

## ERASING IRAQ

### IN SEARCH OF A “MODEL” FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

**The introverted schizophrenic or melancholic may be likened to a walled city which has closed its gates and refuses to trade with the rest of the world. . . . A breach is blown in the wall, and relations with the world are re-established. Unfortunately we cannot control the amount of damage done in the bombardment.**

—Andrew M. Wyllie, a British psychiatrist, on electroshock therapy, 1940<sup>1</sup>

**In a post-Sept. 11 world, I thought the prudent use of violence could be therapeutic.**

—Richard Cohen, a *Washington Post* columnist, on his support for the invasion of Iraq<sup>2</sup>

It was March 2004. I had been in Baghdad for less than three hours, and it wasn't going well. First, our car hadn't shown up at the airport checkpoint, and my photographer, Andrew Stern, and I had to hitch a ride on what was already being called “the most dangerous road in the world.” When we made it to the hotel in the busy Karada district, we were greeted by Michael Birmingham, an Irish peace activist who had moved to Baghdad before the invasion. I had asked if he could introduce me to a few Iraqis concerned about the plans to privatize their economy. “No one here cares about privatization,” Michael told us. “What they care about is surviving.”

A tense debate followed about the ethics of bringing a political agenda to a war zone. Michael wasn't saying that Iraqis supported the privatization

plans—only that most people had more urgent concerns. They were worried about bombs going off in their mosques or finding a cousin who has disappeared into the U.S.-run Abu Ghraib prison. They were thinking about how to get drinking and bathing water for tomorrow, not whether a foreign company wanted to privatize their water system and sell it back to them in a year. The job of an outsider, he argued, is to try to document the reality of war and occupation, not to decide what Iraqi priorities ought to be.

I defended myself as best as I could, pointing out that selling this country off to Bechtel and ExxonMobil wasn't an idea I had dreamed up—it was already in its early stages, spearheaded by the White House's top envoy to Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III. For months I had been reporting on the auctioning off of Iraq's state assets from trade shows in hotel ballrooms, surreal events where body-armor salesmen terrified businessmen with stories of severed limbs while U.S. trade officials assured everyone that it really wasn't as bad as it seemed on TV. "The best time to invest is when there is still blood on the ground," I was told earnestly by a delegate at the "Rebuilding Iraq 2" conference in Washington, D.C.

The fact that it was hard to find people in Baghdad who were interested in talking about economics was not surprising. The architects of this invasion were firm believers in the shock doctrine—they knew that while Iraqis were consumed with daily emergencies, the country could be auctioned off discreetly and the results announced as a done deal. As for journalists and activists, we seemed to be exhausting our attention on the spectacular physical attacks, forgetting that the parties with the most to gain never show up on the battlefield. And in Iraq there was plenty to gain: not just the world's third-largest proven oil reserves but territory that was one of the last remaining holdouts from the drive to build a global market based on Friedman's vision of unfettered capitalism. After the crusade had conquered Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia, the Arab world called out as its final frontier.

While Michael and I debated back and forth, Andrew went to have a cigarette on the balcony. As he opened the glass door, all the air seem to be sucked out of the room. Outside the window was a ball of lavalike fire, deep red flecked with black. We grabbed our shoes and ran in our socks down five flights of stairs. The lobby was covered in shattered glass. Around the corner, the Mount Lebanon Hotel lay in rubble, along with a neighboring house, destroyed by a thousand-pound bomb, making it, at that point, the largest attack of its kind since the end of the war.

Andrew ran with his camera to the wreckage; I tried not to, but ended up following. After only three hours in Baghdad, I was already breaking my one rule: no bomb chasing. Back at the hotel, all the indie reporters and NGO types were drinking arak and trying to get their adrenalin under control. Everybody kept grinning at me and saying, "Welcome to Baghdad!" I glanced at Michael, and we both silently acknowledged that, yes, he had won the argument. The last word came from the war itself: "Bombs, not journalists, set the agenda here." And they certainly do. They don't just suck oxygen into their vortex, they demand everything: our attention, our compassion, our outrage.

