

National Trust

HERITAGE LECTURE 2005



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Good evening to all of you – thank you for being here.

I've just come back to Sydney after almost two months in Afghanistan. And now that I've had a week to play with my new cross-city tunnel, I'd like to invite some of you to share it with me. I can assure you that it is safe – you certainly won't get mugged, because nobody else is down there. I've literally been playing in it, whipping in and out of the city, insisting that taxi-drivers use it and exploring some of the in-offs. As an engineering project, I love its newness.

No doubt, as I settle back I'll absorb the above-ground politics, become suitably outraged and perhaps even agree with the disgusted cabbie who told me: "It's undemocratic, mate!" It takes time to adjust my brain space when I return from a job – from blighted societies that never have enough of what they need to blessed Sydney that, in the first days of my home-coming, always strikes me as having too much of everything.

Earlier this year, I arrived home from Iraq to a message from Mike Carlton – "could I get across to 2UE the next morning for a studio interview?" I did, and on the way, I listened dumbstruck as another talkback host conducted a prime-time discussion on a new cause for anxiety in Australia. It seemed that teenagers were having fun, tying the laces of old running shoes and swinging them up into suburban powerlines. All I could think was, that where I had just come from, kids didn't have shoes and there were no powerlines. And in the weekend just gone, I couldn't quite grasp why there was a man with a funny-coloured hat on my beach – telling me where I could and couldn't swim; and when I went home and told my wife that I might water the veggie patch, she was shocked:

"You can't do that," she said.

"Why not," I asked.

"It's not the right day," she said.

"The water police will get you!"

Now I was shocked.

Such are the wonders of living in Sydney, Australia. But just as I was horrified when all the problems that I cover 'over there' followed me back to my New York home on September 11, 2001, it is impossible to forget that today is the third anniversary of the Bali bombing, a tragic, shocking and confusing day, in which playful innocence was needlessly targeted.

The Bali killings spelt out in Australian blood what many of us were inclined to, or wanted to forget – we live in a world gripped by a crisis from which we can't escape.

Before Bali, Australia had already chosen to stand centre stage – beside US president George Bush in the wake of what we now call 9/11. Tonight I want to look at how the war in Iraq has swamped the war on terror and to mark out how events might unfold. There are questions that we need to keep in mind as we continue this troubling journey, one on which we can ever be sure about what will happen next.

What moral standards are expected of our leaders, and of us, at such a time? Given the post-9/11 electoral success of George W. Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard, the question is: does national leadership require truth any more? It sounds slightly absurd to talk of Australia as an 'occupation power', but formally at least, that's what we became in Iraq when we signed on for George Bush's war – and because we did, what obligations and responsibilities do we have in its aftermath? How should Iraqis and Afghanis respond when we come knocking at their door, bearing this gift called democracy? And what are we to make of their responses?

As a new world country Australia, like the US, is a melting pot. But for all our travel and our formal recognition of multiculturalism, how well do we know and understand the rest of the world? Many of us can find our way into Times Square and out of Piccadilly Circus, but after repeated assignments in Iraq and Afghanistan since September 11, I have a sense that, culturally, more gulfs separate us than there are bridges that link us meaningfully with cultures that we now need to understand so much more intimately than ever before.

What does a foreign correspondent bring to this debate? For my part, I'm a migrant myself – I was born in Ireland and came to Australia in 1965 on a ship filled mainly with 10-pound Poms. As an Irish family, we paid full fares. But perhaps my first 11 years was useful early training for reporting global crisis and conflict – we lived in an Irish border area known as Bandit Country, where at school in Carrickmacross, in County Monaghan, I sat next to one of the Mountbatten bombers.

Now I live in Australia and I travel the grimmer regions of the world for perhaps six months a year ... enough time to have roots here, but also enough time to be immersed in these other cultures to get a sense of their value systems and of how they work.

A foreign correspondent needs to understand and explain foreign societies as they are. There is a duty for us to explore how others come to terms with the conflicts they inheritor which might have been foisted on them.

It follows ... that if the Australian government joins a campaign to impose radical change on other parts of the world, that we understand the possible consequences – fully. This includes the risk and cost of failure in any such endeavour.

The other side of the correspondent's job is simply to send the news home – it might be an account of a week on the election campaign trail with Imran Khan; a covert visit to pre-independence East Timor to meet Bishop Belo, or the antics of the British royals.

I don't own a car – I go to work on a jumbo jet but I rarely earn frequent-flyer points on the last mile ... to get into the besieged city of Dubrovnik 14 years ago, I had to stow-away on a European Community peace-monitors' boat – hiding under the mattress on a bunk; to get into the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin, on the Israeli-occupied West Bank, all I could do was run as fast as my legs could carry me – and to get out I had to walk, arms high above my head, for five kilometres through the lines of the Israeli Defence Forces.

In the last days of the Taliban wars in Afghanistan, the only way to the frontline was on horseback and then on a raft made from the inner tubes of truck-wheels bound together with rope and twigs, hurtling down the rapids of the Kokcha River with a 10-year-old boy sitting up front, masterfully steering with a single paddle as Taliban rockets and Northern Alliance missiles arched overhead! On another fateful day in the same area in the same war, I went the last mile with five colleagues on a Northern Alliance armoured personnel carrier but only three of us came back alive after we were caught in a Taliban ambush.

