

Baghdad Is Burning

Invade a country. Give it a constitution based on tribal divisions. Rush a government into place. That's how the U.S. led Iraq into civil war—and nostalgia for Saddam Hussein. While pursuing another story, the author e-mailed his editors this raw, firsthand account of uncontrolled corruption, chaos, and killing

By William Langewiesche



A casualty of the battle for Baghdad, April 8, 2003. The battle for the city continues—now a war of all against all.

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Baghdad

We are now more than three years past the fall of Baghdad. It has become obvious to nearly everyone here that the American invasion was an error—a misjudgment not only of the Middle East but of American military power as well. It is known that Saddam had posed no globally significant threat even to his own people since soon after his defeat in the Gulf War, in 1991. The prosecutions currently under way in the Iraq High Tribunal are all for crimes committed at least 15 years ago, and most more than 20. By any neutral reading of the international conventions, and all

ideology or moral judgments aside, there is no question that this war was illegal. Be that as it may, we did invade and thereby assumed a responsibility for Iraq which, difficult though it is, we cannot abandon at this time.

It would be naïve to believe that we can transform Iraq into a functional place. Inside the Green Zone that goal is still sometimes given to explain American efforts here, but whether merely rhetorical or genuinely believed it is wildly detached from the realities on the streets. Baghdad is out of control, the government is a sham, corruption is exploding, the separation of Shiite and Sunni populations is nearly complete, and the civil war spreading through the capital is now touching nearly everyone. There is killing all around. Large parts of the city are off-limits to the opposing ethnicities; large parts of the city,

where just a few months ago I went more or less freely, are off-limits to me. America can do nothing about any of this, except maybe to intervene in sustained battles, and to keep the factions from using artillery against one another. It can keep Baghdad from looking like Beirut. Beyond that, American responsibility may amount to the need simply to endure here, hemorrhaging public funds and bleeding real blood—continuing to pay for a policy that has left us with no better choice. Sometimes I wonder if the damage that America is suffering isn't a good thing—a necessary lesson in the limitations of power. I do not mention that cheaply, since I work here essentially unprotected, and am one of the people at risk.

The ordinary press is even more exposed. There seem to be relatively few reporters left anymore, but with some exceptions they

ALEX MAJOLI

continue to go forth into the city, and to accept the risk. I know from personal experience that these people are smarter, braver, and more committed to maintaining high standards than they are given credit for. It is true that they report mostly on death and destruction—largely because killings and car bombs define the “news,” as opposed to all the non-events that contribute to reality as it is experienced by ordinary people. Nonetheless, in Iraq, because of the narrowness of their reportorial mandates, their attempts to maintain a public stance of balance and neutrality, and the dilution of their content that comes with unavoidable rep-

administration panicked, and decided suddenly to dump political responsibility for the fiasco onto a sovereign Iraq.

The country was obviously unprepared, but no matter—a constitution was rapidly written up by a group of precocious American lawyers barely out of university, who were sitting now in the Green Zone in nearly total isolation from Iraq, with an overly academic and tribal (classically anthropological, schematic, anachronistic) understanding of how Iraq might function. Their earnest insistence on identifying all political figures according to ethnic background, and in accordance with formulas

ing the country’s natural tendency toward civil war. Now former neighbors and school friends are killing one another.

Outside the Green Zone the pretense of government comes quickly to an end—within about 100 feet.

etition (bomb after bomb after bomb), they actually understate rather than exaggerate the severity of the failure here.

Take for example the attempt to install a functioning democracy. I have watched the process from the start, dismayed all along by the mental isolation of the American officials involved, as well as by the transparently dishonest and manipulative expedients that they have resorted to. The history now seems long, though it

is short: having overthrown the regime without a plan of how to govern, and having reeled backward from the ensuing chaos, the United States set up a traditional colonial authority, headed by an American proconsul, Paul Bremer, that was intended to rebuild the country, improve the physical infrastructure, establish the rule of law, eliminate corruption, install a capitalist economy, and generally Americanize Iraq before gradually handing it over, years hence, to a sovereign democratic process. There was at first no rush. But, for complex reasons—including simply that we live in a post-colonial era—the United States soon turned out to be a poor colonial master. Within a year, by the spring of 2004, the Iraqi insurgency was gaining strength, American casualties were increasing, the infrastructure was worsening rather than improving, and nearly every American initiative had stalled. With the American presidential election approaching, six months ahead, the Bush



