

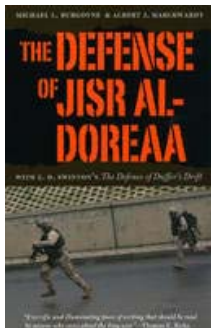


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From Nightmares to Dreams: *The Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa*

Reviewed by Nick M. Masellis



The Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa

By Michael L. Burgoyne and Albert J. Marckwardt
University of Chicago Press, 2009

While some have called the U.S. involvement in Iraq a nightmare, the authors of *The Defense of Jisr al Doreaa* used a series of dreams to discuss the adaptation of counterinsurgency in today's conflict environment. The book particularly exemplifies the lack of such thought in 2003, as well as consistent gaps in unit combat readiness that preside today. The book immediately brought back a personal account of the former, and encapsulates the latter.

Stowing all of the battle-worn rucksacks and bulky weapons on the commercial flight, there was a sense of disbelief that we were finally heading home. I turned to a couple of my friends and said, "what would you do if you took a nap on this flight, woke up, and realized that you were just arriving to Iraq – that the whole past year was just a dream?" I received laughter and mixed responses of who would jump out of the plane first. Only after reading *The Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa* do I realize that I wish that I *would* have had such dreams before serving my time in Iraq, where only persistent nightmares prevailed.

This captivating book brings to light the intricacies and imbroglios of counterinsurgency warfare for the tactical leader and soldiers on the ground. The authors, Army majors Michael Burgoyne and Albert Marckwardt, served tours in Iraq, observing the situation as it evolved from the dreams that they portray throughout their book. This novella is a contemporary reinterpretation of E.D. Swinton's account of the Boer War, a counterinsurgency campaign fought by the British in South Africa. In that account, Swinton describes the situation in a version of a dream in a tale called *The Defense of Duffer's Drift*, which has been long taught to infantrymen in learning the fundamentals of small unit tactics (Swinton's original work is included in the second half of the book).

The first half of *Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa* begins with young second lieutenant, Phil Connors, who is embarking upon his first voyage to Iraq with his unit. On the plane, 2LT Connors naps and finds himself shifting in-and-out of various dreams. In the beginning of each of these

dreams, Connors is briefed by his commander and asked what he needs to complete his mission – which is to gain security in the vicinity of a small town, al-Doreaa.

Each dream is a different scenario presenting a variety of challenges and provoking a series of unique responses. Connors comes away with various epiphanies, or lessons, of how he failed to successfully integrate COIN principles – some pertaining to the fundamentals of outpost defense and counter-sniper measures, others to non-kinetic engagement with the populous and acquiring intelligence. As he continues to experience these different situations, he applies the lessons he learned from the previous “dream” up through the sixth dream – where he finally integrates all of the lessons into a successful mission.

After reading this piece, I came away realizing that just like Phil Connors in this book, as well as Bill Murray’s character in *Groundhog Day*, many units up through 2007 were constantly reliving the events of the first three dreams, respectively. These ranged from operating out of massive forward operation bases detached from the population to not implementing proper force protection, to not understanding the benefit and importance of maintaining relations with the people.

During that first year in Iraq, there was similarly no conception of how to properly work with the Iraqi people, let alone how to view them as the center of gravity when executing daily operations. At most, they were mere by-standers in a situation that called for the constant pursuit of the enemy and lack of concern for working *with* the people. This reflects the first few dreams Connors experiences in the book – in which, though he feels he had done everything according to his training, he would be relieved of his duties due to excessive casualty counts and lack of workable progress. This left him feeling like a failure to his troops, and the mission itself.

As a young enlisted soldier, I also left Iraq feeling that I had not accomplished much. And though there have been many tactical and operational successes since (creating an atmosphere that seems to mistakenly portray the situation in Iraq as “won”), there are still many institutional problems within the military. Specifically, the army has failed adequately prepare leaders to avoid falling into the pitfalls of the first five dreams. This is no more apparent than when it comes to cultural awareness training, which the authors address to be a critical element in combat readiness.

After dreams 3 and 4 Connors learns the following principles:

Lesson 9: “Language skills are critical for gaining information on the enemy and coordinating with host-nation allies.”

Lesson 10: “To gain the trust and confidence of the local population, you must understand their culture...”

The authors are absolutely right, but how is this done? This of course is a question not to these amazing officers, but to the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in charge of Army education and training. The most recent version of Field Manual 3-24.2, *Counterinsurgency Tactics*, also provides a point-by-point means of executing such fundamentals in the field. There

is an entire section that suggests that the officer survey and take account of the economic, ethnic, religious, social and political environment, but does not provide any methods. How would an officer go about this task? The National Training Center and successful decentralized approaches like those taken by COL H.R. McMaster, who commanded the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar in 2005, are excellent strides. However, these measures are not enough, nor are they representative of the entire force's exposure to cultural awareness training.

Therefore, I would first and foremost recommend that TRADOC issue *the Defense of Jisr al-Doreaa* to every soldier going through Basic Training, ROTC, OCS and the military academies as required reading. There should also be translated versions offered to our coalition and NATO partners. I would also add my own strategic recommendation in addition to the 16 tactical points presented by the authors:

TRADOC should immediately compile and implement a cultural awareness curriculum that has both metrics for success and incentives attached. There should be an integrated, centralized and joint system that all services can access, in order to not only learn the general tenants of a particular culture, religion or political system, but build upon those principles in a succinct manner.

In the end, the authors, to use their own words, have written something that enables a soldier to take away lessons without having to go numb reading the "car-stereo-type" instructions of the various field manuals. This is a quick but effective read that couples the lessons of today with very similar issues that the British had to contend with nearly a century ago.

It is also worth noting that the authors elected not to earn any proceeds from this book - all funds go to the Fisher House to help military families in their times of need. This is not only a testament to the good-will and character of these men, but also symbolic of their care for soldiers and dedication to preparing to fight the wars that exist in today's spectrum of conflict. This book is yet another fine addition to the lessons of counterinsurgency at a warfighter's disposal, and should be read by all ranks and branches throughout the services.

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