



# Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier's Perspective

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## **Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier's Perspective** Paul Rieckhoff

As a First Lieutenant and Infantry Platoon Leader for the U.S. Army National Guard, Paul Rieckhoff was charged with leading thirty-eight men in Iraq. He spent almost a year in one of the bloodiest and most volatile areas of Baghdad. And when he finally came home, he vowed to tell Americans the harrowing truth. He does just that, uncensored and unrehearsed, "and with wit and passion" (Arianna Huffington), in *Chasing Ghosts*-the first criticism of the Iraq war written by a soldier who fought in it.

## **Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier's Perspective Details**

Date : Published May 1st 2007 by Dutton Caliber (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780451221216

Author : Paul Rieckhoff

Format : Paperback 326 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, War, Military Fiction, Military, Military History, Politics, History

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## **From Reader Review Chasing Ghosts: Failures and Facades in Iraq: A Soldier's Perspective for online ebook**

### **Krischelle says**

It is a very honest account of the latest war in Iraq, and a telling personal history of the man who started what is today the IAVA (Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America). Many of his views (as with much of the criticism of the war expressed by the IAVA) are unpopular with many current service members, but Rieckhoff is right in saying that the truth must be heard. Whether or not any given service member agrees with the views expressed in this book (or is allowed to agree publicly) does not change the fact that this book is a tribute to their service. After reading this, I truly believe that Rieckhoff is as loyal to his fellow soldiers as ever. He makes a point beyond simply saying that there are two sides to every coin: he reminds us that people are complex and the issues that arise between cultures need to be treated as such.

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### **Glen says**

This book was very well written. Readers looking for a scathing critique of our current war in Iraq might be disappointed. Although there are many things in the book that will anger readers (soldiers using their own money to buy Walmart walkie talkies because they aren't provided with the necessary equipment), the author does a good job of showing that we are truly in a difficult situation. Sometimes the possible options are all bad.

The author was an infantry man, and an Amherst graduate. This is an unusual combination and it makes his point of view well articulated. He speaks of the frustration, pride, uncertainty, and fear that permeate the roller coaster of a tour of duty. It reminded me of Jarhead by Anthony Swofford, only the situation is so different when the tour of duty is extended indefinitely in a hostile zone.

It's hard to imagine from the comfort of my bed what soldiers feel. The author talks about being assigned to guarding the only hospital in Baghdad with an ER. Their position would be attacked and they would shoot hostile enemies who would then be brought into their facility for life saving surgery. Surgery that would enable them to attack again. He talks of an Iraqi gentleman who is denied medical treatment because his injuries were not caused by American soldiers. I'd like to believe that in that situation I would do what the author did. I'd like to believe that my platoon would pony up the money out of our own pockets to pay for the emergency life saving medical care, but I don't know. I do know that I'm furious that soldiers have to do that. That they have to pay for medical treatment for wounded Iraqis out of their own pocket while their wives are filing for divorce or taking away custody of children because they didn't appear in court. I can't imagine not being allowed access to a phone to tell a judge back in the states that you're serving in Baghdad not drinking at the bar and that's why you weren't in court.

As a percentage of population, there are so few Americans that actually serve in our military that it's easy to forget that we're even at war. This book is a great war report that begs us not to forget.

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### **Autumn says**

My Uncle Jimmy gave 2 copies of this book to my dad in hopes that he would read it and perhaps recognize

some of the same ignorance and inefficiencies that marked the Vietnam War. I stole one copy.

*Chasing Ghosts* is really well-written in the sense that Rieckhoff spells it all out for the reader: the military terms, the dread, the lack of ownership and leadership and the waiting, the waiting, the waiting. He doesn't feign superiority and attempt to suggest that he knows the right way to fight the Iraq War--just that it isn't working and there are a few easy reasons why not.

It scares me to learn that with all our military might and dollars that we are still sending our boys to war unprepared, unsupported, and under-funded. From the stories that my dad used to tell me about his two tours in the Vietnam War, it sounds as if nothing has changed.

Rieckhoff is a thinking man's soldier and his writing is easy going and deliberate. A college educated man, he is protective of his men and thoughtful about how war affects them. He quickly begins to understand the hypocrisy of his stay in Iraq as President Bush claims **MISSION ACCOMPLISHED** just as the fighting intensifies and their duties are extended time and time again. It's disheartening to read that the soldiers slowly learn that the weapons of mass destruction are mythical and are more a distraction from the true battle at hand.

