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Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib

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Seymour Hersh continues with his latest work his journey as a man with an agenda. Released in September 2004, it is a compilation of articles published in *The New Yorker,* with additional information intended to present a congruent, as well as compelling, story about the Bush administration’s efforts to wage a worldwide war on terrorism. That Hersh is a fan neither of the president and his closest aides nor of the Iraq war is made abundantly clear from the opening pages. As a consequence, *Chain of Command* has drawn heavy criticism from those who are either administration loyalists or ideologically supportive of the Global War on Terror despite its unconventional and violent nature. Conversely, the president’s political opponents and others who oppose war on any number of grounds have heralded Hersh’s book as the latest efforts of a quixotic protagonist sworn to bring truth into the light. The former have assailed the book for its perceived inaccuracies and lack of credible sources, while the latter have lauded it for exposing programs and decisions that appear inimical to deep-seated American beliefs about decency and honesty.

This book is clearly a polemic, intended to draw attention to Hersh’s concerns over what he sees as an abuse of power at the highest levels of a government seemingly obsessed with a vision for Iraq and its Muslim neighbors that may be out of step with traditional American ideals. Whether you agree or disagree with Hersh’s assessments and conclusions, *Chain of Command* is a work every serious student of U.S. national security should read, because he raises important fundamental and somewhat disquieting questions: Who is ultimately accountable for the prisoner abuses that occurred at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay? What are the moral and ethical obligations of those in uniform to adhere to international norms of behavior when national guidance appears at odds with, if not in complete contradiction to, accepted global standards?

Hersh also challenges his readers to contemplate the effects of the secretary of defense’s domination over the military conduct of the war on terror and its ramifications on the future of civil-military relations. Secretary Rumsfeld bent the military to his will in almost every phase of the war on Iraq, with what Hersh describes as disastrous results both in Iraq (where an insurgency rages on) and in the greater war on terror (in which the architect of 9/11 remains free). The reader is left to contemplate what the obligations of senior military leaders were and why they were not more effective in making their voices heard on strictly military matters. Further, what salient ethical issues arise from *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* considerations of the Iraq war?

Hersh reserves much of his vitriol for the Bush administration’s handling of the intelligence used to justify war on Iraq. In a chapter titled “Who Lied to Whom?” he recounts much of what has come to light about the way intelligence was “manipulated” to build a case. For Hersh, the inability of U.S. intelligence organizations to collect accurate intelligence about Iraq and al-Qa’ida is nearly as egregious as the manner in which
that intelligence was analyzed and interpreted. He is clearly disturbed by the apparent usurpation of national intelligence activities by the Department of Defense. The reader is left with the nagging suspicion that further such consolidation may not be in the best interests of the country’s leadership, since opposing opinions already appear to have no voice.

Hersh concludes Chain of Command by posing a troubling set of questions. “How did eight or nine neo-conservatives who believed that a war in Iraq was the answer to international terrorism get their way? How did they redirect the government and rearrange long-standing American priorities and policies with so much ease?” Discerning readers must look past the author’s bias and answer for themselves. While it is arguable whether this book will earn the stature of My Lai 4, Hersh succeeds in confronting us with important questions that force us to look harder at ourselves and our country.

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Beyond that, nothing about this book is clear or straightforward, including the title. The title leads one to think that the book will examine how revolutionary technologies have transformed warfare, but the subtitle, “Disguising Innovation,” should serve as a warning—nothing is as it first seems. This work is a sociological study of how the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps have achieved what the author terms “disruptive innovations” (new ways of combining technologies that create new forms of warfighting) and sustaining innovations (those that improve existing forms). Technology plays a distant second fiddle to doctrine. Pierce’s major thesis is that the catalysts for disruptive innovation are senior military officers. How these officers manage the disruptive innovation process is key. He shows that they establish small groups to define the tasks that must be carried out to conduct a new form of warfare, ensure that like-minded officers are promoted, and most intriguingly, disguise the disruptive innovation as merely improvements to existing modes, in order to avert ruinous opposition from entrenched interests. In support of his thesis Pierce offers a number of case studies, including amphibious warfare, Japanese and American carrier warfare in World War II, and Marine maneuver warfare. A nice twist is the inclusion of more recent case studies like surface-land-attack warfare and the Tactical Collaboration Network.

After a promising first chapter in which the author generally defines his terms and surveys the existing literature on disruptive innovation, however, comes a nearly disastrous attempt to establish a theoretical framework to support the