

**DEFEAT**



# DEFEAT

WHY THEY LOST IRAQ

JONATHAN STEELE

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For Sumaya, Pravin, Leah, and Amos

*They shall overcome*



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*Jonathan Steele*





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# INTRODUCTION

*We had to build a success story here that, like Germany and Japan,  
still looked good after 50 years.*

L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq*

*They marched away enduring a belief  
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief*

W.H. Auden, *The Shield of Achilles*

**T**his book is not a narrative or chronology of the American and British occupation of Iraq. It is an explanation of why George W. Bush and Tony Blair lost their war, and were bound to do so.

Many writers have catalogued the bad decisions made by the Americans and the British in relation to Iraq after April 2003. Some, like myself, are reporters who spent long periods on the ground during the occupation. Others are former officials who worked for the occupying authorities and became disillusioned. On returning home they turned their notes and diaries into illuminating accounts of incompetence, stupidity, arrogance, and corruption. Their common argument is that Bush and Blair failed to plan for the post-war period and to send enough troops, and that they then compounded these blunders with a series of mistakes such as their failure to control mass looting and the dissolution of the Iraqi army. The assumption is that with better pre-war preparation and post-war management the USA could have won the peace as impressively as it won the war.

My thesis is more fundamental. The occupation was doomed from the start. No matter how efficient, sensitive, generous, and intelligent the so-called

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Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) had been, it could not have succeeded. Occupations are inherently humiliating. People prefer to run their own affairs; they resent foreigners taking over their country. A foreign army that topples a regime needs to leave within weeks or at most months. Otherwise, suspicion will grow quickly that the foreigners' real aims are imperial – to run the country directly or through the locals they put in charge, and to exploit its resources. Nowhere is this truer than in the Middle East where feelings of dignity, honour, sovereignty, and humiliation are the currency of daily life.

Opposition to invaders starts with mistrust, grows into anger, and moves on to a refusal to collaborate with the foreign authorities, and the application of pressure on friends, family, and neighbours to do likewise. At any point it may lead to armed insurgency. Different groups in society will go through these stages at their own pace, but none will be immune. In trying to deal with this gathering opposition occupiers are drawn into a cycle of action and reaction that undermines their initial goals.

Improvisation and short-term crisis control replace strategic thinking. Insurgency is met with repression. Those who thought they came as liberators are perceived as murderous outsiders and those who work with them are seen as traitors. Sooner or later occupiers are forced to come to two painful conclusions: their project is unattainable, and the price of any course of action other than retreat has become too high. The main issue becomes how much damage is done, to themselves and the people they occupy, before they leave.

The only exceptions to this rule in modern times have been the Western occupations of Germany and Japan after 1945. In Germany's case the Western occupiers were not imposing alien institutions. They were trying to restore a political and economic system that had been disrupted by an aberrational period of Nazi dictatorship lasting 13 years – in historical terms a short interval. It also helped that the occupiers had a similar background, upbringing, and values to the people they had liberated. There was no major clash of cultures.

In Japan the Americans were dealing with a society and civilisation different from theirs. However, in 1945 Japan was a country whose troops had suffered hugely from four years of expansionist war, while the civilian population endured severe economic deprivation, months of carpet bombing, and two nuclear blasts. Japan's cities lay in ruins, millions of people were dead, and the survivors were in no mood to resist a foreign occupation,

especially one that kept the key symbol of state authority and dignity, the Emperor, in office. His powers were cut back but he remained as a guarantee of continuity and a rallying point for national dignity and pride. When he called on his people to submit to the occupying authorities and accept defeat, they loyally obeyed.

For Western powers to invade a Muslim country in the heart of the Middle East in the twenty-first century was a very different story. The region has a strong collective memory of imperial intrusion and a deep sense of anti-Western nationalism based on patriotic resentment against powerful alien outsiders who lord it over local peoples and in the process challenge their Muslim identity. Historically, a mixture of anger, humiliation, and shame informs almost every Arab encounter with Westerners. The Middle East has been repeatedly invaded and occupied by foreigners for the last eight centuries, with its dominant religion despised and belittled.

Today's Western intervention is mainly one of ideas, values, and products. Nevertheless when it takes a military form, as in Iraq, the enormity of having foreign tanks on Arab streets revives memories of an era of imperialism that was supposed to be over and brings back every Arab's latent sense of shame. In the starkest terms it hammers home the myriad onslaughts that the Arab world faces from the West – political, economic, technological, and – by no means least – cultural. Military invasion is the sharp end of the West's penetration of the region. It produces anger and resistance from secular Arabs as much as Islamists.

In Iraq in 2003, endemic suspicion of US and British motives was compounded by the fact that British colonisers had invaded the country, defeated the Ottoman army, and assumed total control in 1918. The Ottomans were Muslims and ran their empire in relatively benign style. With the arrival of the British, Iraqis found themselves truly under foreign rule. The British abolished the elected municipal councils, and dealt with resistance by means of massive military repression. They then occupied the country for two generations. So Bush and Blair were launching their attacks on a nation that was unlikely to welcome another takeover.