Some times you just don't get there. Crossing the Allenby Bridge by foot, from Jordan into the West Bank, I was often stopped because of confusion between me and an Irish terrorist, also a McGeough, whose name was on the Israelis' list of the usual suspects. A few months ago, driving from Basra, in the south of Iraq, to Baghdad, I was pulled over by the Iraqi authorities. They took one look at me in full Arab dress, a critical safety procedure adopted by many western reporters which makes it possible to travel outside the blast-walled safety of a hotel compound. The Iraqis looked at my Irish passport, and reached a considered conclusion. "A Syrian terrorist!" they exclaimed. They held me for several hours and I was freed only after the chance passing of some British soldiers who read my documents and vouched for me. Tea and apologies all round.

It's often said that journalists write the first draft of history, but we are not historians and we are not anthropologists. Yet, someone must be there to see and tell – if you'll excuse the slightly Biblical tone, to bear witness. I was struck by a sense of this on a surreal night during the war in Baghdad in 2003. It was late when a group of us headed to the outlying suburb of Al-Shuala, the scene of an errant US bombing – a hospital that couldn't cope; a morgue and a mosque filled with mangled bodies in an impoverished Shiite neighbourhood. It was 1am when we were done and as three of us reporters looked in vain for a taxi, a local youngster called out – the boy had recognised us because he was on the housekeeping staff at the al-Rashid Hotel, 25km away in the city centre. He escorted us on foot through the maze of the marketplace; to where a giant expressway knifed through the district and he flagged down a 'safe' car that delivered us all the way back to the city.

As we stood on a median strip, waiting for an unknown ride in an unknown city that was being bombed in the middle of the night, I knew that despite all the risks and our fear for our lives, the media had to be there ... if only because no government would issue a press release on what had happened that night.

It follows that what foreign correspondents file is not always appreciated ...by governments and especially by their arm-chair generals, that band of pliant columnists, whose shrill certainty that the US-led coalition and Canberra are on the right track is in inverse proportion to the time they've spent on the ground in Iraq, Afghanistan or any war zone.

George W. Bush didn't go to Iraq to understand the people of Al-Shuala. He had his own personal reasons – 'Saddam tried to shoot my dad!' – that made him susceptible to the lobbying of the Neocons who assured him back in 2001 that this would be a little war in which his forces would be welcomed by Iraqis with flowers and candy. But history will look at the facts, so we might as well be clear about the Iraq war – it was based on lies.

Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11 and he was not connected to Osama bin Laden or his Al Qaeda terrorist network. And Saddam had no weapons of mass destruction.

9/11 was a brutal and destructive assault that reflects the vicious mindset of its perpetrators. But what has our response revealed about us... about the use and abuse of power in our political culture? Do we have to behave like the enemy, to pursue the enemy? Why in this great western democratic culture, did so few leaders come clean with their citizens? Is it naïve to think we should care that critical decisions might be based on a succession of lies and half-truths?

That's how it seemed in New York in the wake of 9/11, as the authorities, like frogs, leapt from one Lilly pad of emotion-charged information to the next, not caring about what they left in their wake as long as they landed neatly on the next Lilly pad from which they further manipulated

public opinion to bolster their case for war. And in all of this, the really shocking truth was the switching of the focus from capturing bin Laden to chasing Saddam instead.

Remember John Walker Lindh? Americans first heard of him in 2001 as the treacherous California-reared face of the Taliban who'd had a hand in the murder of a CIA agent in the north of Afghanistan. But months later, when the case got to court, the only charge was that the young man had carried a gun for the Taliban.

Remember the arrest of the Dirty Bomber in Chicago? Then US Attorney General John Ashcroft had Americans cowering with a live-cross news feed from Moscow, in which he left us believing that a radio-active attack had been imminent – a detailed case is yet to get to court, but it seems that Ashcroft exaggerated wildly.

Mohammed Atta? He was the 9/11 ringleader who secretly met with Iraqi agents in Prague – Atta was the man who piloted a plane into the World Trade Centre in New York City, but he was never in Prague cutting deals with Saddam. And all that anthrax – the only leads that US investigators have come up with are home-grown; not the Taliban, not Al-Qaeda.

More recently, Bush vowed to 'prevent Al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorists from turning Iraq into what Afghanistan was under the Taliban. But it's too late – the CIA and the UN have assessed Iraq after the US-led invasion to be even more effective as an Islamic terrorist training centre than Afghanistan ever was. They bus them in from Afghanistan now – for training – and Osama bin Laden is still at large!

This sense of unreality continues. After his absurd 'mission accomplished' claim in May 2003, George Bush handed America's highest civil honour, the Presidential medal of Freedom, to some of the key wrong-doers on his side – to CIA director George Tenet who assured the White House that the WMD case for war against Iraq was 'a slam dunk'; to Paul Bremer, his Baghdad

proconsul, who made the most short-sighted decisions of the occupation – disbanding the Iraqi military and marginalising all the Baathists; and to Tommy Franks the general whose failed military planning for the occupation spawned an insurgency that has killed very close to 2000 young Americans and ten or more times that many Iraqis.

There was little fuss when those who did have the courage to speak out before going to war were punished – and hardly the batting of an eyelid when they were later proved correct.