That night I thought about Claudia Acuña, the extraordinary journalist I had met in Buenos Aires two years earlier who had given me a copy of Rodolfo Walsh's "Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta." She had warned me that extreme violence has a way of preventing us from seeing the interests it serves. In a way, it had happened already to the antiwar movement. Our explanations for why the war was waged rarely went beyond one-word answers: oil, Israel, Halliburton. Most of us chose to oppose the war as an act of folly by a president who mistook himself for a king, and his British sidekick who wanted to be on the winning side of history. There was little interest in the idea that war was a rational policy choice, that the architects of the invasion had unleashed ferocious violence because they could not crack open the closed economies of the Middle East by peaceful means, that the level of terror was proportional to what was at stake.

The invasion of Iraq was sold to the public on the basis of fear of weapons of mass destruction because, as Paul Wolfowitz explained, WMDs were "the one issue that everyone could agree on"—it was, in other words, the lowest-common-denominator excuse.<sup>3</sup> The more rarefied reason, favored by the most intellectual proponents of the war, was the "model" theory. According to the pundits who advanced this theory, many of them identified as neocons, terrorism was coming from multiple locations in the Arab and Muslim world: the September 11 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon; Iran was funding Hezbollah; Syria was housing Hamas's leadership; Iraq was sending money to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers. For these war advocates, who conflated attacks on Israel with attacks on the U.S., as if there were no differences between the two, that was enough to qualify the entire region as a potential terrorist breeding ground.

So what was it about this part of the world, they asked, that produced terrorism? Ideologically blinded from seeing either U.S. or Israeli policies as contributing factors, let alone provocations, they identified the true cause as something else—the region’s deficit in free-market democracy.\*†

Since the entire Arab world could not be conquered all at once, a single country needed to serve as the catalyst. The U.S. would invade that country and turn it into, as Thomas Friedman, chief media proselytizer of the theory, put it, “a different model in the heart of the Arab-Muslim world,” one that in turn would set off a series of democratic/neoliberal waves throughout the region. Joshua Muravchik, an American Enterprise Institute pundit, forecast a “tsunami across the Islamic world” in “Tehran and Baghdad,” while the archconservative Michael Ledeen, an adviser to the Bush administration, described the goal as “a war to remake the world.”<sup>15</sup>

Within the internal logic of this theory, fighting terrorism, spreading frontier capitalism and holding elections were bundled into a single unified project. The Middle East would be “cleaned out” of terrorists and a giant free-trade zone would be created; then it would all be locked in with after-the-fact elections—a sort of three-for-one special. George W. Bush later simplified this agenda to a single phrase: “spreading freedom in a troubled region,” and many mistook the sentiment as a starry-eyed commitment to democracy.<sup>6</sup> But it was always that other kind of freedom, the one offered to Chile in the seventies and to Russia in nineties—the freedom for Western

\* The free-market wave had bypassed this region for several reasons. The richest countries—Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the emirates—were so flush with oil cash that they managed to keep out of debt and thus out of the grip of the IMF (84 percent of Saudi Arabia’s economy, for instance, is state controlled). Iraq had a heavy debt, accumulated during the war with Iran, but just as the era of globalization was beginning, the first Gulf War ended and Iraq was locked away under strict sanctions: not only would there be no “free trade,” there would be virtually no legal trade at all.

† The idea that a failure to join the Washington Consensus could be enough to provoke a foreign invasion may seem far-fetched, but there was a precedent. When NATO bombed Belgrade in 1999, the official reason was Slobodan Milošević’s egregious human rights violations that had horrified the world. But in a little-reported revelation years after the Kosovo war, Strobe Talbott, deputy secretary of state under President Clinton and the lead U.S. negotiator during the war, provided a distinctly less idealistic explanation. “As nations throughout the region sought to reform their economies, mitigate ethnic tensions, and broaden civil society, Belgrade seemed to delight in continually moving in the opposite direction. It is small wonder NATO and Yugoslavia ended up on a collision course. It was Yugoslavia’s resistance to the broader trends of political and economic reform—not the plight of the Kosovar Albanians—that best explains NATO’s war.” The revelation came out in a 2005 book, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo* by Talbott’s former communications director, John Norris.

multinationals to feed off freshly privatized states—that was at the center of the model theory. The president made that perfectly clear only eight days after declaring an end to major combat in Iraq when he announced plans for the “establishment of a U.S.-Middle East free trade area within a decade.”<sup>7</sup> Dick Cheney’s daughter Liz, a veteran of the Soviet shock therapy adventure, was put in charge of the project.

