

REPORTING FROM IRAQ

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A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

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As I began writing this in April 2005, *Time's* Baghdad bureau was in lockdown again. It was not the first time we'd been confined to quarters by a direct threat to the magazine's personnel, so the routine was familiar: stay inside the house, twenty-four hours a day, until the threat eases. This time, an Iraqi stringer working for us was picked up by a group of insurgents and interrogated, none too gently, to confirm their suspicion that the foreigners in the *Time* house were CIA agents. It was plain these insurgents had been keeping a sharp eye on us, monitoring our movements closely, and digging into personal details about our Iraqi staff. Once we got wind of their interest, our correspondents had little choice but to hunker down: there isn't much else you can do to protect yourselves at such a moment except try to keep out of sight and reach. Experience had taught us to take these rumors seriously. In March 2004, one of our Iraqi staffers was murdered as he left his car one morning to enter the house we had rented during the buoyant days right after the U.S. invasion, in what we thought was a peaceful, discreet, upper-class Baghdad neighborhood. After that attack, *Time* moved back to the heavily fortified Palestine Hotel, still occupied by many Western journalists, until conditions there grew intolerable: no reliable electric power, dwindling security, increasing danger and discomfort for our staff to get in and out. We then moved again, to our current house, a modest place inside a lower-profile, barricaded compound that offers a less obvious target to those who are attacking Westerners. After a week of that strict lockdown, our stringer was freed when he finally managed to convince his captors that we were really journalists, and we resumed what passes for normal life in Baghdad.

The dangers in Iraq have reached a point where staying safe overshadows getting the story. In other wars, there was the front and there was the base, behind the lines, where you could retire in relative peace and safety to write your story, grab a good meal, and hang with friends. In Iraq, there is only the front line, and it is everywhere except, you hope, within the cramped confines of your own fortified room. Whether we like to admit it or not, the constant sense of personal jeopardy affects our reporting. We often feel we're not seeing the full picture, we're missing important stuff, we're limited in our perspective, we're not able to witness critical events for ourselves. It's immensely frustrating, especially when the story is as important as this one.

Good stories do get done, just not enough of them. Two years into this conflict, coverage has been substantially reduced by all Western media. Some of that is the natural falloff of any long-running story. Except for stories about American soldiers, Americans seem weary of Iraq: of the sameness in the daily compilations of violence, the lack of military progress, the slow pace of political change, the sense of American failure. They've heard enough of the grim vicissitudes of life for Iraqis or the hundred and one ways the U.S. enterprise has failed to achieve its promised goals. They say they want more "good" stories from Iraq. But for reporters on the ground, it's the danger involved that is shrinking coverage. We'd all love to file a broader range of stories. Not surprisingly in that environment, more organizations and more correspondents are deciding the risk is not worth it. From the beginning of the war in March 2003, 60 journalists and 22 media support staffers have been killed (nearly all of them Iraqis, nearly all of them after the United States declared an end to hostilities in May 2003—that is, when Bush landed on the aircraft carrier and spoke in front of a huge sign saying "Mission Accomplished") and more than 150 foreigners, including at least 35 journalists, were kidnapped: about a third of whom died in captivity.

Reporting from hot spots always has been a game of chance and compromise, but rarely is the working arena as constricted as this one. Iraq has experienced a long retreat from the days when foreign correspondents were implicitly granted a degree of respect and broad neutrality that provided

some protection amid violence. Here, we're not considered observers but a prime part of the war. We face threats from all sides: we're a target of choice for the insurgents, we're often looking down the barrel of a gun held by nervous American GIs or jumpy Iraqi police, we're accidental victims just like Iraqi civilians. The danger from our own side was made manifest in March 2005 when Giuliana Sgrena, the kidnapped Italian journalist, was freed from captivity only to be shot at and wounded in her vehicle at a U.S. checkpoint on her way out of Baghdad. Marla Ruzicka, a young American human rights advocate who worked with many journalists, died in a car bombing aimed at U.S. troops, a potent reminder of the risk facing all of us who travel the country's perilous roads.

