About the Book

Nathaniel Fick, a former captain in the Marines' First Recon Battalion, who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, reveals in his extraordinary new book, One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer (Houghton Mifflin; October 3, 2005), how the Corps trains its elite and offers a point-blank account of twenty-first-century battle.

If the Marines are "the few, the proud," then the Recon Marines are the fewest and the proudest. Only one Marine in a hundred qualifies for Recon and is charged with clandestine work, often behind enemy lines. Fick's training begins with a hellish summer at Quantico, after his junior year at Dartmouth, and advances to the pinnacle — Recon — four years later, on the eve of war with Iraq. Along the way, he learns to shoot a man a mile away, stays awake for seventy-two hours straight, endures interrogation and torture at the secretive SERE course, learns to swim with Navy SEALs, masters the Eleven Principles of Leadership, and much more.

His vast skill set puts him in front of the front lines, leading twenty-two Marines into the deadliest conflict since Vietnam. He vows he will bring all his men home safely, and to do so he'll need more than his topflight education. He'll need luck and an increasingly clear vision of the limitations of his superiors and the missions they assign him. Fick unveils the process that makes Marine officers such legendary leaders and shares his hard-won insights into the differences between the military ideals he learned and the military practices that can mock those ideals.

One Bullet Away never shrinks from blunt truths, but it is ultimately an inspiring account of mastering the art of war.
About the Author

After receiving a bachelor's in classics from Dartmouth in 1999, Nathaniel Fick served as an infantry officer and then as an elite Recon Marine. He saw action in Afghanistan and Iraq before leaving the Corps as a captain. He is now in a dual-degree program at the Harvard Business School and the Kennedy School of Government.

An Interview with Nathaniel Fick about the war in Iraq today

Should we be in Iraq at all? Is this war winnable?

We're losing. The debate over whether the United States should have gone to war in Iraq is, from where I sit, moot. This war is costing us about a dozen lives and a billion dollars per week. Academics and think-tank analysts can debate the merit of the war's declaration, but my concern is much more about the conduct of the war on the ground. If we continue down the path we're on, the result will be a catastrophic loss for America and for the millions of people in Iraq who want nothing more than a promising future for their children.

How do you think President Bush and his administration have handled the war in Iraq?

Badly, for many reasons. First, we must recognize that there cannot be military success abroad — in any war, at any time — without political support at home. Second, the burden of this war is being borne by the tiny fraction of one percent of Americans who wear a uniform, and by their families. There has been no broader call for sacrifice. There are 150,000 Americans fighting over there, and most people don't even care. Third — and most dangerous — the administration consistently fails to admit mistakes. The hallmark of successful counterinsurgency forces is recognizing mistakes and then adapting on the fly so as not to repeat them. Instead, we stick our heads in the sand and talk about "staying the course."

What have been our biggest mistakes in this war?

First of all, mistakes are inevitable and shouldn't be automatic grounds for severe criticism. What's unforgivable in leaders is a lack of introspection and an unwillingness to admit and learn from mistakes, especially two or three years on. I think the summer of 2003 will emerge as the period in which we started down the wrong path. The Iraqi army was disbanded, leaving thousands of armed, trained, and disenfranchised men on the street. U.S. forces didn't intervene to stop the widespread looting, which sapped the average Iraqi's hope that life in the new Iraq would be better than under Saddam. The borders were never properly sealed. Today, almost three years after the war began, men, weapons, and money, the three ingredients of insurgency, are freely crossing into Iraq from Syria and Iran.

You write in One Bullet Away about the Corps' belief in learning from past mistakes so as not to repeat them. Do you think we're learning from our mistakes?

The U.S. military is learning from its tactical experience, but those lessons have to be
supported by a broader political strategy. War, after all, is politics by other means. Any ultimate resolution in Iraq will be political in nature. The military is only a tool for effecting it.

**Is it possible to fight insurgents successfully?**

The average Iraqi’s opinion is the prize for a successful counterinsurgency. This isn't a new revelation. Armies have been fighting insurgencies since the dawn of human conflict, and it's widely recognized as just about the toughest military task out there. There are two basic tracks you can take in fighting insurgents: either kill the bad guys or protect the innocent people. As in Vietnam, we've focused almost completely on the former — on body counts, on the number of insurgents killed, the number of weapons captured, the number of prisoners taken. But the enemy's numbers aren't finite. When U.S. forces kill people while they're building a school or passing out clean water, we do more harm than good. We anger the people whom we're trying to help.