When the idea of invading an Arab country and turning it into a model state first gained currency after September 11, the names of several possible countries were floated—Iraq, Syria, Egypt and, Michael Ledeen’s preference, Iran. Iraq had a great deal to recommend it, however. In addition to its vast oil reserves, it also made a good central location for military bases now that Saudi Arabia looked less dependable, and Saddam’s use of chemical weapons on his own people made him easy to hate. Another factor, often overlooked, was that Iraq had the advantage of familiarity.

The 1991 Gulf War had been the U.S.’s last major ground offensive involving hundreds of thousands of troops, and in the twelve years since, the Pentagon had been using the battle as a template in workshops, training and elaborate war games. One example of this postgame theory was a paper that had captured the imagination of Donald Rumsfeld called *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*. Written by a group of maverick strategists at the National Defense University in 1996, the paper positions itself as an all-purpose military doctrine, but it is really about refighting the Gulf War. Its lead author, the retired navy commander Harlan Ullman, explained that the project began when General Chuck Horner, the commander of the air war in the 1991 invasion, was asked about his greatest frustration in fighting Saddam Hussein. He replied that he did not know where to “stick the needle” to make the Iraqi army collapse. “Shock and Awe,” writes Ullman (who coined the phrase) “was intended to address this question: If Desert Storm could be refought, how could we win in half the time or less and with far fewer forces? . . . The key to its success is finding the entry points for Horner’s needles—the spots that, when targeted, get an enemy to collapse immediately.”<sup>8</sup> The authors were convinced that if the U.S. military ever got the chance to fight Saddam again, it would now be in a far better position to find those “entry points,” thanks to new satellite technologies and breakthroughs in precision weaponry that would allow it to insert the “needles” with unprecedented accuracy.

Iraq had another advantage. While the U.S. military was busy fantasizing about refighting Desert Storm with a technological upgrade equivalent to

“the difference between Atari and PlayStation,” as one commentator put it, Iraq’s military capacity had been hurtling backward, eroded by sanctions and virtually disassembled by the United Nations–administered weapons inspection program.<sup>9</sup> That meant that, compared with Iran or Syria, Iraq seemed the site for the most winnable war.

Thomas Friedman was forthright about what it meant for Iraq to be selected as the model. “We are not doing nation-building in Iraq. We are doing nation-creating,” he wrote—as if shopping around for a large, oil-rich Arab nation to create from scratch was a natural, even “noble” thing to do in the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup> Friedman is among many of the onetime war advocates who has since claimed that he did not foresee the carnage that would follow from the invasion. It’s hard to see how he could have missed that detail. Iraq was not an empty space on a map; it was and remains a culture as old as civilization, with fierce anti-imperialist pride, strong Arab nationalism, deeply held faiths and a majority of the adult male population with military training. If “nation creating” was going to happen in Iraq, what exactly was supposed to become of the nation that was already there? The unspoken assumption from the beginning was that much of it would have to disappear, to clear the ground for the grand experiment—an idea that contained, at its core, the certainty of extraordinary colonialist violence.

Thirty years earlier, when the Chicago School counterrevolution took its first leap from the textbook to the real world, it also sought to erase nations and create new ones in their place. Like Iraq in 2003, Chile in 1973 was meant to serve as a model for the entire rebellious continent, and for many years it did. The brutal regimes that implemented Chicago School ideas in the seventies understood that, for their idealized new nations to be born in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, whole categories of people and their cultures would need to be pulled up “from the root.”