Each of the three times I've returned from Iraq, people have asked me what it's really like there. Despite the steady stream of grisly news reports, they don't quite know how to judge the effects the insurgency might have on working journalists. In truth, for everyone in Iraq, native and foreign, it is worse day to day than most Americans imagine—unless they're used to living in a state of ceaseless, pervasive, invisible danger. Outside our gates is a turbulent world of car bombs, suicide attacks, remote-controlled bombs, roadside explosives, gun battles, random shootings, holdups, fake checkpoints, kidnappings, and beheadings. You never know who or where the enemy is, and the warfare around you is predicated on unpredictability. Everyone has something they most dread: mine is kidnapping. You could be abducted anywhere, in broad daylight, in transit, at an interview, at home. So you take as many security precautions as you can against the dangers you think you can limit, but you have to accept that you can't do a lot about many of them. Even if you stay in perpetual lockdown, as a foreign reporter you are vulnerable—even in bed. When I was in Baghdad in January 2005, a powerful truck bomb exploded one morning at the Australian Embassy just behind our compound. It blasted in the front of our house, in the peculiar way bomb concussions ricochet around buildings, and for a frightening minute we weren't sure if it was the start of a direct attack on our house. As I sprinted through the debris to my shattered bedroom door, our armed guards came barreling in with AK-47s at the ready.

Luckily, the bomb went off at 7 A.M. when most of us were still in bed, horizontal, the best position to be in to weather that kind of explosion. But we were really saved by forethought: we had replaced the glass windows in our house with tough plastic material that blows in without shattering into lethal shards. Still, the property damage was substantial; plaster walls, window frames, and doors were splintered. (Iraqis have made a good business of repairing bomb damage swiftly: our house was sealed up again by nightfall.)

For a short period, it wasn't like that. In the few months right after Saddam fell in April 2003, reporters could move freely around the country and inside the cities. Iraqis of all kinds, whether for or against the U.S. presence, were willing to talk to us and courted no danger in doing so. Compared to the visits I used to make during Saddam's reign, when reporting was strictly restrained by omnipresent minders—government watchdogs who always accompanied journalists wherever they went—you could go anywhere and talk to anyone without the fear and lying that had colored pre-war responses. While we may have felt repressed by the apparatus of Saddam's police state, in general the worst that happened was being kicked out of the country and denied future visas. (That was something I learned myself in the months before the war, when I suddenly could not obtain a visa, despite numerous past visits. Then, not long after the invasion, a Canadian reporter called to tell me he'd seen my file at the Ministry of Information, where it had been stamped "Blacklisted" in September 2002.) But as the insurgency has grown, our sphere of reporting has steadily contracted until it has become extraordinarily perilous to do the basic thing reporters are supposed to do: see and hear for ourselves what is happening.

HOW DO WE WORK

If you read news reports from Iraq closely, you've noticed those italic bylines that regularly appear at the bottom of a story and tell a central truth: the list of Arabic names indicate that most of the fresh reporting in the story was

supplied by local stringers. It's not safe for the Western correspondents with the Baghdad bylines at the top to do a lot of that kind of reporting themselves: they're constrained, to an uncommon degree, to using Iraqi legmen or gathering reports by phone from witnesses of varying degrees of credibility. They don't have much opportunity to corroborate or triangulate the reports they get from U.S. or Iraqi government spokesmen, handouts, or sources, which helps explain why there are so many daily pieces that lay out the basic facts of the latest violence, and so few about all the other aspects of the situation in Iraq.

Forget the jibes that reporters are intentionally slanting the story. Journalists in Baghdad struggle daily to get beyond those bare reports at great risk to themselves. But security colors everything, and so you develop no-go lists. You don't travel by car outside of Baghdad, putting much of the country off-limits. You don't go out in the capital without a prior appointment, which eliminates random interviews. You don't stay out after dark. You don't trust any checkpoints. The ones manned by Iraqis pose a kind of double jeopardy since good guys and bad guys alike wear black balaclavas and camouflage, so you can't tell legitimate security forces from fake, and you're never sure if the real police are trained well enough not to shoot you. You steer clear of American checkpoints, too, as increasingly jittery troops regularly shoot first at suspect cars. You try to get out of the vicinity when the U.S. armored patrols that attract attack rumble by. You don't go anywhere on foot. You don't stop to interview people in the street—they'd be scared to talk to you anyway. You don't go to outdoor markets or shops or restaurants or the park. You don't stay reporting at a public place, like a hospital or university or mosque (and you don't go to a mosque unless invited and guarded by the sheik's own security), for more than an hour: you want to get in and get out before bad guys can organize an attack or a kidnapping. You don't interview citizens in their houses long or often either: it poses too great a risk for them as well as you. You don't go to check out a bombing or assassination, to avoid angry crowds or secondary blasts.