US Army Secretary Thomas White and General Eric Shinseki were bundled out of their jobs for pre-invasion claims that planned troop-numbers were insufficient to effectively occupy Iraq. Ditto Larry Lindsay, director of the US National Economic Council, who told *The Wall Street Journal* that the war could cost up to \$US200 billion – by last month Congress had approved \$US204 billion. And furious that the International Atomic Energy Agency had found no weapons in Iraq – because there were none – Washington launched a determined campaign to roll Mohamed Al-Baradei as the agency's chief ... hoping to replace him with one Alexander Downer.

None of this made sense till about a year ago when American journalist Ron Suskind, writing in *The New York Times* magazine, was able to reveal the inverted reality of the Bush White House. His – and ultimately our – moment of enlightenment came as he was being admonished by a senior presidential aide for his – that's Suskind's – failure to understand the functioning of presidential power post 9/11.

Suskind writes: "The aide said that guys like me were in what we call the reality-based community, which he defined as people who 'believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality. That's not the way the world really works any more,' he told Suskind. 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will –

we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do'.

The Americans should have stopped in Afghanistan. Toppling the Taliban and putting bin Laden on the run was a low-cost, high-yield intervention unchallenged anywhere in the world as a perfectly legitimate response to ferocious and unforgivable attacks on New York and Washington.

And even though it was not in the Middle East, it set the scene for what still could be Bush's democracy beacon in the Islamic world. It's still very shaky Precisely because the Americans *did* rush off to start another war.

If only a half of the funds that have been thrown into the Baghdad black-hole had been devoted to Afghanistan and only half of the military commitment, Afghans and the world might be rallying today in a fledgling democracy with more sustained hope for the future than the prospective narco-state that Afghanistan is.

In much the same way that the Americans allowed the looting of Baghdad to reduce a normally well-behaved and law-abiding society to lawlessness and their country to a criminal wasteland in a matter of days the Americans have stood by and allowed the old warlord, tribal and religious leaders of Afghanistan to manipulate a supposedly democratic electoral process to deliver power to ... themselves.

The release of election results in the coming days will be a measure of their success, but globally the world is moving on from Afghanistan because, as in Iraq, Bush already has declared it a democratic success.

There are signs of hope in Kabul. The security crisis is nothing like that in Iraq and it's a joy to see young girls skipping off to school every morning. And as I walk into an office in the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, a group of excited young men is gathered around a poster advertising Fulbright scholarships.

But ... there are daily signs of underlying problems that could well be insurmountable in the absence of a more determined world aid effort.

As we wait for our appointment at the Foreign Ministry, a young Afghani tells me excitedly of his role in the previous days as an intermediary between some of the country's most senior policemen and some of its roughest drug barons as a deal was hammered out to 'buy back' 28kg of confiscated heroin. The previous day, the man who had headed the Taliban's cruel security apparatus had eyeballed me, insisting there was nothing for which he needed to apologise to the people of Afghanistan; Despite a clearly-stated yearning for a process of national reconciliation, the president's brother and suspected drug dealer, Wali Karzai, argued to me that Afghanistan just had to just forget the past; And in his austere chambers in Kabul Chief Justice ... Faizal Hadi Shinwari explains in all seriousness that the requirement for four eye-witnesses to prove a rape charge, which is virtually impossible, was in the law to save women the embarrassment of having the whole community know they had been raped.

It doesn't matter that bin Laden is still at large or that US aid officials in Kabul are wringing their hands in desperation because they do not have the funds to seriously tackle drugs and other problems. Last month, when one of them complained to me that just a few billion dollars would kick-start the alternative livelihoods program essential to weaning Afghanistan farmers from opium, I was taken aback ...by his anger and frustration. "Why don't you just nick it from the 87 billion going into Iraq," I asked – mostly in jest. He snorted through clenched teeth, and said: "Don't get me started".

But the Americans knew what they were doing – straight off to Iraq, where Saddam his bureaucracy and military literally walked away from their posts. There was hardly a conquest. As looters ran amok, US proconsul Paul Bremer created half-a-million new enemies for Washington with his twin decisions to disband the military and to outlaw anyone who had been a Baathist ...

which meant much of the professional and managerial classes who previously had kept the country running were now sidelined ... stewing ... and bent on revenge, just as the extended family of every Iraqi killed in this crisis is culturally programmed to seek vengeance.

The elephant on the Baghdad table was the huge Shiite majority that had been oppressed for centuries. But Americans are not good elephant trainers – they wanted to work around the Shiia religious leadership, hoping they could buy time for the exiles they brought back by the planeload, to build their own political parties and constituencies. But, as Mark Danner, observed perceptively in *The New York Times* last month, they never managed to confront Iraq's underlying political dysfunction – of which the tyranny of Saddam Hussein was a product, not the cause. Ditto the insurgency itself – for all the talk of foreign fighters few of them would survive for more than a day in Iraq without the support of locals.

Worst of all, ...strategically the conflict in Iraq has revealed not so much the extent of US power, as its limit – apart from repeated military setbacks in an environment in which the insurgency doesn't have to win to win, it merely has to not lose, Iraqis and the whole Arab world watch with as much fear as amazement, as the greatest superpower battles to achieve even the levels of power and oil production managed by a sanction-shackled Saddam in the months before the invasion.

The neocons and their acolytes are fond of charging that people 'don't get it...' But Bush clearly didn't get one of the paradoxes of American power as articulated by Harvard's Professor Joseph Nye – that the US is too great to be challenged by any other state in this world, but not great enough to act alone in solving problems such as global terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

Having made its call by going into Iraq, the US is stuck there for the foreseeable future. Any attempt to sneak out with more dodgy claims of 'mission accomplished' will be revealed so quickly that the damage to US credibility and prestige could be catastrophic.

