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Letter From Baghdad

War After The War

What Washington doesn't see in Iraq.

by George Packer

In the shade of a high sandstone arch, a Bradley Fighting Vehicle and a platoon of American soldiers from the 1st Armored Division guard the main point of entry into Baghdad's Green Zone, the heavily fortified area west of the Tigris River from which the Coalition Provisional Authority governs occupied Iraq. The arch was built a few years ago by Saddam Hussein, in imitation of ancient gates that once protected Baghdad from Persian invaders. American soldiers now call it the Assassin's Gate.

Early each morning, before the sun grows dangerous, crowds of Iraqis gather at the Assassin's Gate. Some are job-seekers, others are protesters carrying banners: "PLEASE REOPEN OUR FACTORIES," "WE WISH TO SEE MR. FRAWLEY." Demonstrators bring their causes here and sometimes turn into rioters. People hand out lists naming family members executed by Saddam's regime or carry letters addressed to L. Paul Bremer III, the top civilian administrator in Iraq. With the old order overthrown, the Baath Party authorities purged, and the ministries stripped bare by looters, most Iraqis don't know where to take their grievances and petitions, where to unload the burden of their personal histories. So, like supplicants to the Caliph of ancient Baghdad, they bring them directly to the front gate of the occupation. But few Iraqis have the credentials to enter the Green Zone, and there are few, if any, interpreters at the gate. The Iraqis stand on one side of coils of concertina wire, gesturing and trying to explain why they must get in; on the other side stand American soldiers in body armor, doing twelve-hour shifts of checkpoint duty, keeping them out.

One day in July, a tiny woman in a salmon-colored veil stepped out of the crowd and thrust a handwritten letter at me. She was a schoolteacher, about thirty, with glasses and thick white face powder and an expression so pointedly solemn that she might have been a mime performing grief. Her letter, which was eighteen pages long, requested an audience with "Mister respectable, merciful American ambassador Pawal Bramar." It contained a great deal of detailed advice on the need to arm the Iraqi people so that they could help fight against the guerrilla resistance. The teacher, who was well under five feet tall, wanted permission to carry an AK-47 and work alongside American soldiers against "the beasts" who were trying to restore Saddam or bring Iranian-style oppression. She had drawn up a fake gun permit to illustrate her desire. She was having trouble sleeping, she said, and had all but stopped eating.

A man with a cane hobbled over from the line. His left hand, wrapped in a bandage, was missing the thumb. He explained to the teacher in Arabic that he had been paralyzed in a car accident while fleeing Kuwait at the end of the Gulf War, and that at some point he had lost the piece of paper entitling him to hospital care. Now that the Americans were in charge, he felt emboldened to ask for another copy—and so he had come to the Assassin's Gate. The man, unshaven and wretched-looking, began to cry. The teacher told him not to be sad, to trust in God, and to speak with the American soldiers at the checkpoint. He shuffled back into line.

"Please, sir, can you help me?" the teacher continued. "I must work with Americans, because my psychology is demolished by Saddam Hussein. Not just me. All Iraqis. Psychological demolition."

The Historian

The Coalition Provisional Authority, or C.P.A., is headquartered in the Republican Palace, about a mile beyond the Assassin's Gate, down a road of eucalyptus trees, past bombed state buildings and concrete barriers. The palace, protected by a high iron gate and sandbagged machine-gun positions, is a sprawling two-story office building in the Babylonian-Fascist style favored by Saddam, with Art Deco eagles spanning the doorways. Evenly spaced along the top of the façade are four identical twenty-foot gray busts of Saddam, staring straight ahead, his eyes framed by an imperial helmet. Beneath these Ozymandian tributes, twelve hundred officials of the C.P.A. go about the business of running the country. Getting in to see one of them, a senior adviser to Bremer acknowledged, "is like a jailbreak in reverse." Though it is in the geographical heart of ochre-colored, crumbling Baghdad, the C.P.A. sits in deep isolation. There are legitimate security reasons for this: on November 4th, the compound was hit by mortar fire, and four people were injured.

The Republican Palace is lavishly paved in marble and granite, with mirrored alcoves, gilded faux-Louis XIV furniture, and, in one vast domed room, murals of Scud missiles and the Al Aqsa mosque in a Jerusalem without Jews. Along a second-floor corridor is the office of the C.P.A.'s advisers to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. After the overthrow of the Saddam regime, a thirty-six-year-old American, Andrew P. N. Erdmann, who has a doctorate in history from Harvard, became Iraq's acting Minister of Higher Education.

Drew Erdmann is a rangy, broad-shouldered former rower with a strong chin and short sandy hair parted in the middle; when I met him during a month's stay in Iraq, he had a bushy mustache that turned his face into that of a British colonial official circa 1925. His features and oarsman's physique, together with those double-barrelled middle initials, prepared me for a terse Anglophilic bureaucrat. Instead, Erdmann broods. He speaks in long, reflective sentences that are frequently interrupted by second thoughts and qualifications; he settles into a faster, more explosive rhythm when recounting something that angers him—often, his own conduct. He was getting just a few hours of sleep a night, sharing a cramped trailer on the grounds of the palace. By his own account, he was short-tempered and close to nervous exhaustion.

He had just returned from a meeting at which he'd tried not to humiliate a university president who asked what "operating budget" meant during the fifth or sixth discussion of the subject. Two weeks earlier, on the campus of Baghdad University, Jeffrey Wershow, a twenty-two-year-old soldier from Erdmann's security detail, had been shot dead at point-blank range while waiting for Erdmann to come out of another meeting. Wershow was the seventy-first American soldier in Iraq to have been killed since the overthrow of Saddam. Since then, attacks on coalition forces have doubled—to more than thirty a day—and grown more fierce, sometimes involving car bombs. More than a hundred and fifty soldiers have been killed during the first six months of the occupation, and some twenty-two hundred have been wounded.

I sought out Erdmann in part because his dissertation adviser had been Ernest May, an authority on historical analogies. I was interested in the analogies that Erdmann was carrying around in his head for his new job of nation-building: The British in colonial Iraq? The Americans in postwar Germany? Lying on a cot in the trailer and fiddling with a Swiss Army knife, his feet propped on an Army duffelbag, his desk littered with water bottles, empty packets of Meals Ready to Eat, and unread books on the Middle East, Erdmann flashed a self-mocking grin. "I can't think historically—there've been times when I don't even know what I did forty-eight hours before," he said wryly. "I try. It's like a test for myself. Can I remember what I did the day before? I eventually can, but it takes effort. That's not a good situation. You should be able to remember what you did in the last twenty-four hours."

Hanging on the wall of Erdmann's office was a sign that reminded him of his mission. It read,

> "END STATE: A DURABLE PEACE FOR A UNITED AND STABLE, DEMOCRATIC IRAQ THAT PROVIDES EFFECTIVE AND REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT FOR AND BY THE IRAQI PEOPLE; IS UNDERPINNED BY NEW AND PROTECTED FREEDOMS AND A GROWING MARKET ECONOMY; AND NO LONGER POSES A THREAT TO ITS NEIGHBORS OR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND IS ABLE TO DEFEND ITSELF."

Erdmann believed in this goal, but he was wary of the lofty rhetoric. One of his favorite books, which he was trying to find time to reread in Baghdad, is the French historian Marc Bloch's "Strange Defeat," a firsthand account of the collapse of France in 1940. Bloch served in the French Army in both world wars and then joined the Resistance before his capture, torture, and execution by the Nazis. Erdmann, in talking about his own efforts in Iraq, more than once cited a passage from "Strange Defeat": "The ABC of our profession is to avoid these large abstract terms in order to try to discover behind them the only concrete realities, which are human beings."

The ongoing debate over the war in Iraq has rarely moved beyond abstract terms to take into account the human beings—Iraqis and Americans alike—whose lives are affected by decisions in Washington. To Erdmann, success in Iraq will ultimately depend on the small, concrete actions of individuals on the ground. The psychological demands of the occupation were daunting, he said, and added, "Some people can navigate it, some people can't. Some people can make a mistake and recalibrate, others can't. On both sides." He paused. "So much of this is up to the wisdom of people—their prudence, their judgment."

The Planners

Before arriving in Iraq, in April, Erdmann had done a lot of relevant historical thinking. In his dissertation, "Americans' Search for 'Victory' in the Twentieth Century," he wrote about Americans' growing realization that in a military intervention a careful transition from war to peace is as crucial as battlefield success. "The language that we live with today of 'exit strategy,' and the focus on the 'end game'—that's recent, and part of this historical evolution," he said.

Erdmann received his Ph.D. in 2000, and promptly abandoned an academic career. There is something self-punishing and obsessive in his character. A life spent analyzing military history would be insufficient; he was the sort of academic who had to know how he would do under fire. He wanted to be a good citizen more than a good professor.

In early 2001, Erdmann was about to fly to Kosovo and take the first job he could find—"Anything. Load bags of grain. That's how far away I wanted to get from academia"—when a call came from Richard N. Haass, who had just been named director of policy planning at the State Department. By May, Erdmann was in Washington, working for the Bush Administration. At Harvard, he had been an Eisenhower specialist, and he entered government in the old-fashioned spirit of a political independent. "This is a little too grandiose, but there is a previous tradition in foreign-policy circles of being more nonpartisan, serving the national interest," he said.

In the summer of 2002, when the Administration began leaning toward an invasion of Iraq, Haass asked Erdmann to analyze twentieth-century postwar reconstructions. In fifteen single-spaced classified pages—epic length for a State Department memo—Erdmann applied the ideas in his dissertation to a series of case studies from the two world wars through more recent conflicts such as Bosnia and Kosovo. One of Erdmann's fundamental conclusions was that long-term success depended on international support. In the short run, he explained to me one evening, "the foundation of everything is

security," which partly depended on having sufficient numbers of troops. "You don't have to look too far to see that isn't the case here. And I don't fault the people who are here. There's no way any fault should be put on the kids in the 3rd I.D. or the brigade commanders. The question is, why weren't more people put in? That was the concern of my project—were we prepared to do what it took in the postwar phase?"

Last fall, Secretary of State Colin Powell circulated Erdmann's memo to Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and the national-security adviser, Condoleezza Rice. "Maybe it wasn't read," Erdmann said.

Erdmann's view that rebuilding Iraq would require a significant, sustained effort was echoed by the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. Throughout 2002, sixteen groups of Iraqi exiles, coördinated by a bureau official named Thomas S. Warrick, researched potential problems in postwar Iraq, from the electricity grid to the justice system. The thousands of pages that emerged from this effort, which became known as the Future of Iraq Project, presented a sobering view of the country's physical and human infrastructure—and suggested the need for a long-term, expensive commitment.

The Pentagon also spent time developing a postwar scenario, but, because of Rumsfeld's battle with Powell over foreign policy, it didn't coördinate its ideas with the State Department. The planning was directed, in an atmosphere of near-total secrecy, by Douglas J. Feith, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy, and William Luti, his deputy. According to a Defense Department official, Feith's team pointedly excluded Pentagon officials with experience in postwar reconstructions. The fear, the official said, was that such people would offer pessimistic scenarios, which would challenge Rumsfeld's aversion to using troops as peacekeepers; if leaked, these scenarios might dampen public enthusiasm for the war. "You got the impression in this exercise that we didn't harness the best and brightest minds in a concerted effort," Thomas E. White, the Secretary of the Army during this period, told me. "With the Department of Defense the first issue was 'We've got to control this thing'—so everyone else was suspect." White was fired in April. Feith's team, he said, "had the mind-set that this would be a relatively straightforward, manageable task, because this would be a war of liberation and therefore the reconstruction would be short-lived."

This was the view held by exiles in the Iraqi National Congress, led by Ahmad Chalabi. The exiles told President Bush that Iraqis would receive their liberators with "sweets and flowers." Their advice led policymakers to assume that Iraqi soldiers and policemen would happily transfer their loyalty to the Americans, providing a ready-made security force. "There was a mistaken notion in certain circles in Washington that the Iraqi civil service would remain intact," Barham Salih, the Prime Minister of the Iraqi Kurdish administration and a strong advocate for the overthrow of Saddam, said. A week before the war, he discussed the problem of law and order with a senior member of the Administration. "They were expecting the police to work after liberation," Salih told me. "I said, 'This is not the N.Y.P.D. It's the Iraqi police. The minute the first cruise missile arrives in Baghdad, the police force degenerates and everybody goes home.' "

In the Pentagon's scenario, the responsibility of managing Iraq would quickly be handed off to exiles, led by Chalabi—allowing the U.S. to retain control without having to commit more troops and invest a lot of money. "There was a desire by some in the Vice-President's office and the Pentagon to cut and run from Iraq and leave it up to Chalabi to run it," a senior Administration official told me. "The idea was to put our guy in there and he was going to be so compliant that he'd recognize Israel and all the problems in the Middle East would be solved. He would be our man in Baghdad. Everything would be hunky-dory." The planning was so wishful that it bordered on self-deception. "It isn't pragmatism, it isn't Realpolitik, it isn't conservatism, it isn't liberalism," the official said. "It's theology."