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## Sandy says

I'd give this book a "10" rating if it was available. I could not put the book down. Rieckhoff did a fabulous job of writing about the war in Iraq in a way that those of us who will never experience it, could understand what they went through. I can only imagine how tough it would be to be a soldier ready to take out the enemy and yet have to turn on a dime mentally when trying to work with the Iraqi people in a humane way. We are not at war with the Iraqi people - only with Iraqi insurgents, and when they look the same, talk the same and dress the same, 'confusing and frustrating' to the soldiers doesn't even seem close to describing what they must feel.

Paul also provides excellent analogies regarding the Sunni and Shia and how to tell the difference, which give great insight on why they're fighting each other and will probably continue to do so for years.

The administration has fed the American people and the people of the world a bill of goods - not the truth.

Anyone wanting to know about the war from a soldier's point of view should read 'Chasing Ghosts'. To quote Paul, "I was not speaking out *against* the war,... I was speaking out *about* the war."

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## Stop says

Read the STOP SMILING interview with author Paul Rieckhoff

Separating the Warrior from the War  
By James Hughes

(This interview originally appeared in the first annual STOP SMILING 20 Interviews Issue)

After serving 10 months as an infantry officer in Iraq — idling for a month in the sandstorms of Kuwait before being redeployed to the streets of Baghdad on the same day George W. Bush declared an end to major combat operations from the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln — Paul Rieckhoff returned to his country a changed man. What immediately struck him, and the thousands of returning soldiers he now represents through the New York-based nonprofit organization Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, was how little the country had changed. During a week of outprocessing at Fort Stewart in Georgia, Rieckhoff, a former Wall Street stock analyst who devours news like he devours tickertape, vegetated in a motel room with his girlfriend during his off-hours and “channel-surfed with total selfishness.” As he recalls in his book, *Chasing Ghosts: A Soldier’s Fight For America From Baghdad to Washington* (NAL), released in May 2006: “There was barely a mention of the war at all. Groundbreaking issues like Janet Jackson’s exposed breast at the Super Bowl dominated the news. The names of soldiers dying each day in Iraq weren’t even mentioned. It didn’t feel like the country even knew we were at war. I felt guilty being home.”

Two years later, sitting at his desk in the Manhattan offices of IAVA, little seems to have changed. Hunched over his laptop, which remained open and purring throughout our interview, Rieckhoff called out the top news items on CNN’s website like a kind of derelict roll call: “Top story: JonBenet’s death an accident. Number two story: Mel Gibson pleads no contest. Three stories on JonBenet in the top 10. J-Lo is number 11.”

Undeterred, Rieckhoff and IAVA continue to feed the malnourished news cycle by consulting Iraq veterans who want to express their views, offer technical expertise or announce aspirations for elected office on the airwaves. Rieckhoff refers to this process as “media boot camp.” Speaking with the confidence and precise diction of someone who’s comprehended and been shaped by his role in world events (as a New York Army National Guardsman, he also participated in the Ground Zero relief effort), Rieckhoff proved once again this past August why he’s one of the country’s most qualified voices for change.

Read the rest of the interview...

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## Tom says

An Army second lieutenant, fresh out of Amherst College, chronicles his deployment to Baghdad in 2003 as US forces invade Iraq and topple the Sunni Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. Paul Rieckhoff at first is eager to put his patriotism into combat action, but as the U.S. occupation bogs down in logistical mistakes and wavering commitment from Washington, his enthusiasm turns to cynicism. Rieckhoff writes vividly and honestly about the toll that the war takes on ordinary American soldiers who know nothing about Iraq. His account is useful for learning about the frustration the built up on the front lines as supplies ran short, the insurgency strengthened, and the unit's tour of duty kept getting extended. But with his limited contacts as a platoon leader, he could offer no insight into the muddled decision-making that took place among the brass at the commander's headquarters or at the Pentagon. He does provide a revealing account of how he tried to make a political difference after he returned to the States. The young officer offered his military expertise to both the Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns in 2004 but found no takers. No surprise that the Bush camp didn't want to hear his suggestions, but it was discouraging to learn that Democrat John Kerry also blew him off after just one earnest conversation between the two men. Rieckhoff refused to give up, and went on to organize the Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans Association, which still lobbies Washington for military strategy based on reality, not politics. Their goal remains elusive.