It is no exaggeration to say there's a risk the entire region could implode, possibly delivering to Al Qaeda or one of its satellites a state-based operation – in Iraq or maybe even in Saudi Arabia – that would threaten global oil supplies and the delicate balance of power in the region.

It can't be allowed to happen – so at what cost, at what price might Iraq be rescued from the US? The short answer is: Probably not the way the Americans are going about it.

When Donald Rumsfeld first spoke of an Iraqi 'tipping point', the defence secretary was referring to the imminent collapse of Saddam's military in the face of a US-led invasion. Today his term is being applied to the Americans and that tipping point is the intersecting graphs of US tolerance for death and dollars in Iraq and a dawning reality that unless Washington orders a new military draft, there simply won't be enough US soldiers to maintain the numbers in Iraq by early next year.

A void is opening between Bush and his commanders. The president talks about denying terrorists an opportunity to claim an historic victory; but in the trenches and against all the negative implications, his officers are doing the math, trying to get a fix on what pale imitation of Iraqi democracy might allow them to start bringing home the troops ahead of next year's mid-term elections.

But this is going to be a long, hard-fought insurgency. Rumsfeld stripped away all the layers of the security onion shortly after the invasion of Iraq when he asked an essential question about progress in the war on terror:

“Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and radical clerics are recruiting training and deploying against us?”

The answer is 'NO'. Attacks on the US in Iraq have averaged about 65 a day for the last year, but the weapons and the tactics are more sophisticated.

One of Rumsfeld's senior intelligence officers told *The New York Times* in July "We're capturing or killing a lot of insurgents, but they are being replaced quicker than we can bust their operations. There's always another insurgent ready to step up and take charge."

Rumsfeld also seemed to cut through a lot of the 'we'll smoke 'em out' nonsense when he predicted in June that the Iraqi insurgency might last for 12 years.

How do you measure progress in Iraq? Under growing pressure and desperate for a new angle, Bush last week claimed that 10 major terrorist strikes had been thwarted since 9/11. But even apart from the headline attacks on Bali, Madrid, London and Sharm el Sheik, the US State Department recorded 651 'significant terrorist attacks' around the world last year. That was the highest in 20 years – up 300 per cent on the previous year globally; and in Iraq alone, up 900 per cent on the previous year.

Comparisons with World War II and Vietnam rankle with the Bush administration – but consider this: 48 months after Pearl Harbour the US had defeated Germany and Japan. And after just two-and-a-half years

of the Iraq war, US opinion polls already are registering the same levels of doubt and anxiety that were being recorded in year seven of the Vietnam conflict.

More Americans died in the year *after* the US returned sovereignty to Iraqis than in the year preceding the hand-over; and a majority now believes that the Iraq war simply is 'not worth it'. In the last year the number of poll respondents claiming that 'people they know are becoming less involved emotionally' in the news from Iraq almost doubled – to 44 per cent.

But Iraq and the war on terror are best measured in their own right by glaring mistakes, appalling ignorance, bad judgement and, if you'll excuse the use of a technical term, stupidity.

A searing assessment of the US effort to date by American defence analyst Andrew Krepinevich, finds lots of goals – but little strategy. His own conclusion in the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs* is that nearly two-thirds of Americans think the coalition is ‘bogged down’.

The insurgency took advantage of the security vacuum created by the US to establish itself after the demise of Saddam and the Americans’ hunt-n-kill tactic is not working – pockets of the country are secure only for as long as US forces are stationed in them.

Now, a seeming urge by some in the US to quit Iraq is buoying insurgency hopes of success at the same time as it stokes a local power struggle – this is why all sides in Iraq refuse to stand down their considerable private militias. And the presence of so many Americans and a teetering government that can be presented as an agent of American design in the region, makes it a logical theatre of war for jihadists whose numbers still are estimated to be perhaps 20 000 Iraqis and no more than a few hundred foreigners.

Krepinevich says: “[The insurgents] know they cannot defeat the US-led coalition militarily. Their best chance of success is to wait for a premature US withdrawal and then spark a coup, in which a small, well-disciplined group with foreign backing seizes power from a weak, demoralised regime.

“[This is why they fight] to perpetuate disorder and to prevent the establishment of a legitimate, democratic Iraqi government. By creating an atmosphere of intimidation, insecurity, and despair, they hope to undermine support for the government.”

This explains the hyper-charged level of the insurgency’s violence. Sporadic attacks were enough to keep the Northern Irish insurgency ticking over, but in Iraq the insurgents are so desperate to maintain the post-Saddam vacuum, rather than have a new government find its feet, that they blast away every day.

They believe the US-led coalition lacks staying power – they see proof for this in the American withdrawals from Beirut in the 80s and Somalia in the 90s and in a flood of US opinion polls that show deepening disquiet with the manner in which George Bush went to war and the conduct of his war.

In Iraq, the warring sides Wrestle for control of three vital hearts-and-minds centres of gravity – the Iraqi people, the American people and the US military. To win this war the US must capture and hold all three; the insurgents need only one for victory.

Krepinevich concludes: “The key is to recognise that US forces have overwhelming advantages in terms of combat power and mobility, but a key disadvantage in terms of intelligence. If they know who the insurgents are and where they are, they can quickly suppress the insurgency.