On January 20th, President Bush signed National Security Presidential Directive No. 24, which gave control of postwar Iraq to the Department of Defense. At the end of the month, the Pentagon threw together a team of soldiers and civilians, under the leadership of retired General Jay Garner, in the newly christened Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. ORHA would administer Iraq after the end of hostilities. The war was only seven weeks away.

In 1991, at the end of the Gulf War, Garner had led the largely successful effort to save Kurdish refugees in northern Iraq. Garner and his inner circle of generals and ambassadors essentially used the same template for the war in Iraq. ORHA was divided into three "pillars," as Garner called them: humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, and civil administration. Garner's experience in northern Iraq led him to focus on the potential for a humanitarian disaster: displaced populations, starvation, outbreaks of disease, prisoners of war, and, above all, chemical-weapons attacks. The U.N. was warning of the possibility of half a million deaths. ORHA thoroughly prepared for each of these nightmares—and if any one of them had come to pass Garner's foresight would have been applauded.

But in concentrating on possible emergencies he failed to consider the long view. On February 21st and 22nd, some two hundred officials gathered in an auditorium at the National Defense University, in Washington, for a "rock drill"—a detailed vetting of the plans that had been made so far. The drill struck some participants as ominous.

"I got the sense that the humanitarian stuff was pretty well in place, but the rest of it was flying blind," one ORHA member recalled. "A lot of it was after hearing from Jay Garner, 'We don't have any resources to do this.' " Plans for running the country's ministries were rudimentary; ORHA had done little research. At Douglas Feith's insistence, his former law partner Michael Mobbs was named the head of the civil-administration team. According to Garner and others, Mobbs never gelled with his new colleagues. Yet this "pillar" would turn out to be the one that mattered most.

During the rock drill, Gordon W. Rudd, a professor from the Marine Corps's Command and Staff College, who had been assigned to Garner's team as a historian, noticed that a man sitting four rows in front of him kept interjecting comments during other people's presentations. "At first, he annoyed me," Rudd said. "Then I realized he was better informed than we were. He had worked the topics, while the guy onstage was a rookie."

It was Tom Warrick, the coördinator of the State Department's Future of Iraq Project, and his frustrations had just begun. Two weeks after the rock drill, after a meeting at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld asked Garner, "Do you have a guy named Warrick on your team?" Rumsfeld ordered Garner to remove Warrick from ORHA, adding, "This came from such a high level I can't say no." Warrick, who had done as much thinking about postwar Iraq as any other American official, never went to Baghdad.

The war between State and Defense continues: For months, Feith's office has held up the appointment of other senior State Department officials to the C.P.A., even as the organization remains fifty per cent understaffed. The reports of the Future of Iraq Project were archived. In Baghdad, I met an Iraqi-American lawyer named Sermid Al-Sarraf, who had served on the project's transitional-justice working group. He was carrying a copy of its two-hundred-and-fifty-page report, trying to interest C.P.A. officials. Nobody seemed to have read it.

The Administration was remarkably adept at muffling its own internal tensions. On only two occasions did dissenting views become public. The first was on the subject of money: a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* quoted Lawrence Lindsey, the President's chief economic adviser, floating a figure of up to two hundred billion dollars for the war and the reconstruction. This was at odds with the Administration's projection—stated publicly by Vice-President Cheney and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz—that the cost of reconstruction would be largely covered by Iraqi oil revenue. By April,

the White House had requested only $2.4 billion for postwar rebuilding.

The second rift was over troop deployment. In February, General Eric Shinseki, the Army's chief of staff, testified before the Senate that the occupation of Iraq would require several hundred thousand troops. This prediction prompted Wolfowitz to get on the phone with Thomas White, the Army Secretary. "He was agitated that we in the Army didn't get it," White recalled. "He didn't give arguments or reasons. Their view was that it was going to go the way they said it was going to go." Two days later, Wolfowitz appeared before the House Budget Committee and said that so high an estimate was "wildly off the mark." He explained, "It's hard to conceive that it would take more forces to provide stability in post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his Army. Hard to imagine."

On March 16th, three days before the first bombs fell on Baghdad, a hundred and sixty-nine ORHA members flew to Kuwait. Among them was Drew Erdmann.

Though he had left academia behind, Erdmann's reasons for going to Iraq were, in a sense, professional. "My analysis was that we really are at a turning point in history," he told me in Baghdad. "I had a particular historical perspective. I felt that this was a defining event which, good or bad, would have an impact for the next decade. If it went badly, the consequences would be worse than Vietnam. And, second, the postwar phase was going to be the most important." Before heading to Iraq, Erdmann had to justify his plans to his wife, who was skeptical of the need for war. "I knew if I didn't go I'd always regret it," he said. "And my wife did, too. She knew that my regret would be corrosive."

Erdmann asked to join the civil-administration team, led by Mobbs. By the time he reached the beachfront villas in Kuwait where ORHA had set up operations, Mobbs's team was in disarray. They were getting more information about the fighting in Iraq from CNN than from Washington, and nobody even had an "org" chart of the Iraqi ministries. Garner had decided to divide Iraq into three (later four) administrative zones, which meant that ORHA's maps bore no relation to the country's eighteen governorates.

Gordon Rudd, the military historian, was worried enough to speak to Garner. "I said, 'We're not putting enough attention on civil administration.' And he said, in so many words, 'Gordon, that can wait—we've got to focus on humanitarian assistance.' He was thinking about saving lives, not reforming Iraq. And at the time that made perfect sense."

"I really like Jay Garner," one ORHA member told me. "But I never got from him what the vision was and what we were going to do. To the extent that I did, it didn't seem remotely realistic to me—that we would be going in there for three months and we would get everything in order and we would be done."

In Kuwait, Erdmann and some others felt so undirected that they began looking for tasks. Together they drew up a list of sixteen key sites around Baghdad that the military should secure and protect upon the fall of the city. At the top of the list was the Central Bank. No. 2 was the Iraqi Museum. "Symbolic importance," Erdmann explained. The Ministry of Oil was last.

On March 26th, the list went to the military war planners at Camp Doha, near the Iraqi border. Two weeks later, as Baghdad fell and intense looting began, Erdmann and the others went to Camp Doha to find out what had happened to their list. They met with a young British officer. "He's sitting there on the stool in front, in his British desert cammies," Erdmann recalled. "And he's, like, 'Well, you know, I just became aware of this big stack of stuff that you ORHA guys did yesterday.' " The list had fallen into a bureaucratic gap—and now Erdmann was watching on television as the Iraqi Museum was looted and the ministries were burned.

One day during the war, Albert Cevallos, at the time a contractor with the United States Agency for International Development, was standing with a group of civil-affairs

officers at the Iraq-Kuwait border. One officer asked him, "What's the plan for policing?"

Cevallos's job was in the field of human rights. "I thought you knew the plan," he said.

"No, we thought *you* knew."

"Haven't you talked to ORHA?"

"No, no one talked to us."

Cevallos wanted to run away. "It was like a Laurel and Hardy routine," he said. "What happened to the plans? This is like the million-dollar question that I can't figure out."

Timothy Carney, a career foreign-service officer who was called out of retirement by Wolfowitz to join Mobbs's team, said that the military simply didn't understand ORHA's importance. "It was as if these guys didn't have a clue what Jay Garner was about," he said. "There was no priority given to the essential aspects of our mission."

Erdmann was impatient with any facile condemnation of the planning effort. When I mentioned that, in 1944, the United States military had produced a four-hundred-page manual for the occupation of Germany, he retorted that, given the available lead time, a fairer comparison would be with the wartime occupation of French North Africa, which was so beset with problems that it nearly cost General Eisenhower his job. Erdmann reminded me that, in the case of Iraq, doing any planning at all was a delicate matter. The Administration had to prepare for the effects of a war it was still claiming it wanted to avoid.

"How much diplomacy would there have been at the U.N. if people had said, 'The President is pulling people out of the Departments of Agriculture and Commerce to take over the whole Iraqi state'?" Erdmann said. "That's the political logic that works against advance planning."

But the haste and confusion of the planning, the determination to keep grim forecasts out of public view, the groundless assumptions, the desire to do it on the cheap—all this left Erdmann and his colleagues poorly prepared for what awaited them when they finally reached Baghdad, on April 23rd.

"Freedom's Untidy"

An infantry captain in Baghdad gave me his war log for the months of March, April, and May. The days leading up to the city's fall are crowded with incidents. But immediately after April 9th, when the statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down, the entries turn brief: "Nothing significant to report, stayed at airport all day doing maintenance and recovery operations." Meanwhile, the city's leading institutions were being plundered.

It remains a mystery why American forces did so little to stop the looting. Martial law was not declared; it was days before a curfew was imposed throughout the city. It was as if the fall of Baghdad were the military's only objective. At a Pentagon news conference, Rumsfeld regarded the chaos with equanimity. "Freedom's untidy," he said. "Free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things."

The economic cost of the looting was estimated at twelve billion dollars. The ruined buildings, the lost equipment, the destroyed records, and the damaged infrastructure continue to hamper the reconstruction. But on a more profound level the looting meant that Iraqis' first experience of freedom was disorder and violence. The arrival of the Americans therefore unleashed new fears, even as it brought an end to political terror. The Administration had naïvely concluded that an imprisoned and brutalized population would respond to its release by gratefully setting up a democratic society. There was no contingency for psychological demolition. What had been left out of the planning was the Iraqis themselves.

"The state disappeared," Erdmann said. "Mostly, either the people melted away or the institutions were melted down by them." By the time Erdmann and his colleagues moved into the Republican Palace, which was without doors or windows or electricity or water, with half an inch of fine desert dust coating everything, they were already months behind schedule.

Iraqis, who had been taught by Saddam that individual initiative could be fatal, were waiting to be told what would come next; and no one told them. Many reacted to the vacuum with a kind of paralysis. "People just stopped doing everything that they would normally do," an ORHA official recalled. In late April, a man in a Shia neighborhood approached Noah Feldman, a law professor at New York University, who had come to Iraq as a constitutional adviser, and asked him who was in charge. Nobody seemed to know.

"We were incompetent, as far as they were concerned," Feldman said. "The key to it all was the looting. That was when it was clear that there was no order. There's an Arab proverb: Better forty years of oppression than one day of anarchy." He added, "That also told them they could fight against us—that we were not a serious force."

In the last week of April, American officials met with three hundred and fifty Iraqis in the Baghdad Convention Center to discuss the country's future. Garner was asked by a tribal sheikh, "Who's in charge of our politics?"

"*You're* in charge," Garner answered.

The audience gasped. An American who was present said, "I later realized they were losing faith in us by the second."

Upon his arrival in Baghdad, Erdmann joined an effort to find the highest-ranking officials "still left standing" from the Saddam regime—if only to fire them. But the ministries had been stripped of everything, including the urinals and pipes. Simply getting out of the palace was difficult, with few military escorts available. Progress depended almost entirely on random encounters in the city between American officials and Iraqi bureaucrats. "You had Iraqis just showing up at work, hoping that someone from the coalition would stop at their ministry, and saying, 'Welcome. Take me to your leader,' " Erdmann recalled, laughing. "No joke! It was like, 'I represent the Grand Galactic Federation.' " He cupped his hands around his mouth to make a ghostly echo. " '*Who are you*? *And what is your position*?' Then they'd tell you their job, and then it's like, 'What the hell is that?' "

Owing to the tightfistedness of the Office of Management and Budget, in Washington, Erdmann and his colleagues initially had roughly twenty-five thousand dollars for each devastated Iraqi ministry. Getting the money required grant applications that took several weeks for approval. (This process was later streamlined.) "To do reconstruction, you need to have the ability to deliver resources right away," Erdmann said. "People in a desperate situation need help. Boy, that's a blindingly obvious insight! The next thing is that if you're not giving them help they're going to go somewhere else."

