

## Driving Around, Waiting to Get Blown Up

**Mark L. Stoneman**

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*Analytical in considering how the Iraq War effort failed, Driving Around, Waiting to Get Blown Up is an insightful memoir.*

Soldier Mark L. Stoneman's incisive military memoir *Driving Around, Waiting to Get Blown Up* is about the Iraq War and the nation's yearslong occupation.

Covering the work of American soldiers, alongside Iraqis, to rebuild the nation and establish a democracy, including efforts to win hearts and minds, this personal chronicle preserves conflicting interests and critiques "the good idea fairy of Washington D.C." Stoneman, an officer, was part of efforts to provide security and stability to Iraq's Diyala Province and its impoverished, remote villages. In covering the war, the book takes account of both its successes and failures.

The book is analytical in considering how the war effort failed, saying that those on the ground lacked sufficient resources while private contractors raked in millions by doing the bare minimum. Its pages represent an accurate picture of what most of the one million soldiers deployed there did, following the course of Stoneman's deployment with trenchant observations, as about how enlisted men all fell within the same age group but otherwise hailed from various geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The book begins in medias res, focusing on unit guards at a polling site during Iraq's first election. After a series of IED attacks, soldiers detained a fleeing driver, finding incriminating evidence via an explosion detection test on his hands. Notes on how he was treated as a detainee follow, with graphic information about how he soiled himself in terror. His potential innocence is also ruminated on, leading into coverage of the broader issues that shaped public perceptions of the war.

Throughout, Stoneman's anecdotes are infused with intellectual depth. There are complementary sociological observations, though some go afield of the war, as with notes on how "class" in Britain is comparable to "race" in the US. Details about the oppressive Georgia heat and about a barbershop's tired linoleum ground its discursive scenes, though, as do natural conversations between soldiers: A specialist calls an officer the whitest guy he knows and is commanded to exercise until he reaches exhaustion. There are also notes about how soldiers on leave marvel at seeing streetlights and paved streets again—features they once took for granted. Still, in the end, the war is called tragic for everyone involved, and the book is wry in declaring the platitude "Thank you for your service" hollow.

An insightful military memoir, *Driving Around, Waiting to Get Blown Up* is an unvarnished account of Operation Iraqi Freedom, recounting the everyday work that the bulk of the soldiers did there.

JOSEPH S. PETE (December 31, 2024)

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