The Iraqi people are the best source of this intelligence.

But US forces and their allies can only gain this knowledge by winning local hearts and minds; that is, by convincing them that the insurgents’ defeat is in their interest and that they can share intelligence without fear of insurgent reprisals”.

This is a tantalising issue. Is a \$US25 million price on bin Laden’s head not enough to seduce just one person into dobbing him in? The same applies to Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in Iraq and all the families and friends of the thousands of individuals who make up the insurgency – why in a population of millions are so few prepared to spill the beans to US or Iraqi intelligence?

Undoubtedly there is a fear element. ut there is another overpowering reason – they don’t trust the Americans. Especially the Shiia – they were betrayed by Washington when they rose against Saddam 14 years ago and the Arab regimes that the US has supported for more than half-a-century are all Sunnis who rule over sizable Shiite minorities.

Brooding on the Iraqi sidelines are the Iranian Shiites who are so despised in Washington. During the Saddam years the Iranians looked after the Shiites of Iraq, funding and training their militias

and sheltering those who fled into exile. Now the Iranians are reaping a huge dividend – as a procession of Iraq's new Shiite leaders beats a path to their door. In Washington there is a joke that doesn't get too many laughs – “the Iraq war is over and the Iranians won’.

The debate among analyst is not so much *when* will the Iraq civil war start, as much as *has* it started? I have always been of the view that with 20-plus per cent of the world's oil, Iraqis are destined to have a great and prosperous future – but sadly, I don't see it eventuating this side of a full-blown civil war.

Even Henry Kissinger, the old Republican warlord, has taken to lecturing the White House on the danger of cutting US troop numbers too soon because he's anxious that Washington's creation of a new Iraqi military actually is a prelude to inevitable civil war. As the former Secretary of State sees it, the new Iraqi security forces are essentially Shiite and the insurgency is mostly in areas that traditionally are Sunni – “[That's] a return to the traditional Sunni-Shiite conflict,” he says.

Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi is Osama bin Laden's pointsman in Iraq. He is determined to bring a civil war on as he scratches at the Sunni-Shiite fault line with his constant and brutal suicide bombings in Shiite communities. And despite the pretence of not responding violently, the Shiites are hitting back – their private armies have taken control of entire sections of the military, police and intelligence services; they run their own illegal prisons – I've seen them – And now, they are now rounding up Sunnis for summary execution.

Last weekend I spoke by phone to an associate of one of Iraq's new breed of Shiite henchmen – he reported that his acquaintance had executed 37 Sunnis in the previous 24 hours and how that night, they were to be guests at one of the highest Shiite tables in the land for *Iftar*, the twilight breaking of the Ramadan fast.

Sunni hit men also stalk Shiites living in Sunni strongholds – paying locals to identify their targets; and both Shiite and Sunni families are reportedly selling up and moving out of areas in which they are in localised minorities. Even in the supposed peace of the British-controlled south, rival Shiite gangs and militias are carving out territory – the local police chief admits he can trust only a quarter of his men and diplomats admit that the British grip on security is tenuous. It is a cruel merry-go-round.

Twenty-five years ago, the Americans always took great pleasure in giving to Moscow its very own ‘Vietnam War’ in Afghanistan. But check the blow-back... what the US-funded war against the 1980s Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, actually did was to convince the Afghan Mujahedeen and the thousands of Arabs who fought with them, including Bin Laden and Zarqawi, that they could defeat a super-power.

Call them mad, but now they believe they can do it again. This time they have Washington in their sights – not Moscow. And just as Bush tots up successes, so too does bin Laden – on 9/11 Al-Qaeda savagely dented America’s superpower prestige; in Iraq, Zarqawi is now mauling the US and the new Iraq Government; and wherever they strike around the globe, terrorists put a question mark over what often has been long-standing support for the US – which, through much of the Middle East is now at rock-bottom.

And remember Bush’s use of the word ‘crusade’? He’d have us believe that he is cleaning up terrorists in Iraq, but this is a fight that the Islamic terrorists relish. Apart from spot attacks around the globe which have a limited shelf life because of the shrinking news-attention span of so much of the western world these days, what Al Qaeda really, really wanted in the wake of 9/11 was a Middle East theatre of war. The thinking was that the US had to be provoked into a long-term conflict in the Muslim homeland so that Al Qaeda could have a long-term opportunity to demonstrate, as it sees them, its purer Islamic credentials. That’s precisely what Bush has given to them in Iraq.

The president would have Americans believe that the global enemy is a single army of 'terrorists' – 'evil-doers and bad folk', as he might put it. But his own military and other intelligence agencies have repeatedly argued that while, yes, there are some foreign fighters in Iraq the insurgency is essentially home-grown and merely taking advantage of foreign help that would not be in Iraq – and would not be welcomed in Iraq – if the American's had not made such a hash of the 2003 invasion.

George Bush's simplistic equation of who the enemy is also denies other real issues that need to be tackled. If John Howard and Donald Rumsfeld were to walk the teeming markets of Kabul or venture into the border refugee camps in Pakistan they might revise their notion that poverty is not a breeding ground for terrorism. These places are prisons – there are no bars, but they are prisons of the mind, the heart, prisons of life.