## Zach says

One of the best war novels EVER  
Chasing Ghosts by Paul Rieckhoff  
Review by, Zach Ramondetta

This book is not your ordinary war novel in my opinion. Most of the other war novels that I have read start with the soldier entering the armed force, going into battle and ends when he or she gets back to the US. This book is much different in that this story doesn't end when Paul (the man the book is based on and written by) gets back after his time of service but also continues into his time when he got back into The US. This is really interesting because it is really hard for him to adjust back to normal life in the US. Because of the life he had been living in the army in Iraq he is used to driving very fast, not stop and to always focus on the side of the road not on what is in front of him. Also, I like how he worked hard to voice his opinion during the campaign of Bush vs. Kerry in 2004 in how he wanted Kerry to have an advantage over Bush because Kerry had been in Vietnam. This book also has the classic war novel fighting scenes that make a war novel a war novel but I don't want to put in any specifics for the fact that it could make the book a lot less fun to read because everyone hates to have action parts given away. These are some of the many reasons why I would definitely give this book five stars.

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## Ron says

You can fault this book for its bias, but the bias seems well earned. The guy walked the walk, and anybody who didn't is gonna be mostly talk, so who are you going to believe? Neither pro-war nor anti-war, Reickhoff's chief concern is men in combat, for whom there may be "support our troops" magnets on the back of SUVs back home, but they have continually waited for that support to show up in needed numbers, protective equipment, supportive services, and supplies.

Serving as an officer in Baghdad during the first 10 months of the occupation, Reickhoff describes the erosion of civilian support for his mission, as hostilities worsen, and the political rhetoric from Washington assumes a bring-it-on attitude that dares the "bad guys" to engage his men as they patrol the streets. Meanwhile, as tours of duty are extended, marriages fall apart at home, businesses fail, and conditions for PTSD intensify. From beginning to end, his first concern is his men - none of whom is lost - and you witness the bonding that takes place between men in combat. Memorable, among many such moments in the book, is the men's efforts to keep a school open in the neighborhood, providing students and teachers with not only protection but school supplies shipped by friends from back home.

To question Reickhoff's credibility is to ignore an undeniable fact. No matter how the military adventures in the Middle East eventually play out, it's clear from the evidence that we owe more to our soldiers and their families than they've been getting. Reickhoff's book does much to clarify that, and it deserves to be read.

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## Shane says

Well - this book was recommended to me by a 'Goodreads Friend'. I can now see that it is not always so easy to write a formal review of a book so I am going to tweek the email that I sent to her.

"I am grateful to you for the 'education'. I loved the book !! There is just something about non-fiction !! more later. The book spoke to me in a bunch of ways. A book for my permanent library for certain.

To begin with, I commend Paul Rieckhoff for the bravery it took follow his heart and write this book. I also say 'bravo' to the editor/publisher/agent for letting it fly -- .... Paul writes the truth but in his epilogue reminds us "I must disclose that I held back holds back on some of what I wanted to write.... I had no idea that writing was such an exercise in caution." How true !!

We've all heard about it - the camaraderie and trust among those individuals who cooperate together in the Military. Paul's depiction of his experiences, the respect he has for those he is responsible for and the mutual respect and concern that his troops have for one another - so realistic and believable !!

But the crux of the subject matter....

I had heard about the lack of equipment for our soldiers etc. etc. The way Paul, the author, tells of his arrival overseas (which seems almost 'unexpected' since they do not have what they need when they land; nor is there an agenda set in place for them to follow), it is clear that 'the powers that be' are remote from the war, do 'not' really prioritize 'Our Troops' (so that they have what they need in the form of info/intelligence; equipment; water!!; radio communication) and do not seem to give a hoot ! Damn. Here these people go in with their heart on their sleeves to serve our country - contribute to the betterment of humanity and get paid squat to put their lives on the line. They are basically ignored.

A few specific points that really surprised me or irritated me follow: It appears that the fact of the matter is that there are different branches of the service who are suppose to work in unison but who are 'unable' to communicate on radios/(??). Because they are on different 'channels', so much time is wasted as they follow protocol to go up the chain of command to wait for the channel to communicate with that other faction of our service etc. etc.

They (the troops) depend on equipment that they themselves purchase or have sent from home rather than government issue items: the 3 pound issued gps vs. the one Paul bought at walmart or wherever; the nightvisions google stuff/batteries; the keflar vests....

