

# The stage-managed events in Baghdad's Firdos Square: image-making, lies and the "liberation" of Iraq

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Several photographs publicized by an antiwar web site shed light on the way the American media is manipulating images of the war in Iraq to give the false impression that the vast majority of the Iraqi people are joyfully welcoming the invasion and occupation of their country by US and British troops.

These photographs, available on the web site of Information Clearing House show that the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square, given massive publicity in the US and international media April 9-10, was a stage-managed affair.

As transmitted to the world by US television and newspaper reports, the pictures from Firdos Square purported to show a mass of enthusiastic Iraqis hailing the US military and trampling on a gargantuan bronze statue of Saddam Hussein. Hours of television time and pages of newspaper coverage were devoted to these pictures, with accompanying commentary comparing the scene to the bringing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the liberation of Paris in 1944.

The first photograph on the Information Clearing House site is a wide-angle shot encompassing the entire expanse of Firdos Square, rather than the narrowly focused, closely cropped framing used in the mass media. It shows that the "crowd" surrounding the statue of Saddam Hussein is anything but massive, and that the square itself has been surrounded by US Abrams tanks, cutting it off from the rest of the city.

The caption supplied by the site notes that Firdos Square is across the street from the Palestine Hotel, where most international journalists based in Baghdad are located, a fact that even the *Washington Post's* TV critic noted was "either splendid luck or brilliant planning on the part of the military." Of the 200 or so assembled, the majority were journalists and American soldiers. The BBC reported that only "dozens" of Iraqis were involved.

Who those dozens were is suggested by two additional

photographs published below the wide-angle photo. They show the arrival from exile of the Pentagon's handpicked Iraqi "leader," Ahmed Chalabi, in Nasiriya on April 6, accompanied by several aides, and a close-up of one of the participants in the April 9 statue demolition scene in Baghdad. It is clear from the two pictures that the man celebrating "liberation" in Baghdad was one of those accompanying Chalabi into Nasiriya three days earlier.

The significance of this should be clear: those who "spontaneously" gathered in Firdos Square included Iraqi political agents of the American military, dispatched from Nasiriya to Baghdad to serve as an appropriate backdrop for the visuals desired by Bush administration spin doctors. If not "Wag the Dog," it is at least a case of "rent a crowd." Or, as Robert Fisk of the British newspaper the *Independent* described it, "the most staged photo-opportunity since Iwo Jima."

To a critical observer, the live coverage from Firdos Square had already suggested that there was less than met the eye to the scenes of universal rejoicing. Even this small and controlled crowd fell silent and muttered its disapproval when a US Marine initially draped the statue's head with an American flag. An Iraqi onlooker supplied one of his own country's flags, and there were cheers when this replaced the Stars and Stripes.

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted one Iraqi bystander who said that while some Iraqis in the square were praising Bush in English to the American media, others were denouncing the US president in Arabic. "Today I saw some people breaking this monument," he told the *Times*, "but there were people—men and women—who stood there and said in Arabic: 'Screw America, screw Bush.' So all this is not a simple situation."

The cynical staging of "news" and manipulation of visual images in the service of gargantuan lies is typical of both the Bush administration and the US media. It is the technique of Madison Avenue applied to the justification of a program of

aggression and military conquest. In their Orwellian presentation, conquest is “liberation,” bombing is “humanitarian aid,” and seizure of the world’s second largest oil reserves is “rebuilding Iraq.”

To expose Firdos Square as outright fakery is not to say that every account of Iraqis welcoming the arrival of US or British troops is equally phony. There is no doubt that millions of Iraqis hated and feared the regime of Saddam Hussein and welcomed its end, whatever their feelings about the new regime of violence that is replacing the Ba’athist dictatorship.

But the reality is more complicated than the simplistic and cynical propaganda of the Bush administration and its media accomplices. First of all, the vast majority of Iraqis have not taken to the streets to hail the conquering armies of the US and Britain.

Indeed, as even some American media outlets have reported, since the Firdos Square episode of April 9, whatever euphoria might have existed in Baghdad has largely turned to fear and anger directed against the American occupiers. ABC News on Friday evening showed outraged citizens of Baghdad denouncing the US for unleashing chaos and a wave of killings and looting. Some were filmed shouting that the hellish conditions in the city proved that the US had come not to liberate the country, but rather to steal its oil wealth.

The first days of the invasion evoked fierce resistance from Iraqi soldiers and civilians alike, and far from precipitating a wave of emigration out of the country, the onset of the war witnessed thousands of Iraqi exiles returning from Jordan, Syria and elsewhere to stand and fight against the aggressors from the West.

American and British soldiers were not pelted with flowers, but faced heroic and death-defying armed resistance. It was only after Bush and Blair changed tactics, resorting to unrestrained bombing of civilian neighborhoods and the wholesale incineration of Iraqi troops, that this resistance was largely overcome.

By Pentagon figures, more Iraqis were killed in Baghdad on Saturday, April 5—the day of the Third Armored Division’s drive-by killing rampage through the city—than died at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The total number of Iraqis killed in three weeks of war likely exceeds the 50,000 Americans killed over a 12-year period in Vietnam. This death toll is in a country whose population is less than one tenth that of the United States.

Added to this must be the long-term impact of Hussein’s repressive regime (supported by the United States government until 1990), the Iran-Iraq War, the shattering defeat in the first Persian Gulf War, and the effects of 12 years of US-imposed economic sanctions, which starved

Iraqi society, causing a death toll estimated by UN aid workers at between 1 million and 1.5 million, with children accounting for over half of the victims.

The result is a society that has been physically, emotionally and morally traumatized—as demonstrated by the widespread looting, not only of targets associated with the regime, such as the homes of the Ba’athist elite, but of hospitals, educational institutions, the UNICEF feeding program, and other vital elements of Iraq’s social infrastructure.

If sections of the Iraqi people are now prepared to welcome the invading forces—and just how large remains to be determined—their motivation must be understood as a complex mixture of hatred of Hussein (not only for his repression and corruption, but for his failure to defend the country against invasion), relief at the end of bombing, hope for restoration of essential services, and, for some, the desire to curry favor with the new masters.

Far more Iraqis have lost a loved one to American bombs, missiles, tanks and guns, or to the US-led economic blockade, than have embraced American soldiers or shouted praise for George W. Bush. As the essential American purpose in Iraq becomes more evident—control of Iraq’s oil reserves and domination, in partnership with Israel, of the Middle East—there is no doubt that popular opposition to the US occupation will intensify.

The liars and image-makers in Washington and the media understand little of the historical process and its deep impact on popular consciousness. What they cannot comprehend is the deep-seated legacy of decades of struggle against colonialism and foreign domination. Whatever the broad layers of Iraqi society may think of Saddam Hussein, they retain an abiding hatred of imperialism and a determination to resist a return to colonial domination in a new form and under new, American masters.



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