**So how can we fight this insurgency?**

Instead of focusing exclusively on our offense, we should be setting up protected "cantons" — areas in which the locals' security and comfort are our first priorities — and pouring manpower and money into them. We could set up a canton in a village or over a few city blocks, a kind of green zone for Iraqis. Then people from nearby villages or blocks would see the advantages of our system over Zarqawi's. A few concrete benefits, such as electricity, clean water, and basic security, are worth more than all the democracy speeches in the world. Nobody cares about a constitution when they can't even get their kids to a doctor.

**You have studied military history extensively. Aside from serving in the Marines, you were a classics major in college and are currently studying at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Based on your knowledge and experience, how soon can we get out of Iraq?**

We can't get out of Iraq anytime soon, and we shouldn't. Colin Powell was right when he said, "If you break it, you own it." The United States broke Iraq, and now we own it. As high as the human and financial costs seem, the alternatives are worse. Imagine a failed state in the heart of the Middle East, bordering Syria and Iran, with almost limitless oil revenue. That's a nightmare scenario much worse than Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

**How do you envision Iraq in five or ten years?**

I can confidently predict that it won't be a functioning pluralistic republic. The United States will be unable to graft that system onto Iraq's unique historical divisions. At the same time, I doubt Iraq will be allowed to dissolve into the sort of total anarchy or civil war that would spark a regional conflagration. The most likely outcome is some unhappy medium — a primarily martial state riven by internal discord and perhaps controlled by a powerful strongman or oligarchic coalition, a slightly less odious version of Saddam.

**You led two platoons overseas, so you not only had to take orders but had to make difficult decisions on a daily basis to protect the lives of your men. Was there a moment during your time at war when you felt you had become a leader?**
I felt I had become a leader one night during the second week of the war, when my platoon mistakenly shot two young shepherds while assaulting an Iraqi airfield. Higher command changed our rules of engagement at the last minute and then refused to take any ownership of the predictable result when innocent people were injured. I had to disobey direct orders to get medical care for the shepherds. In the process, I learned that leaders have to be willing to stand alone. Despite the insanity all around you, you have to maintain your sense of right and wrong. I draw a joking analogy between leaders and airline pilots — they sometimes get paid for years and years to do nothing. Then one day they earn all that salary in the span of a few seconds or minutes. I felt that I’d earned my pay that night — we saved the lives of the two boys and managed to keep the platoon psychologically intact.

**What would you do now if you were commander in chief?**

Unfortunately, I think George Bush has been thoroughly weakened with respect to Iraq. Our traditional allies will continue to snub him and bide their time until they decide whether to work with the next American president. Domestic opposition — both in Congress and in the public at large — is so completely entrenched and opposed to the Iraq War that there’s little room for change other than on the margins. So if I were *this* commander in chief, I would abandon any concern about political damage or my historical legacy, and I would seek to give the 150,000 soldiers the thing they deserve above all else from their commander: honesty. I would honestly assess U.S. national interests, the threats to those interests, and how to address those threats.

**What's the next crisis?**

There are plenty of frightening scenarios: suicide bombings in the States, a global energy crisis, conflict with China over its evolving role in the world. But the one that worries me most is the prospect of nuclear terrorism. When the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, it had 22,000 tactical nuclear weapons spread across its republics. Even if 99 percent of those were recovered and safeguarded — a remarkably high success rate — that would leave 220 small nuclear devices unaccounted for. So the weapons are probably out there. Could one be smuggled into the United States? One wag suggested wrapping it in a bale of marijuana. And once in an American city, any one of those weapons could make 9/11 look like a dress rehearsal. Imagine the repercussions for the economy, for civil liberties, for U. S. foreign policy. It's chilling.

**Video of Nate Fick**

Nate Fick's *One Bullet Away* was reviewed favorably everywhere, from *People* magazine to Military.com. A *New York Times* bestseller, it was called a "must-read" by General Anthony C. Zinni. In this video, Nate discusses his experiences as a platoon leader first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq.

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