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Iraq and Back: Inside the War to Win the Peace

Col. Kimberly Olson USAF (Ret.)

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In April 2003, soon after Operation Iraqi Freedom had been declared a success, President Bush sent retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Jay Garner to Iraq to rebuild the country. As Garner's executive officer, the author of this book was part of the senior leadership circle charged with three tasks. They were to reconstruct Iraq's infrastructure, provide humanitarian assistance, and lay the foundation for a democratic process to take hold. But not long after their arrival in the rubble and ruin of Iraq, the political, military, and economic wheels ground to a halt and theirs became mission improbable. In this book, Air Force Colonel Kim Olson tells how and why. Readers are privy to the candid discussions of U.S. generals frustrated by operating in a policy void. They sit at the table with Iraqi leaders who warn of an impending insurgency if the proclamations crafted by ill-informed and arrogant policy makers are implemented. And they share Olson's fear as Saddam's death squads attempt to assassinate her in an explosion of bullets.

This gripping, firsthand account of what went wrong is seen from Olson's unique point of view as a senior female military officer, pilot, wife, and mother. Many of the stories she tells are known to only the handful of people involved, including a mission to rescue two Iraqi women and details of early meetings with tribal leaders to discuss building a coalition government--an effort quashed by Garner's successor. Her haunting descriptions of Shiite families searching for loved ones in Saddam's killing fields and malnourished children in the town of Umn Qasr untouched by the International Oil-for-Food Program, will remain with readers long after they close the book. From the decisions of political leaders and military commanders to everyday encounters with the Iraqi people and informal conversations with soldiers, such a wealth of honest, insider information is rare. No other author weaves together military, political, and humanistic insights so effectively.

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