

**WARRIOR KING: THE TRIUMPH AND BETRAYAL OF AN
AMERICAN COMMANDER IN IRAQ¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JAMES T. HILL *

I. Introduction

On 3 January 2004, a platoon of U.S. Soldiers detained two Iraqi males for violating curfew in Northern Samarra, Iraq.² The Soldiers handcuffed the two Iraqis, took them to a bridge overlooking the Tigris River, and forced them to jump.³ Later, allegations arose that one of the Iraqis may have drowned.⁴ When the brigade commander, Colonel (COL) Fred Rudesheim, became aware of the incident, he discussed it with the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Nathan Sassaman.⁵ During the conversation, COL Rudesheim told LTC Sassaman, “If water was involved, soldiers are going to be court-martialed.”⁶ Afterward, LTC Sassaman determined “the subject of water was best omitted from any future conversations”⁷ and told the Soldiers’ company commander and platoon leader, “Don’t say anything about the water.”⁸ In the months following the incident, two Soldiers would be court-martialed⁹ for their involvement and LTC Sassaman would receive nonjudicial punishment, irreparably damaging his career.¹⁰

Nathan Sassaman, now retired, begins his tell-all autobiography, *Warrior King*, on 13 March 2004 in Tikrit, Iraq.¹¹ He is awaiting the arrival of Major General (MG) Raymond Odierno,¹² who will preside over Sassaman’s nonjudicial punishment hearing to address an allegation

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Army. Presently assigned as Brigade Judge Advocate, 2d Brigade, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, Texas.

¹ LIEUTENANT COLONEL (RET.) NATHAN SASSAMAN, *WARRIOR KING: THE TRIUMPH AND BETRAYAL OF AN AMERICAN COMMANDER IN IRAQ* (2008).

² *Id.* at 240.

³ *Id.* at 240–41.

⁴ *Id.* at 240.

⁵ *Id.* at 253.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.* at 245.

⁹ *Id.* at 287–90.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 265, 269.

¹¹ *Id.* at 1, 5.

¹² *Id.* at 5–6.

that he impeded an investigation.¹³ As Sassaman waits, he evaluates his life, beginning with his strict religious upbringing¹⁴ through his time as a West Point football star.¹⁵ Through this narrative, an underlying theme emerges: Sassaman hates to lose.¹⁶ This background lays the context for the book's thesis: Sassaman implemented a winning counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq¹⁷ and his chain of command betrayed him for his efforts.¹⁸ To support his thesis, Sassaman seeks to convince the reader that ordering his subordinates to withhold information was born of his desire to win the war,¹⁹ was legal, and was justified.²⁰

Ironically though, Sassaman's often impassioned efforts to defend his actions are what ultimately undermine his credibility, his thesis, and reveal the most plausible reason for his downfall—leadership failure. While unconvincing, Sassaman's attempts to sway the reader make for an entertaining read, provide valuable lessons on leadership, and offer fascinating insight into the merits of differing counterinsurgency strategies.

II. Post-Invasion Iraq, 2003

Sassaman's reason for ordering his subordinates to withhold information stems from the chaos existing in post-invasion Iraq. By July 2003, U.S. forces were fighting a fledging insurgency²¹ fueled by unemployed and disgruntled Iraqi males.²² In the absence of concrete guidance on how to fight the insurgency, Sassaman implemented his own personal "formula for success."²³ A component of this approach was that "[n]o open defiance, under any conditions, of American authority was allowed."²⁴ Implementing this directive involved taking the fight to

¹³ *Id.* at 267.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 14.

¹⁵ *See id.* at 24–38.

¹⁶ *See generally id.* at 13–38 (discussing Sassaman's religious upbringing, development of his competitive spirit, and the moral values instilled upon West Point cadets).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 109.

¹⁸ *See id.* at 9, 267.

¹⁹ *See id.* at 7, 269.

²⁰ *See id.* at 9, 269.

²¹ *Id.* at 72.

²² *Id.* at 85.

²³ *Id.* at 94.