Rumsfeld and Howard are right – the terror masters are not driven by poverty, but they certainly do prey on and exploit those who are impoverished. Make an offer to a young man sentenced to a lifetime pushing a barrow among the fetid stalls of the street markets in Baghdad or Kabul; or who sits for years in the border refugee camps, and he'll take any escape route – be it an offer of education, an entry visa to Australia ... or a gun and a bomb kit. Stir into this mix a super-propagandist like Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and you can see how poverty and vengeance do mix.

The repressed societies of the Middle East and Central Asia will remain the Islamic terrorist's recruiting grounds for as long as nearly a third of their people live on less than \$2 a day and while the combined GDP of all 22 member nations of the Arab League is no more than that of Spain. Youngsters will be easily convinced of the greatness of strapping on a bomb unless they can enjoy the rights that we in Australia take so much for granted – the economic, political, educational, media and economic freedoms that are essential to creating a middle class to which the would-be bombers might otherwise aspire.

Few outsiders can understand what happens to the human spirit in these places. A terrifying experience for me was to go alone to the Jalozai camp for fleeing Afghans on the Pakistani border in 2001. There were 60 000 traumatised and frightened refugees - they took a look at me in my western dress, with a notebook and pen and decided that I was there to help them. They stampeded – yelling and screaming for help in half-a-dozen languages, their hope quickly turned to frustration. They grabbed and pushed and pulled at me. As the crowd pressed in, three old mullahs materialised by my side and, I'm ashamed to say, used sticks to beat back the crowd as we inched our way to the perimeter of the camp. These people had fled the beatings of Afghanistan, but here they were being beaten in Pakistan – because of my carelessness.

It is virtually impossible to define 'winning' in the Bush war on terror. But University of Chicago political scientist Robert A. Pape's remarkable study between 1980 and 2003 is illuminating on the need to do something for the barrow boys. Pape concluded that in virtually every instance the terrorists were attempting to, as he puts it, to 'compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland'. Crafting his own definition of 'winning', Pape sets a high bar for Washington: "[The US needs to] defeat the current pool of terrorists now actively planning to kill Americans [and at the same time] prevent a new, potentially larger generation from rising up."

George Bush has articulated three goals in to take the fight to the enemy and to advance freedom. Without loading the case with qualifications, you could argue that he has – or is – succeeding in Afghanistan. But he has failed on goals 1 and 2 in Iraq and No 3 is a very shaky proposition. Yes, Saddam and his repulsive sons are gone, but we have yet to get a clear picture of freedom in the new Iraq.

On the road, I try to write not so much about policy in the abstract sense of capital cities and remote leaders, so much as outcomes for people on the ground – ordinary people who after the

cataclysms we have visited on them, or allowed to be visited on them might be entitled to a better deal. To this end, I used the period between the collapse of Saddam's regime and the establishment of the insurgency in Iraq to travel the country, exploring the power of the tribes and religious leaders and the role they play in governing the lives of their people – just as political power-brokers do here.

A vital element of the US failure in Iraq hinges on Iraq's deeply tribal culture. The problem is not the tribes, so much as the failure by the US to understand and respect them in the first critical months of occupation.

I have interviewed tribal sheikhs who in the years before the invasion worked as US spies against Saddam – but who now are deeply committed to the insurgency because, if I can use an Americanism, they have been *dissed* – or disrespected – by Washington.

The Iraqi tribes pre-date Islam. Over time they became one of the great constants in the life of a region wracked by conflict. But the Americans are not the first to challenge them. Mohammed, the prophet, railed against what he called their “rotten ways”. The British thought they could be co-opted against the Ottoman Empire. They could, but only briefly, while they faced a common enemy in Istanbul, and in 1920 the tribes revolted against London too. So began a cruel 38-year war of attrition to rid old Mesopotamia of the British and their influence.

Today's sheikhs lounge on cushions on richly coloured carpets and speak about legendary foreign figures in their history as though they knew them personally: St John Philby – the father of the spy of the same name, who rode about the deserts on a motorbike, a British diplomat in leathers who drew lines in the sand that became today's oft-disputed national borders; Gertrude Bell – an Arabist, a diplomat and a spy who was dubbed the uncrowned queen of Iraq; and the man in whose shadow they all walked, Lawrence of Arabia.

Lawrence's 1920 description of Britain's lunge at Iraq as “not far from a disaster” proved to be correct. But if they cared to look back, the Americans might be struck by the resonance of a

warning by Lawrence that the people of Britain had been led into a Mesopotamian trap: “They have been tricked into it by a steady withholding of information. Things are far worse than we have been told,” Lawrence wrote at the time.

As the Americans pushed into Iraq in 2003, they encountered little resistance. A sheik in Ramadi explained to me why this was so: “Our decision not to fight for Saddam was spontaneous. It’s not that we didn’t love him or that we did love George Bush. We simply chose the stronger side and we did it for self-preservation.” The sheikhs could see that Saddam Hussein would go down, but the tribes of Iraq would not go down with him; not when they were already dreaming about the deals they might strike with the forces of the richest and most powerful empire of all time, then marching on Baghdad.

But things didn’t work out as the sheiks had expected. The Americans seemed either unwilling or out of their depth when it came to understanding the tribal and religious culture of Iraq - they refused to engage in the political barter process anticipated by the sheiks.

As I sat in on a meeting of the American-appointed municipal council in Abu Ghraib in 2003, Mayor Dhari Khamis al-Dhari was very precise in explaining to me who he was, where he fitted in and where the Americans didn’t fit in: “I’m not a candidate of the Americans. I told them when they came here that if they could not work with the tribes, their enterprise would fail.”