Add to that two other facts. Shias remembered the US failure to help their uprising against Saddam Hussein after the first Gulf War in 1991, and Iraqis of all groups hated the following decade of US-sponsored sanctions that threw hundreds of thousands into poverty and joblessness and left hospitals, universities, and other institutions starved of equipment. At best the

USA appeared an unreliable ally; more often it was seen as a hostile outside power with its own agenda.

Iraqis assumed that agenda was about gaining control over the region's oil and protecting Israel. The USA has acquiesced in Israel's occupation of the West Bank for the last 40 years and remains hopelessly one-sided in its approach to the Palestinian issue. The invasion of Iraq would be the second occupation of Arab lands by a Western army in recent times. It ought to be no surprise that it provoked an Iraqi intifada in which both Sunnis and Shias took part.

Nearly every mistake the Americans made after toppling Saddam Hussein – from the use of heavy-handed and abrasive military tactics at checkpoints and during house searches, the failure to spend reconstruction money intelligently, the under-estimation of the armed resistance as nothing more than a few former Baathists and foreign jihadis, the killing of hundreds of civilians in air strikes described as counter-insurgency, the reluctance to transfer genuine sovereignty to Iraqis, and the refusal to name a date for withdrawal – strengthened Iraqis' feelings of outrage at the humiliation they were casually expected to digest. The occupation was a daily affront to their dignity, as well as an increasing source of violence and death.

Bush and Blair seemed unaware of Iraqi history, the broader context of Arab nationalism, or the depth of Arab and Iraqi frustration over Western support for Israel's policies. Blair, if not Bush, paid lip service to the need for a Palestinian–Israeli settlement, but Blair never used the minimal leverage he had over Washington to insist on a radical change in US policy over Israel as the condition for British support for the US invasion of Iraq. He told a meeting of British diplomats, summoned back to London on 7 January 2003:

The reason there is opposition over our stance on Iraq has less to do with love for Saddam but [is] over a sense of double standards. The Middle East peace process remains essential to any understanding with the Muslim and Arab world.<sup>1</sup>

Blair's description of the problem was correct, but he did nothing to resolve it.

Neither Bush nor Blair made any obvious attempt to understand the complexity of Iraqi society, or the vibrancy of its politics in the 1960s before Saddam's dictatorship and the economic hardships of its last two decades

hollowed out Iraq's professional class and the country's pool of activists. Many were executed, forced to flee, or silenced by repression. Even in the 1960s before the Baathist coup, newspapers and political parties were frequently banned, forcing activists underground. But that did not mean the Iraq that emerged after Saddam's fall had no experience or memory of political debate and organisation. There were tens of thousands of Iraqis, still only in their fifties and sixties, who had devoted youthful courage, energy, and idealism to women's groups, political parties, trade union militancy, and the theatre and the arts during the renaissance that followed the toppling of the monarchy in 1958, and in clandestinity in later years. Yet the Bush administration and most US and British officials who moved to Baghdad and Basra operated from the same patronising template that was put on post-Cold War Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and East Timor. Iraq was perceived as just another 'transition' country with no civil society or history of democratic struggle.

Perhaps the biggest error that resulted from the lack of interest in Iraqi society from the White House and Downing Street was the failure to see the strength of Islamism. Bush and Blair did not seem to know that Islamists were already on the rise in Iraq in the final decade of Saddam's secular regime and were bound to become stronger if he was toppled. Islamism, of course, opposes the West's dominant presence in the Middle East. It is one response – perhaps the most powerful one over the last two decades – to the shame and humiliation caused by the remorseless onrush of Western influence. There should have been a warning here, had Bush and Blair factored it into their pre-war planning. But no. The two leaders' view of Iraq seemed to focus exclusively on the atrocities of the Iraqi dictator's regime.

Saddam was indeed widely hated in Iraq by 2003. Yet it was laughable to think this meant Iraqis would automatically welcome an invasion, treat occupiers as liberators, and be glad that Westerners with their own strategic agendas and long records of Middle Eastern interventionism would stick around to tell them how to govern their country.

Much has been made of the faulty intelligence claim that Saddam had a secret arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, which was used to justify the US invasion. In my view, the failures of political intelligence were equally serious. Why were Bush and Blair not told of the depth of Iraqi nationalism or given a warning that hatred of Saddam did not produce automatic support for an invasion? Why did they not ask for impartial advice on who

would inherit Iraq once Saddam was toppled? Why did they not realise that their invasion would lead to a combination of nationalist resistance and the rapid emergence of Shia Islamists, many of them linked to Iran, as the country's dominant political force? Where were the political analysts in the US and British governments who should have told them what would happen in the vacuum after Saddam's departure?