For all that, most reporters try to get out and around as much as they can even though the simple act of traveling on the streets and roads puts them in jeopardy. There are two ways to travel. You can go out wearing body armor inside big steel-plated SUVs accompanied by contract Western security men with weapons bristling, like the TV correspondents, with their telltale video cameras, pretty much have to do. That also marks you as an obvious target. Or you can try to blend in, as most print journalists have done, riding in ordinary soft-skinned Iraqi sedans (four doors mandatory) with your local bodyguards hiding their weapons, trying to look as much as possible like every other Iraqi car on the road. Nowadays, however, most of us travel in a convoy of two vehicles to step up protection. The foreign reporter rides in the front car with a driver whose pistol is on the armrest, a translator, and often a bodyguard with a weapon on his lap; in the chase car behind is another driver and a bodyguard, with the locked-and-loaded heavy weapons—AK-47 assault rifles and high caliber pistols—stashed by their feet. That requires a lot of vehicles and manpower for every correspondent or photographer venturing out of the house and obviously limits the number of reporting trips any bureau can manage in a day.

At least you can interview American sources on the phone or meet them with some degree of ease inside the Green Zone. But to get the Iraqi side of any story, you and your translator have to talk to Iraqis in person. Those interviews are always set up in advance because getting to them involves complex logistics. Traffic is a problem, with heavy jam-ups a constant in Baghdad at all hours: the flow of vehicles is constricted by street closings, blast walls, homemade barricades, and permanent and temporary checkpoints—not to mention the eight-mile square enclave of the Green Zone blocking off the center of town. Baghdad is a sprawling place, cut through by Saddam-era highways and a river that must inevitably be crossed: the overpasses and bridges are always hamstrung by military checkpoints, choking traffic back to a standstill in the side streets. Normally, we drive as fast as possible so no one has a chance to mark our convoy. It's dangerous to get stuck, although it often happens without warning: suddenly a U.S. military convoy

drives by and you have to let them pass or a random checkpoint is set up narrowing travel to a single, hotly contested lane or a street is closed and Iraq's wayward drivers U-turn to drive at you on the wrong side. You don't want anyone to notice you if your car is hemmed in, so you don't speak English, look curious, make eye contact with anyone. I often carry an Arabic newspaper so someone glancing in the window will think I'm local. We try to send drivers out to scout an area where we have an interview set up: is it safe, how long will it take to get there, what's the security at the interview site? Once you've arrived at government offices or mosques or the heavily guarded houses where Iraqi politicians and officials receive visitors, you try to scoot inside: it can be unnerving to stand exposed at a gate for the time it takes to undergo security checks by the gun-packing Iraqi guards everyone employs. The little curbside booths found at virtually every official's place of residence or business are especially vulnerable to car bombs and you're always checking to see if that is a friendly sharpshooter half-hidden on the balcony across the street or an enemy sniper. You learn to suspect everyone, all the time, since Westerners have been snatched by kidnappers as they leave an interview or at the gates of their own houses as they return. Italian journalist Sgrena was caught when she stayed at the same place interviewing people for three hours: plenty of time to organize the abduction. In dicey areas like Sadr City or angry Sunni neighborhoods, you have to trust in the protection of insurgents in order to report on their turf.

It's a risk just to get through the main checkpoint into the U.S.-held Green Zone. That entrance, where journalists stand anxiously on line with Iraqis to pass through a maze of American security checks, is a favorite car-bomb corner, the frequent target of suicide attackers. Despite the presence of U.S. tanks and a row of blast walls, the entry area faces a broad, open roadway where people and cars must pass, so casualties here among those seeking entry to the Green Zone are not uncommon. Even leaving the Green Zone poses a risk: cell phones and satellite phones cannot be used to call drivers for pickup until you have reached the streetside blast walls, so you hide behind them while you call your driver and bodyguard to escort you across that open expanse to your car.

So how do journalists do a day's work? TV is at a huge disadvantage: Western TV correspondents are tied to the video cameras that make them a visible target. So a great deal of the reporting you see on television—the interviews and film footage of pretty much everything and everyone outside the Green Zone—are recorded by Iraqi employees and stringers or acquired from local freelancers. That means the networks get plenty of pictures of violence and carnage, but much less about Iraqi reconstruction and politics, for example. Trained Western TV correspondents regularly find themselves restricted to working the phone or going to interviews inside the Green Zone. Most of the action footage they use is shot by cameramen, and the correspondents later fill in the narration from the safety of their compounds. Many Western TV correspondents find it immensely frustrating day to day, and most of their networks have cut back foreign manpower to the minimum, sending their high-profile correspondents back in only occasionally for major events such as the January election.