At the time in Abu Ghraib, the Americans were helping to build a new street market to stop street sellers from encroaching on the highway running through the town. They were repairing the sewerage system and servicing trucks and pumps for al-Dhari’s municipal council. But the sheik still kept them at arm’s length. So what did the tribes’ acceptance of such US efforts amount to? I told the mayor about a conversation I had had in Amman, on the way to Baghdad in the summer of 2003, with a Jordanian colleague who insisted that the tribes could make or break Washington in Iraq. She had argued that a sheikh was essentially driven by greed and his own need to survive. In consequence, he would accept whatever largesse he could from whomever he could;

and by distributing it around the tribe he would be well thought of and command the gratitude and loyalty of his people. Sheikh Dhari, who was educated by the Jesuits in Baghdad and later completed his university studies in Germany, was not offended by this analysis. In fact, he agreed, arguing that Iraqis might accept the benefits, but it did not follow that they accept the Americans. This is a tribal culture and when you go beneath the surface it becomes apparent that it is not as conducive to democracy as it might appear from Washington.

The difficulty confronting George W. Bush is that having ventured into Iraq, he can't leave any time soon. US strategic interests require a long-term military presence in Iraq and the prospect of civil war demands that Washington maintain or even increase its numbers in the country. But domestic politics in the US requires signs of progress, so in desperation, Washington points to the relative peace of the north and the south of the country as a substantial achievement. But while the centre of Iraq, especially Baghdad, remains a cauldron, it is virtually impossible to create the half-normal living conditions that might inspire in Iraqis some hope for the future. Apart from West Germany and Japan, only two of the sixteen US-led efforts in nation rebuilding in the last century – namely, tiny Panama and Grenada – continued to function as democracies ten years after US intervention.

It's still early days in Afghanistan, but much of the country remains under the boot of autocratic warlords. None of the other candidates for a Washington make-over in the last 100 years was an Islamic nation. At best, the Arab countries embraced by the US might be described as "liberalised autocracies" – Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria and Kuwait. They have constitutions in flowery language that purport to guarantee many of the rights we take for granted in Western democracies, but their leaders survive by control and repression – their self-serving security apparatuses are ugly and their parliamentary oppositions a joke. In truth, with the exception of Israel, democracy does not yet exist in the Middle East, and this despite the sorrow of so much Western intervention in the region over the years. Can it be planted in Iraq, which has known only

occupation and puppet statehood, repression and ruthlessness since it was set up by Britain in the 1920s?

Supporters of the White House drive for democracy claim it is heresy to even pose this question, but for many other observers, the reality of the Middle East means that any attempt to foist the bottom-up principles and rights of democracy onto societies that are so top-down driven will require a decades-long commitment, if not longer. Or, more likely, the attempt will simply fail ... particularly if democracy is proposed at the point of a gun and it is not backed sufficiently by humanitarian, cultural and diplomatic efforts. Few of what the experts call the preconditions for democracy exist. Compared with the historical backdrop of post-war Japan and Germany, Iraq's history of colonialism, imposed monarchy, fascist revolution, Arab nationalism and Islam leaves little or no room for tolerance and trust.

In this patriarchal society, much is made of the lack of rights for women. But in the Iraqi culture, the reality is that nearly all have surrendered what we in the West think of as democratic rights – either to their tribe or their religion. The tribal sheikhs are born to rule and many of the imams exercise the same hereditary powers, taking authority from a direct ancestral link to Mohammed the Prophet or by imposing a strict Koranic code on their congregations.

The educated middle class that might have provided the fertile ground in which to plant democracy in Iraq all but fled the country during Saddam's rule.

Out of the feuding, vengeful mess that is the current Iraq, the Americans must do the near impossible – craft a leadership structure which, like it or not, will be Shiite-dominated but which is acceptable to all.

I have a sense that Iraq is a world of sliding doors and parallel universes in which two dialogues are being conducted – one between Washington and Baghdad, in which the Iraqis tell the Americans what they want to hear – about the niceties of democracy, their dubious new

constitution and all the international treaties they have signed. But there is a second exchange, a very different and brutal discourse among the Iraqis themselves on how they intend to carve up the country ... and probably each other.

There is no common ground between the key players – Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis. The country was fashioned early last century not from the shared interests and culture of the people who came to be called Iraqis, so much as the competing strategic and commercial interests of France and Britain. Now, Saudis diplomats are traipsing to Washington, warning any who will listen, that their volatile neighbour – Iraq – is hurtling towards disintegration. The Riyadh analysis is that the entire region could now be dragged into war because, as foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal put it last week: “No dynamic is pulling the nation together ... all are pulling the country apart”.

Each time I have been to Baghdad in the last year, I have observed from my room in the Palestine Hotel, an American-sponsored attempt to establish a park on the banks of the Tigris River. It was the brainchild of a Major Peter Chiarelli who put up \$1.5 million to employ locals to beautify the banks of this languid river in the hope that work might distract them from war – grass was planted, sprinklers, water coolers and paths installed and then ... Chiarelli was rotated out of Iraq. Today, the grass is dead, the paths are littered with broken glass and the sprinkler heads have been looted. Razor wire and blast walls seal off the northern end of the park, closing it to Iraqis so that they do not draw the fire of American snipers on the roof of a nearby hotel. They have gone full circle – in Saddam’s day they risked being shot if they ventured along this section of the river bank.

