

# The Best War Ever

Lies, Damned Lies, and  
the Mess in Iraq

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## INTRODUCTION

# The Innocents Abroad

**IN NOVEMBER 2003—ABOUT THE TIME THAT THE** initial euphoria of war began to fade in the United States—*Newsweek* magazine reported a startling fact about the tactics Iraqi guerrillas used against U.S. soldiers: “In Iraq, when guerrillas place an IED (improvised explosive device) by the side of the road, they sometimes write a warning on the street—in Arabic. The locals understand to steer clear; the Americans drive right into the trap. ‘Everyone knows about it except us,’ grouses Lieutenant Julio Tirado of the 124th Infantry Regiment, Florida National Guard, patrolling warily in the town of Ramadi.”<sup>1</sup>

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The story reminded us of an unrelated incident that we happened to witness back in the United States, when we took a trip that required flying on a small commuter airplane. The plane had only a single bathroom, and it had a note taped to the door that said “Out of order.”

On the same plane, we noticed another traveler—a woman, dressed in a non-Western white robe that suggested she was from some country in Asia or the Middle East. She was traveling alone and apparently did not know how to speak any English. After the flight got under way, she got up to use the bathroom. She tried the door, but it wouldn’t open. The note on the door was written in English, so she couldn’t read it. She tried the door again. She looked around at the other passengers and said something in her native language, which no one understood. People tried to tell her that the bathroom was broken, but she didn’t understand a word they said. People tried hand gestures, also to no avail. The concept of “broken” is simple and easily understood in any language, but there is no universal hand gesture for it. No one was able to communicate. Eventually she simply gave up in frustration and returned to her seat.

The incident made us think about our own experiences traveling in foreign countries—not in countries like England or Mexico, where English is either the native language or is widely spoken in tourist areas—but in countries like Turkey and Japan, where our own ability to communicate was every bit as limited as that of the woman on the plane. Simple tasks such as ordering food in a restaurant, buying batteries, or asking for directions became nearly impossible.

Imagine for a moment that the woman on the airplane were suddenly placed in charge of running a major city in the United States. Would she be able to handle the job? That is essentially the situation in which U.S. troops find themselves in Iraq. They don't simply lack an understanding of Iraq's history and culture, they lack even the language skills needed to communicate about basic, simple things. The enemies they are fighting do not need to be particularly intelligent to outmaneuver them, and they certainly don't need to be noble. (Indeed, they are not.) The mere fact that they can speak the native language confers a huge advantage over U.S. forces, which cannot be overcome by mere money and technology, let alone by the arrogance that has been America's main defense against the realization that the war in Iraq was a mistake.

On November 15, 2005, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Greg Jaffe told the story of David (last name withheld for security reasons), a U.S. Army foreign-affairs officer stationed undercover in northwestern Iraq. David wore civilian clothes and was so fluent in Arabic that the locals thought he was one of them. As a result, he was able to tell American military commanders how jihadist fighters had moved into Iraq across the Syrian border. He advised commanders and other officials on how to deal with their Iraqi counterparts and fired incompetent interpreters who had been hired by officials who didn't know the language. But here's the catch: he was one of only a handful of U.S. soldiers with those skills, and the military was in the process of pulling him out of Iraq. According to Colonel John D'Agostino, who oversaw his unit, "When David leaves, the U.S. Embassy's regional

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office in Mosul won't have a single Arabic speaker or Middle Eastern expert on its staff.”<sup>2</sup>

This shocking deficit is a reflection of one of the central yet rarely mentioned paradoxes about the role that the United States has come to occupy in the world. No other nation on earth is as involved in the affairs of other countries, yet the American people show very little knowledge of or even interest in knowing about those countries and their cultures. Hundreds of thousands of American troops are stationed on more than eight hundred military installations scattered throughout the world, and currently the United States is simultaneously fighting two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet whereas many citizens of Europe learn to speak several languages by the time they are adults, most people in the United States are lucky if they pick up even a smattering of French or German by the time they graduate from school. When large numbers of Hispanic immigrants began arriving in Florida and the U.S. southwest a couple of decades ago, the backlash included efforts to pass English-only laws that would restrict the immigrants' abilities to do business and communicate publicly in their native language.