²⁴ *Id.*

insurgents, engaging the population aggressively,²⁵ and holding the population accountable for insurgent attacks.²⁶ The philosophy underlying this formula was that there would be no lasting success in Iraq until the Iraqis feared the U.S. troops more than they did the insurgents.²⁷ According to Sassaman, only when this fear was firmly established could U.S. forces initiate necessary socioeconomic reforms.²⁸

Despite its initial successes,²⁹ Sassaman's aggressive strategy put him on a direct collision course with his brigade commander, COL Rudesheim. Colonel Rudesheim preferred a less aggressive strategy Sassaman describes as akin to the "softer, gentler approach" preferred by General (GEN) David Petraeus.³⁰ Sassaman pejoratively characterizes COL Rudesheim's strategy as "appeasement"³¹ overly concerned with "collateral damage"³² that Sassaman says is the "cost of war."³³ Initially, COL Rudesheim merely encourages Sassaman to tone down his aggressiveness.³⁴ Later, their differences turn to confrontation and Sassaman develops a pattern of withholding information from COL Rudesheim.³⁵ The stage is then set for Sassaman to order his subordinates to withhold information regarding the incident of the two Iraqi men at the bridge.

Interwoven into the prelude and aftermath of Sassaman's decision to issue the order is his bird's-eye-view of daily life in Iraq. From moments of tranquility³⁶ to engaging in direct combat with insurgents,³⁷ Sassaman

²⁵ See *id.* at 94–95, 98.

²⁶ See *id.* at 183.

²⁷ See *id.* at 99.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ See *id.* at 6, 166, 170 (citing statistics that Sassaman's battalion killed or captured over 1100 insurgents, 60% of his brigade's total, and the number and frequency of attacks dropped rapidly as the enemy began dissipating and the populace increased its trust in U.S. forces). See also Dexter Filkins, *The Fall of the Warrior King*, N.Y. TIMES (Magazine), Oct. 23, 2005 (discussing Sassaman's triumph in holding provincial elections in Balad earlier than the rest of Iraq, and his initial warm relations with the local nationals), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/23/magazine/23sassaman.html>.

³⁰ SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 162.

³¹ *Id.* at 162, 201.

³² *Id.* at 159, 234.

³³ *Id.* at 159.

³⁴ See *id.* at 93.

³⁵ See *id.* at 161, 183.

³⁶ *Id.* at 124.

³⁷ *Id.* at 136–41. See also *id.* at 282 (highlighting that the command awarded Sassaman the Bronze Star for valor after redeploying from Iraq).

keeps the reader on the edge, depicting the vivid reality of war: death, despair, and all the triumphs and setbacks in between.

III. Sassaman's Credibility

Sassaman's story is compelling but too often he drifts into anecdotal diatribe on subjects beyond his personal knowledge which distract the reader and diminish his credibility. For example, Sassaman criticizes the United States for acting unilaterally in invading Iraq.³⁸ He supports this conclusion based solely on his personal observation that he did not see "a German, an Englishman, or an Aussie" in Kuwait in the prelude to the war. He also addresses those who think the war was really just about "O-I-L," stating, "I spent a lot of time in Iraq, and oil never seemed that abundant or accessible."³⁹ The validity of his criticisms and conclusions aside, who cares what Sassaman thinks about such issues? The reader wants to hear about his personal experiences. When Sassaman drifts off that path and jumps to conclusions about subjects beyond his firsthand knowledge it raises questions about how he reaches conclusions on subjects pertinent to his thesis.

Sassaman's tendency to jump to conclusions also bleeds over to his analysis of COL Rudesheim's counterinsurgency strategy and leadership abilities. On numerous occasions he concludes COL Rudesheim's less aggressive counterinsurgency strategy is akin to "appeasement."⁴⁰ He makes an unsupported assertion that COL Rudesheim's tactics "led to the maiming and deaths of several soldiers in his brigade."⁴¹ He also describes COL Rudesheim as a "terrible combat commander"⁴² who is incompetent.⁴³ He even asserts that COL Rudesheim did not believe in fighting or was unwilling to fight.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Sassaman fails to adequately explain how he reached these conclusions and resultantly he comes across as engaging in name-calling and labeling. Consequently, the narrative too often assumes the feel of an incoherent rant with Sassaman appearing more concerned with vengeance than truth-telling.

³⁸ *Id.* at 49.

³⁹ *Id.* at 50.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 162, 201, 235, 255.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 158.

⁴² *Id.* at 242.

⁴³ *Id.* at 158.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 161, 201, 242.