In the countries that suffered the political cleansings, there have been collective efforts to come to terms with this violent history—truth commissions, excavations of unmarked graves and the beginnings of war crimes trials for the perpetrators. But the Latin American juntas did not act alone: they were propped up before and after their coups by Washington, as has been amply documented. For instance, in 1976, the year of Argentina’s coup, when thousands of young activists were snatched from their homes, the junta had full financial support from Washington. (“If there are things that have to be done, you should do them quickly,” Kissinger had said.)<sup>11</sup> That year, Gerald Ford was president, Dick Cheney was his chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld was his

secretary of defense, and Kissinger’s executive assistant was an ambitious young man named Paul Bremer. These men faced no truth-and-justice process for their roles in supporting the juntas and went on to enjoy long and prosperous careers. So long, in fact, that they would be around three decades later to implement a strikingly similar—if far more violent—experiment in Iraq.

In his 2005 inaugural address, George W. Bush described the era between the end of the Cold War and the start of the War on Terror as “years of repose, years of sabbatical—and then there came a day of fire.”<sup>12</sup> The Iraq invasion marked the ferocious return to the early techniques of the free-market crusade—the use of ultimate shock to forcibly wipe out and erase all obstacles to the construction of model corporatist states free from all interference.

Ewen Cameron, the CIA-funded psychiatrist who had tried to “depattern” his patients by regressing them to infantile states, had believed that if a little shock was good for this purpose, more was better. He blasted brains with everything he could think of—electricity, hallucinogens, sensory deprivation, sensory overload—anything that would wipe out what was and give him a blank slate on which to imprint new thoughts, new patterns. With a far larger canvas, that was the invasion and occupation strategy for Iraq. The architects of the war surveyed the global arsenal of shock tactics and decided to go with all of them—blitzkrieg military bombardment supplemented with elaborate psychological operations, followed up with the fastest and most sweeping political and economic shock therapy program attempted anywhere, backed up, if there was any resistance, by rounding up those who resisted and subjecting them to “gloves-off” abuse.

Often, in the analyses of the war in Iraq, the conclusion is that the invasion was a “success” but the occupation was a failure. What this assessment overlooks is that the invasion and occupation were two parts of a unified strategy—the initial bombardment was designed to erase the canvas on which the model nation could be built.

### War as Mass Torture

For the strategists of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the answer to the question of “where to stick the needles” appears to have been: everywhere. During the 1991 Gulf War, roughly three hundred Tomahawk cruise missiles were fired over the course of five weeks. In 2003, more than three hundred and eighty were launched in a single day. Between March 20 and May 2, the weeks of “major combat,” the U.S military dropped more than thirty thousand bombs

on Iraq, as well as twenty thousand precision-guided cruise missiles—67 percent of the total number ever made.<sup>13</sup>

“I am so scared,” Yasmine Musa, a Baghdad mother of three said during the bombings. “Not a single minute passes by without hearing and feeling a drop of a bomb somewhere. I don’t think that a single meter in the whole of Iraq is safe.”<sup>14</sup> That meant Shock and Awe was doing its job. In open defiance of the laws of war barring collective punishment, Shock and Awe is a military doctrine that prides itself on not merely targeting the enemy’s military forces but, as its authors stress, the “society writ large”—mass fear is a key part of the strategy.

Another element that distinguishes Shock and Awe is its acute consciousness of war as a cable news spectacle, one playing to several audiences at once: the enemy, Americans at home and anyone else thinking of making trouble. “When the video results of these attacks are broadcast in real time worldwide on CNN, the positive impact on coalition support and negative impact on potential threat support can be decisive,” the Shock and Awe manual states.\* From the start, the invasion was conceived as a message from Washington to the world, one spoken in the language of fireballs, deafening explosions and city-shattering quakes. In *The One Percent Doctrine*, Ron Suskind explains that for Rumsfeld and Cheney, “the primary impetus for invading Iraq” was the desire “to create a demonstration model to guide the behavior of anyone with the temerity to acquire destructive weapons or, in any way, flout the authority of the United States.” Less than a war strategy, it was a “global experiment in behaviorism.”<sup>15</sup>