Under the Bush administration, this combination of cultural isolationism and imperial ambition has taken political form as unilateralism—the odd notion that the United States can invade and successfully occupy a country as far away and as alien to American understanding as Iraq, without listening to or obtaining agreement and support from its own major allies, let alone from the people and nations of the Middle East. A few months before the war began, then House majority leader Tom DeLay was interviewed by Fox News correspondent John Gibson. “You

know,” Gibson said, “experts such as Henry Kissinger, Lawrence Eagleburger, have said . . . you should get many countries as allies on board first. Should we?”

“We’re no longer a superpower. We’re a super-duper-power,” DeLay replied. He added, “We are the leader that defends freedom and democracy around the world. We are the leader in the war on terrorism. When we lead, others will follow.”<sup>3</sup>

Nearly four years have passed since those words were uttered, and reality is beginning to sink in. The carefully constructed images of invincibility, victory, and triumph that attended the onset of war have lost much of their power to persuade. Our previous book *Weapons of Mass Deception* began and ended with two of those iconic moments that, at the time, seemed to many people to capture the stunning success of Bush’s war in Iraq: the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Firdos Square, and Bush’s “mission accomplished” speech aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier, in which he declared an end to “major combat” in Iraq. We wrote that “the situation is more complicated than the images of victory that looked so unambiguously inspiring on American television. It is important, therefore, that we ask ourselves what lies behind those images, how they were constructed, and what they may be hiding.”<sup>4</sup>

Today, we know much more about how those images were constructed. According to a U.S. Army assessment report, for example, the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue was actually orchestrated by an army psychological operations (“psy-ops”) unit.<sup>5</sup> And rather than the “end to major combat” that Bush promised, we have seen continuing and escalating violence. When Bush was filmed flying onto that aircraft carrier, commentators predicted that his reelection team would want to use

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the footage in future campaign commercials. By 2004, however, the “mission accomplished” speech had become an embarrassment for the administration, and by 2005 a majority of Americans were telling pollsters that the war was a mistake.

A number of reasons can be offered for the unraveling of U.S. support for the war: the admission by the White House that its claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and links to Al Qaeda were false, the embarrassment of Abu Ghraib, the mounting human and economic cost of war. Together, they demonstrate that reality always bats last in politics, as it does in the rest of life. Propaganda may sometimes lead people and nations astray, but, as Abraham Lincoln observed, “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

One of the saddest realities about Iraq is that the American people have had to relearn a lesson they already learned during the Vietnam War: that the nation’s leaders, like the leaders of other countries, are capable of misleading the public even with respect to matters of life-and-death importance. The mess in Iraq also ought to teach us a lasting lesson about the dangers of believing our own propaganda. America entered Iraq with the belief that its moral, technological, and military superiority—its “super-duperhood”—would ensure victory. Instead, it found a morass of problems that do not lend themselves to ethical, technological, or military solutions—especially in a country whose language and culture are so different from its own. Paul Bremer, the U.S.-appointed head of the coalition occupation authority during the first year of the occupation, had never set foot in Iraq until the day he arrived to start running the country, and he did

not even know how to speak Arabic. During his time in Iraq, he took daily lessons in the language, and shortly before his return to the United States, he expressed satisfaction that he was finally starting to understand the gist of conversations.<sup>6</sup> Is it surprising that Bremer would admit, a year and a half later, that “we really didn’t see the insurgency coming”?<sup>7</sup> America’s cultural isolationism carries a heavy price. If Americans cannot understand the rest of the world, they cannot hope to successfully engage with it, let alone to lead.

We are writing this book in the hope that this lesson, learned once again at great cost, will this time be fully appreciated and never again forgotten.