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Baghdad After the Fall of Saddam Hussein

By Patrick Cockburn
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There used to be a mosaic of President George HW Bush on the floor at the entrance to the al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad. It was placed there soon after the first Gulf War in 1991 and was a good likeness, though the artist gave Bush unnaturally jagged teeth and a slightly sinister grimace. The idea was that nobody would be able to get into the hotel, where most foreign visitors to Iraq stayed in the 1990s, without stepping on Bush's face. The mosaic did not long survive the capture of the city on 9 April 2003 and the takeover of the al-Rashid by US officials and soldiers. One American officer, patriotically determined not to place his foot on Bush's features, tried to step over the mosaic. The distance was too great. He strained his groin and had to be hospitalised. The mosaic was removed.

Almost all of the thousands of pictures of Saddam Hussein that used to line every main street in Baghdad have gone, though for some reason the one outside the burned-out remains of the old Mukhabarat (Intelligence) headquarters survives. My favourite was straight out of *The Sound of Music*: it showed Saddam on an Alpine hillside, wearing a tweed jacket, carrying an alpenstock and bending down to sniff a blue flower.

Other equally peculiar signs of Saddam's presence remain. The Iraqi Natural History Museum was thoroughly ransacked by looters, who even decapitated the dinosaur in the forecourt. In the middle of one large ground-floor gallery, almost the only exhibit still intact is a stuffed white horse that, when living, belonged to Saddam. Wahad Adnan Mahmoud, a painter who also looks after the gallery, told me the horse had been given to the Iraqi leader in 1986 by the King of

Morocco. The King had sent a message along with it saying he hoped that Saddam would ride the horse through the streets of Baghdad when Iraq won its war with Iran. Before this could happen, however, a dog bit the horse and it died. Saddam issued a Republican Decree ordering the dog to be executed.

“I don’t know why the looters didn’t take the horse — they took everything else,” complained Mahmoud, who was in the wreckage of his office painting a picture of Baghdad in flames. “It isn’t even stuffed very well.” The horse, he added, was not the only dead animal that had been sent from Saddam’s Republican Palace to be stuffed by the museum. One day an official from the palace had arrived with a dead dolphin in the back of a truck. He said the leader wanted it stuffed. The museum staff protested that this was impossible because a dolphin’s skin contained too much oil. Mahmoud laughed as he remembered the terrified expression on the official’s face when told that Saddam’s order could not be obeyed.

Saddam had three enthusiasms in the 1990s, two of which still affect the appearance of Baghdad. Soon after 1991 defeat in Kuwait, he started obsessively building palaces for himself and his family. None of these is likely to be knocked down since they now serve as bases for the US army and the Coalition Provisional Authority . Paul Bremer, the head of the CPA, has his headquarters in the enormous Republican Palace beside the Tigris, where he and his staff live in an isolation comparable to Saddam’s. Then, in the mid-1990s, Saddam began to build enormous mosques, the largest of which, the Mother of Battles mosque at the old Muthana municipal airport, was only beginning to rise from its foundations when the regime collapsed.

Saddam’s third craze, beginning about three years ago, was more surprising. He started to write novels. He dictated them to his secretaries and they were published anonymously in cheap editions, but Iraqis were left in no doubt as to the author. The critical response was adulatory, the print runs enormous. After the fall of Baghdad, documents were found in the Mukhabarat headquarters instructing agents to buy the books and get their contacts to do the same. Copies of his most recent novel, *The Impregnable Fortress*, as well as an earlier volume called *Zabiba and the King*, are still for sale in the Friday book market on al-Mutanabbi Street.

They cannot do much about the palaces and mosques Saddam built, but the US army and the CPA are obsessed with removing every mention of his name from Baghdad. You cannot enter the main children’s hospital without walking through a stream of raw sewage, and on some days there is no electricity or water, but earlier this month two cranes were at work removing large green overhead signs for Saddam International Airport. The US officials now in charge of Iraq seem to believe that their problems will be over if all evidence of Saddam’s existence is eliminated. This obsession explains in part the political failure of the US and Britain after their swift military victory. Their demonisation of Saddam produces a picture of Iraqi society as being wholly dominated by one man. In fact, the regime’s support base was always narrow – this was the reason for its exceptional cruelty.

Iraqis were never going to welcome the US and British armies with cheering crowds hurling flowers. It is, nevertheless, extraordinary that in only three months the US has managed to generate such fury against its occupation. Guerrilla actions have so far been limited, but they are popular. In the middle of June, two men drove up to US soldiers guarding a propane gas station

near al-Dohra power station in south Baghdad and opened fire. One of the soldiers was shot through the neck and killed and the other was wounded in the arm. An hour or so later I asked the crowd standing around a pool of drying blood on the broken pavement what they thought of the shooting. They all said they approved of it, and one man said he was off to cook a chicken in celebration.