Four years after 9/11 and two-and-a-half years after the invasion of Iraq, we still don’t know where this country is going. It’s a crisis that will play out in its own dangerous time ... longer than the life of a riverside park and longer than the leadership cycles of the United States of America or, for that matter, Australia. I’d give it at least another 10 ... possibly 20 years before we can judge the outcome of the US ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan and of the extent to which they helped or hindered in George W. Bush’s war on terror.

Hopefully, there'll be a parallel process in which Australians will observe, not just outcomes along the way, but what the decisions we make say about us and our view of the world.

We have voted federally on the issue of truth in leadership, and for now we seem to have decided that it didn't matter; perhaps the security threat we faced was reason enough for us to overlook if we had been taken for a ride. But that view will change here, just as it seems to be changing in the US. You'll have noticed that Washington has backed right off an Iraq-type response to the axis-of-evil behaviour of North Korea and Iran. Instead, diplomats are being allowed to do their work.

In Australia, we no longer are dealing with abstract, over-there issues. Bali – 1 and 2 – have positioned us as a major target and the sense of fear is heightened by specific mentions of Australia in messages from Bin Laden and his mouthpieces in their rocky redoubts on the Afghan-Pakistan border. We have to think about outcomes in Iraq in terms of success or failure for Australians, not just Americans.

We've had small troop numbers in Iraq and a new contingent now is dug in in the south of Afghanistan, engaging in dangerous work in difficult territory. But given our centre-stage role, particularly in the rhetorical the war on terror, is it enough to have just a few hundred troops over there, as though they are manning some sort of forward defensive posts? It all looks like a token contribution to the American's 'hunt-n-kill' exercises. There has to be more – Canberra is now working on setting up a provincial reconstruction team in Afghanistan early next year. This process of mixing humanitarian and security tasks is long over-due for Australia. By contrast, New Zealand is fully established in the central highlands of Afghanistan, successfully helping to extend the authority of a still-feeble new government in a way that does more to put down democratic roots than just chasing terror suspects in the hills.

Perhaps I could finish with a true story of last Anzac Day in the Iraqi desert. It's funny, sad and dangerous ... all at the same time ... but it might also make you think about gulfs and bridges between cultures ... Iraqi and Australian, media and military.

In a rare easing of its restrictive media policy, the Australian Defence Forces decided reporters could attend the Anzac Day memorial service at Camp Smitty, the Australian base in Al Muthanna, in the south of Iraq.

As advised, by the military, I went to see an Australian contingent at a British base in the southern city of Basra – on the afternoon of April 24. Everything seemed fine – they had found a bit of space for me in a tent and told me I should head for Smitty, four or five hours by road to the west.

Could I have a map? No, they said. Directions? – OK, A driver was called in to explain the way. We set off – me; Salaam, my fixer; and Mohammed, our driver. We got to the city of Samawa, but try as we might, we could not make sense of the directions they had given us in Basra.

We stopped at a gas station and struck up conversation with a local engineer. Did he know of an Australian base in the area – Yes – and he offered to show us the way. But the road he took went the opposite way to the directions we had been given. By then it was dark, a dust storm had reduced visibility to 10m and we were breaking one of the most basic survival rules for foreigners in Iraq – don't be out after dark.

When we stopped at an intersection I told our local guide that we were going the wrong way. Did he know another military base in the area – yes. We were about to head off again when a flashing blue light announced that we had company. He was armed and wearing a police uniform, but in Iraq that doesn't mean that he was a policeman. Many kidnappers wear police or army gear. He took one look at me and decided that Salaam, the fixer, must have kidnapped me. Salaam and I, meantime, were debating whether he was a policeman or a kidnapper. The policeman ordered our guide to skip it because he was taking us in. We drove off into the swirling dust with him in the

back training his gun between the seats. It was unsettling, because he was in no hurry to get to a police station. Instead, he continued his patrol of the outskirts of the city, which left us even more worried.

Finally he delivered us to a police station, which in turn delivered us to a British army camp where we were told that the directions we had been given in Basra, were the mirror image of how we needed to get to the Aussies at Camp Smitty.

The Poms got on the radio to Smitty to say that we were on our way – it was now close to 11pm. But the Australians suddenly and inexplicably withdrew the welcome mat – after driving around for hours we were now being told that we were not welcome and there was no camp stretcher with my name on it.

Finally we found a local hotel and because it was to be a dawn service, we hit the road again at 4am. – still in the dark and still breaking that survival rule. We took a wrong turn and got lost again, but happily we encountered a heavy gate and a guard's hut. In the current climate, it's not a good idea to go knocking on anyone's door in the middle of the night in Iraq. But one of the guards emerged and volunteered to show us the way to the Australian camp.

But then his older colleague emerged from the hut, bellowing at us that this was a set up and we were kidnappers attempting to abduct the other guard and planning to demand a ransom! Our denials were in vain. If it wasn't serious I might have thought that we were in a long-running Monty Python sketch.

But Salaam immediately hit on a very Iraqi solution – if one of the guards would come with us, he proposed, we'd leave Mohammed, our driver, with the other guard and we could have a 'hostage swap' later - after the dawn service.

We got to the service; I did my reporting, we drove back and swapped hostages and filed my report on time.

Mission accomplished. Thank you.