Washington's mistake was not a lack of planning, as is commonly argued, leading to the so-called triple failure (not sending enough troops, not providing security from looting, and not restoring electricity and other basic services quickly). In the run-up to the 2008 presidential election that line of argument has become a useful alibi for Democratic hopefuls: 'I would not have supported the war if I had realised there was no post-war plan.' The more significant US and British mistake was the lack of analysis, and the failure to understand the political and cultural forces in Iraq that would determine the country's future after Saddam.

On behalf of my newspaper, the *Guardian*, I served eight assignments in Iraq between April 2003 and 2007, each lasting around a month or more. My abiding impression from this series of snapshots was of a constantly widening gulf between Iraqis and their occupiers. What little acceptance there was in the early days progressively evaporated, yet this was barely acknowledged by US or British officials. Opinion polls that showed the occupation's lack of popular support received minimal attention from policy makers or coverage in the media. TV news channels occasionally showed Iraqi crowds cheering and dancing over burning Humvees after insurgent attacks but it was not until December 2006 that a high-level public document, the report of the Iraq Study Group (sometimes referred to as the Baker-Hamilton Report) headed by former Secretary of State James Baker and former congressman Lee Hamilton, mentioned the uncomfortable fact that 61 per cent of Iraqis approved of attacks on US forces.<sup>2</sup> Attacks on the so-called coalition were not coming primarily from Al-Qaeda or foreign jihadis. They came from Iraqis, outraged by the fact of the occupation as well as the actions of the occupiers.

Yet indicators of the occupation's unpopularity were brushed aside, when they should have been the starting point for policy makers to analyse what was going wrong and whether corrections could be found to salvage the US position. This book attempts to answer those questions. I accept as a given that the war was illegal, since it had no United Nations support. No other



Security Council members shared the US and British governments' line that UN resolutions going back to 1990 provided sufficient authorisation for an invasion in 2003. I also accept that the war was unnecessary. If the aim was to deal with Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, the UN inspectors had barely begun their work and Washington should have allowed them more time. This book concentrates on the occupation, however, not the invasion.

To emphasise the point that this is not another narrative, the book does not run chronologically. It is divided thematically. Chapter I discusses the origins and extent of Iraqi Arabs' suspicions of the USA and Britain, and the mutual distrust of Iraqis by the new occupiers. It explains how American and British decision-makers failed to take account of Iraqis' complex views about the desirability of having a foreign army topple Saddam. This meant that, for most Iraqis, satisfaction with his downfall did not translate into satisfaction with being occupied. Chapter II looks at the wider context of Arab attitudes to Western intervention in the Middle East from the Crusades to the present day. Iraqis and other Arabs do not view the invasion of Iraq in isolation, as do so many Western policy makers; it was only the latest in a long history of assaults on Arab and Muslim dignity.

Chapters III and IV explain how US civilian administrators and troop commanders created resistance among Sunnis and Shias by raising justified suspicions about American intentions, as well as through a series of political and military blunders. Chapter V poses the question of whether the USA could have withdrawn from Iraq with relatively little loss of life if, after toppling Saddam, Washington had left quickly and allowed Iraqis to run their country on their own. Was there a viable option to 'leave in time' rather than the one that was adopted and by 2005 had already become 'get bogged down'?

Chapter VI discusses the scandal of Abu Ghraib and explains why it was just the tip of an iceberg of mass detention of innocent civilians in a brutal counter-insurgency campaign that shocked and alienated millions of Iraqis while further undermining the US image in the Muslim world. Events at Abu Ghraib prison were not just a disaster of bad management, poor training, and indiscipline. They are important because they demonstrate how culturally unattuned and essentially racist most of the occupiers were. At one level, nothing better could have been expected from ordinary young soldiers with no experience of the cultural nuances of a very different world.

Ignorance is no sin. It becomes vitally important, however, when ignorance is factored into decision-making.

Chapter VII describes how the British went to war with as little analysis as the Americans of the likely political shape of post-Saddam Iraq. Based on interviews with officials who worked for the Blair government in 2003, it reveals for the first time that Britain's Arabists failed to predict the rise of Iraq's Islamists or to realise that the occupation would provoke an insurgency. It also shows why the British army never accepted the US neoconservatives' goals. Officers based their policy on pragmatism rather than ideology and quietly ceded power in Basra and the rest of south-eastern Iraq to Islamic militias, many of which had ties to Iran.

Chapter VIII analyses the sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias, which has caused the worst ethnic cleansing in the Middle East for a generation, forcing close to 4 million Iraqis to flee their homes for refuge elsewhere in Iraq or abroad. It answers the questions: who is to blame, and what role, if any, did the USA play in provoking the catastrophe?

Finally, Chapter IX looks at the farce of sovereignty. It describes how Iraq's successive governments, whether they were directly nominated by the Americans or picked from members of parliament elected by Iraqis, never had genuine freedom of action. Washington always held the purse strings or had the military clout to enforce the policies it wanted.