Western print reporters have the advantage of casting a much smaller footprint. They are still able, if they're willing and their head offices allow them (and some don't), to get out and about Baghdad themselves, though the requirements of security always govern the shape and extent of reporting. What and where you report on any given day is always dictated by what is reasonably safe at that time. Coverage beyond Baghdad remains skimpy, since trips out of Baghdad to the troubled parts of the country pretty much have to be organized through the U.S. military, which supplies the only safe transport, in their choppers. So you can't just hop out to the Sunni triangle or the Iranian border or Najaf's Shiite center whenever you want. It is still possible to get reporters independently into the far north and far south from neighboring countries, however, which explains why the Kurds and the Basra area are comparatively well covered: reporters can get into those provinces more easily and report more freely, with less personal danger and outside the purview of the U.S. occupation.

Most of what we do every day is focused in Baghdad, and even that requires a substantial amount of advance arrangement. You can't roam

around or pop in on Iraqis without appointments, whether they're officials or religious figures or ordinary civilians. When we do go out in the city, we try to minimize our foreign appearance as much as possible: male correspondents not only grow beards but copy the prevailing men's style of dress (more Soviet-era retro-chic than dashing war correspondent); women reporters wrap their hair in full head scarves and don long black abayas or robes similar to those Muslim women wear. Women ride in the back seat. You need drivers who know every street, who have an instant feel for trouble spots and know when and how to avoid them. Certain neighborhoods are off-limits entirely, and you don't want to stumble into them. Since every interview requires extra time for traffic, security checks, and the sheer distance between parts of the city, a reporter is lucky to manage two a day outside the Green Zone. And you've always got to factor in the time it takes to be home before dark.

Even inside the Green Zone, where key Iraqi government officials as well as American diplomats and military brass receive reporters, the process of navigating security and coordinating with escorts is so cumbersome and delays so frequent that it's hard to conduct many face-to-face interviews in one day. Under the circumstances, it's easy for the U.S. government to control briefings and access. Cell and satellite phones frequently go dead, so a lot of reporting even inside the Green Zone has to be organized via e-mail. It can be a trial to pierce the bureaucracy that way. Moreover, from the time John Negroponte arrived in July to run the U.S. Embassy, his people kept a tight lid on interviews, doling out backgrounders by invitation as it suited them: the ambassador himself announced from the start that he intended to "make no news," except the canned pronouncements the embassy wanted to release—and he has pretty well succeeded. In recent months, U.S. political officials have been more willing to conduct background briefings or sit down with reporters, but it's still a tightly controlled operation. Iraqi officials at offices and ministries outside the Green Zone, though, are surprisingly accessible in a country that has no experience with press freedoms. Reporters have found

it comparatively easy to cover the slowly unfolding political transformation of Iraq. But covering Iraqi politics requires a traditional network of personal contacts to get you in the door.

In a reversal of the norm, the most accessible people in Iraq are the U.S. military. Soldiers in the field are far more candid than their counterparts at the Pentagon. They quickly learned the value (from their point of view) of embedding reporters during the invasion and that practice is still one of the basic means of reporting inside Iraq. Of course, it means the story is seen through the American prism, but for the past two years, embedded reporters have had the best access to stories about the insurgency and the U.S.-Iraqi efforts to combat it. This is virtually the only way journalists can get into dangerous parts of the country and observe for themselves what is happening on the ground, at least as far as that is possible from the inside of a Humvee or the protection of a military patrol. Being embedded is dangerous, even surrounded by all the security trappings of the military, but it's the only way to capture action stories. Embeds also provide the prime coverage of what is happening to Iraqis outside the capital, but accompanying the military may limit their view. The U.S. military, and occasionally the Iraqi security forces, have been quite accommodating in taking journalists along on dangerous and routine missions alike. But in penetrating the Iraqi side of the story from what is really happening to civilians to how well Iraqi officials and security forces are doing outside the capital, being embedded is definitely second-best, not the same as being able to enter places and talk to a broad spectrum of Iraqis on your own. And it also explains the high number of stories devoted to U.S. soldiers, though that is heavily reinforced by the interests of the American public. Nevertheless, embeds have provided much of the best reporting coming out of Iraq.