Warfare is always partly a performance, always a form of mass communication, but Rumsfeld’s marshaling of his tech and media know-how from the business world put the marketing of fear at the center of U.S. military doctrine. During the Cold War, the fear of a nuclear attack was the core of the deterrence strategy, but the idea was for the nuclear missiles to stay in their silos. This attack was different: Rumsfeld’s war would use everything short of a nuclear bomb to put on a show designed to bombard the senses, pull and play on emotion, and convey lasting messages, with targets carefully chosen for their symbolic value and their made-for-TV impact. In this way, Rumsfeld’s theory of war, part of his project of “transformation,” had far less in common with the “force-on-force” battlefield strategies of the generals, who

were always slowing him down, and far more in common with the terrorists against whom Rumsfeld had declared permanent war. Terrorists don’t try to win through direct confrontation; they attempt to break public morale with spectacular, televisual displays that at once expose their enemy’s vulnerability and their own capacity for cruelty. That was the theory behind the 9/11 attacks, just as it was the theory behind the invasion of Iraq.

Shock and Awe is often presented as merely a strategy of overwhelming firepower, but the authors of the doctrine see it as much more than that: it is, they claim, a sophisticated psychological blueprint aimed “directly at the public will of the adversary to resist.” The tools are ones familiar from another arm of the U.S. military complex: sensory deprivation and sensory overload, designed to induce disorientation and regression. With clear echoes of the CIA’s interrogation manuals, “Shock and Awe” states, “In crude terms, Rapid Dominance would seize control of the environment and paralyze or so overload an adversary’s perceptions and understanding of events.” The goal is “rendering the adversary completely impotent.” This includes such strategies as “real-time manipulation of senses and inputs . . . literally ‘turning on and off’ the ‘lights’ that enable any potential aggressor to see or appreciate the conditions and events concerning his forces and ultimately, his society” as well as “depriving the enemy, in specific areas, of the ability to communicate, observe.”<sup>16</sup> The country of Iraq was subjected to this experiment in mass torture for months, with the process beginning well before the bombs started falling.

### Fear Up

When the Canadian citizen Maher Arar was grabbed by U.S. agents at JFK airport in 2002 and taken to Syria, a victim of extraordinary rendition, his interrogators engaged in a tried-and-tested torture technique. “They put me on a chair, and one of the men started asking me questions. . . . If I did not answer quickly enough, he would point to a metal chair in the corner and ask, ‘Do you want me to use this?’ . . . I was terrified, and I did not want to be tortured. I would say anything to avoid torture.”<sup>17</sup> The technique Arar was being subjected to is known as “the showing of the instruments,” or, in U.S. military lingo, “fear up.” Torturers know that one of their most potent weapons is the prisoner’s own imagination—often just showing fearsome instruments is more effective than using them.

As the day of the invasion of Iraq drew closer, U.S. news media outlets were conscripted by the Pentagon to “fear up” Iraq. “They’re calling it ‘A-Day,’ ”

\*The 1991 Gulf War was the first CNN battle, but since the idea of twenty-four-hour live coverage was still young, the military had not by then fully incorporated it into its war planning.

began a report on *CBS News* that aired two months before the war began. “‘A’ as in airstrikes so devastating they would leave Saddam’s soldiers unable or unwilling to fight.” Viewers were introduced to Harlan Ullman, a *Shock and Awe* author, who explained that “you have this simultaneous effect, rather like the nuclear weapons at Hiroshima, not taking days or weeks but in minutes.” The anchor, Dan Rather, ended the telecast with a disclaimer: “We assure you this report contains no information that the Defense Department thinks could help the Iraqi military.”<sup>18</sup> He could have gone further: the report, like so many others in this period, was an integral part of the Department of Defense’s strategy—fear up.

Iraqis, who picked up the terrifying reports on contraband satellites or in phone calls from relatives abroad spent months imagining the horrors of Shock and Awe. The phrase itself became a potent psychological weapon. Would it be worse than 1991? If the Americans really thought Saddam had WMDs, would they launch a nuclear attack?