Sufficient drinking water is not provided in 100+ degree heat for Our Troops!!

The following was relayed in Paul's story. It was something that he found illogical or detrimental. The Iraqi Army and Civil Service is disbanded leaving 400,000 + people 'disgruntled and unemployed' - yeah that helps ! Then all/most of the Intelligence Officers are relocated back to florida - yeah that helps !

The book was written in 2006. It's worth reading !!

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## **Chris Fenaroli says**

Chasing Ghosts by Paul Rieckhoff is not your ordinary novel in the military genre. Paul Rieckhoff served in Baghdad with the U.S. National Guard. When Paul Rieckhoff arrives in Kuwait, he is told that his term there will not be more than 3 months, but he ended up staying a lot longer. During his long 14 month tour of duty, a result of constant delays and lack of soldiers to take their place, he realizes that the U.S. cannot be effective with its current military doctrine. In order to make Iraq a more stable and sovereign country, the U.S. needed more soldiers, supplies, and time in Iraq. In Baghdad Rieckhoff and his men are given one bottle of water while out on patrol for a day, in the 110 degree heat. They are forced to ask their family or friends back home to buy them necessities such as clothes. Instead of patrolling in the heavily protected Humvees, they drove around in civilian SUVs found in a old stash of Saddam, that would be torn to shreds if hit by an IED. After his struggle in Iraq, Paul Rieckhoff returns home expecting to be relaxing and the hardship to end. But, the war followed him back home. He found himself constantly on edge, when at home, while at work, and

even while eating out. He scanned crowds looking for hidden weapons while walking in New York. He could never relax, and began to do poorly financially. He seeks help, and finds that there is no one to help him. There were no agencies helping Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans. So Paul Rieckhoff set out to fix this. He made speeches anywhere his voice would be heard. He grew to be known, and was hired by the John Kerry Campaign to speak for them against the Iraq war, because the war was believed to be one of the Republicans main mistakes. He got to meet John Kerry, and they talked about the issue at length.

Afterwards, Paul was featured on countless news programs, and he created the foundation Operation Truth and later IAVA. Operation Truth helps OIF Veterans after their struggle, and helps their ideas be heard, because they are the ones who were in Iraq, and they often know what's wrong.

There are three main issues presented in the book, and they are all powerful and thought provoking. The first is the lack of men, supplies, and time in Iraq. Paul's company (about 140 men) was one of the three assigned to handle all of Baghdad. Only 420 soldiers assigned to all seven million Iraqis living in Baghdad. They had very little supplies. Patrols were expected to go out for an entire day with only one bottle of water per person. The soldiers were miserable due to the pressure, fatigue, and the constant danger present due to their lack of numbers. Also, the U.S. expected to make Iraq a stable and sovereign nation after less than half a decade. Paul Rieckhoff said in his book, "After more than 200 years America still hasn't overcome its own divided history. Yet in Iraq we expect Shunni and Shia to get along amiably two years after we knock out Saddam, because America says the should"? The second issue is the lack of rationale for the Iraq war, and the doctrine at the time. The opening sentence of the book is, "George Bush Had Better Be Fucking Right". There was little reason for entering Iraq. The WMDs were never found, and U.S. presence made them Iraqis despise Americans even more. Every time an Iraqi was killed by the U.S., his family would seek revenge against the U.S. They would find any weapons they could, and then go out to get revenge on the people that killed their loved one. Candy was much more effective. When Paul was on patrol, he would give all the kids he saw candy. This made sure the future generation of Iraqis would like the U.S. When he saw an Iraqi in need of something he would try all he could to help them, if they trusted the U.S. they were more likely to cooperate. But no amount of candy could help the Iraqi like the U.S. if they lost someone to a U.S. soldier. Helping the Iraqis was far more effective. Lastly, OIF veterans should be given financial aid, and a voice. Veterans that recently returned are extremely valuable. They can provide insight from the perspective of a soldier. They know what needs to be done in Iraq, so Paul Rieckhoff created Operation Truth to help with this issue. Operation Truth was a way for veterans of OIF's ideas to be heard and provided assistance to veterans, but is now a part of IAVA (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America).