After spending just twenty-four hours in the capital, Jay Garner flew north to Kurdish territory, where he was acclaimed as a hero. He met with the two Kurdish leaders, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, to discuss the political handoff. The Kurds and the opposition leaders who had been in exile, including Ahmad Chalabi, would form a provisional government in Baghdad, along with a few "internals"—Iraqis from inside the country. When these pro-Western Iraqis took charge, the Americans could slough off some responsibility without giving up power.

Garner recently spoke with me in his office at the defense-contracting company he now heads near the Pentagon. I asked him if these political moves had been directed by Defense officials. "I never got a call from anybody saying, 'Don't do that,' " Garner said. "You follow me?"

But Chalabi short-circuited the plan. According to an Iraqi politician who was close to the negotiations, Chalabi, along with the Shiite leader Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, who was killed in an August car bombing, resisted Garner's idea of including internals—and anyone else who might diminish their power. "They wanted basically to control who would be there," the Iraqi politician said.

Chalabi's obstructionism ultimately didn't matter. The handoff scenario that had been hatched in Washington was disintegrating even as Garner was trying to carry it out. "The exiles made a big mistake, thinking that they could ride an American tank into Baghdad and gain legitimacy. It just doesn't work that way," the Iraqi politician said. Chalabi and the seven-hundred-man militia of the Iraqi National Congress, which commandeered choice properties upon arrival in Baghdad, were not acclaimed by their compatriots. ("They may have looked like a bit of a warlord group," Gordon Rudd said. "I told that to Garner. He said, 'Gordon, I don't like that word.' ") Making matters worse, the police and the Army had not defected; they had disappeared. Criminal gangs proliferated throughout the city.

"All of this was funnelled up to Feith," a senior Administration official said, "and from Feith to Rumsfeld, and they had a come-to-Jesus meeting and said, 'We've got to change things fast.' "

In late April, Rumsfeld called Garner to tell him that the veteran diplomat L. Paul Bremer would be replacing him. It was a tacit admission that the situation in Iraq was out of control. In an interview, Feith insisted that Garner's removal was routine and signalled no change of policy. He also denied that the Administration had been intent on transferring power to Chalabi. "The idea that we had a rigid plan for the political transition is a mistake," he said. "We developed concepts, policy guidelines—for example, organize as much authority as possible in Iraqi hands. That is a policy guideline. But, as for specific names and timetables and rules, nobody here presumed to dictate that, because you can't possibly know that. That's like trying to tell a local commander in advance of the battle exactly how many people to put where as the fighting proceeds. Nobody can work with a plan that rigid. Nobody here in Washington is micromanaging."

But Bremer suggested that his appointment was marked "Urgent." "I had ten days to get ready to come here," he told me in Baghdad. A former diplomat who had served under Republican Presidents before becoming the managing director of Henry Kissinger's consulting firm, Bremer was acceptable to Rumsfeld; his selection represented a brief truce in the war between Defense and State. By mid-May, he had taken Garner's place. Garner had worn shirtsleeves and insisted on being called Jay; his successor wore a suit and was referred to as Ambassador Bremer. ORHA was dissolved into the Coalition Provisional Authority, and Bremer, with the status of a Presidential envoy, the legal imprimatur of a U.N. Security Council resolution, and the command authority that Garner never had, let it be known that he was in control. The Iraqi Army was promptly abolished, all members of the top four levels of the Baath Party were expelled from government service, Chalabi's militia was disarmed, and the formation of a provisional government was stopped cold. There was even talk of shooting looters, though it didn't happen.

The Defense Department, which was predicting in early May that troop levels would be down to thirty thousand by the end of the summer, extended the deployment of battle-weary divisions indefinitely. What had been envisaged as a swift liberation had become a prolonged occupation.

To this day, key policymakers maintain their faith in the Pentagon's original plan. According to a senior Administration official, not long ago in Washington, Cheney approached Powell, stuck a finger in his chest, and said, "If you hadn't opposed the I.N.C. and Chalabi, we wouldn't be in this mess." But one Pentagon official acknowledged that his agency was responsible for the debacle. "It was ridiculous," he said. "Rummy and Wolfowitz and Feith did not believe the U.S. would need to run post-conflict Iraq. Their

plan was to turn it over to these exiles very quickly and let them deal with the messes that came up. Garner was a fall guy for a bad strategy. He was doing exactly what Rummy wanted him to do. It was the strategy that failed."

The Captain

In April, CNN aired footage of a marine in Baghdad who is confronted with a crowd of angry Iraqis. He shouts back in frustration, "We're here for your fucking freedom!"

In the months following the overthrow of Saddam, tens of thousands of soldiers who thought they would be home by June saw their departures postponed again and again. They are now the occupation's most visible face. Combat engineers trained to blow up minefields sit through meetings of the Baghdad water department; airborne troops who jump in and out of missions spend months setting up the Kirkuk police department; soldiers of the 3rd Infantry Division who spearheaded the invasion pass out textbooks in a Baghdad girls' school. The peacekeeping missions in the Balkans gave some of them a certain amount of preparation, but there was little training for the concerted effort now required of soldiers in Iraq. Ray Jennings, a policy consultant who spent several months in Iraq, told me that he encountered officers running midsized cities who said, "I'm doing the best I can, but I don't know how to do this, I don't have a manual. You got a manual?" A civil-affairs captain asked Albert Cevallos for training in "Robert's Rules of Order 101." Rumsfeld's nightmare of an army of nation-builders has come to pass in Iraq.

The captain who showed me his war log was a company commander named John Prior. He is a twenty-nine-year-old from Indiana, six feet tall and stringy. His youthful face, deadpan sarcasm, and bouncy slew-footed stride do not prepare you for his toughness.

"Some people are just born to do something," Prior said. By his own account, he loves Army life, the taking and giving of orders. "The sappy reasons people say they're in the military—those are the reasons I'm in," he said. "When the Peace Corps can't quite get it done and diplomacy fails and McDonald's can't build enough franchises to win Baghdad over, that's when the military comes in."

His unit, Charlie Company of the 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, is now based at the Iraqi military academy in south Baghdad. (His soldiers' sleeping quarters are festooned with crêpe-paper decorations from the last Ramadan.) The academy is next to the bombed ruins of a vast military camp and airfield that have become home to five thousand displaced people, looters, and petty criminals. After the fall of Baghdad, it took two and a half months for Prior's company to arrive at its current location. During their odyssey in central Iraq, Prior and his men came to realize that what President Bush, on May 1st, had called the end of "major combat operations" was just the beginning.

Charlie Company's first mission after the fall of Baghdad sent Prior west to the town of Ramadi, to retrieve the body of Veronica Cabrera, an Argentine journalist who had been killed in a highway accident. Prior and his soldiers were the first conventional forces to enter Ramadi, which was becoming a center of Baathist resistance. The company was asked by Special Forces and the C.I.A. to stay on for a few days and help patrol the town. They promptly found themselves in the middle of an anti-American riot, with insults, fruit, shoes, two-by-fours, rocks, and, finally, chunks of concrete flying at them. The Americans didn't shoot and no one was seriously injured; in his log Prior commends his soldiers for their restraint. In the following days in Ramadi, and then in the nearby town of Fallujah, Prior records a series of successful raids on houses and weapons markets. He expresses pride in his soldiers' resourcefulness. Then something new and strange enters the margins of his account: Iraqis.

In Ramadi, a man who speaks broken English around other Iraqis suddenly pulls Prior aside and whispers in flawless English, "I am an American, take me with you."

When Prior tries to learn more, the man reverts to broken English and then clams up. Another man on another day approaches a soldier and, speaking perfect English, warns him not to trust Iraqis—that things are not what they seem. He disappears before the soldier can get more information. Prior and his first sergeant, Mark Lahan, track down the man at home with his family. Now using broken English, the man tells them that everything is fine.

In another mysterious incident, an Iraqi approaches Lahan and abruptly asks, "How are things in Baghdad? Have there been any suicide bombings? Have any Americans been killed?" Soon afterward, the guerrilla war starts.

"The entire situation seemed very weird," Prior writes on April 26th, after five days in Ramadi. "It is clear now that they are not as happy as they say that we are here. For the first time in a while, I felt extremely nervous being in such close proximity to Iraqi nationals." In another entry, from Fallujah, he writes, "The Iraqis are an interesting people. None of them have weapons, none of them know where weapons are, all the bad people have left Fallujah, and they only want life to be normal again. Unfortunately, our compound was hit by R.P.G."—rocket-propelled-grenade—"fire today, so I am not inclined to believe them."

Prior was among the first soldiers to encounter the hidden nature of things in an Iraq that was neither at war nor at peace. Firepower and good intentions would be less important than learning to read the signs. Iraqis, no longer forming the cheering crowds that had greeted the company on its way up to Baghdad, were now going to play an intimate role in Prior's life.

The raids in Ramadi and Fallujah lasted almost a month; then Charlie Company was recalled to Baghdad. There Captain Prior's log ends. "We put trouble down, we left," he told me. "Trouble came again."

Charlie Company spent its first month back in Baghdad billeted at the zoo. The soldiers had been there in mid-April, on a mission to escort a truckload of produce and frozen meat ("A gift from the Kuwaiti people to the Iraqi people") for the few animals that had survived firefights and were too dangerous or worthless to steal. I visited the zoo several times, and the experience was always upsetting. It was the one place in Iraq where Saddam's regime seemed still to exist. "It was not a zoo, but more of an animal prison," Prior notes in his log. "Small cages, closely packed, no attempt to give the animals any sense of natural setting." Dogs and puppies, favorites of Saddam, lay panting in sweltering cells next to a catatonic blind bear that had mutilated its own chest. (Some of the dogs had been fed to the lions during the war, when food supplies ran out.) The soldiers who took control of the zoo in April found a baboon loose on the grounds; it proved harmless to them, but when one of the zookeepers, who had been hiding in his office, was brought out the animal flew into a rage and attacked him, so that the soldiers had to shoot the baboon to save the Baathist.

Bremer's C.P.A., needing a public-relations victory, refurbished the zoo and reopened it to the public in July, with great fanfare; the cost was close to a half million dollars. On a subsequent visit, I found the place, which had been popular before the war, desolate and nearly abandoned. It was surrounded by American checkpoints, which discouraged families from visiting. In September, a group of soldiers at the zoo got drunk after hours, and one of them reached into the cage of a Bengal tiger with a piece of meat; when his hand started to disappear into the tiger's mouth, one of his buddies shot the animal. The Baghdad Zoo seemed to combine the cruelty and injustice of the old regime with some of the stupidity and carelessness of the new.

Charlie Company spent a month establishing security in the area near the zoo and setting up a neighborhood council. Then, in late June, the company was moved again—to the military academy in south Baghdad—because its zone of control did not coincide with Baghdad's administrative districts. "We'd made friends there," Prior recalled. Pack-

ing up again, he said, "was not that cool." He added dryly, "We'd been planning this war since freaking 12 September, and it might have helped if someone had drawn a map before the war and figured out where everyone went."

According to the brigade's original calendar, Baghdad's infrastructure would be rebuilt in August, elections would take place in September, and the soldiers would leave the city in October. This brisk forecast was soon abandoned, of course. Because of confused planning, it wasn't until August that Charlie Company's activities began to yield tangible benefits for Iraqis. And there was no time to lose. Throughout the summer, electric power operated sporadically, violence of all kinds kept rising, and Iraqis who could have been won over to the American side were steadily lost.

One morning, I sat in the base-camp canteen with Prior, First Sergeant Lahan, and their translator, Numan Al-Nima, a gray-haired former engineer with Iraqi Airways. Prior opened a coalition map of Baghdad's security zones and showed me the piece of the city he "owns": a rectangle of Zafaraniya, a largely Shiite slum in south Baghdad. Roughly two hundred and fifty thousand people live in the area. Prior chairs the new neighborhood council and is in charge of small reconstruction projects such as renovating schools; he's also responsible for sewage and trash disposal in his battalion's zone, which contains half a million people.

"Infrastructure is the key now," Prior said more than once. "If these people have electricity, water, food, the basics of life, they're less likely to attack." Sewage, Prior realized, was the front line of nation-building. When I met him, in early August, Prior was trying to get two hundred thousand dollars into the hands of Iraqi contractors as fast as he could.

"Show us something," the translator urged Prior. "People are hungry, starving. They don't believe they got rid of Saddam. If they got rid of Saddam, give me something to eat. That's why people hate Americans. We don't hate them because they are Americans. It is because they are the superpower, but where is the super power?"

