

Arson, anarchy, looting and revenge

Baghdad's two forms of liberation

It was the day of the looter. They trashed the German embassy and hurled the ambassador's desk into the yard. I rescued the European Union flag – flung into a puddle of water outside the visa section – as a mob of middle-aged men, women in chadors and screaming children rifled through the consul's office and hurled Mozart records and German history books from an upper window. The Slovakian embassy was broken into a few hours later.

At the headquarters of Unicef, which has been trying to save and improve the lives of millions of Iraqi children since the 1980s, an army of thieves stormed the building, throwing brand new photocopiers on top of each other and sending cascades of UN files on child diseases, pregnancy death rates and nutrition across the floors.

The Americans may think they have “liberated” Baghdad but the tens of thousands of thieves – they came in families and cruised the city in trucks and cars searching for booty – seem to have a different idea what liberation means.

American control of the city is, at best, tenuous – a fact underlined after several marines were killed last night by a suicide bomber close to the square where a statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down on Wednesday, in the most staged photo-opportunity since Iwo Jima.

Throughout the day, American forces had fought gun battles with Saddam loyalists, said to be fighters from other Arab countries. And, for more than four hours, marines were in firefights at the Imam al-Adham mosque in the Aadhamiya district of central Baghdad after rumours, later proved untrue, that Saddam Hussein and senior members of his regime had taken flight there.

As the occupying power, America is responsible for protecting embassies and UN

Robert Fisk » Arson, anarchy, looting and revenge

offices in their area of control but, yesterday, its troops were driving past the German embassy even as looters carted desks and chairs out of the front gate.

It is a scandal, a kind of disease, a mass form of kleptomania that American troops are blithely ignoring. At one intersection of the city, I saw US Marine snipers on the rooftops of high-rise building, scanning the streets for possible suicide bombers while a traffic jam of looters – two of them driving stolen double-decker buses crammed with refrigerators – blocked the highway beneath.

Outside the UN offices, a car slowed down beside me and one of the unshaven, sweating men inside told me in Arabic that it wasn't worth visiting because "we've already taken everything". Understandably, the poor and the oppressed took their revenge on the homes of the men of Saddam's regime who have impoverished and destroyed their lives, sometimes quite literally, for more than two decades.

I watched whole families search through the Tigris-bank home of Ibrahim al-Hassan, Saddam's half-brother and a former minister of interior, of a former defence minister, of Saadun Shakr, one of Saddam's closest security advisers, of Ali Hussein Majid – "Chemical" Ali who gassed the Kurds and was killed last week in Basra – and of Abed Moud, Saddam's private secretary. They came with lorries, container trucks, buses and carts pulled by ill-fed donkeys to make off with the contents of these massive villas.

It also provided a glimpse of the shocking taste in furnishings that senior Baath party members obviously aspired to; cheap pink sofas and richly embroidered chairs, plastic drinks trolleys and priceless Iranian carpets so heavy it took three muscular thieves to carry them. Outside the gutted home of one former minister of interior, a fat man was parading in a stolen top hat, a Dickensian figure who tried to direct the traffic jam of looters outside.

On the Saddam bridge over the Tigris, a thief had driven his lorry of stolen goods at such speed he had crashed into the central concrete reservation and still lay dead at the wheel.

But there seemed to be a kind of looter's law. Once a thief had placed his hand on a chair or a chandelier or a door-frame, it belonged to him. I saw no arguments, no fist-fights. The dozens of thieves in the German embassy worked in silence, assisted by an army of small children. Wives pointed out the furnishings they wanted, husbands carried them down the stairs while children were used to unscrew door hinges and – in the UN offices – to remove light fittings. One even stood on the ambassador's desk to take a light bulb from its socket in the ceiling.

On the other side of the Saddam bridge, an even more surreal sight could be observed. A truck loaded down with chairs also had the two white hunting dogs that belonged to Saddam's son Qusay tethered by two white ropes, galloping along beside

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the vehicle. Across the city, I caught a glimpse of four of Saddam's horses – including the white stallion he had used in some presidential portraits – being loaded on to a trailer. Tariq Aziz's villa was also looted, right down to the books in his library.

Every government ministry in the city has now been denuded of its files, computers, reference books, furnishings and cars. To all this, the Americans have turned a blind eye, indeed stated specifically that they had no intention of preventing the “liberation” of this property. One can hardly be moralistic about the spoils of Saddam's henchmen but how is the government of America's so-called “New Iraq” supposed to operate now that the state's property has been so comprehensively looted? And what is one to make of the scene on the Hillah road yesterday where I found the owner of a grain silo and factory ordering his armed guards to fire on the looters who were trying to steal his lorries. This desperate and armed attempt to preserve the very basis of Baghdad's bread supply was being observed from just 100 metres away by eight soldiers of the US 3rd Infantry Division, who were sitting on their tanks – doing nothing. The UN offices that were looted downtown are 200 metres from a US Marine checkpoint.

And already America's army of “liberation” is beginning to seem an army of occupation. I watched hundreds of Iraqi civilians queuing to cross a motorway bridge at Daura yesterday morning, each man ordered by US soldiers to raise his shirt and lower his trousers – in front of other civilians, including women – to prove they were not suicide bombers.

After a gun battle in the Adamiya area during the morning, an American Marine sniper sitting atop the palace gate wounded three civilians, including a little girl, in a car that failed to halt – then shot and killed a man who had walked on to his balcony to discover the source of the firing. Within minutes, the sniper also shot dead the driver of another car and wounded two more passengers in that vehicle, including a young woman. A crew from Channel 4 Television was present when the killings took place.

Meanwhile, in the suburb of Daura, bodies of Iraqi civilians – many of them killed by US troops in battle earlier in the week – lay rotting in their still-smouldering cars. And yesterday was just Day Two of the “liberation” of Baghdad. Stephen Pollard: Fine words from Brown - but had he spoken to the Health Secretary? ♦