

## Now for the Good News

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Nov 1, 2003

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Articles & Testimony

The first snows are arriving in New Hampshire, but the action for the first of the US presidential primaries is still being played out elsewhere. American voters and news junkies in the rest of the world might be excused for thinking that the political battleground is Baghdad. The nightly news broadcasts chronicle in detail every new dead American soldier. Is Iraq going to be the issue? It will be, if the mainly liberal major newspapers and the television networks have their way. Why? Because they think that's the way you get rid of George Bush.

The future will tell, but Iraq could well turn out to be a good-news story for George Bush. An American journalist friend emailed me from Baghdad recently after I had sent him a message saying that I thought one of his figures about unaccounted-for weapons was out by more than a factor of ten. (I was right: he amended the figure, without acknowledging the mistake publicly, in a subsequent story, telling me it was all the fault of a useless official.) After teasing me about whether my family still loved 'the US of Ashcroft [Bush's attorney-general]', he let slip a surprising admission. He had volunteered for a stint in Iraq because he 'wanted to see the first chapter of the end of the American Empire'. But he continued, 'Now that I'm here, however, my first reaction is that Bush/Blair might just pull it off.'

If they can get the phones working, water running, lights on, they have a lot of goodwill,' he wrote. When did you last hear that perspective on the BBC? And don't expect to hear it any time soon either. Two weeks ago, I was relaying this tale to a meeting of senior BBC correspondents and news producers, and it went down like a lead balloon.

Those with a liberal bias would have had their prejudices confirmed by last Sunday's rocket attack on the al-Rasheed hotel in Baghdad, where Paul Wolfowitz, the influential US deputy defence secretary, was staying. Although an American soldier died, Wolfowitz refused to see it as a setback. 'There are a few who refuse to accept the reality of a new and free Iraq,' he said. 'We will be unrelenting in pursuing them.'

Bomb explosions on Monday, murderously effective outside the headquarters of the Red Cross, make it urgent that Wolfowitz follows up on his remarks. For the present, though, the attacks remain a tactical irritant as opposed to a strategic threat.

For ordinary Iraqis, the telephone system is still poor, but it will improve from next month as cellular systems are installed -- one for the north, another for the centre and a third for the south. The winners of the contracts include

Egyptian and Kuwaiti companies as well as an Iraqi Kurdish company. Water is much better, and in Baghdad the electricity is now following a regular five hours on-two hours off pattern. With petrol generators widely available, many avoid being in the dark at all.

US and coalition forces fear roadside bombs or being shot at; ordinary Iraqis are afraid of crime. But for every Humvee ambushed, there are thousands that go unattacked. And by using four-wheel-drive Land-Cruiser-type vehicles, coalition forces can merge into the background of tens of thousands of similar vehicles. For ordinary Iraqis, as well, improvements are tangible: secular Iraqi women no longer when going out drape themselves in chadors to minimise the risk of assault or kidnap. This week, the overnight curfew was lifted in Baghdad.

After some apprehension about personal security when the schools opened in September, there is now less concern. Children are walking home without their parents. Students and teachers have become eligible again for Fulbright scholarships in the US. In the courts, 130 of which have been renovated, vetted judges and prosecutors, after taking classes in the rule of law, now form an independent judiciary. The British system of criminal courts is being emulated.

The goodwill towards Americans is mingled with humour. An official went to see a Shia tribal leader, and as they sat down for the first of many cups of a hot sweet beverage, the lights in the majlis, the reception room, dimmed and went out. The American started to apologise, but was stopped short by his host: 'No, I blame the French. If they hadn't played around at the United Nations Security Council, you would have been here three months earlier.'

Such political astuteness is mixed with a curious ability to believe the most far-fetched political conspiracy theories. 'America is plotting to bring back Saddam Hussein' is so absurd as to be unanswerable. 'The whole of the south of Iraq is being looted by Kuwaitis' suggests a greater willingness for hard work than previously attributed to the citizens of Iraq's southern neighbour. Perhaps the Kuwaitis have sent in their Filipino servants to do the dirty work; but putting such a suggestion to the rumourmonger risks a blank or even hostile stare.

Of course, looting was a problem and still is in some areas. The Kurds, who accept US protection and friendship while making the most of any opportunity for a quick profit, have been conducting a lively trade in captured Iraqi military hardware, including tanks and artillery pieces. The customer: the Islamic Republic of Iran. But the main form of economic activity taking place across the country is the exploiting of an entirely tax-free environment -- no VAT, no customs duties, zip. Iraqi families, who we thought were pawning their last old university textbooks and saucepans, suddenly have sufficient money for satellite dishes, electricity generators and second-hand or even new cars. The newly available cash is bolstered by remittances from Iraqis overseas. The result is that goods are flowing in and affecting the price of used cars as far away as Dubai.