We went out into the streets of Zafaraniya, travelling in the usual two-Humvee convoy, complete with gunners. Captain Prior's mission that morning was to visit nine pumping stations, which directed the district's untreated sewage into the Tigris and the Diala Rivers. To study a Shiite slum's sewage is to understand that Saddam reduced those parts of Iraq he didn't favor to the level of Kinshasa or Manila. Green ponds of raw waste, eighteen inches deep, blocked the roads between apartment houses where children played. The open ditches that were the area's drainage system were overflowing.

"How foolish of me not to realize that the open sludge flowing past the children is the way the system is supposed to work," Prior remarked. A complete overhaul of the system was not his immediate priority. "I'm going to support their open-sewage sludge line and get it flowing," he said. The heat rose, the streets stank, and Prior moved in battle gear at such a businesslike pace that two engineers from another battalion struggled to keep up. Each of the pumping stations, in various states of disrepair, was maintained and guarded by an Iraqi family that lived in a hovel on the premises, tended a lush vegetable garden, and kept an AK-47. Prior had never studied civil engineering—and he reminded me that his unit contained no city planners—but he already seemed to have mastered the inner workings of the Zafaraniya sewer system. Lahan told me, "People have said the Army's done this before, in '45 with Japan and Germany. Unfortunately, none of those people are in the Army anymore, so we have to figure it out ourselves."

With Prior, there were no earnest attempts to win hearts and minds over multiple cups of tea. He was all brisk practicality, and the Iraqis he worked with, who always had more to say than Prior gave them time for, seemed to respect him. "I will get you the money," he told a grizzled old man who was explaining at length that his pump was broken. "Six thousand U.S.? Yeah, yeah, great. Get started."

Later, we visited Zafaraniya's gas station, another of Prior's responsibilities. Initially, he had devoted his energy to getting customers to wait in orderly lines. "In a lot of ways, you're trying to teach them a new way of doing things," he said. " 'Teach' might be the wrong word—they're capable, competent, intelligent people. We're just giving them a different way to solve certain problems."

Prior's mission that day was to settle a price dispute between the gas-station managers and the community, which was represented by several neighborhood council members. A meeting took place in the gas-station managers' cramped back office, equipped with an underperforming air-conditioner. The council members wanted three hundred litres of diesel set aside every week for neighborhood generators. The managers wanted written permission from the Ministry of Oil.

The council members pulled out authorizations signed by various American officers. Prior tried to move the discussion along, but the Iraqis kept arguing, until it became clear that the problem went beyond a dispute over diesel. One of the most hierarchical, top-down state systems on earth had been wiped out almost overnight, and no new system had yet taken its place. The neighborhood councils are imperfect embryos of local democracy. Confused, frustrated Iraqis turn to the Americans, who seem to have all the power and money; the Americans, who don't see themselves as occupiers, try to force the Iraqis to work within their own institutions, but those institutions have been largely dismantled.

Flies were landing on Prior's brush cut. "Guys, we've been talking about this for twenty minutes," he said to the council members. "Do what I say. Go to the Oil Ministry. Just do it—just be done with it. Then you won't have to have slips of paper and we won't have to have this conversation."

Everyone was getting irritated. One of the council members told Prior that other Iraqis suspected them of making millions of dinars off public service. They were considered collaborators; their lives had been threatened.

Prior changed his tone and lowered the pressure. "I would tell all of you candidly that you have a very tough job," he said. "We are not paying you, your people are angry and frustrated, and I know they take out their anger on you, and I really thank you for what you're doing. They may not understand or appreciate it now, but I'm telling you, your efforts, they're what are going to transform this country."

There was a commotion outside the office—loud, accusatory voices. Prior put on his helmet and flak vest, grabbed his rifle, and went out to the pumps. Customers had left their vehicles, a crowd had formed, and it was getting ugly enough that the soldiers who had been waiting by the Humvees were trying to intervene. Amid the shouting, Prior established that an employee of the Oil Ministry had come to collect diesel samples from each of the pumps for routine testing. One of the council members was accusing him of stealing benzene.

"No accusations!" Prior said. "Let's go see."

The crowd followed him under the blinding sun to the ministry employee's truck. Five metal jerricans stood in back. Prior opened the first can with the air of making a point and sniffed: "Diesel." He opened the second: "Diesel." As he unscrewed the cap on the third jerrican and bent over to smell it, hot diesel fuel sprayed in his face.

Everyone fell silent. Prior stood motionless with the effort to control himself. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed them with his fingers. The fuel was on his helmet, his flak vest. A sergeant rushed over with bottled water. Then the chorus of shouts rose again.

"Everybody shut up!" Prior yelled. "I'm going to solve this. What is the problem? No accusations." His face wet, he began to interrogate the accusing council member, who now looked sheepish.

"How do you know someone gave him benzene? This is a great object lesson, everybody!" Prior was speaking to the crowd now, as his translator frantically rendered the

lesson in Arabic. "You came out here and said this guy's a thief, and everybody's angry and he's going to get fired—and now you're backing down."

"It wasn't just an accusation," the council member said. "The guy drove up on the wrong side—"

"But what proof do you have that he did it? Wait! Hold on! I'm trying to make a point here. How would you like it if my soldiers broke into your house because your neighbors said you have rocket-propelled grenades, and I didn't see them but I broke into your house—how would you feel? Stop accusing people, for the love of God!"

"I caught him red-handed," the council member insisted.

"No, you didn't."

"O.K., no problem."

Prior wasn't letting it go. "There is a problem: the problem is that you people accuse each other without proof! *That's* the problem."

Prior's treatise on evidence-gathering and due process ended. The crowd dispersed, and the meeting resumed inside. Prior tried to laugh off the incident. "Who doesn't like diesel in their eyes?" he joked. Later, he told me, "I wish I hadn't lost my temper. It wasn't the diesel—it was the way they kept bickering."

That afternoon, two of the council members, Ahmed Ogali and Abdul Jabbar Doweich, invited me for lunch. Both men were poor, and neither had a home he was proud of, so we ate chicken and rice in the living room of Ogali's brother-in-law. Ogali, a thirty-three-year-old gym teacher, said, "Today was a small problem. If I told you about our problems, you wouldn't believe it. They exhaust us." Both men were working without pay—they couldn't even get cell phones or travel money from the C.P.A. "Prior is doing more than his best," Ogali said. "But he's also controlled by his leaders."

Doweich, an unemployed father of four, had spent eight years in prison under Saddam for belonging to an Islamist political party. He still hoped for an Islamic state in the future—as did eighty per cent of Iraqis, he added.

"That's his personal opinion," Ogali interrupted. "It's not eighty per cent."

For now, Doweich saw working with Captain Prior on the neighborhood council as the best way to serve his country. The expectations of Iraqis were falling on the council members' heads, and Doweich believed that, at levels well above Prior, American officials had no interest in solving problems.

"The people are watching," Ogali said. "When I come back at night, they're waiting. They want to know what we're doing. Last week, I told them about the schools, the sewer projects. They were happy—but these are very old projects, they were promised for a long time."

Doweich suggested that the Americans give a hundred dollars to every Iraqi family. That would take the edge off people's frustration. "I can't say why the Americans don't do these things," he said. "Iraqis have trouble understanding Americans."

Ogali said that, sadly, the reverse was also true. The Americans, he told me, "came here to do a job, and that's what they'll do. Iraqis work closely with them, but they don't try to understand us."

American soldiers have a phrase for the Iraqis' habit of turning one another in. Prior once used it: "These people dime each other out like there's no tomorrow." With these betrayals, Iraqis play on soldiers' fears and ignorance, pulling them into private feuds that the Americans have no way of adjudicating.

The night after the meeting at the gas station, Prior and a few dozen soldiers from Charlie Company went out in two Humvees and two Bradleys to look for a suspected fedayeen militiaman. For such missions, Prior used a different translator: a strapping young guy with an aggressive manner. I expected to see the rougher side of Prior and Charlie Company that night—these were soldiers, after all, not civil engineers.

The suspected fedayeen happened to be named Saddam Hussein, and he was High Value Target No. 497. It would be the Americans' second visit to his house. The tip had come from a plump informant whom Prior called Operative Chunky Love, and whose intelligence had already tagged three men in the neighborhood, including his brother-in-law. Tonight, Chunky Love was supposed to show up at his sister's house, near Saddam Hussein's, in an orange garbage truck loaded with weapons—a sting operation. Lahan warned me, "Out of a hundred tips we've gotten from Iraqi intelligence, one has worked out."

Recently, Prior had experienced what he called an epiphany. He and his soldiers were searching a man's house on what turned out to be a false accusation. "And I just realized—we're on top," he said. "Rome fell, and Greece fell, and I thought, I like being an American. I like being on top, and you don't stay on top unless there's people willing to defend it." It was a feeling not of triumph but of clarity—and a limited kind of empathy. "I thought, What if someone did this to my family? I'd be pissed. And what if I couldn't do anything about it? And I thought, I don't want this to happen to me or my family, and we need to maintain superiority as the No. 1 superpower."

Tonight's target was a village along a dirt road, on a peninsula where the Diala River doubles back on itself. At sunset, Prior pulled up before a yard where a cow was grazing. A middle-aged woman came to the gate. She was the sister of Saddam Hussein and the wife of one of the men picked up on Prior's last visit.

"Saddam Hussein?" she said. "The President? He's not here." She laughed nervously. Prior did not; his dry humor was not in evidence tonight. "Saddam Hussein moved out with his wife and children," she said. "I don't know where they went."

"She's lying," the translator told Prior, in a thuggish tone. Prior told the woman that he wanted to search the house. A younger woman who looked ill was trying to calm a crying baby.

The search of the bedroom turned up nothing: pictures of a young man with his girlfriend, love notes, Arab girlie photographs.

I went back into the living room, which was nearly bare except for a television. An old Egyptian movie was on, without sound. The woman with the baby was retching in the doorway. Speaking Arabic, the middle-aged woman exclaimed, "We were happy when you Americans came to get rid of the dictator—and now here you are searching our house." Her two sons, about six and ten, were standing against a wall and staring at the soldiers. They would never forget this, I thought—big strangers in uniforms, with guns, who had already come once and taken away their father, speaking a strange language, walking through their home, removing things from closets.

The bedroom that Prior had searched turned out to be the wrong one. Saddam Hussein's bedroom was locked, and the woman couldn't produce a key. A soldier arrived with an axe; three blows with the blunt end broke open the door. The younger woman's retching grew louder. This search, too, was fruitless. Saddam Hussein was long gone.

Night had fallen while we were inside. As we left, the translator taunted the woman: he said her brother was wanted because his name was Saddam Hussein. When Prior heard this, he snapped, "Tell her the truth—he's wanted for being fedayeen." By morning, I was sure, the translator's remark would have made its way around the neighborhood as an example of American justice—baseless arrest, accusation without proof.

The woman brought up her husband's case. Why had he been taken away?

"Because he's fedayeen," Prior said. "He's Baath Party."

"No! No! No!"

"Tell her he's in detention," Prior instructed the translator. "That if he's guilty he'll be kept there. If he's not, he'll be processed and released." (A few days later, he was let go.)

Out on the road, Prior shone his flashlight on an old man sitting on the ground. "Why did you lie to me last time we were here and say he was just gone for the day?

Tell Saddam Hussein that he's a fugitive from coalition justice, and when he returns he should turn himself in to coalition forces immediately. Let's go, we're out of here."

We drove farther down the road and parked in front of a tall hedge. The house behind the hedge was owned by Chunky Love's sister. Prior and another soldier moved along the hedge under the palm trees and a full moon. Prior called out into the silence, "*Salaam alaikum*"—"Peace be with you."

The translator turned to me. "Like Vietnam."

I was having the same thought. I knew that it was a limited analogy, more useful for polemic than for insight, but at the moment Iraq *did* feel like Vietnam. The Americans were moving half blind in an alien landscape, missing their quarry and leaving behind frightened women and boys with memories.

There was no sign of Chunky Love or his orange garbage truck full of weapons. His sister hadn't seen him in a month; when she did, she told the translator, she would kill him for turning in her husband.

Prior realized that he'd been pulled into a family feud. The sister was told that her husband would be released. Prior called this the "hearts-and-minds moment," but the sister did not look grateful.

"What do you think, First Sergeant?" Prior asked Lahan on the way back to the base.

"I think we should disassociate ourselves from any information from Chunky Love," Lahan said. Operative Chunky Love had gone from informant to fugitive.