A month later the attacks have spread to the centre of Baghdad. I was waiting outside the National Museum, where the CPA had arranged a brief showing of the 3,000-year-old golden treasure of Nimrud, whisked for the occasion from the vaults of the Central Bank, to demonstrate that life was getting back to normal. Suddenly there was a six-minute burst of firing on the other side of the museum. It is a measure of the chaos in Baghdad that this turned out to be the result of two quite separate incidents. The first was a funeral: as is normal in Iraq, people were firing their guns into the air as a sign of grief. The American troops on the roof of the museum thought they were under attack and shot back. But most of the gunfire was in response to somebody firing a rocket-propelled grenade into an American Humvee in Haifa Street, wounding several soldiers. The surviving soldiers had then opened fire indiscriminately and killed a passing driver. As the Americans withdrew, the crowd, dancing in jubilation, set fire to the already smouldering Humvee.

A week after I had been to look at Saddam's stuffed horse, Richard Wild, a young British freelance journalist, went to the Natural History Museum to get a story about its destruction by looters. He was a tall man with close-cropped blond hair and he was wearing a white shirt and khaki trousers. To an Iraqi he may have looked as if he were working for the CPA. As he stood in a crowd outside the museum an Iraqi walked up behind him and shot him in the back of the head, killing him instantly.

There are 55,000 US troops in and around Baghdad but they seem curiously vulnerable. They largely stick to their vehicles; there are very few foot-patrols. They establish checkpoints and search cars, but usually have no interpreters. "*Mou mushkila* (no problem)," one driver said when asked to open the boot of his car. "Don't contradict me," a soldier shouted. Military vehicles are often stuck in horrendous traffic jams (because of the electricity shortage the traffic lights are not working) making them an easy target for grenades. Just before the attack in Haifa Street, I was talking to an American soldier outside the National Museum. The tag on his shoulder read "Old Ironsides". I asked him what unit this referred to. He replied: "The First Armoured Division, the finest armoured division in the world." But tanks and heavy armour are not much use in Baghdad. A few hours later, a sniper shot dead another soldier as he sat in his Bradley Fighting Vehicle by the gates of the museum.

Outside Baghdad, the army has been conducting search missions in the villages and giving them such names as "Desert Scorpion". The press office puts out statements proudly listing the number of detainees and arms captured and suspicious amounts of money discovered. Villagers protest that they have always had weapons, and need them more than ever because of looters. They also have large amounts of cash, often in \$100 bills. Iraqis have not kept much of their money in banks since Saddam closed them just before the first Gulf War. When they reopened the Iraqi dinar was worth only a fraction of its former value.

Some foreign observers are already convinced that this American and British venture will end disastrously. A friend representing a French company in Washington was told by the Pentagon that there was no chance of his employers in Paris getting a contract in Iraq because of France's opposition to the war. He was not looking forward to reporting the total failure of his well-paid efforts, but to his relief the chairman of the Paris firm greeted the dire news with prolonged laughter, saying: "Don't worry. Let's just wait a year or two and then it will be American companies that won't be able to do business with the Iraqis."

This could be discounted as the evil-minded French watching with delight as the Americans, with Tony Blair loyally chugging behind, sink deeper into the Iraqi quagmire. But the quite correct perception that the US has already failed in Iraq is becoming the consensus in Iraq as well as much of the rest of the world.

It is a failure of historic proportions. The aim of the war in Iraq was to establish the US as the world superpower that could act unilaterally, virtually without allies, inside or outside Iraq. The timing of the conflict had nothing to do with fear of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and everything to do with getting the war won in time for the run-up to next year's Presidential election in the US.

The US failure to win a conclusive victory in Iraq is like that of Britain in South Africa during the Boer War. Like the US, Britain went into the war filled with arrogant presumptions about an easy victory. As the conflict dragged on, with a constant trickle of casualties from attacks by the elusive Boers, nationalists from Dublin to Bombay drew the conclusion that the British Empire was not quite as tough as it looked.

In Washington, as a visiting fellow at a think-tank for the first six weeks of the year, I was continually struck by the ignorance and arrogance of the neo-cons, then at the height of their power. They had all the intolerant instincts of a weird American religious cult, impervious to any criticism of their fantasy picture of Iraq, the Middle East and the rest of the world. Iraqis willing to explain how their country really worked found appointments with senior officials mysteriously cancelled at the last moment, sometimes while they were sitting in the official's waiting room.