The first year of the occupation was decisive in setting the agenda and sealing Iraq's fate. Had the Americans followed their easy military victory over Saddam with an announcement of plans to withdraw completely within a year or less, they could have left Iraq without shedding much of their own or Iraqis' blood. Iraq's political class – not just the exiles who came in with the invaders – would have come forward readily to work out a new social compact and form a government once they knew Americans were not trying to control it. Tension and struggles for power would certainly have taken place, but there would have been no basis for armed insurgency. Had violence by Saddamists, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (sometimes called Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia) or other outside groups emerged, the UN and the Arab League would have been more open to Iraqi government requests for peace-keeping, if the new Iraqi authorities felt their own police and security forces needed help.

Of course, the option of early withdrawal was not chosen, or even considered in Washington. The neoconservatives always wanted a prolonged

occupation as a way to put new pressure on Iran and Syria, develop US military bases on Iraqi soil, and send a message of US dominance across the Middle East. As a result, Iraq's post-invasion landscape rapidly moved from light to shade to black despair. The chaos, the crime, the terrorism, the sectarian violence, and the slide towards civil war, all flowed from the disastrous US decision to control Iraq's government and keep an open-ended presence in Iraq.

The exact trajectory of what happened and the scale of the human tragedy that now engulfs Iraq could not have been predicted. What is certain is that none of the goals that Bush and Blair originally set for themselves in Iraq – democracy, security, and a stable pro-Western regime – have been met nor will be. The day on which Bush decided to have an occupation was the day he ensured its defeat.



# I

## IRAQ WITHOUT IRAQIS

*All donne, go home*

Graffiti in Baghdad, June 2003

A rare joke circulated among Iraqis shortly before Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met President George W. Bush in Amman in November 2006 to discuss the latest plan to end the country's pervasive insecurity. What would the US president be demanding? Answer: a timetable for Iraqis to withdraw from Iraq.

Every day 3,000 Iraqis were leaving the country to escape the threat of kidnapping, suicide bombers, and sectarian murder. In Baghdad around a hundred civilians were being abducted and killed every 24 hours, their recovered bodies often showing marks of torture and mutilation.

The joke was not just a bitter reference to the accelerating Iraqi exodus from Iraq, however. It reflected a widespread Iraqi feeling that Americans harboured a secret wish: an Iraq without Iraqis. The country's failure to organise a competent government, end the inter-communal violence, create a professional national army to replace the sectarian militias, and knuckle down to building a modern democratic state had drained the last ounce of American patience, it seemed. Blame for the disaster was increasingly being put on Iraqis themselves. The Americans had sacrificed thousands of their troops' lives and billions of US taxpayers' dollars. If things were not working, it must be the Iraqis' fault.

Judging by their behaviour, many US officials certainly seemed to prefer as little contact with Iraqis as possible. Even in the early days of the occupation in 2003, when travel outside Baghdad's Green Zone was perfectly

safe, they confined themselves to a narrow set of contacts. When Barbara Bodine, a tough former US diplomat who was appointed by Washington to be Baghdad's first post-invasion mayor, suggested she would open her office in the city centre, 'there were cries of horror – "There are Iraqis there,"' an occupation official told me.

American advisers and other political staff in Iraq made little attempt to read up on Iraqi history or Arab culture. The State Department and other US agencies sent few of their Arabic-speakers. The available pool was not large before the invasion, and many US Arabists avoided applying for posts in Iraq, either because they knew enough about the Middle East to realise the invasion was a blunder, or because they feared a Baghdad posting would be a career-killer.

'The number of Americans who spoke Arabic in the Coalition Provisional Authority was shamefully, shockingly low,' commented Noah Feldman, who was senior constitutional adviser to the CPA, as the US occupation's civilian administration was called.<sup>1</sup> He described how 'a chill went over me' when he peeped at what his fellow passengers were reading in the US military transport plane that flew him and other US officials to Baghdad in May 2003. 'Not one seemed to need a refresher on Iraq or the Gulf region. Without exception, they were reading new books on the American occupation and reconstruction of Germany and Japan,' he recalled.<sup>2</sup>

Three and a half years later, when the USA was mired in massive difficulties in Iraq, the Bush administration's use of expertise was still feeble. The Baker-Hamilton Report revealed that in a staff of 1,000 at the US embassy in Baghdad there were only six Americans with fluent Arabic.<sup>3</sup> It also revealed that the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington, which was supposed to give advice on the aims and attitudes of America's enemies, had fewer than ten staffers with more than two years' experience of analysing the Iraqi insurgency. Officials were constantly rotated to new assignments.

Was this incompetence or wilful ignorance, a feeling that there was no need to try to understand what the majority of Iraqis were saying or thinking? Iraqis were going to be given a Western-style secular liberal democracy, whether they wanted it or not. Or perhaps the Americans and British sub-consciously sensed they might be told things they did not want to hear – it was better to stay in the Green Zone and the coalition's provincial HQs, and talk only to those Iraqis who had clear benefits to gain from the occupation, such as jobs on its payroll or project grants.