On a daily basis, the most courageous foreign journalists are the non-Iraqi photographers. Some of them continue to prowl the city on their own every day looking for good pictures, often traveling in a single car with just a driver and translator, popping out to snap photos—you have to shoot fast and furtively—and moving on. And the most intrepid reporters dare

to venture deep into the danger zones to cover stories from the Iraqi side, even without U.S. military help. A number of Western correspondents braved the highly dangerous drive from Baghdad to Najaf in October 2004 to cover the fierce fighting when U.S. forces confronted Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army at the Shiites' holy shrine. They made their way alone, with loyal Iraqi translators, down the notorious "highway of death" and through lines of open fire inside the city to reach the mosque where the Sadr rebels were based, in order to report the story from the Mahdi side. A *Time* colleague was crouched behind a wall waiting to cross a snipers' alley that led into the shrine, when his translator decided he was too afraid to go along. The reporter checked his body vest, pulled down his Kevlar helmet, and ran for the shrine. Not staying to watch, the translator retreated and telephoned *Time's* Baghdad office to report: "Mr. Chris has gone to his doom." Within the hour, a driver and a translator on our staff sped to Najaf and found their way to the shrine to make sure our correspondent was alive, and to bring him out when the fighting ended. And at least one reporter has managed to penetrate the Sunni insurgency itself, where the chances of losing your life or being held hostage by brutal jihadis is extraordinary high. It's always a high-risk venture to try to tell the story from the enemy's side, but never more so than in Iraq, where insurgent sources, distrustful of Western media, can turn on reporters in a heartbeat. *Time's* Michael Ware has made a name for himself with stunning reports from inside the insurgency, through the personal contacts he has developed with some of the most dangerous men in Iraq. But this is high risk, the kind of deep-peril reporting that most media bosses and their reporters would not countenance. The insurgents could turn on a reporter at any moment. The stories also bring strong responses from Americans who consider reporting the enemy's viewpoint tantamount to treason. It also brings the magazine and its employees, Western and Iraqi, uncomfortably into the sights of some extremely violent people. And yet, such gutsy journalism is essential if Americans are to understand what the fight for Iraq is all about.

HOW WE LIVE

Media companies have to make a big financial investment to cover the story in Iraq, and most are feeling the pain. For a reporter to be insured, and no media company would send an uninsured reporter, the insurance companies who provide the policies to news outfits require attendance at one of the week-long hazardous-area training courses offered by professional security outfits. For a hefty fee, in the neighborhood of \$4,000 or \$5,000, they teach the basics of how to operate in a war zone—common sense plus some counterintuitive advice, such as never rushing to help a screaming, wounded colleague until you're sure the shooting has really stopped—and the rudiments of life-saving medical techniques. Media companies' insurance policies differ, but all insurers must shell out a hefty sum if a full-time employee is injured or killed, and many media organizations extend substantial financial benefits to Iraqi staffers and their families if they are hurt. *Time* has covered injuries sustained by two Western staffers in a grenade attack and has paid benefits to the family of the Iraqi staffer killed on his way to work. In addition, most organizations pay a sliding-scale monthly retainer to one of the big private security firms for a variety of services that can run from basic consultation to escort duty to emergency evacuation. It even costs a great deal just to get into Iraq: the three-hundred-mile daily Royal Jordanian flight from Amman, currently the only wise route to Baghdad, costs \$1,200. The flight is piloted by South African mercenaries willing to make the high-altitude trip that ends in a gasping spiral dive straight down from twenty thousand feet to the city's embattled airstrip.

Maintaining a bureau in Baghdad also requires spending thousands of dollars a month for local staff salaries, housing, security, food, vehicles, generators, training and weapons, and communications and computer equipment. When I was there in January 2005, some Western media organizations had moved their correspondents into the Green Zone for protection; others had reduced their coverage to the occasional visit.

For much of 2003 and 2004, many in the Western press operated out of the Palestine and Sheraton Hotels, two tall towers inside a compound guarded

from the city's violence by a broad ring of concrete blast walls, with a significant American military presence outside and the main offices of major international security companies inside. CNN was on the ground floor of the Palestine, AP was upstairs, the *Washington Post* was in the Sheraton, as were dozens of other media organizations. But that compound is no longer a press mecca. Run down to start with, it gradually lost its two main attractions: hefty security and reliable electric power. Although the towers attracted the occasional mortar strike, the well-manned ring of checkpoints and guarded car parks made it seem like a relatively safe place to live. For months, *Time* lived on the fourteenth floor, in a string of rooms and mini-suites running along a dingy corridor: our Iraqi staffers had to make their way through multiple security checks every time they needed to come or go, and they spent their downtime crammed into a two-room suite filled with our electronic equipment. At least one translator, driver, and bodyguard had to sleep over every night on mattresses on the floor. At first the hotels had a reasonably constant flow of electricity, but as the hot summer wore on, the unpredictable power outages grew worse and worse until we were lacking electricity for two hours here, three hours there, and then for fourteen or fifteen hours each day. Without air conditioning, our rooms were stifling. Our computers and phones routinely ran out of battery power (and setting them up to run off the hotel's emergency lights presented a serious fire hazard). There were only two slow elevators when the power was on (and none otherwise), so we had to add an extra fifteen minutes just to get to the ground floor whenever we went out, and another fifteen minutes to get to the parking lot and clear our car through the checkpoint. The only food available was at the bar in the Palestine and the dining room at the Sheraton, or from takeout: it was always kebabs, kebabs, or kebabs. Then we learned the mayor of Baghdad wanted to reopen the road between the hotels and allow public access to the riverbank, severely curtailing outside protection. And then the big security outfits living inside, who supplied most of the guards, announced they were moving out in the fall.

