

Once-oppressed people now walk like giants

Day ends with ritual destruction of the dictator's statues

The Americans “liberated” Baghdad yesterday, destroyed the centre of Saddam Hussein’s quarter-century of brutal dictatorial power but brought behind them an army of looters who unleashed upon the ancient city a reign of pillage and anarchy. It was a day that began with shellfire and air strikes and blood-bloated hospitals and ended with the ritual destruction of the dictator’s statues. The mobs shrieked their delight. Men who, for 25 years, had grovellingly obeyed Saddam’s most humble secret policeman turned into giants, bellowing their hatred of the Iraqi leader as his vast and monstrous statues thundered to the ground.

“It is the beginning of our new freedom,” an Iraqi shopkeeper shouted at me. Then he paused, and asked: “What do the Americans want from us now?” The great Lebanese poet Kalil Gibran once wrote that he pitied the nation that welcomed its tyrants with trumpeting and dismissed them with hootings of derision. And the people of Baghdad performed this same deadly ritual yesterday, forgetting that they – or their parents – had behaved in identical fashion when the Arab Socialist Baath Party destroyed the previous dictatorship of Iraq’s generals and princes. Forgetting, too, that the “liberators” were a new and alien and all-powerful occupying force with neither culture nor language nor race nor religion to unite them with Iraq.

As tens of thousands of Shia Muslim poor from the vast slums of Saddam City poured into the centre of Baghdad to smash their way into shops, offices and government ministries – an epic version of the same orgy of theft and mass destruction that the British did so little to prevent in Basra – US Marines watched from only a few hundred yards away as looters made off with cars, rugs, hoards of money, computers, desks, sofas, even door-frames.

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In Al-Fardus (Paradise) Square, US Marines helped a crowd of youths pull down the gaunt and massive statue of Saddam by roping it to an armoured personnel carrier. It toppled menacingly forward from its plinth to hang lengthways above the ground, right arm still raised in fraternal greetings to the Iraqi people.

It was a symbolic moment in more ways than one. I stood behind the first man to seize a hatchet and smash at the imposing grey marble plinth. But within seconds, the marble had fallen away to reveal a foundation of cheap bricks and badly cracked cement. That's what the Americans always guessed Saddam's regime was made of, although they did their best – in the late Seventies and early Eighties – to arm him and service his economy and offer him political support, to turn him into the very dictator he became.

In one sense, therefore, America – occupying the capital of an Arab nation for the first time in its history – was helping to destroy what it had spent so much time and money creating. Saddam was “our” man and yesterday, metaphorically at least, we annihilated him. Hence the importance of all those statue-bashing mobs, of all that looting and theft.

But of the real and somewhat less imposing Saddam, there was no trace.

Neither he nor his sons, Uday and Qusay, could be found. Had they fled north to their homeland fortress of Tikrit? Or has he – the most popular rumour this – taken refuge in the Russian embassy in Baghdad. Were they hiding out in the cobweb of underground tunnels and bunkers beneath the presidential palaces? True, their rule was effectively over. The torture chambers and the prisons should now be turned into memorials, the true story of Iraq's use of gas warfare revealed at last. But history suggests otherwise. Prisons usually pass over to new management, torture cells too, and who would want the world to know how easy it is to make weapons of mass destruction.

There will be mass graves that will have to be opened – though in the Middle East, these disinterments are usually performed in order to allow more blood to be poured onto the graves.

Not that the nightmare is entirely over. For though the Americans will mark yesterday as their first day of occupation – they, of course, will call it liberation – vast areas of Baghdad remained outside the control of the United States last night. And at dusk, just before darkness curled over the land, I crossed through the American lines, back to the little bit of Saddam's regime that remained intact within the vast, flat city of Baghdad. Down grey, carless streets, I drove to the great bridges over the Tigris which the Americans had still not crossed from the west. And there, on the corner of Bab al-Moazzam Street, were a small group of mujahedin fighters, firing Kalashnikov

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rifles at the American tanks on the other side of the waterway. It was brave and utterly pathetic and painfully instructive.

For the men turned out to be Arabs from Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Palestine. Not an Iraqi was among them. The Baathist militiamen, the Republican Guard, the greasy Iraqi intelligence men, the so-called Saddam Fedayeen had all left their posts and crept home. Only the foreign Arabs, like the Frenchmen of the Nazi Charlemagne Division in 1945 Berlin, fought on. At the end, many Iraqis had shunned these men and a group of them had turned up to sit outside the lobby of the Palestine Hotel, pleading to journalists for help in returning home.