Some Iraqis sought to make their views known. Sometimes they tried their hand at English. Spelling was not his strong point, but the person who wrote the graffiti on the pedestal where Saddam Hussein's statue once stood in Baghdad's Firdous Square had a clear message: 'All donne, go home.'

It was less than three months since US Marines had put steel hawsers round the statue's metal neck and brought it crashing to the ground. Shown live on television, the scene was the iconic proof of a great American victory, regularly replayed in countless documentaries. The Marines briefly hoisted the Stars and Stripes above Saddam's head, a humiliating image of conquest that Iraqis and millions of other Arab TV-watchers remember, even if most Americans forget. Weeks later, American troops were still posted outside the nearby Palestine Hotel and US officials frequently visited the building, which housed several American TV networks. They could not avoid seeing that at least one Iraqi graffiti-writer had already lost patience with the occupation.

Prominent Iraqis were more polite, although even they were reluctant to thank the Americans for the invasion. There was a telling moment when the 25 Iraqis whom the USA had just appointed to the so-called Interim Governing Council (IGC) were paraded before the media in Saddam's old convention centre on 13 July 2003. Halfway through the proceedings Ahmad Chalabi, the long-time exile who became the Pentagon's favourite Iraqi, strode to the microphone to say he wished 'to express the gratitude of the Iraqi people to President Bush and Prime Minister Blair for liberating Iraq'.<sup>4</sup> We waited for applause. The other 24 appointees looked stunned and embarrassed. No one clapped Chalabi's remarks, even though comments by earlier speakers had been applauded.

Insensitive to his colleagues' views but with an eye on L. Paul Bremer, the CPA boss who was sitting in the front row below the stage, Chalabi ploughed on. He proposed that 9 April, the day the Saddam statue was toppled, should become a national holiday with the title Liberation Day. Again, there was silence. At its first working session shortly afterwards the IGC did take up the idea of a national holiday but they pointedly rejected Chalabi's title. They decided to call 9 April The Day the Regime Fell.

The council's avoidance of the L-word (in his memoirs Bremer always spelt it with a capital 'L') reflected its members' understanding that few Iraqis were as jubilant about the invasion as Chalabi. This fact had become clear in the very first days when US troops came across armed resistance on the edge of Basra and in the largely Shia city of Nassiriya. It did not conform to the

pre-war briefings they had received. 'I imagined Iraqi women would be greeting us with flowers in our gun tubes, and holding up babies to be kissed,' one American soldier who almost lost his life in Nassiriya commented later.<sup>5</sup>

Within hours of Saddam's downfall reporters repeatedly met Iraqis who felt shame and anger at finding their country under occupation. Many were deeply suspicious of American intentions. My translator, Abbas Ali Hussein, took me to his family home in Baghdad on 15 April, just less than a week after the Saddam statue was toppled. His brother Hassan was sitting in the sparsely furnished front room looking depressed. Was he some unhappy Saddam supporter, I wondered? Far from it. Now in his early thirties, Hassan explained he had studied at Baghdad's prestigious oil institute a decade earlier but on graduation decided not to take a job as a geologist or engineer. The state had a monopoly of oil extraction and refining, and Hassan felt he hated Saddam Hussein too much to want to work for the Iraqi regime. Instead, he found a job in the private sector as a taxi driver.

Well educated, a man of principle, and a Shia, here was the kind of man who, the Americans expected, would surely be thrilled by the arrival of US troops. Washington saw Iraq in sectarian terms and viewed the Shias, along with the Kurds, as the biggest victims of Saddam's regime. What did Hassan think of the dictator's removal from power? 'Saddam betrayed us,' he told me.

Startled, I asked him what he meant. 'He didn't organise any resistance in Baghdad,' Hassan replied. He went on to hint that there might have been a secret deal between Bush and Saddam under which Saddam would refrain from ordering his forces to defend the capital. Abbas nodded in agreement. 'The United States must leave Iraq to the Iraqi people. We must rule ourselves,' he said. 'We have many educated people. We can do this. We want the Americans to leave today.'

The next day, at Baghdad's main hospital for children, I found the same sense of shame that foreign troops were in the heart of the Iraqi capital. Dr Abdul Hamid al-Saddoun, a heart specialist, was presiding over a scene of monumental scarcity. Sick children lay on cheap vinyl mattresses under tattered blankets. There were no sheets. Guards at the front gate had done an outstanding job in keeping looters out of the building, but the hospital was chronically short of basic equipment, from oxygen canisters to bandages, gauze, and surgical gloves. Dr Saddoun said he was appealing to the Americans for supplies, but he also wanted them out. 'Everything is settling down



now. Iraq will be Iraq. We will not accept an American or British occupation,' he insisted.