The wreckage of a car that exploded in Baghdad's affluent Mansur neighborhood, April 24, 2006.

for power sharing among ethnic groups, had the effect of strengthening ethnic divisions, and formalizing those divisions in a system of political parties—many of which, predictably, have now armed. There had been ethnic divisions before in Iraq, to be sure, but they were muted, especially where the populations were mixed, in and around Baghdad. I remember when I first came here, in 2003, my Iraqi friends paid little notice to ethnic differences—and indeed there was much mixing through marriage. This was the legacy of a dictatorship that was brutal, but also highly secular and nationalistic, and that insisted at the point of a gun that people forget their “tribal” allegiances. Then came “freedom,” also at the point of a gun. The new parliamentary democracy engineered by the earnest young Americans, which in a mature society might have unified people through political inclusion, has now done the opposite here, inducing groups to fear one another, and exacerbat-

But back to the start: a rigid timetable was set for elections, based on American domestic political needs, and Iraq was awarded its sovereignty on July 28, 2004. I remember on the eve of this birth hearing some gunfire, which I decided was celebratory. It did not quite sound like the shooting that every other night went on around my house, because it was less sustained and did not involve exchanges, with the voices of different weapons answering each other. It was desultory. Mostly what people felt was gloomy about the future. The press did not report much on the mood, I suppose in order not to seem too negative, but the mood was real nonetheless. Paul Bremer had left the country two days ahead of schedule because of security concerns, in haste and in secrecy.

Then came the elections. The first one took place about a year and a half ago, in the spring of 2005. It was a beautiful day in Baghdad. A ban on vehicle traffic was imposed, and because the city therefore seemed safe, I walked for hours through the streets, watching the election procedures, but mainly just enjoying the moment of freedom after a year during which movement had become possible only by car, and one was forced to shrink into the seat to keep from being noticed. I was struck by how severely the city had declined—as much through lack of repair as through explosions and the impact of bullets. There was celebration in America, I remember, because of the high turnout among the electorate, but what was obvious on the streets was that practically no Sunnis were voting. This was more than just a little problem, it seemed to me. Even the reporters here were confusing elections with democracy, ignoring the other necessary ingredients, for instance the guarantee of a position and voice to the minorities and political losers. Afterward, the attitude in the U.S. was that the Sunnis just needed to be taught about democracy and the advantages of political participation, and that this would sap the insurgency. It was ridiculous and insulting. The Sunnis understood the theory of democracy as well as anyone, but they also know Iraq, and they had no reason to believe that the majority Shiites—who, given the chance to seize power, were increasingly identifying themselves as such—would not now try to crush them. This, indeed, is what has happened. The electoral process turned out to be something like a coup d'état by a different name. Now, under the guise of de-Ba'athification, or no guise at all, Sunnis have been systematically purged from their positions in the state companies and bureaucracies that constitute the main employers here. Much worse than that is now going on at checkpoints and in prisons

all through central and southern Iraq, where Sunnis are being beaten and shot. The Kurds are coming in for their share of killings, too. And, wherever it is possible, the Kurds and Sunnis are giving as good as they get. Most victims are innocent civilians, women as well as men. An Iraqi friend of mine said, "The Shia militias kill Sunni civilians, and the Sunni insurgents kill Shia civilians." Aside from the indiscriminate bombings, some people are killed because they are known, and others are killed because of the ethnicity implied by their names.

The government is hardly a government at all. There is some small hope—a last, residual hope—that the new prime minister may be able to pull things together, and through force (rather than conciliation) keep the civil war from growing. Nobody really expects it to happen, and they give him at the most a few months. Afterward? The middle class is trying desperately to get passports and take refuge elsewhere, especially in Damascus and Amman. Meanwhile, a small group of elected officials and high bureaucrats, most interested mainly in stealing as much as they can before they escape the country, huddle in the Green Zone, protected by American forces, going through the motions of governing. The money they take comes for the most part from the United States, though apparently the on-again, off-again oil production is also making some people very rich. On every level corruption here is pervasive, inescapable, and beyond anyone's ability to contain.