Prior marvelled over how many flatly contradictory stories he had heard from the same people during his two visits to the neighborhood. He admitted that he would never get to the bottom of them all. "I'm not freaking Sherlock Holmes," he said. Then he deadpanned, "I'm just an average guy, trying to get by."

Later, I asked Prior whether his night work threatened to undo the good accomplished by his day work. He didn't think so: as the sewage started to flow and the schools got fixed up, Iraqis would view Americans the way the Americans see themselves—as people trying to help.

Others at Prior's base are less sanguine. His battalion is under serious strain: In their first six months of deployment, some soldiers had only three days off. Others are stretched so thin that, one soldier told me, they've been reporting "ghost patrols" back to headquarters—logging in scheduled patrols that didn't actually take place. Prior wants to make a career in the Army, but many other junior officers plan to quit after their current tour. Alcohol use, which is illegal for soldiers stationed in Iraq, has become widespread, and there have been three suicides in other battalions at the base.

At the end of a four-day patrol rotation, relations between young Americans and the Iraqis tend to deteriorate, according to one officer, into "guys kicking dogs, yelling at grown men twenty years older than they are, and pushing kids into parked cars to keep them from following and bothering them." In September, soldiers in a platoon from Charlie Company were accused of beating up Iraqi prisoners. All the soldiers suffer from the stress of heat, long days, lack of sleep, homesickness, the constant threat of attack (about which they are fundamentally fatalistic), and the simple fact that there are nowhere near enough of them to do the tasks they've been given.

For some reason, this last point continues to be controversial in Washington. Rumsfeld echoes his generals' assurances that no additional American divisions are needed. Meanwhile, Iraq's borders remain basically undefended and its highways unpatrolled; tons of munitions lie around the country unguarded. Overburdened soldiers have begun to lose hope even as their work begins to show results.

One soldier at Prior's base recently wrote me a lengthy e-mail:

> The reason why morale sucks is because of the senior leadership, the brigade

> and division commanders, and probably the generals at the Pentagon and Central Command too, all of whom seem to be insulated from what is going on at the ground level. Either that or they are unwilling to hear the truth of things, or (and this is the most likely), they do know what is going on, but they want to get promoted so badly that they're willing to screw over soldiers by being unwilling to face the problem of morale, so they continue pushing the soldiers to do more with less because Rummy wants them to get us out of here quickly. These people are like serious alcoholics unwilling to admit there even is a problem.

His letter concluded:

> There are great things we're doing here, much has already been done, yet much more remains to be accomplished, and what we need now is the money, people, and most importantly, time to do it. We'll win, that's for sure, and this won't be another Vietnam; I truly believe that.

In early November, Captain Prior spoke with me on the phone from Baghdad. The sewage ponds have been cleaned up, and security in his sector has improved with better intelligence. The council members are now being paid sixty dollars a month and run their own meetings. Abdul Jabbar Doweich has a job as a security guard. But, for various reasons, Prior's division has stopped paying for new reconstruction projects, and current projects are running out of funds. Hearing this, I remembered something Prior had said as we were driving into Saddam Hussein's village: "The most frustrating thing is we can't do more for them. My hands are tied—everyone's are."

The Sheikh

"The human committee for prisonners and lossners international," said the sign on a side street in Kadhimiya, a Shiite neighborhood in the northern part of Baghdad. The sign indicated a two-story building that was office and home to Sheikh Emad al-Din al-Awadi. The sheikh had spent almost ten years in Saddam's prisons, where he had formed a clandestine prisoners' group. Now that Saddam was gone, he was becoming an important man in Baghdad. Like other Shiites, he was eager to fill the vacuum of postwar Iraq with his own ideas.

On April 12th, word reached the sheikh that the central market building in the expensive Al Mansour district was on fire. Before the war, the security police had stowed millions of prisoner files in the building's basement. Now the Baathists were trying to destroy the files, and the sheikh and a handful of associates, armed with knives, raced across town to salvage the evidence. Other groups were already on the scene, but the sheikh's group managed to carry away carloads of files and microfilm to Kadhimiya, along with a melted Canon microfilm reader. The sheikh understood that these documents, stored in pink and green folders, represented not just the past but the future.

They now fill old metal file drawers stacked to the top of his high-ceilinged office; they sit in nylon grain sacks under the banana tree in his yard; they bake on his rooftop under the desert sun. More arrive from various locations every week; the sheikh possesses only a fraction of the records of imprisonment and execution left behind by the old regime.

Men and women come from all over the country to the sheikh's office and comb through the files that his followers have alphabetized, hoping to discover the fate of a lost son or cousin. Though the sheikh denies that he has any political ambition, the service has made him a man to whom Iraqis bring problems and requests.

One afternoon, a doctor arrived from a town about an hour northeast of Baghdad. He said that he was an ear-nose-and-throat specialist; one night in 1995, he was ordered

by local Baath Party officials to cut off the ear of a young Army deserter. "I told them it is not probable to do this at night, and I am not ready for this psychologically," he recalled. "They told me, 'You must cut it even if you are cutting it with your teeth—or we will cut *your* ear.' " This punishment was conceived by Saddam Hussein's son Uday, and in the months before Uday turned to other ideas, the doctor severed forty-seven ears.

"I had a feeling of nonexistence, a feeling of guilt," he explained. "I am trying to satisfy myself that I had no choice."

The doctor had come to the sheikh's looking for information about his brother, an emotionally disturbed man who was arrested in 1992 for cursing Saddam. "I think he was still alive until last year," the doctor said. He left without finding his brother's file.

Sheikh al-Din al-Awadi is in his forties, short, round-bellied, dark-complected. He habitually wears a black cloak, white vest and pantaloons, pointed slippers, and a white turban, which signifies a Shiite not descended directly from Muhammad. Though he kept his wife hidden and his forehead bore the dark bruise of fervent prayer—and in his inner office there was a portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini—the sheikh was a worldly man, a sensualist, a lover of impish jokes. He once amused me with a description of a pornographic spy tape that he had somehow obtained, featuring a female Baathist agent seducing a Sudanese diplomat. The bushy beard, the full lips, the bug eyes behind thick black-rimmed glasses, and the sonorous voice prompted me to think of him as Ayatollah Allen Ginsberg.

The sheikh received me on several occasions in his pale-green sitting room, where we were served tea and enormous lunches. "I am one of the regime's victims," he once began—whereupon the power failed, his electric fan died, and the sheikh continued, "and one of the facts of the new regime is that the electricity has gone off." He sat with his legs drawn up in a vinyl swivel chair, sweat pouring from under his turban, and I felt compelled to apologize on behalf of the Americans for the terrible state of Iraq's utilities. His way of sizing me up—eyebrows arched, amusement playing on his lips—suggested from the start that our relationship would be marked by seduction and manipulation.

The sheikh had an agenda: he wanted me to introduce him to important Americans. At our first meeting, he asked, "Did they come here to pay a visit, or did they come to put their hands on the country?" At our second meeting, he welcomed me with a kiss on both cheeks and said, "I like you. I feel that I've known you for years." At our third, he said, "There are hidden bodies swimming in the sky. Maybe our hidden bodies met in the sky before we met each other, and that's why we get along so well." At our fourth, when I came with several C.P.A. officials who had thousands of dollars to dole out to groups like his, he exclaimed, "George must have some Arab blood!"

The sheikh was born near the town of Hilla, which is south of Baghdad, into a family of tribal chiefs, and he grew up studying religion at a Shia school of theology in Najaf. He pursued broad interests: Catholic doctrine, the writings of Nostradamus, Arabic poetry, Greek philosophy. In Najaf, he also met and came to admire Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, who spent his exile there in the late seventies. It was the beginning of Shia political activism in Iraq, and in 1977 the sheikh was arrested at a demonstration in Karbala. After a year, he escaped from prison and ended up in Saudi Arabia. But the Saudi government betrayed him to Iraqi intelligence, he said. He remembers being drugged and sent back in a box to Baghdad, where he endured a year of interrogation at General Security headquarters. He was tried and sentenced to life in prison; before being sent to Abu Ghraib jail, he was beaten with cables for three days. "They wanted to make me taste torture, so that I would know this is a terrorist jail," he said.

The sheikh spent seven years in a special ward, sharing a cell the size of his current sitting room with fifty other men. It was so crowded that they took shifts lying down. Visitors were not allowed. The guards were punished if they failed to show sufficient cruelty. Pen, paper, and books were forbidden.

Yet the sheikh described his prison years with nostalgia, and listening to his tales I began to understand why the religious Shia have been the first Iraqis to seize the new opportunity with purposefulness. In prison, the sheikh became a leader. He settled differences that arose over food and sleeping space. When the guards distributed oranges on Baath Party holidays, the sheikh saved the rinds to treat his own and others' stomach troubles. Using the broken tips of vials of distilled water, he scratched out a theological tract on nylon sacks, and when the known Baathist spies were asleep he preached to his clandestine group. By chance, Abdul Jabbar Doweich, the Islamist member of Prior's neighborhood council, had shared the sheikh's cell through the eighties. The sheikh taught Doweich and the other prisoners about *wilayat al-faqih*, a system of government in which ultimate power resides with one Islamic jurist. Doweich recalled, "In prison I was happy, because I lived under Islam."

The sheikh said that he wanted the Americans to leave fairly soon, but in the meantime he had established good relations with the Army captain responsible for security in his area and had got what he could out of him (a faulty generator). The sheikh was also trying to cultivate Elahé Sharifpour-Hicks, a human-rights officer working at the United Nations offices in Baghdad. The sheikh had given her a wish list; it included eight computers, four vehicles, a guard, a generator, an air-conditioner, and a new building.

Sharifpour-Hicks found the sheikh charming and dangerous. She had grown up in Iran as a revolutionary; she had taken part in the overthrow of the Shah and then seen the mullahs break all their promises of freedom and democracy. She was certain that the same thing was happening in Iraq.

"This ayatollah is hooking the international community by using prisoners' tales," she said. "No one should underestimate these ayatollahs, and I'm afraid the Americans are doing this." As we spoke over lunch at the U.N. cafeteria in Baghdad, she became upset. "There are many like him. The dream, the model, the idea is to come to power the same way as in Iran." She found the Americans' reluctance to interfere maddening; the religious factions were growing stronger, and secular groups were too frightened to make noise. "The Americans are very shy and afraid to look like an occupier. They say, 'Oh, we want the Iraqis to lead.' But what kind of Iraqi should lead?"

The Americans haven't known how to handle the Shia problem. For months, Moqtada al-Sadr, the radical son of a murdered cleric, who has an armed following among unemployed young men in the vast Shiite slum that was once called Saddam City and is now known as Sadr City, was regularly busing his Baghdad followers a hundred miles south to Najaf for Friday prayers, and staging rallies. He runs a newspaper, which in July published the names of a hundred and twenty-four Iraqi "collaborators"—people who worked with the Americans—and at least one was subsequently assassinated. He has pushed his followers toward armed confrontation with the occupiers. In October, al-Sadr declared himself the head of the government of Iraq. The C.P.A. has since taken steps to limit his influence, and in recent weeks al-Sadr has toned down his anti-American rhetoric. But he remains a source of concern. "He is close to the line," Hume Horan, a senior C.P.A. adviser on religious affairs, said. "The prevailing opinion is that taking him into custody could turn him into a big martyr. But there are those in the C.P.A. who believe that the delay in taking action has allowed the evil genie to escape from the bottle." As for the chances of an Iranian-style theocracy being imposed by the Shia majority in Iraq, Horan said, "Absolutely zero. Not a chance in the world."

When I told the sheikh that the C.P.A. funded Iraqi civic groups like his, he urged me to set up a meeting with Americans and pumped me for advice. "Take my side with them," he pleaded.

Dave Hodgkinson, a former Army lawyer and the C.P.A. official responsible for "transitional justice," went with me on my next visit to Kadhimiya. On the drive from the

Green Zone, he said that there was "word on the street" that the sheikh was aligned with extremist Shiite tendencies—perhaps with Moqtada al-Sadr. I asked if that would keep the C.P.A. from funding him. "Only if the money would go for bazookas," Hodgkinson said. "If he's just anti-coalition, if he wants us out, all the better."

In his sitting room, the sheikh regaled us with prison stories. At one point, he was so overcome that he had to excuse himself. When he opened the door to his inner office, I noticed that the Khomeini portrait had disappeared.

Five minutes later, he came back. "I'm sorry to bother you with this conversation," he said.

"It's very important for us to hear," Hodgkinson said sympathetically.

