The Assassins' Gate – America in Iraq by George Packer.
Faber and Faber 2006.

The controversy surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the overthrow of the dictator Saddam Hussein, and the saga of WMDs will doubtless rage for years. For many of us it will be one of the defining events of our lives, and it is still much too early to tell its long term implications for the Middle East as a whole, Iraq in particular, and the future of American hegemony throughout the world.

The Assassins' Gate, written by the eminent New Yorker journalist George Packer, is as fine an account as one could wish to read of the entire episode. It is hugely well-informed – especially with regard to the George W Bush administration and the machinations of the invasion's principal architects, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld – and expresses the views of ordinary Iraqis as a result of the author's long, impassioned, and occasionally highly dangerous involvement with their country.

All of the disasters find their explanation here, especially the disintegration of the country after the dictator's fall – an outcome that the administration almost criminally refused to contemplate. America's wilful refusal to understand the implications of Iraq's history, and especially its ethnic and religious tensions and complexities, compounded the problem, as has their simplistic view that after 35 years of crushing dictatorship Iraqis would respond with sagacity and maturity to the blessing of 'freedom'.

The Assassins' Gate is an essential read for anyone who wants to gain a broad understanding of the Iraq episode to date, and contains valuable, and deeply pessimistic, pointers to the way events may unfold in coming months and years. It cannot be easy in the fervid atmosphere of post-Patriot Act America to write so critically of an Administration and on every level George Packer deserves to be saluted for this book.

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