Outside the Green Zone the pretense of government comes quickly to an end—within about 100 feet, I'd say. Things aren't quite as atomized as they were before, but only to the extent that groups and militias have organized to protect turf and to fight. There are a bewildering number of men in and out of uniform, many of them wearing face masks, careening around with automatic weapons. Most of them, though nominally agents of the government, are essentially on their own. Recently a "security clampdown" has been under way in Baghdad, with a show of Iraqi National Guard troops (in beautiful American-style uniforms) who man some checkpoints (fewer since they have been car-bombed) and create dangerous traffic jams, but systematically wave everyone through. They have no security effect at all. We routinely drive through in a beat-up old car, making no attempt to show IDs or hide the AK-47s and pistols that the Iraqis who work for me carry for self-defense. Recently, when jammed up in the approach to one of those checkpoints, and on edge because of the threat of being targeted by any of the many people around us, my driver, Mujahed, adjusted the pistol on his lap and said, "This is their government? It was safer before." He meant during the time of the Coalition Provisional Authority, when the Americans in

the Green Zone were dreaming up their would-be Iraq, and the U.S. Army ran its menacing but futile patrols. But he could have meant when Saddam was in power.

After passing the checkpoint, we shook off a car which was perhaps following us, turning up an alley and then accelerating against oncoming traffic on the wrong side of a boulevard. Mujahed laughed and said, "This is democracy!" A sort of considered nostalgia for Saddam is now widespread, and not merely among the Sunnis. People such as Mujahed, who dislike Saddam (Mujahed's father was arrested; others in his family were killed), say that things were easier then. Mujahed said, "Under Saddam there

feel nostalgia for the Saddam era, who express deep disillusionment with American performance here, who have lost hope that the American presence might provide for solutions, also express fear that the United States will soon pull out. But they know that the United States is losing this war.

It is not one war, but many. A contact of mine up North, in Mosul, sees it as a Tom and Jerry cartoon, with all the different groups running in circles, and no way to tell who is being chased or doing the chasing. Foreign fighters, mujahideen, al-Qaeda in Iraq, splinter groups of Sunni insurgents, splinter groups of Shia militias, the Kurdish

peshmerga militia, and the American forces. Round and round they go, blasting and shooting up the place. In the South, which is overwhelmingly Shia, the same is true without the *peshmerga*, but with the addition of elements crossing the border from Iran. In Baghdad, more of the same. Only in the Sunni West, in Anbar, is the war simple: there the entire population has to one degree or another risen up in opposition to American troops, and those troops in



The aftermath of a suicide bombing that killed 33 people in a Baghdad restaurant, November 10, 2005.

A small group of Iraqi officials, most interested mainly in stealing what they can, huddle in the Green Zone.

were red lines. You knew that if you crossed the red line you were killed. But now there are no lines at all." The red lines under Saddam had nothing to do with ethnicity, only with maintaining his personal power and control; the organizing principle was a concept of a unified nation, and of nationalism, built entirely around him. When individuals crossed the red lines, they were eliminated as individuals; when groups crossed the red lines, they were eliminated as groups. This in fact is what happened to the Kurds in the North, and the Shia in the South—crimes against humanity, yes, but not genocide. People point out that in the 1990s, under Saddam, their lives were limited, but Baghdad was safe, and actually quite vibrant and pleasant; there were plenty of restaurants and cafés, and people could move freely at any hour of the day or night. They are disillusioned that none of that is true now. Such reactions are not so much dogmatic or bitter as descriptive. The same people who

turn have an easier time in identifying nearly everyone as a potential danger. This gives us the idiotic destruction of Fallujah, and now the insurgent-breeding tactics of the Ramadi offensive, and leads as well to incidents such as the killings in Haditha. For the most part the accounting works like this: you are dead, therefore you are the enemy. To a large degree, it used to be: you are dead, therefore you are a foreign fighter. That pretense is now very hard to maintain, though I hear soldiers still speak about it and, beyond that, still claim (they who speak hardly a word of Arabic) to be able to distinguish one nationality from another. Meanwhile, there is the supposed Iraqization of the conflict. This has led to a bizarre term, in the context of a popular civil rebellion, in which the enemies are no longer known as Anti-Coalition Forces (ACF) but as Anti-Iraqi Forces (AIF)—language in this sad story that a person in the right frame of mind can savor. But maybe you have to be here to appreciate it. □