IV. Sassaman's Defense and Justification

Sassaman also appears to be uninterested in truth-telling when he attempts to defend his decision to order his subordinates to withhold information. For example, Sassaman asserts he had no reason to believe an investigation was pending when he ordered his subordinates to withhold information, in essence saying he did not violate the law.⁴⁵ But the facts demonstrate quite convincingly he did have reason to know. Colonel Rudesheim told Sassaman that his Soldiers would be court-martialed if water was involved. Also, this conversation occurred before Sassaman gave the order.⁴⁶ In fact, Sassaman cites COL Rudesheim mentioning the possibility of court-martial as the reason Sassaman gave the order in the first place.⁴⁷ Did Sassaman, an officer with nearly nineteen years of service⁴⁸ and who participated as a panel member in more than a dozen courts-martial⁴⁹ really have no reason to know an investigation could precede a court-martial? If not, he surely would have reason to believe that a court-martial could be pending for these Soldiers, in which case he would be guilty of obstructing justice.⁵⁰ Either way, Sassaman violated the law and his allusions otherwise undermine his credibility.

But even if he violated the law, was Sassaman justified in doing so under the circumstances?⁵¹ Sassaman's penchant for shifting blame demonstrates that not even he believes ordering his subordinates to withhold information was justifiable. For example, Sassaman blames his decision to issue the order on COL Rudesheim, "undue command pressure," and on the fact he did not have a legal advisor.⁵² Why does he shift blame for issuing an order he does not feel was wrongly issued in the first place?

⁴⁵ See *id.* at 269. Sassaman in essence argues he did not commit the crime of impeding an investigation, as the statute requires the accused have had a reason to believe an investigation was pending. See generally MANUAL FOR COURTS-MARTIAL, UNITED STATES pt. IV, ¶ 96a.b(2) (2008) [hereinafter MCM].

⁴⁶ SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 247.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 263.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 8.

⁵⁰ To obstruct justice, the accused must have had "reason to believe there were or would be criminal proceedings pending." MCM, *supra* note 45, pt. IV, ¶ 96.b(2).

⁵¹ See SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 9.

⁵² *Id.* at 247-48.

Nor does Sassaman convince the reader that ordering his subordinates to withhold information about the bridge incident was born of his desire to “win a war.”⁵³ First, he does not logically explain the connection between his decision to order his subordinates to withhold information and his desire to win the war. Second, he does not cite any lasting achievements of his counterinsurgency strategy and in fact declared the war “unwinnable”⁵⁴ before his deployment ended. If Sassaman was so determined to win,⁵⁵ why was he so quick to raise the white flag? Thus, a less lofty but more direct reason explains Sassaman’s decision: to shield his men from prosecution. In fact Sassaman admits he was trying to protect his men.⁵⁶

Major General Odierno also apparently thought Sassaman was trying to shield his men from prosecution, as illustrated by his accusing Sassaman of trying to be “one of the boys.”⁵⁷ Sassaman counters MG Odierno’s allegation by citing numerous instances in which he had punished Soldiers under his command.⁵⁸ But Sassaman misses the point. In the cases Sassaman cites, he obviously supports punishment. By contrast, in the case of the Soldiers involved in the bridge incident, Sassaman does not believe they even committed a crime.⁵⁹

From Sassaman’s perspective, it is easy to imagine why he would feel his Soldiers should not be prosecuted. Their actions, after all, were consistent with his personal counterinsurgency strategy—instill fear⁶⁰ and do not be overly concerned with collateral damage.⁶¹ From his perspective, his Soldiers were just doing their job.

V. Counterinsurgency Strategy

Sassaman developed his counterinsurgency approach amidst a near twenty-year doctrinal gap in counterinsurgency strategy.⁶² Thus, the only

⁵³ *Id.* at 7.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 93 (“My entire life has been based on winning.”).

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 243.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 248.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 267–68.

⁵⁹ *See id.* at 246.

⁶⁰ *See id.* at 99.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 159.

⁶² U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY foreword (15 Dec. 2006) [hereinafter FM 3-24] (“It has been 20 years since the Army published a field

guidance Sassaman received on how to approach the insurgency was to “secure and stabilize the region.”⁶³ Today, however, servicemembers in Iraq are operating under an overarching doctrine with a track record that gives perspective to Sassaman’s strategy.

General Petraeus is the architect of the new doctrine⁶⁴ contained in Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24. The tenets underpinning FM 3-24 are in many ways similar to the strategy COL Rudesheim preferred: focus on protecting civilians over killing the enemy, assume greater risk, and use minimum force.⁶⁵ In February 2007, GEN Petraeus took command in Iraq⁶⁶ and implemented the new doctrine. Since then, violence has fallen dramatically.⁶⁷ Today, GEN Petraeus is widely credited with pulling Iraq from the abyss.⁶⁸

The success of the new counterinsurgency doctrine is the elephant in the room that Sassaman never discusses. It is most likely unintentional.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, it undermines his central theme that Sassaman was a visionary and COL Rudesheim was shortsighted. With the new doctrine’s success, the reader cannot help but think just the opposite is true. Sassaman compounds this perception by describing COL

manual devoted exclusively to counterinsurgency operations.”).

