

Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad's Green Zone

Rajiv Chandrasekaran

Reviewed by Neil James

Back in April 2003 the ADA observed that the poorly planned and executed occupation of Iraq by the US-led coalition risked undoing the undoubted good resulting from the skillfully executed military campaign that had toppled the hated Saddam Hussein regime so swiftly. We noted that there were clearly insufficient troops available for the occupation, following US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's arrogant ideological interference in military professional matters, and his naïve and ahistorical assumption that rebuilding Iraq would somehow require less forces than invading and conquering it did.

Following the widespread looting that had occurred, and the long-term depredations of Baathism, we further noted that there was little enduring Iraqi civil society to fall back on for rebuilding. Finally, we suggested that the Sunni-Shia schism presented an enduring and fundamental problem, and that Iraq's Sunni-Arabs were now a displaced ascendancy class who would strongly resent their displacement. In summarising the situation we warned that unless the situation was fixed quickly, the US risked replicating the British quitting of Aden in 1968 on a larger scale.

The Summer 2006/07 *Defender* included reviews of the major books published over the last two years cataloguing how those in charge of the US war effort in Iraq have made so many misjudgments. Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* is a useful addition on the topic. Much narrower in scope and timeframe than, say, George Packer's *The Assassin's Gate: America in Iraq*, Chandrasekaran concentrates on the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and its leader Paul Bremer.

Far from being a one-sided critique, however, the book gives praise where it is due. With some humour it describes the valiant efforts of many CPA staff to do the right thing. The book is built around a series of highly illustrative and well-told vignettes of what did and did not work and why. And the odd ways in which many CPA staff were recruited and, in some cases, how the experts available and needed were deliberately not recruited. These vignettes are centred on individual staffers at first, but later on the book includes examples of their interaction and increasing group frustration – at least among those who cared.

Chandrasekaran, an American journalist with the *Washington Post* since 1994, is currently an assisting managing editor. He was the Post's bureau chief in Baghdad from April 2003 to October 2004 and, prior to the US-led invasion, had also spent much of the previous six months in Iraq covering the build-up to the war. He has also worked as a foreign correspondent in Cairo and Jakarta and briefly, after the 9/11 attacks, as a war correspondent in Afghanistan.

Several key lessons are emphasised in *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, many in direct contrast to or contradiction of

Bremer's own memoir, *My Year in Iraq*. First and fundamentally, US ignorance of Iraqi society and the scope of the problem was profound, often unrecognised and even more often ignored or discounted.

Second, not enough whole-of-government expertise was applied by the Bush administration. Where it was, often by the State Department or at its urging, this was frustrated by Donald Rumsfeld's grip of the Department of Defense and his refusal to heed advice or share power

Third, direction of the CPA from Washington was often insufficiently focused, too loose or even at times, too arbitrary.

Fourth, insufficient funds were allocated to enable the CPA to do its job, even less were effectively expended, and even less effectively accounted for.

Fifth, there were never enough troops to provide sufficient security for the rebuilding to start or to snuff out opposition at its source. Even worse, the military commanders and their troops were never given enough legal authority or policy back-up to robustly enforce reasonable levels of security in order to restore and sustain Iraqi public confidence. Even worse again, US military doctrine and training, and the less than adequate levels of cross-cultural awareness among American soldiers generally, greatly hampered the recognition and resolution of such problems.

Finally, it was clearly a mistake to separate command and control of the mechanics of rebuilding from the mechanics of the actual military occupation that provided its basis. This lesson also emerges strongly from the other books analysing what has gone wrong in Iraq. As in post-war Germany and Japan, the person in ultimate charge at that crucial stage should have been a military officer not a civilian official – not least where this official was a presidential appointee selected more for his political and bureaucratic loyalties than for his expertise or talent for the post.

In pre-empting a law and order breakdown and/or political vacuum mutating into a full-blown insurgency war, several other historical examples are highly relevant. Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer's successful tour as High Commissioner in Malaya (1952-54), where he held both supreme civil and military power, provides an obvious template. The disunited and difficult UN/NATO/EU suzerainty over Kosovo exemplifies the same lesson in reverse.

As the ADA observed back in April 2003, given the US's long involvement in the Middle East it was surprising that they had no 21st Century, Arabic-speaking, 'General MacArthur-equivalent' waiting in the wings to properly govern and rebuild Iraq. ♦

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