“We left our wives and children and came here to die for these people and then they told us to go,” one of them said. But at the end of the Bab al-Moazzam Bridge they fought on last night and when I left them I could hear the American jets flying in from the west. Hurling back through those empty streets, I could hear, too, the American tank fire as it smashed into their building.

But tanks come in two forms: the dangerous, deadly kind and the “liberating” kind from which smart young soldiers with tanned faces look down with smiles at Iraqis who are obliging enough to wave at them, tanks with cute names stencilled on their gun barrels, names like “Kitten Rescue” and “Nightmare Witness” (this with a human skull painted underneath) and “Pearl”. And there has to be a first soldier – of the occupying or liberating kind – who stands at the very front of the first column of every vast and powerful army.

So I walked up to Corporal David Breeze of the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, from Michigan. He hadn’t spoken to his parents for two months so I called his mother on my satellite phone and from the other side of the world, Mrs Breeze came on the line and I handed the phone to her son.

And so this is what the very first soldier to enter the centre of Baghdad told his family yesterday evening. “Hi you guys. I’m in Baghdad.

“I’m ringing to say ‘Hi! I love you. I’m doing fine. I love you guys. The war will be over in a few days. I’ll see you all soon.”

Yes, they all say the war will be over soon. There will be a homecoming no doubt for Corporal Breeze and I suppose I admired his innocence despite the deadly realities that await America in this dangerous, cruel land. For even as the marine tanks thrashed and ground down the highway, there were men and women who saw them and stood, the women scarved, the men observing the soldiers with the most acute attention, who spoke of their fear for the future, who talked of how Iraq could never be ruled by foreigners

“You’ll see the celebrations and we will be happy Saddam has gone,” one of them

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said to me. “But we will then want to rid ourselves of the Americans and we will want to keep our oil and there will be resistance and then they will call us “terrorists”. Nor did the Americans look happy “liberators”. They pointed their rifles at the pavements and screamed at motorists to stop – one who did not, an old man in an old car, was shot in the head in front of two French journalists.

Of course, the Americans knew they would get a good press by “liberating” the foreign journalists at the Palestine Hotel. They lay in the long grass of the nearest square and pretended to aim their rifles at the rooftops as cameras hissed at them, and they flew a huge American flag from one of their tanks and grinned at the journalists, not one of whom reminded them that just 24 hours earlier, their army had killed two Western journalists with tank fire in that same hotel and then lied about it.

But it was the looters who marked the day as something sinister rather than joyful. In Saddam City, they had welcomed the Americans with “V” signs and cries of “Up America” and the usual trumpeting, but then they had set off downtown for a more important appointment. At the Ministry of Economy, they stole the entire records of Iraq’s exports and imports on computer discs, with desk-top computers, with armchairs and fridges and paintings. When I tried to enter the building, the looters swore at me. A French reporter had his money and camera seized by the mob.

At the Olympic sports offices, run by Uday Hussein, they did the same, one old man staggering from the building with a massive portrait of Saddam which he proceeded to attack with his fists, another tottering out of the building bearing a vast ornamental Chinese pot.

True, these were regime targets. But many of the crowds went for shops, smashing their way into furniture stores and professional offices. They came with trucks and pick-ups and trailers pulled by scruffy, underfed donkeys to carry their loot away. I saw a boy making off with an X-ray machine, a woman with a dentist’s chair.

At the Ministry of Oil, the minister’s black Mercedes limousine was discovered by the looters. Unable to find the keys, they tore the car apart, ripping off its doors, tyres and seats, leaving just the carcass and chassis in front of the huge front entrance.

At the Palestine Hotel, they smashed Saddam’s portrait on the lobby floor and set light to the hoarding of the same wretched man over the front door. They cried “Allahuakbar” meaning God is Greater. And there was a message there, too, for the watching Marines if they had understood it.

And so last night, as the explosion of tank shells still crashed over the city, Baghdad lay at the feet of a new master. They have come and gone in the city’s history, Abbasids and Ummayyads and Mongols and Turks and British and now the Americans. The United States embassy reopened yesterday and soon, no doubt, when the Iraqis have

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learned to whom they must now be obedient friends, President Bush will come here and there will be new “friends” of America to open a new relationship with the world, new economic fortunes for those who “liberated” them, and – equally no doubt – relations with Israel and a real Israeli embassy in Baghdad.

But winning a war is one thing. Succeeding in the ideological and economic project that lies behind this whole war is quite another. The “real” story for America’s mastery over the Arab world starts now. ◆