challenge was compounded by a failure to effectively counter media and political opposition on the home front.

This book isn't meant to serve as a justification of the Iraq War or to delve into a lengthy defense of the complex decision-making process that led to the invasion. However, it has been suggested that invading Iraq was not justified because no direct link was proven between Saddam's regime and the 9/11 attacks. The War on Terrorism is not about 9/11. That tragedy should have served as a catalyst for change in the way we deal with the gathering threat of hate directed by the likes of Al-Qaeda and now ISIS and its affiliates. It was supposed to change the way we fight and deter this modern enemy. Suggesting, as many critics have, that the War on Terrorism is about 9/11 and, therefore, only about Al-Qaeda would be like claiming that World War II was only about Pearl Harbor. Of course, no one would agree today that our actions in the larger conflict should have been governed by the events of a single day.

When it came to the War on Terrorism (of which Iraq became a central front), the Bush White House was faced with the challenge of handling both the traditional territorial and institutional impacts of war. These were namely that external forces such as terror groups

were embedding in and influencing the governments of state actors—along with the viral nature of the radical Islamist terrorist movement and the exploitation by governments of the new global paradigm that emerged after the end of the Cold War.

President Bush believed that addressing the freedom deficit in the Middle East and in countries that serve as incubators for these groups—however long-term and complex that strategy might be—was essential. He believed it was an avenue toward ensuring a more peaceful world and furthering international cooperation to interdict terrorist networks. He also understood that it was necessary to employ a policy of active deterrence not only with respect to countering terror groups but also regarding the nation-states who support them. Iraq became part of the War on Terrorism and part of a larger effort of active deterrence.

Where the Iraq strategy fell short was how to fight and manage all of the various components simultaneously while maintaining public support at home. This mission was not the ejection of one state power from within the borders of another, or protecting territorial integrity. The mission became the fighting of a foreign insurgency and former regime elements while attempting to rebuild physical infrastructure and new government institutions. The administration also had to attempt to prevent other state actors like Iran from exploiting regional instability and supporting the efforts of the terrorist enemy. Of course, there was a media war to be fought as well.

The manpower issues that plagued the Iraq mission early on were real. For our part, nearly every civilian and military liaison I worked with—from Ambassador L. Paul Bremer on down—agreed from the outset that we needed an increase in the number of troops on the ground to accomplish the mission. Despite poor intelligence regarding the state of the Iraqi infrastructure, the mass looting, and a lack of indigenous security forces, the Iraq mission realized a range of successes often not sufficiently promoted by the Bush administration and frequently ignored by the media.

As we look back, many issues can be analyzed and debated, and, certainly, lessons can be learned. A few things are certain that must inform our thinking: The world has changed. The challenges we face

have changed. Yet giving people a chance to be free and self-govern is the surest way to a greater peace.

We are a nation at war. Unlike wars of the past, this War on Terrorism will require the service of a broader range of participants. Among them are our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and relatives—people who don't wear the uniform but who nonetheless will be driven to fight with their minds, their passions, their experience, and their talents. Their boot camp is the battlefield, their bullets their expertise, their uniform their convictions. Through the successes and failures of the Iraq mission, history should record the unbending purpose of many a coalition civilian as a triumph of spirit and sacrifice. I hope it will.