⁶³ SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 94.

⁶⁴ Nathaniel C. Fick & John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition*, FOREIGN POL’Y (Wash., D.C.), Jan.–Feb., 2009, at 42.

⁶⁵ *Id.*; see also FM 3-24, *supra* note 62, para. 1-150 (“The more force applied, the greater the chance of collateral damage and mistakes. Using substantial force also increases the opportunity for insurgent propaganda to portray lethal military activities as brutal. In contrast, using force precisely and discriminately strengthens the rule of law that needs to be established.”).

⁶⁶ Press Release, Stephen P. Kretsinger Sr., Multi-National Force Iraq, Petraeus Assumes MNF-I Command (Feb. 11, 2007), available at <http://www.militaryconnection.com/centcom/articles/petraeus-assumes-command.html>.

⁶⁷ See U.S. DEP’T OF DEF., MEASURING STABILITY AND SECURITY IN IRAQ, REP. TO CONG., June 2009, at 22, available at http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/9010_Report_to_CongressJul09.pdf (illustrating month-to-month security incidents in Iraq since 2004).

⁶⁸ Fick & Nagl, *supra* note 64, at 42.

⁶⁹ The book appears to have been written before General (GEN) Petraeus’s counterinsurgency strategy produced significant achievements. First, the epilogue is dated 31 January 2007, approximately twelve days before GEN Petraeus took command. SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 301; Kretsinger, *supra* note 66. Second, it is difficult to believe that Sassaman would intentionally bolster Colonel (COL) Rudesheim’s standing by describing COL Rudesheim’s strategy as akin to GEN Petraeus’s successful strategy. See *supra* note 30 and accompanying text.

Rudesheim's strategy as akin to General Petraeus's now venerated "softer, gentler approach."⁷⁰

The success of the new counterinsurgency doctrine colors nearly every aspect of the *Warrior King*, often undermining key points. For example, despite Sassaman's declaration that the war is unwinnable,⁷¹ violence levels have dropped dramatically since February 2007. Similarly, despite his criticism that the Army has produced a generation of poor leaders incapable of original thought,⁷² this generation of leadership produced FM 3-24, a radical doctrine that rewrote the book on counterinsurgency and turned the Iraq war around.⁷³

VI. Lessons in Leadership

The real leadership lesson to be learned from *Warrior King* is not that the Army produces poor leadership, but that Soldiers should trust their leadership. In the end, Sassaman's unwillingness to do so amounted to his own leadership failure and led to his downfall, a perspective shared by MG Odierno.⁷⁴ Sassaman admits he lost faith in both MG Odierno and COL Rudesheim but does not take responsibility as to why it occurred. A deeper analysis betrays Sassaman's arrogance; he thought he knew better than his leadership and therefore thought the ends justified his means. The irony is that the success of the new counterinsurgency doctrine in many ways vindicated COL Rudesheim's views and repudiated Sassaman's views.

VII. Conclusion

Sassaman utterly fails to convince the reader that he implemented a winning counterinsurgency strategy or that his chain of command betrayed him in any way. Sassaman cites no enduring achievement of his strategy and his own narrative demonstrates that he violated the law which merited punishment. In this light, Sassaman's assertion that he ordered his subordinates to withhold information out of his desire to win

⁷⁰ SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 162.

⁷¹ *Id.* at 7.

⁷² *Id.* at 88–90, 158.

⁷³ Fick & Nagl, *supra* note 64, at 42.

⁷⁴ SASSAMAN, *supra* note 1, at 267 (quoting GEN Odierno: "You did not trust your leadership; you didn't trust us.").

the war seems preposterous. Worse, the later success of the new counterinsurgency doctrine undermines many of Sassaman's key points.

Despite its failures, *Warrior King* is well worth the read. First, Sassaman offers thrilling insight into military operations, battlefield engagements, and interaction with the Iraqi people. Second, the book provides a window into the mind of an infantry battalion commander. Whether or not one agrees with Sassaman's underlying philosophy, simply being privy to his thought process is insightful and particularly helpful to judge advocates who advise commanders. Lastly, *Warrior King* illustrates two competing views on counterinsurgency strategy at a time when the United States is shifting its counterinsurgency focus from Iraq to Afghanistan. On balance, *Warrior King* succeeds in keeping the reader's attention and rarely fails to be thought-provoking and entertaining.