Though Chasing Ghosts is not very fast paced or action-packed, it is extremely hard to put down, and provides insight to the issues of the Iraq war through a veterans perspective. The title of the book is based on his way of describing the Iraq war. Their company would always get scared and excited about a threat that never materialized. "I felt like the L.T. who cried wolf. We kept getting cranked up again and again for an enemy that struck us swiftly and melted into the dark. It always felt like we were chasing ghosts". Paul Rieckhoff is not afraid to say what he thinks, and he will say it clearly and bluntly. For example, the opening sentence is, "George Bush had better be fucking right". Also, despite being very patriotic, he still analyzes the situation fairly. In other war novels the narrator is usually objective, but Paul tells the story without letting his emotions affect his clear eyed view, "After more than 200 years America still hasn't overcome its own divided history. Yet in Iraq we expect Shunni and Shia to get along amiably two years after we knock out Saddam, because America says the should". This shows how Paul isn't afraid to criticize his own country and tells his story without letting his emotions get in the way.

Compared to other war novels, Chasing Ghosts is a refreshing change of pace. It may not involve as much action as others, but it provides a refreshing new point of view not commonly found in the military genre. Paul Rieckhoff's unobjective narration allows him to bring up points against America that are thought provoking and are usually not found in a typical war novel. Despite there being few confrontations and battles, the book never lets you stop reading. Its events are more that of a normal soldiers, not a tense twenty-four hour firefight such as in Black Hawk Down. It gets down to the problems of the normal soldier, and their everyday struggles in Iraq, and back home. "Three wives had filed for divorce and a fiancée sent a ring back to a kid in Baghdad. Thirty-Nine men missed their homes. And they would not see their homes for another eight months". Overall, Chasing Ghosts is a powerful novel that will leave you thinking about Paul

Rieckhoff's experience for weeks afterwards.

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### **Ken says**

There is a lot to be said for the voice of the soldier in understanding the true state of war. Paul Rieckhoff has given us an insiders view that goes beyond the good news/bad news journalism and asks some hard questions about American politics. His stories are sad, funny, and inspiring. With all the "let's support the troops" talk its clear from "Chasing Ghosts" that we are doing a poor job of even getting that piece right. There are too many cases of soldiers left to fend for themselves to get simple things like batteries. Rieckhoff writes in smart direct prose. And after all is said and done, he lobbies the two leading 2004 Presidential candidates for support for Iraq soldiers. Then writes an incredible book. Then heads up a movement/organization to help Iraq/Afgan war veterans. He is a true American patriot. I've seen him speak on various shows and he immediately gets your attention as a well-spoken but no bull-%^ kind of guy. Great read. Highly recommend it.

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### **Lewis says**

I enjoyed Paul's account of his time in Iraq.. I read this after admiring Paul's work advocating for veterans after founding the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). Not only does this book give a detailed account of the challenges military leaders face in getting things done in combat, it also goes on to address the political challenges of trying to change policy. I read this book in one sitting... if you want a real life account of the early years of the Operation Iraqi Freedom, add this to your list.

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### **James says**

Whatever your political opinion on the Iraq war, this is a book you must read for a true understanding of what the boots on the ground are actually going through. At the end of the day, the political arguments, and the sacrifices that they are making should be kept apart.

I picked this book up at a thrift shop, and I was glad I did. Mr. Rieckhoff provides an honest, sometimes funny, yet often times sad account of his experience as a soldier during the early days of the Iraq invasion. Seeing this come full circle to his public radio address is a very fulfilling journey, one that I am glad I took the chance on.

Probably the most meaningful, thought provoking chapter of this book for me was during the time he recounted his time spent in LA after the war, mostly pertaining to the attitude of the public, which does reach out and make you think.

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### **Tom Taylor says**

Chasing Ghosts is a gripping first hand account of the horror of Iraq from a Lieutenant who has served, honorably with sacrifice and true heroism. After reading his grueling account of Bagdad and the complete failure of our President and his so called leaders to understand the complexities of this war, I know this war is wrong. Rieckoff does an excellent job in helping the reader understand the complexities of a nation that is battered from years of torture, and embraces the reality that it will take generations of peace before these people can emerge from the abuse. Our presence does nothing but contain the pain and heighten the fear. Not only does Reickoff so successfully capture the tragic feeling of war from all sided, he presents a bipartisan account of the failures of our government in its mission there. He paints a weary account of John Kerry's reluctance to listen to Veterans, the President's incredible stupidity, and the medias insensitivity to the soldiers who risk their lives every day.

I saw Paul Rieckoff on Tavis Smiley's PBS show and was impressed with him there, so I knew I had to purchase this book. It was well worth the price of admission.

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