It was time for the press to move. *Time* was lucky to find a suitable house in July 2004 inside a smaller hotel compound also used by journalists,

and it invested the money to bring it up to high standards of security. It not only replaced all the window glass but added blast protection, steel doors, and other barriers. The result was a comfortable living room and a large office for the staff, a kitchen and bathrooms and bedrooms for three correspondents (a couple of rooms are maintained in the hotel next door for others as needed), and a small yard in front. To keep the *Time* Baghdad bureau running requires a staff of about twenty Iraqis, including a bureau manager, housekeeper, bodyguards and house security, drivers, and translators. A contingent of them sleep in the house every night. In addition to the hotels, *Time* also shares its compound with several other houses rented by journalists as well as one occupied by an Iraqi police official. All those in the compound pay for an extensive array of security measures, from mobile barricades and under-car bomb sensors at a series of entry and exit gates, to all the men needed to staff them around the clock. In addition, each house hires its own team of security guards, armed with AK-47 assault rifles, who guard the entrances and rooftops inside the house gates in rotating shifts. *Time* has its own generators, protected inside iron cages, to provide power whenever the city supply goes off. Everyone in the house tries to vary their movements in and out, using different combinations of cars, which have to be checked constantly for attached explosives. Though it is much easier to live and work in the house and we operate on the theory that our small compound is a less obvious or dramatic target, it is more vulnerable to direct attack than high-rises like the Palestine/Sheraton. The small hotels in our compound have been car bombed in the past, and the entrance off a main street has been the scene of suicide bombs and gun battles. You have to assume someone is always scouting the comings and goings of everyone in the compound. An Australian journalist making short documentary films who stayed at the *Time* house last fall was kidnapped a few hundred yards from the main entrance to the compound as he was filming on the sidewalk. He was held for four days before his captors decided to let him go. And there is a lot of boredom as a result of all those restrictions. Most of the time, you're stuck in your own house between dusk and dawn. You can't take a walk. You don't go to

someone else's compound at night unless you stay over. You can't go out to eat. The last time I went to a restaurant, we were, uncomfortably, the only foreigners there. As one of our colleagues left, she was tailed at high speed by a suspicious car full of men who had evidently been alerted to our presence, but she made it back to the compound unharmed. We've never gone to a restaurant since. Cooking dinner is one of the few entertainments we have—and the food is definitely better than our meals at the Palestine or Sheraton ever were.

A *New York Times* reporter noted not long ago that every time he went to a press conference in the Green Zone, he saw fewer and fewer Western colleagues. The press corps swells when some big event is in the offing: the handover of sovereignty to Iraq in July 2004, the elections in January 2005. The January vote was a rare story, indeed: cars were banned for three days, and for the first time in two years, reporters and Iraqis were actually able to walk in the empty, tank-guarded streets of Baghdad. For Iraqis, going to the polls was a singular act of personal bravery and defiance. For us, it was a wonderful break in the suffocating demands of security that constrict our work. But in the weeks after, the press corps was again reduced in size significantly. It's getting harder even for the biggest and best media companies to find reporters willing to take on an Iraq assignment; none force a correspondent to accept one. And, as every reporter in Baghdad knows, it's even harder on your family and friends back home, who have to endure the worry and uncertainty. Most correspondents who do take the beat rotate in and out at fairly frequent intervals: it's pretty hard to take the strain for more than two or three months at a time.