On the second Friday after US troops entered Baghdad, nationalist pride and Islamist fervour were in full view on the streets. Thousands poured out of mosques in the mainly Sunni district of Adhamiya, chanting both anti-Saddam and anti-American slogans. The organisers called themselves the Iraqi National United Movement and said they represented both Muslim communities, Sunni and Shia. One of the biggest columns emerged from the Abu Hanifa mosque, whose dome was damaged during the invasion. 'No to America. No to Saddam. Our revolution is Islamic,' some chanted. One protester I interviewed prefigured the insurgency: 'We will give the Americans a few months to leave Iraq. If they do not, we will fight them with knives,' he said. I watched as a dozen US marines appeared in front of the marchers. A few protesters waved their fists and shouted 'America is God's enemy'. The troops turned into an alley and there was no confrontation.

The following week, hundreds of thousands of Shias turned out for the annual pilgrimage to Kerbala to the shrine of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. Hussein was executed or 'martyred', as Shias say, after being taken prisoner. Under Saddam pilgrims were banned from walking along the main roads; they had to make their way to Kerbala in small groups in vehicles or through villages. Now they celebrated their freedom, marching in long columns down the main highway south from Baghdad, or north from Nassiriya and other cities in the Shia heartland. The atmosphere was good humoured, even though the festival of Ashoura is essentially a collective mourning, during which many carry palm fronds and flagellate themselves symbolically.

The mass march was not designed to be explicitly political. However, the huge outpouring of Shias onto one of Iraq's key highways for the first time for a generation could not help but send a political message. Here was a community coming alive at last. The image of Saddam's statue being toppled was what Americans saw as the defining moment of their invasion, even though fewer than 200 Iraqis were on hand and most watched in silence. For Iraqis the televised tides of devout Shias presented a more powerful picture of a new Iraq. It was an exclusively Iraqi event, and there was little in the mood of the marchers to comfort Bush or Washington's neoconservatives.

I heard many points of view firsthand during the march. On 21 April, in Kerbala's outskirts, Umm Zahra, in the long, black cloak known as an

*abbaya*, was standing by her front gate with other women similarly clad. 'I want an Islamic president. Only an educated clergyman can give us peace and security. We want the US troops to go,' she told me.

Halfway along the 50-mile stretch from Baghdad to Kerbala scores of men were resting on the banks of the Euphrates in the spring sunshine. 'If the US prevents us having a religious leader as president, we will reject it,' one said. Referring to the Shia religious and educational establishment in Najaf known as Al-Hawza, he went on: 'If Al-Hawza orders us to turn ourselves into bombs, we can make the US leave Iraq. We say, "Thank you for getting rid of Saddam. Now goodbye."'

I heard a few expressions of unconditional gratitude. 'Please tell Mr Blair "God bless him,"' said Abdullah Ganin, an English teacher from Najaf. 'If Bush wants to become a Muslim, he will enter paradise for sure,' a middle-aged man told me. But comments as warm as these were rare. These were not the cheering crowds, as predicted by Washington's neoconservatives before the invasion. The hundreds of thousands of marchers were Islamists. They did not support secular liberal values; they were not pro-Western.

Without being as starry-eyed as the neoconservatives, most other Western politicians also convinced themselves that Iraqis were so eager to see Saddam removed they would applaud a foreign invasion. In the weeks before Bush gave the go-ahead a stream of Iraqi exiles had passed through the White House and Downing Street, giving this message. Exiles who were against an invasion, including generals and diplomats who had defected from Saddam and strongly opposed him, tended not to be invited. On their way out of their meetings Bush's and Blair's specially selected guests hastened to tell the media they supported the looming invasion. Saddam's three decades of tyranny and war-mongering had brought untold suffering to Iraqis and his support was paper-thin. His army would not fight another war, and certainly not this one. All this was true, but their third point, that the invaders would be greeted as liberators, was highly dubious. Proper political intelligence plus some historical understanding of Iraq would have shown it to be wrong.

Meanwhile, the US and British governments' spin-machines pilloried the swelling crowds of anti-war marchers in New York City and London as appeasers. They gave prominence to anti-war politicians like Tony Benn and George Galloway, who had campaigned against US and British sanctions on Iraq and made trips to Baghdad to see Saddam. Their presence at the head of demonstrations was falsely trumpeted as evidence that the protesters

understood little of Saddam's atrocities and that anti-Americanism was blinding the marchers to the side that was the biggest violator of human rights.

Bush and Blair wanted to believe the pro-war exiles' encouraging words. They took the line that if you were against Saddam you would be for the invasion. They also latched on to the supposed corollary – if you opposed the invasion you must be a Saddam supporter. It was easy to fall for such a set of arguments.

What did Iraqis really believe, however? Would there be gratitude and cooperation or sullen acquiescence, which might develop into active resistance? Getting the right answer was surely as important as verifying whether Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. It should have been a crucial factor in the war-planning in Washington and London, at least if serious options were to be considered for how to govern the country after the fall of Saddam.