Saddam Hussein is out there somewhere, of course, but he is increasingly irrelevant. His scratched audiotapes appear to be having little impact. Only in the Sunni triangle to the north-west of Baghdad is there support for him. Saddam bought this support by favouring tribes from this area during his rule. When his money runs out or, in economic terms, his discounted future value is less than the \$25 million reward money, these tribes will shop him. The raucous joy in the rest of Iraq that greeted news of the deaths of his sons Uday and Qusay in July was a reminder of how much he and his family were loathed.

More good news emerged last week, when the donors' conference in Madrid was deemed successful. BBC Online reported, through gritted teeth, 'Donations [were] proving more generous than expected.' Whose expectations, one wonders. The US has already committed itself to the \$20 billion or so that it expects administration and security to cost for the next three years. Madrid money -- \$13 billion has been promised, although another \$20 billion might be needed over the next three years -- will be useful for rebuilding electricity, water and other infrastructure. These were items that had United Nations-controlled money thrown at them during the years of sanctions, apparently

without much effect. The challenge will be how to disburse the money, employing Iraqi contractors and workers when possible, and allowing it to trickle down to benefit the economy.

Iraq's oil, despite delays in rebuilding production, remains a great hope. A rise in the price of oil, orchestrated by Opec, which refuses to let market forces operate, is bad news for us in the West, but good news for Iraq's coffers. And one of the few agreed future policies of the new Iraqi Governing Council is that Iraq's oil production should grow. That will help the West, either by weakening the price or replacing Saudi Arabia as the world's largest exporter -- or possibly both.

But good news is not news in media terms unless it is a quiet news day. Provided the American death toll stays low or its rate declines (it will always increase with every death, as lazy correspondents never fail to remind us), the prospective news list for Iraq will be filled with unexciting reconstruction stories.

The wider story, though, will remain intensely interesting, although not necessarily televisual. How will Bashar Assad in Syria react to being squeezed by Israel to the south, Turkey to the north and possibly by Turkish forces along Iraq's north-western frontier if Ankara joins the coalition? How will US forces react if Saudi Arabia continues to allow jihadists to slip over the frontier into Iraq? How will Iran deal with being squeezed between US forces both in Iraq to the west and in Afghanistan to the east?

On an international level, the issue was never simply Saddam but rather Russia, France and Germany trying to use multilateralism to negate America's unilateral tendencies. But George Bush decided that, post-9/11, being asked to provide both the big stick and the fat wallet allowed him to have a say on when to use them. In the Middle East, Moscow and Paris are now considered quantitatively less important. They were further weakened by the success of the Madrid donors' conference, which was one more nail in the coffin of their hopes to have the debt owed to them by Saddam's Iraq paid back.

Where is Britain in all this? Don't we know so much better than the Americans how to handle these quasi-imperial situations? Suggest that in the US, and they laugh, relating the tale of how a British general in Basra told a public meeting that he came in good faith. The translator rendered this as 'our religion is stronger than yours'. Washington, though, worries about London's flirtation with Tehran. The Iranian capital was part of the circuitous route taken by John Sawers when he left his post as the top British representative in the Coalition Provisional Authority to become the Foreign Office's political director, the main action man in King Charles Street. When Jack Straw, accompanied by Sawers, went to Tehran with his French and German counterparts to secure (perhaps) a surrender of Iran's nuclear-weapons ambitions, the Americans did not know whether to laugh or cry.

Things can go wrong, but many of the challenges of Iraq come down to physical engineering and financial engineering. The American approach is successful on these fronts. The human and political angles are more challenging but not insurmountable. Washington and London differ here over the balance between stability and democracy, with the British favouring the former at the expense of the latter. So far the Americans are allowing a surprisingly free press, even though some rags contain nothing more than conspiratorial rubbish. The political future? Almost certainly a series of rather weak coalition but democratic governments, with the US needed to make sure that Iraq's neighbours do not meddle.

Does George Bush have the stamina to see it through? Will Karl Rove, his election strategist, whisper in his ear that in order to win the presidential race the US should speed up its exit strategy? George Bush is likely to respond by saying that he will certainly lose if the American people think that he bottled out when the going got tough. Will he win? It is, as always, far too early to say until the first ballot has been cast in the primaries. But if Bush doesn't win, it will be because of the economy and not because of Iraq. ❖

Spectator (London)

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