"Let's talk about the prisoners' association," the sheikh said.

"Perfect."

"Do you want me to continue the story, or talk about the association?" the sheikh asked. And there was another half hour of personal history.

The subject of the files created some awkwardness. The Americans wanted the sheikh to acknowledge that the files needed to be put in a centralized storage area, where they could be accessed for the prosecution of crimes against humanity. The sheikh agreed: "But this will take many years, many files will be burned, and many heads will be cut off. So I want to build a storehouse to keep them in—it will be safer because it will be under the care of my tribe."

He saw that he had moved the Americans with his presentation. The C.P.A. soon decided to fund his project. So far, the sheikh has received forty-three thousand dollars in American aid.

The last time I went to see the sheikh, I asked him what kind of government he wanted for Iraq. He ignored the question; there were three C.P.A. cell-phone applications he wanted me to fill out, for himself, his wife, and his six-year-old son. For the first time in my presence, he unwrapped his turban—and suddenly he was a balding, sweaty, pushy man. Our mutual enchantment was coming to an end.

I finished the applications. "Dave Hodgkinson heard you might be a follower of Moqtada al-Sadr," I said.

"Moqtada al-Sadr! He's a small man. He doesn't have a fraction of the level of my religion." The sheikh was convincingly outraged. "Those who said this to Mr. David are my enemy."

I said that Hodgkinson and the C.P.A. didn't seem to care about his politics.

"That's good," he said. "But we must fix this idea about me." I knew that he was worried about his funding. "If it's proved I follow some line or am a member of any political party, I will stop working and sit at home."

What did he think of Iran's system? I asked.

"Are you working for an intelligence agency?" the sheikh demanded, staring at me with no hint of the charmer's smile. Then he took me rather roughly by the chin. "I'll make you calm by this answer—I'll cool your heart. Trust me, and I'll tell you honestly: I believe in Socrates and his circle. There's a line in the middle." He drew an imaginary line across a wooden coaster that was on his desk. "One side is hot, the other cold. This is the middle. As the philosopher believed, the best is the middle. Is that enough for you, or do you have other questions?"

A few days later, I received an e-mail from Elahé Sharifpour-Hicks. She had gone to see the sheikh that day. "He is in good shape," she reported. "He has now at least two computers and a generator."

The Administrator

The leisure reading of American officials I met in Iraq tended toward sadly pertinent history: guerrilla wars and botched peace efforts. Colonel William Grimsley, an infantry

brigade commander, was reading "A Savage War of Peace," Alistair Horne's study of the French-Algerian conflict. "Lots of similarities to this place," Grimsley told me. A young lieutenant I met had brought a copy of "Four Hours in My Lai." Drew Erdmann was bogged down in David Fromkin's "A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East." No one at the C.P.A. had much time to read, though, or to think.

The bookshelves that lined Paul (Jerry) Bremer's office at C.P.A. headquarters were nearly bare when I visited him in August. Rudolph Giuliani's "Leadership" was on one shelf; a book about the management of financial crises was on another, near a box of raisin bran. On Bremer's desk, next to a wood carving inscribed "SUCCESS HAS A THOUSAND FATHERS," were several marked-up reports about postwar Iraq. A pile of maps detailing Iraq's power grid, administrative districts, and railroad lines sat on a coffee table.

Bremer, who is sixty-two, has the thick hair, boyish eyes, and willful jaw of a Kennedy. He was wearing a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, khakis, and combat boots. An intelligent, disciplined technocrat with an even temperament, Bremer almost always seems focussed on the operational: he has mastered the interconnectedness of Iraq's utilities and can rattle off dozens of budget numbers. A question about the historical precedents for his position led him almost directly to the urgent need for a twenty-kilowatt generator at an oil refinery in Basra. Iraq is a non-stop crisis, and the C.P.A. exists in a temporal as well as a spatial bubble; any attention to the past or to a future beyond thirty days is a luxury.

Bremer speaks directly to Iraqis every week on television and radio. He also meets with dignitaries around the country. He is personally popular and is regarded as modest and hardworking; according to a recent Gallup poll, twice as many Baghdadis approve of him as disapprove. (President Bush, by contrast, has more detractors than supporters.) His approach to the task of leading a chaotic foreign country toward self-rule is largely technical. Under pressure or criticism, he resorts to figures. Throughout the harsh summer, Bremer explained over and over that the power outages came from a lack of capacity in the system, aggravated by looting, sabotage, and the collapse of civil administration. But when he announced in August, "We're going to be thirty to thirty-five per cent short once we get everything working," Iraqis didn't understand why the superpower couldn't do better. (The electricity situation has improved considerably.) When Bremer tells them that they're now free to take responsibility for their own lives, that message, too, often fails to sink in.

Bremer is aware of the deeper problems of the occupation. "You have to understand the psychological situation that Iraqis are in," he said when I asked why Iraqis appeared to appreciate so little of what the C.P.A. has done. "They went from this very dark room to the bright light in three weeks. It's like somebody just threw a switch. And your mentality, if you're an Iraqi, still is: It's the government that fixes things. The government fixed everything before, for better and for worse—they did everything. And here comes a government that can throw out our much-vaunted Army in three weeks, so why can't they fix the electricity in three weeks?"

The psychological gap between Iraqis and the C.P.A. remains wide. Most of Bremer's confidants are Americans. When he leaves the palace, it's necessarily under heavy security. "It is an epistemological problem," one of Bremer's senior advisers said, describing the experience of leaving the Green Zone. "You wonder, 'What's going on out there?' You sniff, and then once you're out you overanalyze."

Of course, the C.P.A.'s isolation and inaccessibility are also partly deliberate. "I've just reorganized the strategic-communications center here," Bremer told me, a day after ordering one of his aides not to speak with me. The situation is compounded by the failure of the C.P.A.'s own news outlet. The Iraq Media Network produces a mixture of C.P.A. announcements and Arabic music videos—programming so reminiscent of

TV under Saddam's regime that most Iraqis get their information from Al Jazeera and Iranian broadcasts instead. The C.P.A. has thus far squandered the chance to begin the civic education that will be vital for Iraq's transition to democracy. As with so many other aspects of the occupation, the origins of the problem lie in Washington: the insipid programming reflects the Pentagon's desire to proclaim freedom in Iraq without doing the harder, riskier work of helping Iraqis create the necessary institutions. In this sense, the intellectual failures of the planning continue to haunt the occupation.

One searing day, I joined Bremer's press pool, following him by Chinook helicopter as he hopscotched across the southern desert. The first stop was a maternity hospital in Diwaniyah; its former director, a gynecologist, now serves on the Governing Council, the American-appointed Iraqi interim authority. Bremer, who forces himself to endure a suit and tie at public appearances, was received by local dignitaries in kaffiyehs. He told them, "We of the coalition are glad that we were able to provide you with your freedom from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. You now have that freedom and you now have a better hope for the future." He recited a long list of statistical improvements in Iraq's health-care system, and concluded: "In May, five hundred tons of drugs were shipped in. Last month, we shipped thirty-five hundred tons—a seven-hundred-per-cent increase in shipments in three months."

The dignitaries applauded. In turn, they presented Bremer with lengthy supplications. Then he paid a visit to the wards upstairs. Bremer travels with a contingent of aides and security guards; this phalanx swept down the second-floor hallway past startled doctors and into rooms where even more startled mothers and infants lay in beds. His aides gave him stuffed animals to present to the patients. In one room, a skeletal baby lay in its mother's arms. On a nearby bed, a toddler lolled against its mother's body, mouth open. This was sickness, maybe even the approach of death, not childbirth. The smile died on Bremer's face. "I don't like seeing this at all," he said, and asked the photographer to stop taking pictures.

Downstairs, I fell into conversation with a couple of young doctors. They said that the electricity was on only because we were here—it had been off all week. The interruptions to power had doubled infant mortality here: without proper incubation, the rate was now seven to ten deaths per day. The hospital had several broken generators; a Marine Corps reservist had told me that with twenty thousand dollars in repairs the generators could provide the hospital the power it needed. The infant-mortality rate would be cut by half.

Christopher Harvin, one of Bremer's press aides, gravitated toward us. "Are you happy with Saddam gone?" he asked the young doctors. "You are happy that he's gone? Things are better now?"

"Yes," Dr. Kassim al-Janaby said, mustering a smile. "Yes."

"What's the best thing about Saddam being gone?" asked Harvin, pushing the conversation back on message.

"Only one—I think only one," Dr. Mohamed Jasim said. "Only the free talking. Only only only. But no doing. No doing."

"Do you think over time it gets much better?"

"Yes, we are thinking the next time it gets better," Jasim said.

"Patience? Yeah?"

"We need continuous electricity," Dr. al-Janaby said flatly. "Security in our city also is not until now. That's it. Also the salary."

Harvin, a veteran of George W. Bush's primary campaign in South Carolina, was undeterred. "But don't you think with time it will get better? What can we do?"

"Security," one of them said.

"Americans? Iraqis? Both working together?"

"Yes."

"So . . . the economy will stabilize the looting?"

Bremer's C.P.A., like any government, tries to control news coverage—I received five separate official e-mails alerting me to the arrival of a shipment of fifty-four thousand soccer balls at Baghdad International Airport—and officials complain that the press has failed to present the positive side of the Iraq story. There is some truth to the charge that journalists focus on bad news in Iraq (as they do everywhere), covering the rising daily death toll and street protests more energetically than sewer repairs.

At the same time, the C.P.A.'s good news doesn't always bear scrutiny. The health figures that Bremer cited at the Diwaniyah hospital were undercut by a chance conversation I had the next day with Dr. Jean-Bernard Bouvier, then of the British medical charity Merlin. The Ministry of Health had become an empty shell, without central control, Bouvier told me. Nobody had any information about inventory at the warehouses of the central pharmacy. "They said they've put out six hundred tons—of what?" he asked. "If it's twelve trucks of I.V. fluid, I don't give a damn." According to Bouvier, sixteen tons of drugs were dumped on a single clinic, and the stacks of boxes left no room for patients.

Two months earlier, Bouvier had drawn up an Emergency National Distribution Plan for Drugs; he had heard no response from the coalition. (His suggestions, which were supported by the World Health Organization, were eventually rejected.) A veteran of many disasters, he found that the expertise of organizations like his kept falling into a void at the C.P.A. "They don't see the fragility of the system," he said. "It's not that children are starving yet, but it's a structure that is slowly crumbling. You can degrade a society bit by bit, but then you reach a point where you just crash."

In the view of many critics, Bremer's decision to abolish the Iraqi Army and purge high-level Baathists from the civil administration only added to the tumult in Iraq. As Jay Garner put it, the immediate result of the May 16th order was the creation of "four hundred thousand new enemies." Even some of Bremer's advisers now acknowledge that cutting loose an army with guns and without pay was a serious mistake. The C.P.A. reinstated salaries on a six-month basis after deadly demonstrations outside the Assassin's Gate, but the damage to security and pride was already done. One of Garner's lieutenants, who had been working closely with Iraqi officers, was shocked by Bremer's dissolution order. "From the Iraqi viewpoint, that simple action took away the one symbol of sovereignty the Iraqi people still had," he said. "That's when we stopped being liberators and became occupiers."

To others, such as Barham Salih, the Kurdish leader, the mistake was in the manner of implementation, not in the order itself. "You cannot build a new Iraq while retaining that instrument of repression," he said. Earlier this month, Bremer seemed to acknowledge that abolishing the Army had not been a good idea when he ordered that the recruitment and training of a new Army be speeded up.

Bremer's de-Baathification order similarly put at least thirty-five thousand civil servants—engineers, professors, managers—out of work. The firings were based on rank, not conduct, and, inevitably, qualified Iraqis lost their jobs just when their expertise was needed most. American soldiers told me that the deputy director of the Baghdad Zoo, a Baathist, had been the hardest worker on the staff.

Whatever the bureaucratic and human cost, Bremer's May 16th order was a symbolic break with the totalitarian past, and the Baath Party went the way of the Nazi Party. For Drew Erdmann, who had to fire more than sixteen hundred Baathist university professors and staff members in May, this is one area where the German analogy is apt, and he bristles at any notion that academic freedom might be at issue. "In June, 1945, you're not going to have a discussion about the legitimacy of the Nazi ideology," he said. "It's not academic here! The people are still living next door, working next door, on campus, they're still around, they're still threatening."