One answer was provided a week before the invasion. The Pentagon invited Washington’s military press corps on a special field trip to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida to witness the testing of the MOAB, which officially stands for Massive Ordnance Air Blast but which everyone in the military calls the “Mother of All Bombs.” At twenty-one thousand pounds, it is the largest nonnuclear explosive ever built, able to create, in the words of CNN’s Jamie McIntyre, “a ten-thousand-foot-high mushroom-like cloud that looks and feels like a nuclear weapon.”<sup>19</sup>

In his report, McIntyre said that even if it was never used, the bomb’s very existence “could still pack a psychological wallop”—a tacit acknowledgment of the role he himself was playing in delivering that wallop. Like prisoners in interrogation cells, Iraqis were being shown the instruments. “The goal is to have the capabilities of the coalition so clear and so obvious that there’s an enormous disincentive for the Iraqi military to fight,” Rumsfeld explained on the same program.<sup>20</sup>

When the war began, the residents of Baghdad were subjected to sensory deprivation on a mass scale. One by one, the city’s sensory inputs were cut off; the ears were the first to go.

On the night of March 28, 2003, as U.S. troops drew closer to Baghdad, the ministry of communication was bombed and set ablaze, as were four Baghdad telephone exchanges, with massive bunker-busters, cutting off millions of phones across the city. The targeting of the phone exchanges

continued—twelve in total—until, by April 2, there was barely a phone working in all of Baghdad.\*<sup>21</sup> During the same assault, television and radio transmitters were also hit, making it impossible for families in Baghdad, huddling in their homes, to pick up even a weak signal carrying news of what was going on outside their doors.

Many Iraqis say that the shredding of their phone system was the most psychologically wrenching part of the air attack. The combination of hearing and feeling bombs going off everywhere while being unable to call a few blocks away to find out if loved ones were alive, or to reassure terrified relatives living abroad, was pure torment. Journalists based in Baghdad were swarmed by desperate local residents begging for a few moments with their satellite phones or pressing numbers into the reporters’ hands along with pleas to call a brother or an uncle in London or Baltimore. “Tell him everything is okay. Tell him his mother and father are fine. Tell him hello. Tell him not to worry.”<sup>22</sup> By then, most drugstores in Baghdad had sold out of sleeping aids and antidepressants, and the city was completely cleaned out of Valium.

Next to go were the eyes. “There was no audible explosion, no discernible change in the early evening bombardments, but in an instant, an entire city of 5 million people was plunged into an awful, endless night,” *The Guardian* reported on April 4. Darkness was “relieved only by the headlights of passing cars.”<sup>23</sup> Trapped in their homes, Baghdad’s residents could not speak to each other, hear each other or see outside. Like a prisoner destined for a CIA black site, the entire city was shackled and hooded. Next it was stripped.

### Comfort Items

In hostile interrogations, the first stage of breaking down prisoners is stripping them of their own clothes and any items that have the power to evoke their sense of self—so-called comfort items. Often objects that are of particular value to a prisoner, like the Koran or a cherished photograph, are treated

\* The official reason for the wholesale annihilation of Baghdad’s phone system was to sever Saddam’s ability to communicate with his elite commandos. But after the war, U.S. interrogators conducted extensive “interviews” with top Iraqi prisoners and discovered that for years Saddam had been convinced that spies were tracking him through his phone calls and therefore had used a phone only twice in the previous thirteen years. As usual, reliable intelligence wasn’t necessary; there would be plenty of ready money for Bechtel to build a new system.

with open disrespect. The message is “You are no one, you are who we want you to be,” the essence of dehumanization. Iraqis went through this unmaking process collectively, as they watched their most important institutions desecrated, their history loaded onto trucks and disappeared. The bombing badly injured Iraq, but it was the looting, unchecked by occupying troops, that did the most to erase the heart of the country that was.

“The hundreds of looters who smashed ancient ceramics, stripped display cases and pocketed gold and other antiquities from the National Museum of Iraq pillaged nothing less than records of the first human society,” reported the *Los Angeles Times*. “Gone are 80 per cent of the museum’s 170,000 priceless objects.”<sup>24</sup> The national library, which contained copies of every book and doctoral thesis ever published in Iraq, was a blackened ruin. Thousand-year-old illuminated Korans had disappeared from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which was left a burned-out shell. “Our national heritage is lost,” pronounced a Baghdad high-school teacher.<sup>25</sup> A local merchant said of the museum, “It was the soul of Iraq. If the museum doesn’t recover the looted treasures, I will feel like a part of my own soul has been stolen.” McGuire Gibson, an archaeologist at the University of Chicago, called it “a lot like a lobotomy. The deep memory of an entire culture, a culture that has continued for thousands of years, has been removed.”<sup>26</sup>