Yet almost nothing was done to assess the true state of Iraqi opinion. The USA had no embassy in Iraq, and nor did Britain, unlike every other major European country. So the two countries most anxious to launch a war were the ones with least information about Iraqi society and an invasion's likely consequences. Western intelligence services were equally hamstrung; they had few human assets in Iraq to provide an accurate picture. As a result, the views of pro-war Iraqi exiles rose to prominence by default. Conveniently, they agreed with what Bush and Blair already wanted to do.

The US National Intelligence Council, which coordinates and summarises the analysis of the various US intelligence agencies, produced two reports on the regional consequences of regime change in Iraq and the principal challenges in post-Saddam Iraq. A heavily redacted version of these reports was released by the Senate Intelligence Committee on 25 May 2007.<sup>6</sup> The agencies were right in some predictions but spectacularly wrong in others. Among their correct assessments was their view that 'the building of an Iraqi democracy would be a long, difficult, and turbulent process, with potential for backsliding into Iraq's tradition of authoritarianism'.<sup>7</sup> They also noted that Iraq's political culture did 'not foster liberalism or democracy'<sup>8</sup> and that 'the practical implementation of democratic rule would be difficult in a country with no concept of loyal opposition and no history of alternation of power'.<sup>9</sup>

The intelligence agencies were less well informed about the crucial issue of Islam. They expected the 'US-led occupation of Arab Iraq probably would boost proponents of political Islam',<sup>10</sup> but thought this would happen

throughout the Middle East rather than in Iraq itself. They completely underestimated the strength of Iraq's Islamists, saying efforts at democratisation after an invasion would benefit from 'the current relative weakness of political Islam in Iraq'.<sup>11</sup> They couched their analysis of Iraq in sectarian terms and thought the risk of violent conflict between Sunnis and Shias was high. With hindsight this may seem prescient, but it was a conclusion that the intelligence analysts based on faulty assumptions. They felt Sunni-Shia tensions were endemic in Iraq and the occupying force would act to prevent them becoming violent.

In fact Sunni-Shia tension was not a significant feature of modern Iraq, as the thousands of mixed marriages and mixed neighbourhoods testify. It was the occupation's policies that played a role, though not the only one, in increasing Sunni-Shia tensions, thereby contributing to the appalling sectarian violence of the last two years (as I explain in Chapter VIII).

Four months before the invasion Blair made a brief stab at getting expert views from outside the circle of his official advisers. On 19 November 2002 he invited six academics to Downing Street, three specialists on Iraq, and three on international security issues. George Joffe, a distinguished Arabist from Cambridge University, and his two fellow Iraq experts – Charles Tripp and Toby Dodge, who had both authored books on Iraq's history – took it in turns to make opening statements of about five minutes each. They were not asked to produce written memos. Before the meeting they decided not to risk antagonising Blair by saying an invasion was unwise, they thought they would have more impact by concentrating on the nature of its consequences.

Joffe recalled that 'We all pretty much said the same thing: Iraq is a very complicated country, there are tremendous intercommunal resentments, and don't imagine you'll be welcomed.' He spoke last of the three. He still remembers exactly how Blair reacted: 'He looked at me and said, "But the man's uniquely evil, isn't he?" I was a bit nonplussed. It didn't seem to be very relevant.' Recovering, Joffe went on to argue that Saddam was constrained by various factors, to which Blair merely repeated his first point: 'He can make choices, can't he?' As Joffe puts it, 'He meant he can choose to be good or evil, I suppose.'<sup>12</sup>

The six men left Downing Street after an hour and a half. There had been no meeting of minds. Joffe got the impression of 'someone with a very shallow mind, who's not interested in issues other than the personalities of the

top people, no interest in social forces, political trends, etc..<sup>13</sup> Dodge had a similar recollection that he and his fellow academics had tried to give a flavour of the difficulties ahead in Iraq:

Much of the rhetoric from Washington appeared to depict Saddam's regime as something separate from Iraqi society ... All you had to do was remove him and the 60 bad men around him. What we wanted to get across was that over 35 years the regime had embedded itself into Iraqi society, broken it down and totally transformed it. We would be going into a vacuum, where there were no allies to be found, except possibly for the Kurds.<sup>14</sup>

Tripp recalls telling Blair, 'There's a force in Iraq called Islamic nationalism. When you look at the effects of the West's sanctions, you must be aware of something cooking there.'<sup>15</sup>

One potential source of information on Iraqi attitudes was the foreign press corps. Discovering Iraqi views became one of the main challenges for the few Western reporters who were able to get visas to work in Baghdad in the final weeks before Bush launched his 'shock and awe' campaign. It was a tough assignment since independent interviewing of Baghdadis in Saddam's Iraq was almost impossible. Reporters had to be accompanied by official minders, and even if a correspondent managed to slip away on the excuse he or she was going out of the hotel to buy cigarettes or get a haircut, Iraqis were usually cautious about revealing their true thoughts. Finding an Iraqi ready to offer even a veiled hint of opposition to Saddam was something of a triumph, and these nods and winks of anti-Saddam sentiments were often reported in Western despatches as a sign that people wanted the Americans to remove him.