Erdmann explained his support for de-Baathification by telling me about the "Saddam bonus." On the scale of the dictator's crimes, the Saddam bonus was a minor yet illuminating atrocity. Under Iraq's college-admissions system, students were ranked by test scores, and, with thousands applying for a limited number of openings, a few points made a great difference. The Saddam bonus awarded ten extra points to high-school boys who married widows of the Iran-Iraq War—women often twice their age. The last Baathist Minister of Higher Education under Saddam had withdrawn the points of certain applicants after determining that the marriages were fraudulent. "These guys came to me so they could get back their bonus points," Erdmann explained. "Me, the American coalition guy! They think I'm going to give them fricking Saddam bonus points for a fake marriage?" Baathism, he concluded, had "penetrated in such a twisted way" that a strong response was required.

The day after Bremer's de-Baathification order, Erdmann went to Baghdad University, in the city's south, at a bend in the Tigris. Baathist university presidents across Iraq had been dismissed, and Erdmann had decided that new administrations should be elected by the faculties. (Nominees had to be approved by the C.P.A.) These would be among the very first elections in Iraq, and they were not without risk. Erdmann's reasons were both practical and principled. "Look, I don't know what the hell is going on at any particular university," he explained. "With the bad communications all over the country, we couldn't go to each one and make the appointments in any informed manner. But the principle of getting the faculty involved—it's real. It's not for show." Seven hundred people jammed Baghdad University's sweltering auditorium, and when the votes were counted the faculty had elected as president a biochemist who was widely respected for his integrity under Saddam. "You had people coming out of there saying, 'This is the first time we've seen anything like this,' " Erdmann remembered. As for the deposed university president, a high-ranking Baathist physician, he was shot dead two months later at his clinic while writing a prescription.

One morning, I accompanied Erdmann to Baghdad University. Until that day, I never quite understood his constant tension, his irritability, his ferocity about remnants of the old regime, the sense he conveyed that this was still a kind of combat. His team travelled in two civilian cars, staying in radio contact; in the seat next to me, Erdmann shoved a clip into his 9-mm. Beretta. The campus was largely empty—it was the summer recess—but there was a group of about thirty men standing under a tree in the plaza near the parking lot. They were de-Baathified professors, and as Erdmann walked past, his pistol hidden under his shirt, three of them fell into step with him.

"Are you Dr. Andrew Erdmann?" one professor said. "We have some forms." The men looked middle-aged, neatly dressed, and downcast. They displayed copies of the Agreement to Disavow Party Membership, with their signatures.

"The only exceptions are granted by Ambassador Bremer," Erdmann told them.

"We need your help about the situation."

"I understand the disruption in your life. But I hope you understand the coalition's May 16th proclamation."

"But we've done absolutely nothing that—"

Erdmann said that he couldn't promise anything. "Some of your colleagues don't deserve exemption," he said. "Some should return and some should not."

"I realize that," the professor said. "But our income now is absolutely zero. We can do absolutely nothing. There is no job we can do."

The men under the tree were watching us. One of Erdmann's Iraqi colleagues from the C.P.A. said, "Let's keep moving."

Another Iraqi approached. "Let's get out of here," Erdmann said. "I'm about to have a serious sense-of-humor deficit." We walked away, toward a white pillar at the edge of the plaza. Behind it was a glassed-in cafeteria. An anti-Baathist poster was taped to a

wall: "THERE IS NO ROOM HERE FOR THOSE WHOSE HANDS DRIP WITH THE BLOOD OF INNOCENTS."

"This is where it happened," Erdmann said. "This corner. The body was lying there. I pulled the car up here."

Around noon on July 6th, while Erdmann was meeting with UNESCO representatives in the building across the plaza, Jeffrey Wershow, an infantryman assigned to provide him security, walked alone into the cafeteria with his helmet off and bought a ginger ale. Wershow was an only child, a lawyer's son with an interest in politics; he was a specialist in the Florida National Guard. Wershow was standing near the pillar, holding his ginger ale, when a man approached and shot him in the head. The assassin, who is thought to be a Yemeni engineering student, disappeared into a crowd of students. By the time Erdmann sprinted across the plaza, shouting, his gun drawn, soldiers had cleared the crowd and wrapped Wershow's head wound. They placed him in the back of Erdmann's Chevy Suburban, and Erdmann drove off the campus to an improvised landing zone. Wershow was alive when the helicopter arrived, but he died before reaching a military hospital.

That evening, Erdmann tried to clean the bloodstains out of the car with detergent. He and his superiors agreed that he should go back to campus the next day. ("I can't let the last image of us be tearing out of town," Erdmann thought at the time.) Whenever he ran into a soldier from Wershow's unit, Erdmann would say to himself, "One of them got killed because of me." He told me, "That's the way I feel. I don't necessarily think that's the way they feel—I wouldn't put that on them—but that's what happened."

Erdmann, recounting the story two weeks later in his trailer behind the palace, smiled in his mirthless way. "Guy got killed so I could go and talk to some people from UNESCO."

"We Are Still Afraid"

Dr. Baher Butti is a small, nebbishy man of forty-three who treats patients in crisis at the Ibn Rushd Teaching Psychiatric Hospital, in central Baghdad. He also dispenses antidepressants and antipsychotics of some previous generation to the long-term cases in a locked hospital at the city's eastern edge. Dr. Butti sees private patients as well, and he's made it his goal to offer sensitive therapy in a country where psychological care hasn't always been distinguishable from the methods of the security police.

Dr. Butti is Christian but thoroughly secular; a worrier, he keenly feels Iraq's isolation from the modern world under Saddam, and is concerned by the rising danger of Islamic fundamentalism. Like many members of the urban, downwardly mobile middle class, he doesn't know which way to turn: he is equally distrustful of the American occupiers and of new Iraqi political movements. He once attended a meeting with C.P.A. officials on the subject of forming local nonprofit organizations, and concluded that to get funding he needed to be a fundamentalist.

With a few old classmates from Baghdad's Jesuit High School, Dr. Butti was setting up the Baghdad Rehabilitation and Development Group. One of its proposals was the construction of the Gilgamesh Center for Creative Thinking. In the prospectus, Dr. Butti wrote, with perhaps a bit of self-criticism:

> A great number of Iraqi people are suffering a great deal because of the severed communication with the civilized world, they suffer from lacking the ability to communicate with the others, they have lost the hope in the future, they suspect anything foreign, they are not sufficient in their professional performance, they don't feel enough responsibility towards the society, they lack the power to experience freedom, they don't comprehend the correct performance of democracy, they cannot deal with group

> working . . . etc. Rebuilding what the war has destroyed is a simple effort if compared with the task of rebuilding the distorted human person.

The Gilgamesh Center, Butti wrote, would be a place where Iraqis could learn such skills as "logical and rational thinking," "how to dialogue and discuss with others," and "secrets of the successful negotiation." It was hard to think of a better idea for the reconstruction of Iraq, but, unlike Sheikh Emad al-Din al-Awadi, Dr. Butti was having trouble finding money.

"They lack the power to experience freedom": the phrase helps explain why the moment of good feeling was so short after the liberation of Baghdad. Iraqis were told they were free, they expected to be free, they had been waiting for years to be free—but they still didn't feel free. And so a depression set in almost at once. Akila al-Hashemi, a former diplomat and one of three women who was appointed to serve on the Governing Council, told me that she represented "independent liberal democrats"—what she called "the silent group." Al-Hashemi said, "We are still under the shock, we are still afraid." She was fifteen in 1968, when the Baath Party took power. "Now I'm fifty. You see? You can imagine—can I change in two days, in two months, in two years? We need to be reëducated, rehabilitated." She said of her constituents, "They were happy after the fall of the regime. But then there was an act of sabotage against this joy, against this happiness. It's not accomplished, you see. This feeling you have—ah, yes!—but then it's not accomplished. This is frustrating."

In April, a young exile named Ammar Al Shahbander returned to Baghdad full of high hopes and bold ideas, only to find his countrymen stuck. "They are so normalized to the Baath and the fear and the death and the terror that they can't see the advantages now," he said. "When you tell them they have such a great opportunity to express their opinion, they don't give a damn. They don't have anything to express."

In downtown Baghdad, I met a stage director named Abdulillah Kamal, who sat smoking with a group of actors in the front office of his two-thousand-seat theatre. Kamal was about to resume performances of the play that had been showing when the bombs started to fall, in March. I asked why he didn't stage something that he couldn't have under Saddam, something new—for example, a satire of the occupation. He brushed the notion aside. "The play is out on the street. All Baghdad is a theatre. We are the audience. We don't need to do a play." But it would pack the house, I said, and it would give Iraqis the bonding experience of art. "Could I talk about Bremer and Bush?" the director asked skeptically. I was unable to persuade Kamal that a satire wouldn't be censored—but I also sensed that the idea made him uneasy for deeper reasons. It would demand an act of imaginative courage that was probably beyond his power. Finally, Kamal confided that he had in fact written a new play. It was called "Masonica," crossing "Masonry" with "America." He told me that the play would reveal the "hidden thing that happened in America on 11th September." Apparently, a conspiracy theory was as far as Kamal's mind would go.

The thousands of foreign soldiers, officials, contractors, and humanitarians working in Iraq often find themselves in the position of the American sea captain in Melville's novella "Benito Cereno," who cries to the Spaniard he has rescued from a slave mutiny, "You are saved, you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?" But in Iraq, alongside the paranoid theories and the justifiable fears harbored by the "distorted human person," I constantly encountered an intense longing for some nameless, better future—especially among young people.

When I was at Baghdad University, I met two young women in the hallway of the administration building. "We must go out of Iraq!" one of them, Aseel Hatem Shouket, exclaimed. "We must travel! We must see America! Can you give us hope?"

Shouket is a pale, pretty twenty-eight-year-old computer programmer who works for the university administration. Her cream-colored veil seemed incongruous, given her vitality, and in fact it was just a prop: she wore it to keep from being killed by fundamentalists.

There were many fears in Shouket's life. She was afraid of kidnappers: a group of them had snatched her friend as she got off the bus; Shouket had barely managed to run away. She was afraid of her neighbors, who said that they would harm her if she took another picture of American soldiers. She was afraid of the woman who ran her office, a former Baathist who used to wear a uniform and sidearm to work, and whose three framed photographs of Saddam were still propped up on the floor, facing the wall.

"Do you feel danger here? I feel danger," Shouket said as we spoke in her office. "I feel a life in prison—after liberation! I want to see the world, I want to learn more, I want to feel I'm getting something important for my life." She paused. "Danger is still in the streets. In this room. Especially in this room."

The office manager walked in and glared. She told Shouket that I would have to leave.

"I have no freedom," Shouket whispered.

I offered to drive Shouket home. She lived with her parents and an uncle who had become mentally ill after imprisonment and torture. Their modest house, in an underbuilt new neighborhood of eastern Baghdad, stood baking in the relentless yellow light of midday. They served me a dish of rice and beans.

During the war, Shouket's mother had written a Koranic verse in chalk on the living-room wall; it was a prayer for safety that the family recited together. On another wall hung a photograph of her mother's parents, from 1948—a man with a small mustache, a woman with bright lipstick.

"During royal times, the people were more modern than now," Shouket's father said. He was an architect in the Ministry of Information. In 1965, he had studied in Manchester, England, but the family now belonged to Iraq's beaten-down middle class.

Before the war, Shouket's pay had been six dollars a month; the Americans raised it to a hundred and twenty dollars. The family passionately supported the Americans. If this was colonialism, Shouket was ready to be colonized. She had wept watching the war on TV, urging the 3rd Infantry Division on to Baghdad; the bombs exploding outside had given her heart. Now, every Saturday, the family sat down together and listened to Bremer's weekly address. "I feel him very close," Shouket said. "Even his way, I like it—he's a simple man."

"The Americans should change the region," Shouket's father said. He predicted that Iranians would be inspired to revolt "if they saw what happened in Iraq, and we progress by liberation and wealthy life."

Her veil off, Shouket wore her hennaed hair in a long braid. She brought out her large collection of American movies—she had learned English from watching Nicole Kidman in "Moulin Rouge" and Sharon Stone in "The Quick and the Dead." She said, "It needs time, I think, a very long time, to make connection between the two civilizations. To make us civilized, I mean."

Shouket sat on the couch between her sad-faced parents and talked excitedly about her future. "I'm always saying to my mother, 'I lost my life.' And she says, 'No, you're young, there's still time.' And I say, 'Maybe.' Maybe now I'll catch the rest of my life to see the world." She went on, "I want to leave Baghdad, I want to be free. Just improving myself—my mind, my way of life."