Thanks mostly to the efforts of clerics who organized salvage missions in the midst of the looting, a portion of the artifacts has been recovered. But many Iraqis were, and still are, convinced that the memory lobotomy was intentional—part of Washington’s plans to excise the strong, rooted nation that was and replace it with their own model. “Baghdad is the mother of Arab culture,” seventy-year-old Ahmed Abdullah told *The Washington Post*, “and they want to wipe out our culture.”<sup>27</sup>

As the war planners were quick to point out, the looting was done by Iraqis, not foreign troops. And it’s true that Rumsfeld did not plan for Iraq to be sacked—but he did not take measures to prevent it from happening either, or to stop it once it had begun. These were failures that cannot be dismissed as mere oversights.

During the 1991 Gulf War, thirteen Iraqi museums were attacked by looters, so there was every reason to believe that poverty, anger at the old regime and the general atmosphere of chaos would prompt some Iraqis to respond in the same way (especially given that Saddam had emptied the prisons several months earlier). The Pentagon had been warned by leading archaeologists

that it needed to have an airtight strategy to protect museums and libraries before any attack, and a March 26 Pentagon memo to coalition command listed “in order of importance, 16 sites that were crucial to protect in Baghdad.” Second on the list was the museum. Other warnings had urged Rumsfeld to send an international police contingent in with the troops to maintain public order—another suggestion that was ignored.<sup>28</sup>

Even without the police, however, there were enough U.S. soldiers in Baghdad for a few to be dispatched to the key cultural sites, but they weren’t sent. There are numerous reports of U.S. soldiers hanging out by their armored vehicles and watching as trucks loaded with loot drove by—a reflection of the “stuff happens” indifference coming straight from Rumsfeld. Some units took it upon themselves to stop the looting, but in other instances, soldiers joined in. The Baghdad International Airport was completely trashed by soldiers who, according to *Time*, smashed furniture and then moved on to the commercial jets on the runway: “U.S. soldiers looking for comfortable seats and souvenirs ripped out many of the planes’ fittings, slashed seats, damaged cockpit equipment and popped out every windshield.” The result was an estimated \$100 million worth of damage to Iraq’s national airline—which was one of the first assets to be put on the auction block in an early and contentious partial privatization.<sup>29</sup>

Some insight into why there was so little official interest in stopping the looting has since been provided by two men who played pivotal roles in the occupation—Peter McPherson, the senior economic adviser to Paul Bremer, and John Agresto, director of higher education reconstruction for the occupation. McPherson said that when he saw Iraqis taking state property—cars, buses, ministry equipment—it didn’t bother him. His job, as Iraq’s top economic shock therapist, was to radically downsize the state and privatize its assets, which meant that the looters were really just giving him a jump-start. “I thought the privatization that occurs sort of naturally when somebody took over their state vehicle, or began to drive a truck that the state used to own, was just fine,” he said. A veteran bureaucrat of the Reagan administration and a firm believer in Chicago School economics, McPherson termed the pillage a form of public sector “shrinkage.”<sup>\*30</sup>

\* It’s a spin that puts Halliburton’s overcharging of U.S. taxpayers and the Pentagon’s willingness to let it slide in a new light—perhaps the Department of Defense saw the missing millions not as theft but as shrinkage, all part of the campaign to scale back government and beef up business.

His colleague John Agresto also saw a silver lining as he watched the looting of Baghdad on TV. He envisioned his job—"a never to be repeated adventure"—as the remaking of Iraq's system of higher education from scratch. In that context, the stripping of the universities and the education ministry was, he explained, "the opportunity for a clean start," a chance to give Iraq's schools "the best modern equipment." If the mission was "nation creating," as so many clearly believed it to be, then everything that remained of the old country was only going to get in the way. Agresto was the former president of St. John's College in New Mexico, which specializes in a Great Books curriculum. He explained that although he knew nothing of Iraq, he had refrained from reading books about the country before making the trip so that he would arrive "with as open a mind as I could have."<sup>31</sup> Like Iraq's colleges, Agresto would be a blank slate.

