



Patrick Porter. *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 254 pp. \$41.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-880796-4.

Reviewed by Michael McInerney (Air University, Air War College)

Published on H-War (January, 2021)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

With the thoroughness of a seasoned prosecutor, Patrick Porter's *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* cross-examines the ideas behind Britain's decision to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Without absolving Prime Minister Tony Blair of responsibility for taking Great Britain to war, Porter debunks prominent antiwar arguments that deceit or sycophancy motivated Blair's actions. Instead, he concludes that Blair sincerely but wrongly believed it was the right thing to do. In making this case, Porter dismantles many well-worn arguments both for and against the war in Iraq, including claims that Britain entered the war for the right reasons but was doomed by post-invasion mismanagement. Porter concludes that no amount of planning could correct for faults flowing from the fundamentally flawed ideology that led Britain into war.

In *Blunder*, Porter argues that sincerely held, but flawed ideas about the dangers of rogue states and the ability to successfully impose regime change led to a faulty rationale for war. Though *Blunder* focuses on the United Kingdom, Porter thoroughly covers the American context as well. He argues that the decision to invade Iraq was clearly a mistake without indulging the usual clichés and conspiracy theories that typify much of the literature on this topic. Porter's achievement in *Blunder* is in using a fair and clear-eyed criti-

cism of the war to help future decision makers avoid similar mistakes in the future.

The core of Porter's argument is that "warlike idealism" led to Great Britain's war in Iraq. This apparent paradox is characterized by overblown pessimism regarding the ability to contain threats in a globalized world and naïve optimism regarding the power of democratic governance and Western military might to make the world a better place. This combustible mix of fear and confidence manifested in Washington and London as genuine concern over the dangers posed by rogue states and the belief that regime change could provide lasting security. Further, that powerful states had a moral imperative to protect themselves and spread the benefits of democracy to oppressed peoples by breaking and remaking rogue states.

Porter reminds the reader that in 2003 this thinking was not solely the property of hawkish Republican neoconservatives. Rather, he demonstrates how widely held and conventional these ideas were during the 1990s, even among liberal institutionalists. In doing so, Porter eviscerates claims that Iraq was solely Blair's war and that British lawmakers were fooled into supporting the war by fraudulent intelligence. Blair did lead his country to war, but Porter places blame on the faulty assumptions that many policymaking elites

on both sides of the Atlantic shared at the time and continue to advocate to this day.

Later in the book, Porter examines the Anglo-American “special relationship.” Though he acknowledges the significance of this arrangement in certain contexts, Porter argues that even the archetypal example of Churchill and Roosevelt demonstrates that the United States will ruthlessly pursue its own national interest when views diverge. Porter finds that many British elites believed paying the “blood price” by joining America in Iraq was the only way to preserve exceptional influence in Washington. Porter points out, however, that if British servility to American foreign policy is required to maintain influence, then Britain will never have occasion to make use of this influence. He concludes that this flawed idea neither gained Britain influence over American actions before the war nor gained it a privileged place after the invasion compared to nations that did not support the war.

Porter’s closing chapters make the case that to guard against future blunders like the Iraq War, national leaders should adopt a prudent and skeptical mind-set grounded in classical realism. Porter advocates realism as a way to avoid the excess certainty that steers leaders into self-deception. Routine questioning of assumptions and judicious application of power in the international arena help avoid overreach. Additionally, he argues that realism’s grounding in an anarchic worldview tempers belief that insecurity and risk can ever be eliminated, even through regime change and democratization. Finally, Porter argues that realism restrains leaders from engaging in moral crusades in international affairs.

Throughout the book, Porter’s well-researched argument uses classic works of grand strategy, recent academic analysis, and open-source documents like the 2016 Chilcot inquiry report to bolster his case. Ultimately, in the context of what was known in 2003, some issues such as the danger posed by weapons of mass destruction and the de-

terrability of Saddam Hussein remain judgement calls. In light of that, Porter vows to make the strongest possible case in favor of the war as a foil to his own argument. He largely succeeds in this, though some readers may find that his focus on the British question shortchanges a full exploration of the costs of maintaining a deterrent posture against Saddam indefinitely and the acceptability of even remote risks in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

Blunder is an important book and a must-read for those looking for a meticulous and fair-minded account of the most controversial strategic decision of the post-9/11 period. Readers looking for a play-by-play account of British politics before the war or military actions in Iraq should look elsewhere before coming to *Blunder*. This is not a general history for students or general readers new to the issue. However, readers already familiar with the broad outlines of the Iraq War and the controversies surrounding the decision to go to war, especially American readers less familiar with the British context, will find much in this slim volume that adds to their understanding. Porter’s feat in *Blunder* is to repudiate the decision to go to war without losing his objectivity. This strengthens his argument and breaks down the reflexive resistance that might prevent some readers with a direct stake in this controversy from listening to his message. Ultimately, the classic tragic blunder only comes to resolution if the protagonist learns from his mistake.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Michael McInerney. Review of Porter, Patrick. *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2021.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55982>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.