Her mother was on the verge of tears; her parents were afraid for her to leave Iraq. Shouket put her arm around her mother and touched her father's hand. "He believes in me," she said.

When I rose to leave, they offered me their family heirlooms. I declined by saying that the gifts would be confiscated at the Jordanian border. Outside, Shouket's mad uncle

was pacing, holding a glass in his hand. I was thinking how isolated the family seemed. They had no political party or religious militia, no ayatollah or tribal sheikh; they had only the Americans, who didn't know of their existence. Shouket had never spoken to a foreigner before the morning we met. She wanted to travel, but she was too frightened to go into town and set up an e-mail account at an Internet café. The pressure of her yearning filled the small room.

At the door, Shouket smiled. "Do you think my dreams will come true?"

The Envoy

Nobody searched me on the August day I went to the Canal Hotel, where the United Nations had its offices, to see Sergio Vieira de Mello, the Secretary-General's special representative in Iraq. His staff occupied a hall on the third floor, but before going to Vieira de Mello's corner suite I stopped to talk with his political adviser, a Lebanese professor and former culture minister named Ghassan Salamé. Vieira de Mello and Salamé had met only a few months earlier, when the career international civil servant from Brazil asked the political veteran from Beirut to help him in what seemed to be an impossible assignment: representing the U.N. in occupied Iraq under a Security Council resolution that gave it no real authority. "He said he knew nothing of Iraq," Salamé said, "and less of me."

It had been a particularly bad week in Iraq: continuing power failures, numerous ambushes, explosions at an oil pipeline in Kirkuk and a water main in Baghdad, fatal riots in Basra, and a devastating car bomb at the Jordanian Embassy.

Salamé was thinking about the situation historically. "My deep feeling is that the problem is not in Baghdad but in Washington," he said. "Those who decided this war and did it and won it are not the type of Americans Arab countries have been used to in the past fifty years. This is not the Corps of Engineers, this is not the American pragmatist." Salamé, a brusque man whose thick black eyebrows blend together, fiddled with a strand of gold worry beads. "They are new Americans, Americans with an ideology, with a master plan, with interests—missionaries."

I pointed out that these new Americans were not unlike some of the old Americans who had fought the Cold War. Salamé seized on the comparison. "When I listen to Mr. Wolfowitz, I feel that he mistakes Baghdad for Berlin in 1945," he said. "He doesn't know the place." Salamé was particularly critical of the C.P.A.'s efforts to transform the Iraqi economy. "This country does not need at all the kind of sweeping privatization that these guys back in Washington are looking for."

Vieira de Mello's office was at the end of the hall, overlooking a service road and a nearly completed security wall built to within one metre of the hotel. When I walked in, he had his jacket off, but as he sat down across from me at a coffee table his perfectly pressed suit pants, sky-blue shirt, sleek gray hair, and resonant film actor's voice confirmed his reputation as an elegant diplomat. Vieira de Mello's U.N. career had taken him from Cambodia and Rwanda to overseeing the early reconstruction of Kosovo, and, finally, to playing a role in East Timor similar to that of Paul Bremer in Iraq.

Upon arriving in Baghdad in early June, Vieira de Mello tried to help the Americans out of the trap in which they found themselves, and to help the Iraqis. Bremer, having taken charge of a project in jeopardy, seemed unwilling to loosen his grip. An advisory council of Iraqis with no substantive powers was the only proposal on the table other than complete American control.

"My message from Day One, to them and to Jerry Bremer in particular, was: This won't fly," Vieira de Mello said. He told Bremer that the council needed executive powers. "You've got to give them responsibilities, even though you might be ultimately challenged."

Vieira de Mello, Salamé, and others began having conversations with leading Iraqis

around the country. It was this effort that expanded the ranks of what became the Governing Council, adding people who had lived under Saddam and represented constituencies inside Iraq. Vieira de Mello's task required all his diplomatic skill. He once spent hours convincing a representative from the main Shiite group that joining the council would not be political suicide. When Bremer objected to the appointment of a Communist, Vieira de Mello got him to change his mind, arguing that it was vital to include secular Iraqis. In mid-July, the new twenty-five-member Governing Council became the first indigenous authority in Iraq since the fall of Saddam. "Over half would not have been there if Jerry could have had it his own way," Vieira de Mello said.

So far, he admitted, the Governing Council had functioned "in a kind of cocoon"; ordinary Iraqis weren't sure what it was for. Nonetheless, he was confident that the council would eventually succeed. "I wouldn't be touring countries in the region trying to sell the Governing Council if I didn't believe what I'm saying," he said. "Because the last thing I need and the organization needs is to be marketing the interests of the United States."

He outlined an ambitious timetable for the full transfer of sovereignty to Iraqis: interim ministers and a constitutional commission by the end of 2003; a new constitution by early 2004; general elections in the spring. During this period, he said, the U.N. would play an increasingly central role in the reconstruction.

As the Secretary-General's representative in Iraq, Vieira de Mello had reason to snipe at the Bush Administration, which had spent much of the past year ridiculing, bullying, and snubbing the U.N. In Iraq, the U.N.'s profile was so low that Vieira de Mello admitted feeling irritated and embarrassed by his "total lack of authority." But, because he was pragmatic, and because he had once been in Bremer's role, he refused to be churlish. "I don't want to be unfair to people who are up against an almost impossible task, having myself done similar things," he said.

I asked how greater U.N. involvement early on might have changed the situation in Iraq. "We could have helped, and we would have been only too happy to do so, also pointing to our own mistakes—because unless you admit why things went wrong you won't be heard," he said. "We could probably have done that. We still can. There's still time." He looked at his watch; in a few minutes he had a press conference downstairs.

Six days later, at 4:30 P.M. on August 19th, a flatbed truck pulled up alongside the new security wall under Vieira de Mello's office. American forces had blocked off the road with a five-ton truck, but the U.N., because it was uncomfortable with a heavy military presence, had asked that the obstacle be removed. Vieira de Mello was sitting at the coffee table with several staff members and visitors when a thousand-kilogram bomb exploded. At eight-fifteen that evening, as soldiers helped clear away the rubble, Ghassan Salamé identified the body of his friend.

Twenty-one others died with Sergio Vieira de Mello. Ten days later, at the end of Friday prayers, an even more powerful car bomb killed Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, the spiritual leader of the largest Shia party, and ninety-four others, outside the holiest mosque of Shia Islam, in Najaf. And on September 20th Akila al-Hashemi was shot in the abdomen as she left her house to drive to a meeting of the Governing Council; she died five days later. By the beginning of November, the number of foreign U.N. personnel in Iraq had dwindled from six hundred and fifty people to about forty, with none in Baghdad.

"Some Type of Democracy"

Drew Erdmann left Baghdad in late July, for meetings in Washington and to see his wife, in St. Louis. They spent a beautiful Saturday morning walking through the dazzling green of an organic market, but he felt remote, as if he were looking at the world through a thick pane of glass. He woke up every morning before dawn, just as he did in

Baghdad, feeling the stress of what remained to be done. It was nearly impossible to tell his wife what he'd been doing. He felt dizzy, his hands shook with nervous energy, and he wanted to get back to Iraq.

Erdmann had been offered a position at the National Security Council, in Washington, as Director for Iran and Strategic Planning. When he returned to Baghdad in August, he told me that he didn't want to leave Iraq, but, because it meant being closer to his wife, he would take the job.

I saw him recently in Washington. He wouldn't talk about his current work, but, in any case, the only subject that interested him was Iraq. His debriefing at the White House had lasted only a few minutes. "They don't like us much, but they like the alternatives less," he told Condoleezza Rice, and the conversation moved on. He found that no one in Washington, in or out of government, really understood what it was like in Iraq. The gap between headquarters and the field, he said, is profound. "I sound like 'It's Khe Sanh, damn it! Charlie's inside the wire!' " he said, laughing grimly and adopting a Dennis Hopper tremor. "*You don't understand, man!*"

Erdmann could point to certain successes in his own sector: the resumption, in October, of Fulbright scholarships will help restore intellectual connections between Iraq and the world. He said that he was still unable to think as a historian. He joked that he hoped never to write a book on Iraq called "Strange Defeat."

This fall in Baghdad, terror bombings, assassinations, and firefights have become common occurrences. According to the Pentagon, around five thousand guerrilla fighters are responsible for the violence. In mid-October, Captain John Prior was driving by the Baghdad Hotel when a car bomb exploded, killing six Iraqis. As the ranking officer, he set up a cordon and helped evacuate the dead and wounded. He told me that Iraqis who might have countenanced attacks on American soldiers were bewildered by the recent bombings: "They don't understand why Iraqis are being killed."

Perhaps the escalating terrorism in Baghdad will drive Iraqis toward their occupiers. But it seems equally possible that the mayhem will be blamed on the continuing American presence. A classified C.I.A. memo sent to the White House last week brought the grim news that more Iraqis were supporting the insurgency—and that many believed that it would force the United States out. Last week, the Pentagon tried to indicate its resolve: Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the commander of coalition forces in Iraq, pointedly used the word "war" for the first time to describe the guerrilla attacks, promising an aggressive campaign in Baghdad to restore order. Shortly after Sanchez's announcement, I received an e-mail from Aseel Shouket, who seemed unconvinced. She wrote, "We are very afraid of the thought that the Americans would leave under pressure."

Not long ago, I met Ghassan Salamé in the lobby of U.N. headquarters in New York. He was helping Secretary-General Kofi Annan frame a new international consensus on Iraq. The debate is now about timetables for restoring sovereignty to the Iraqis. Salamé was proposing a swift return to Iraqi self-rule, but cautioned that the country was not ready for elections. Those Iraqis who wanted democracy and not just power were telling Salamé that elections would consolidate the hold of the most sectarian and extremist groups; the moderates had barely begun to organize.

The Bush Administration is pursuing a different approach. Last week, Bremer was urgently recalled from Baghdad for talks in Washington. During a meeting, he was reportedly told that the C.P.A.'s timetable, which was to delay elections and self-rule until the creation of a new Iraqi constitution, needed to be abandoned. The White House now seems determined to move up elections to the middle of 2004; it is also considering the creation of a new sovereign body of Iraqis that would supersede the Governing Council, perhaps by the end of the year.

But an accelerated timetable for Iraqi elections, along with the C.P.A.'s hurried attempts to recruit a new Iraqi Army, suggests that the hunt is on for an "exit strategy"

as America enters its own election year. There is no reason to think that turning things over to divided Iraqi politicians and inexperienced troops will lead to a better outcome. If the Administration hastily adopts policies in order to claim success in Iraq, it will have returned to the wishful thinking that helped make the occupation a continuous crisis.

"Iraq needs to be liberated—liberated from big plans," Salamé said. "Every time people mentioned it in the last few years, it was to connect it to big ideas—the war against W.M.D.s, solving the Arab-Israeli conflict, the war against terrorism, a model of democracy. That's why all these mistakes are made. They're made because Iraq is always, in someone's mind, the first step to something else."

In our last conversation in Washington, Drew Erdmann said that it made no sense to claim any certainty about how Iraq will emerge from this ordeal. "I'm very cautious about dealing with anyone talking about Iraq who's absolutely sure one way or the other," he said.

Before we parted, I asked Erdmann how he would define success in Iraq. His answer was humbler than the official "End State" declaration that had been affixed to his office wall in Baghdad. Still, given the concrete realities of what is now happening in Iraq, it was enormously ambitious.

"Success will be if there's a private sphere where they have some real choice in what they do with their lives, and a public sphere where they can have some control over their destiny and the state doesn't visit arbitrary violence on them," he said. "This means some type of democracy. It won't be Jeffersonian democracy, with farmers plowing the godforsaken sands outside of Nasiriya. Some would say, 'That's modest.' But it isn't. It will be huge. And it'll be something uniquely Iraqi. They don't have to love us, or even like us—why should they? We liberated them, but the fact that we had to do it adds to the trauma of coming out of decades of totalitarian rule. It's difficult for us. We look at ourselves and say, 'We have really good motives and try to do the right thing and why don't people appreciate it?' That's an American thing. Few Iraqis are ever going to step forward and say, 'I really love the C.P.A.' They'll have to live here long after we're gone. They have legitimate interests, and we shouldn't treat them as children—they're not. If in five or ten years they can look back on this period and believe that they're better off, then things will be O.K. We'll be able to move beyond this period to where things are normal between the United States and Iraq." He paused and shrugged. "In a way, success will be if the Iraqis don't hate us."