The Western press corps that was poised outside central Iraq on the eve of the invasion in March 2003 was split into three groups, none knowing who would reach the capital first. The front-runners were based in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. They expected that Kurdish forces, the *peshmergas*, would quickly smash through the Iraqi army's thin defence lines once the war started, allowing reporters to rush to Baghdad's outskirts, if not to the heart of the capital itself.

The second group was in Kuwait, embedded with US and British forces or planning to follow the advancing Western armies independently. Ironically for an administration that prided itself on its unilateralism in foreign affairs, the Pentagon dubbed these determined risk-takers 'unilaterals' and did its best not to help them.

I was in the third group, based in the Jordanian capital, Amman. Our hope was that the isolated guards on Iraq's remote south-western border with Jordan would disappear into the desert on Day One of the war, either in fear of US attack or under actual attack. US special forces had been using Jordanian bases for several months and we knew they were already operating on the ground inside Iraq before the invasion. One of their missions was to reconnoitre two Iraqi air force bases where Saddam held Scud missiles that might be ready to strike Israel, and to prepare for US troops to seize them as soon as the war began (or even pre-emptively a day or two earlier). The desolate terrain between the Jordanian border and Baghdad was inhabited largely by Arab nomads, and we expected to storm to the capital fairly rapidly once the border guards fled.

While we spent much of our time impatiently preparing camping gear for the nights we might have to sleep in the sand on the way, a fantastic reporting source was available on our doorsteps. Jordan was home to at least 350,000 Iraqis. Many were refugees from Saddam's terror; others were students and businessmen who travelled to and fro to Baghdad. Almost all kept close contact with their families, but unlike their relatives in Iraq they could talk to Western reporters freely. They might prefer not to have their names published, but at least their views did not have to be couched in the misleading ambiguities that our colleagues in Baghdad ran into. You could spend time with them, sitting in their homes or in cafés and hotel rooms, rather than grabbing quotes in brief 'vox pop' encounters on the pavement.

Over the course of a week I made contact with a cross-section of Iraqis, of different age-ranges, income groups, and sectarian backgrounds. The first finding, which was hardly surprising, was that the vast majority – over three-quarters – opposed Saddam, variously describing him as a dictator, thug, and megalomaniac.

Did that mean they were looking to the invasion with optimism? Wathiq Abadi, a professor of marketing at Amman's Applied Science University, was firmly in the pro-war camp. A Shia from Basra with a Sunni wife from Baghdad, he had lived in Jordan for two years. They decided to emigrate after the failed uprising against Saddam in 1991 but hoped to do it legally. However, until 2001 couples had to split if one wanted to leave. They were not ready to do that but then Iraqi law changed, making it possible for spouses to emigrate a month after their partner had taken a job abroad.

Professor Abadi admitted to some anxiety for their relatives in Basra and Baghdad in case the planned US bombing campaign caused civilian casualties, but he expected the regime to collapse within 72 hours. 'My main fear is that the USA and the UK will not go to war. Their target is the regime. They must go through with it,' he told me.

His concern was that if the US and Britain backed down at this late stage, Saddam would have felt he had won a great victory in his showdown with the West. Confidence in his apparent immortality would lead to even greater repression.

In the coffee shop in the Hyatt hotel I spoke to an Iraqi comedy actor, whose speciality was an extraordinary ability to make his eyes pop, looking as though they might jump out of their sockets and chase you. He would only give his name as Abdullah, although his unusual gift would surely identify him to any Saddam agent who read my report. He said he did not mind.

In 1999 he paid smugglers to get him out of Iraq after refusing to take part in a film called *The Victories of Iraq's Armies*. He had already spent a month in prison after declining to act in a play glorifying Saddam. Abdullah was anxious to see Saddam toppled, though he expected substantial resistance to US forces as they advanced towards Baghdad. He was also worried about what would happen in Iraq after Saddam fell. He had little faith in the Iraqi exile opposition and hankered after a powerful but democratic leader. 'I don't see any strong leader who can unite Iraqis. It's in our dreams,' he said.

Other Shias I spoke to were opposed to a US invasion. A 31-year-old art teacher and writer from Babylon who had also paid smugglers to get him to Jordan was pessimistic to the point of total bleakness about his country's future. He believed the USA was only making war on Iraq for its own purposes and that the post-war situation would be chaotic since Iraqis were not ready for freedom. He had no faith in the rest of the Arab world and was hoping to emigrate to the USA.

An enthusiastic talker, he seemed to get carried away by his own eloquence, making every sentence and idea gloomier than the previous one, telling me:

This war will happen but the Iraqi people cannot benefit from it. The main beneficiaries will be the United States, Britain and other European countries. Iraq's opposition parties are financed by foreigners ... We've never tasted freedom. We won't know what to do with it. That's the big catastrophe.