If Agresto had read a book or two, he might have thought twice about the need to erase everything and start over. He could have learned, for instance, that before the sanctions strangled the country, Iraq had the best education system in the region, with the highest literacy rates in the Arab world—in 1985, 89 percent of Iraqis were literate. By contrast, in Agresto's home state of New Mexico, 46 percent of the population is functionally illiterate, and 20 percent are unable to do "basic math to determine the total on a sales receipt."<sup>32</sup> Yet Agresto was so convinced of the superiority of American systems that he seemed unable to entertain the possibility that Iraqis might want to salvage and protect their own culture and that they might feel its destruction as a wrenching loss.

This neocolonialist blindness is a running theme in the War on Terror. At the U.S.-run prison at Guantánamo Bay, there is a room known as "the love shack." Detainees are taken there after their captors have decided they are not enemy combatants and will soon be released. Inside the love shack, prisoners are allowed to watch Hollywood movies and are plied with American junk food. Asif Iqbal, one of three British detainees known as the "Tipton Three," was permitted several visits there before he and his two friends were finally sent home. "We would get to watch DVDs, eat McDonald's, eat Pizza Hut and basically chill out. We were not shackled in this area. . . . We had no idea why they were being like that to us. The rest of the week we were

\* When Agresto failed miserably at his job of rebuilding Iraq's university system, leaving the country with the job undone, he revised his early enthusiasm for looting, describing himself as "a neoconservative who's been mugged by reality." This and other details come from Rajiv Chandrasekaran's vivid account of the Green Zone, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*.

back in the cages as usual. . . . On one occasion Lesley [an FBI official] brought Pringles, ice cream and chocolates, this was the final Sunday before we came back to England." His friend Rihel Ahmed speculated that the special treatment "was because they knew they had messed us about and tortured us for two and half years and they hoped we would forget it."<sup>33</sup>

Ahmed and Iqbal had been grabbed by the Northern Alliance while visiting Afghanistan on their way to a wedding. They had been violently beaten, injected with unidentified drugs, put in stress positions for hours, sleep deprived, forcibly shaven and denied all legal rights for twenty-nine months.<sup>34</sup> And yet they were supposed to "forget it" in the face of the overwhelming allure of Pringles. That was actually the plan.

It's hard to believe—but then again, that was pretty much Washington's game plan for Iraq: shock and terrorize the entire country, deliberately ruin its infrastructure, do nothing while its culture and history are ransacked, then make it all okay with an unlimited supply of cheap household appliances and imported junk food. In Iraq, this cycle of culture erasing and culture replacing was not theoretical; it all unfolded in a matter of weeks.

Paul Bremer, appointed by Bush to serve as director of the occupation authority in Iraq, admits that when he first arrived in Baghdad, the looting was still going strong and order was far from restored. "Baghdad was on fire, literally, as I drove in from the airport. . . . There was no traffic on the streets; there was no electricity anywhere; no oil production; no economic activity; there wasn't a single policeman on duty anywhere." And yet his solution to this crisis was to immediately fling open the country's borders to absolutely unrestricted imports: no tariffs, no duties, no inspections, no taxes. Iraq, Bremer declared two weeks after he arrived, was "open for business."<sup>35</sup> Overnight, Iraq went from being one of the most isolated countries in the world, sealed off from the most basic trade by strict UN sanctions, to becoming the widest-open market anywhere.

While the pickup trucks stuffed with loot were still being driven to buyers in Jordan, Syria and Iran, passing them in the opposite direction were convoys of flatbeds piled high with Chinese TVs, Hollywood DVDs and Jordanian satellite dishes, ready to be unloaded on the sidewalks of Baghdad's Karada district. Just as one culture was being burned and stripped for parts, another was pouring in, prepackaged, to replace it.

One of the U.S. businesses ready and waiting to be the gateway to this experiment in frontier capitalism was New Bridge Strategies, started by Joe Allbaugh, Bush's ex-head of FEMA. It promised to use its top-level political