In the end, though, it's not the danger that makes Iraq such a tough post. It's the incredible frustration of taking huge personal risks for unsatisfying journalism. Instead of witnessing history in the making, you're all too often writing at a remove. Firsthand coverage of so much that is critical to the future of the country, from the fighting to physical reconstruction, from political changes to social evolution, and almost everything outside the capital, is far too often out of reach. Personal interaction with

Iraqis is circumscribed in ways that limit your ability to understand the country deeply. You constantly feel like you're missing things, seeing only a part of the picture. You worry the story you're telling is incomplete since you don't know what you can't see and hear yourself, the good as well as the bad. You fear that your stories are shallow and truncated: you know you can't speak for the entire country or give the full sweep of events. And circumstances make it almost impossible to corroborate information from sources, official or ad hoc. You get official press releases, but you can't check them out. You hear intriguing tales and rumors that you can't pursue. You have to rely on secondhand accounts from witnesses you can't look in the eye. You send out Iraqi stringers with a list of questions, but they can't guess what follow-up question you might have asked. You agonize about their biases and truthfulness. You're constantly worried that you're jeopardizing the lives of Iraqis—your staff, stringers, the people you talk to—in a country where association with foreigners can be lethal. You lie awake at night, wondering how you'd feel if your bodyguards died saving your life. Inevitably, what shapes the reporting is the skill of your Iraqi staff. You are dependent on them for everything. They are in charge of keeping you alive, and they organize your interactions with non-American sources. You have to trust their integrity and intelligence, and you are limited by their talent and reliability. Above all, you have to be able to count on their total loyalty—the demands you make of them go well beyond those any paycheck can buy.

You put aside how hard it all is to live with while you're there: otherwise you'd never get anything done. But you realize just how great a strain a stint in Baghdad is when the plane back to Amman has zoomed straight up to cruising altitude and the weight of the stress literally lifts off your shoulders: You're out! You're safe! That's why reporters have to trust their own instincts about when the risk has grown too great. We all find that point. I was recently asked to go back to Iraq, but I felt I'd pushed my luck enough. Three days later, my usual translator and our bureau housekeeper were caught in traffic on their way to the office when a U.S.

convoy rolled by. They were trapped next to the tanks. A car bomb, aimed at the Americans, blasted their car instead, and both were seriously wounded. As every reporter in Iraq knows at a moment like that: it could have been me.

POSTSCRIPT

Once you're back in the United States, removed from all the numbing violence, you can't help but feel frustrated all over again at how the story of the Iraq war is being told. The first question everyone asks you is: What's the solution? And you haven't got a very good answer. At bottom, what a reporter's experience in Iraq teaches is that there are too many imponderables, too many sets of characters and circumstances and ideas about the future to predict which ones will prevail. Every day someone in the Bush administration insists "progress is being made" and points to some particular fact to back up the claim: elections have been held, a constitution is being drafted, more elections will be held at set intervals. Yes, these events constitute a kind of progress, but they hardly cover the full picture of Iraq in all its current mess. And once back home, you realize most Americans are basing their approval or disapproval for the war on what is little more than a partial understanding of what's going on over there: few look beyond the daily bang-bang reports or listen to any opinions that do not echo their own. You hear frequently from readers and viewers that journalists are not telling the whole story, which usually means the reader or viewer is upset that you do not agree with his or her position, but you are rarely asked why it is that the whole story is not getting out.

The simple answer is that journalists covering Iraq still have more questions than answers themselves. Because the country itself is so dangerous and because information is carefully controlled in both Iraq and Washington, reporters haven't been able to give a full accounting on a number of important issues. Here are just a few of them:

1. *The facts about Shiite power.* Because reporters cannot travel freely, they do not know much about what is happening in those portions of Iraq that have been under Shiite rule since Saddam fell, including large portions of the southern and eastern provinces. How do the Shiites now in charge govern? What role does religion play? How are women faring? What kind of economy is taking root? What institutions are developing? What do the schools teach? How close are these regions to Iran in thinking and policymaking? The Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani remains a shadow power no reporter gets to see, much less talk to: What is his current position? What about the other Shiite leaders? Who has what power and how do their rivalries really work? Journalist Steven Vincent was kidnapped and killed in August 2005 when he pursued inquiries into what he called the “Islamofacism” of Shiite rulers in the southern region of Basra.
2. *The strength of Iraq’s factional militias.* The world focuses on the insurgents, but to what extent do the militias, armed by a broad assortment of Iraqi political and sectarian factions, still operate and how do they influence events? They are influential in rebuilding the Iraqi security community, but what about their abilities and loyalties? Are the Kurd peshmerga who make up the best fighting units in the reconstituted Iraqi army loyal to Iraq, or to their Kurdish leaders? Have the militias belonging to Shiite factions close to Iran been disbanded, or do they actually constitute another independent force? Although we’ve seen the army of Moqtada al-Sadr in action, we don’t know what their real aims, capabilities, and intentions are. And there is little knowledge about the Badr Brigade that owes its allegiance to the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), currently the leading Shiite party.
3. *The state of the Sunni community.* We know very little about Sunni aims and interests beyond the self-evident fact of insurgent action. We don’t know enough about Sunni goals, intentions, plans of Sunnis who

