



## Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine

**Steven J. Alvarez**

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*This is a damning look at the deficiencies of the Iraq War by a veteran with a firsthand account.*

The preface to retired Army Reserve Major Steven Alvarez's new book, *Selling War: A Critical Look at the Military's PR Machine* offers a scathing indictment of America's communications strategy in post-invasion Iraq. Conscientious Americans on both sides of the political aisle will gasp at some of the dysfunction, pettiness, and downright dereliction of duty that Alvarez exposes as he systematically and forcefully supports his initial claims.

Alvarez focuses on his time as a public-affairs officer in the Green Zone of Baghdad circa 2004. He pulls back the curtain on a pompous coalition headquarters composed of opportunistic contractors, corrupt Iraqi bureaucrats, Bush administration lackeys, and politically motivated military officers more interested in "cannonballing" in Saddam Hussein's royal pool and drumming up support for the war back home than in winning Iraqi hearts and minds.

Alvarez argues that America's communications strategy should have focused on fledgling Iraqi security forces and engaged with Arab more than Western media in order to gain credibility among the Iraqi people and to counter insurgent propaganda. He shows how even General David Petraeus's best efforts to do this were stymied by the political jockeying of higher-ups. Thus an insulated, self-protective military became its own worst enemy: "Security and collateral damage both proved to be issues that were never appropriately addressed publicly in Iraq and ultimately led to the Iraqi public's acceptance of the insurgency, passively and actively."

Alvarez also succeeds as a memoirist. His reminiscences about the men and women he served with, particularly the Arab journalists he befriended, are haunting and heartrending. "And all of those who fell during my watch seem to follow me. Ghosts I've never met, they follow me and linger over my shoulder," he writes in his epilogue. "More than anything I remember how we stuck together and how together we were stuck."

Alvarez's thorough critique of military public relations isn't a partisan reading of the Iraq War. He shines a damning light on deficiencies wherever he finds them. *Selling War* effects a sobering lesson on the human cost of miscommunication and misinformation. It should be required reading for military personnel and civilian policymakers.

SCOTT NEUFFER (Spring 2016)

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