have not taken up arms. Who are their real leaders? What kind of leadership is there? Who can speak for the community with any real ability to deliver results? What kind of a future do Sunnis envision, and what would it take to get there? How many Sunnis actively support the insurgents versus the number intimidated into support? What is daily life like for the Sunnis in the dreaded Sunni triangle? What is happening to the children there? Is there any viable economy? We know tribal influence is strong among Sunnis, but how is that playing a role in current events, for good or ill?

4. *The abilities of the Iraqi security forces.* Although there have been occasional foreign journalists embedded with Iraqi troops, we need a clearer understanding of their capacities and loyalties, since the Bush plan to withdraw American troops depends on turning over the job to Iraqi forces. Both the U.S. and Iraqi governments regularly cheerlead the progress being made in developing a capable Iraqi force, but reporters need steady, regular access to report on that progress accurately.
5. *The state of negotiations with the enemy.* *Time* has reported on behind-the-scenes efforts to make contact with insurgent leaders who might be able to negotiate a political end to the fighting. But there is so much more to be learned about what is actually under way. Who are the key players? What are the aims of such talks? What prospects are there for success? Of course important diplomacy, like the talks that resulted in the Oslo agreements, is often best conducted in secrecy. Yet it would be good for Americans to have some sense of what might be possible and what is being pursued.
6. *Getting beyond the statistics handed out by U.S. and Iraqi officials.* How can we fairly measure the huge task of rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, economy, and way of life? Everyone hears anecdotal evidence of improvements here, setbacks there, but it has proven difficult

to take a consistent reading of the overall state of people's well-being month after month. Snapshot reports can be illuminating, but trends are far more difficult to ascertain. Readers and bloggers often complain the press has not reported some example of "good news"—a new school, for example—that they have heard about from a friend or soldier they know. Journalists in Iraq spend a lot of time looking for such stories, but without the ability to canvas the whole country, how can reporters fairly measure the context of lone anecdotes?

7. *The real relationship between successive Iraqi governments and their U.S. overseers.* Occasional stories attempt to get behind the scenes in the Green Zone, but it is a place where news is quite carefully controlled. Journalists in Baghdad would love to have a deeper understanding of how the Iraqis placed in power really operate and how the American officials at the top work with them, beyond public platitudes.
8. *The truth about the insurgency.* The U.S. military says that defeating an insurgency depends on good intelligence, but it seems apparent that no one has very good information about the insurgents at the moment. Officials frequently talk about the rebels—who they are, what they want, whether they're winning or losing—but their information is suspect, since it often comes from the same kind of partial, self-serving, frightened, or intentionally misleading sources that journalists hear from. Insurgents regard foreign journalists as an enemy, part and parcel of the occupation they are fighting. So it is, of course, life-threateningly dangerous for reporters to penetrate insurgent circles on their own. And even when that can be done at huge risk, it is usually quite difficult to confirm or corroborate much of they say afterwards. *Time* has produced some exemplary stories about the insurgents based on intrepid reporting by its correspondents, as have other publications, but these are so rare that journalists always come

away from Baghdad frustrated at the, at best, partial knowledge they have of the insurgents' aims, abilities, strategy, identity, organization, even their numbers.

9. *The truths about the issues leading to the war:* There is still a lot to be written about issues raised in the run-up to this war. What did the intelligence community really know and tell the Bush administration prior to March 2003? What is the full story about Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction? Aside from the administration's misplaced claims, there were some specific reports from UN weapons inspectors about chemical and biological agents that were unaccounted for during the years of the UN inspection program. These were generally believed to be credible findings, but if they too were inaccurate, what does that tell us about the inspection process and WMD oversight capabilities in general? How was the intelligence handled in Washington, in Britain, and at the UN? What did other leaders really tell Bush during the run-up to the war? Did any of them have credible information that might have forestalled an invasion, or was their reluctance mainly a matter of domestic politics? We also need to look back at the Bush administration's plans for postwar Iraq. Stories were written before the invasion about Washington's meager planning and the likelihood that its model would fail. But there is more to be learned about how and why the postwar planning was so compromised, who is responsible, and why the Bush administration has failed so dramatically to come up with more effective strategies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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