

How and why the US encouraged looting in Iraq

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The widespread looting in Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk and other Iraqi cities, following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime of President Saddam Hussein, was not merely an incidental byproduct of the US military conquest of Iraq. It was deliberately encouraged and fostered by the Bush administration and the Pentagon for definite political and economic reasons.

Thousands took part in the looting in Baghdad which began April 9, the day the Hussein government ceased to function in the capital city. Not only were government ministries targeted, and the homes of the Ba'athist elite, but public institutions vital to Iraqi society, including hospitals, schools and food distribution centers. Equipment and parts were stripped from power plants, thus delaying the restoration of electricity to the city of 5 million people.

Perhaps the most devastating loss for the Iraqi people is the ransacking of the National Museum, the greatest trove of archeological and historical artifacts in the Middle East. The 28 galleries of the huge museum were picked clean by looters who made off with more than 50,000 irreplaceable artifacts, relics of past civilizations dating back 5,000 years. The museum's entire card catalog was destroyed, making it impossible even to identify what has been lost.

The US military stood by and permitted the ransacking of the museum, an incalculable blow to Iraqi and world culture, just as they allowed and even encouraged the looting of hospitals, universities, libraries and government social service buildings. The occupation forces protected only the Ministry of Oil, with its detailed inventory of Iraqi oil reserves, as well as the Ministry of Interior, the headquarters of the ousted regime's secret police.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) issued a statement in Geneva declaring that the relief agency was "profoundly alarmed by the chaos currently prevailing in Baghdad and other parts of Iraq." The medical system in Baghdad "has virtually collapsed," the ICRC warned, and it reminded the US and Britain that they were obliged under international law to guarantee the basic security of the Iraqi population.

General Tommy Franks, the overall commander of all US and British forces in Iraq, issued an order to unit commanders that specifically prohibited the use of force to prevent looting. This instruction was only modified after several days because of mounting protests by Iraqi citizens over the destruction of their social infrastructure.

The *New York Times* reported one such protest by an Iraqi man

who was standing guard at Al Kindi hospital in Baghdad. Haider Daoud "said he was angry at his encounters with American soldiers in the neighborhood, mentioning one marine who he said he had begged to guard the hospital two days ago. 'He told me the same words: He can't protect the hospital,' Mr. Daoud said. 'A big army like the USA army can't protect the hospital?'"

The role of the US military went beyond simply standing by, and extended to actually encouraging and facilitating looting. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, after the US military reopened two bridges across the Tigris River to civilian traffic, "the immediate result was that looters raced across and extended their plundering to the Planning Ministry and other buildings that had been spared."

Sweden's largest newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, published an interview April 11 with a Swedish researcher of Middle Eastern ancestry who had gone to Iraq to serve as a human shield. Khaled Bayoumi told the newspaper, "I happened to be right there just as the American troops encouraged people to begin the plundering."

He described how US soldiers shot security guards at a local government building on Haifa Avenue on the west bank of the Tigris, and then "blasted apart the doors to the building." Next, according to Bayoumi, "from the tanks came eager calls in Arabic encouraging people to come close to them."

At first, he said, residents were hesitant to come out of their homes because anyone who had tried to cross the street in the morning had been shot. "Arab interpreters in the tanks told the people to go and take what they wanted in the building," Bayoumi continued. "The word spread quickly and the building was ransacked. I was standing only 300 yards from there when the guards were murdered. Afterwards the tank crushed the entrance to the Justice Department, which was in a neighboring building, and the plundering continued there.

"I stood in a large crowd and watched this together with them. They did not partake in the plundering but dared not to interfere. Many had tears of shame in their eyes. The next morning the plundering spread to the Modern Museum, which lies a quarter mile farther north. There were also two crowds there, one that plundered and one that watched with disgust."

Similar scenes were reported in Kirkuk and Mosul, the two large northern cities with ethnically mixed populations. There the looting of public buildings has direct political overtones, since the destruction of property deeds and other government records will make it easier to conduct ethnic cleansing of Arab or Turkmen

populations by the Kurdish forces that now dominate the region, in alliance with US Special Forces.

In Kirkuk, the site of Iraq's richest oilfield, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan has already installed its officials in the homes of former Ba'ath Party leaders. US soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade seized control of an Iraqi air base but permitted looters to leave the base with their stolen goods, even opening the gates to allow them to pass.

There was no effort to halt arson at the city's cotton plant, or at office buildings, but US troops quickly occupied facilities of the North Oil Company, the state-owned firm that manages the huge northern oilfields. Colonel William Mayville, commander of the brigade, dispatched troops to three key oil facilities, while US Special Forces stood watch over four gas-oil separation plants. Mayville told the American media that he wanted to send the message, "Hey, don't screw with the oil."

In Mosul, northern Iraq's largest city, hospitals, universities, laboratories, hotels, clinics and factories were all sacked and stripped of their goods. The 700 US troops sent to Mosul remained outside the city for more than a day while the theft and vandalism continued, leading to widespread complaints from city residents—reported even in the American press—that the US was permitting the pillaging.

Robert Fisk, writing in the British newspaper the *Independent* April 14, noted a pattern in the response of American forces to looting in Baghdad, which, he said, "shows clearly what the US intends to protect." He continued: "After days of arson and pillage, here's a short but revealing scorecard. US troops have sat back and allowed mobs to wreck and then burn the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Irrigation, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information. They did nothing to prevent looters from destroying priceless treasures of Iraq's history in the Baghdad Archaeological Museum and in the museum in the northern city of Mosul, or from looting three hospitals.

"The Americans have, though, put hundreds of troops inside two Iraqi ministries that remain untouched—and untouchable—because tanks and armoured personnel carriers and Humvees have been placed inside and outside both institutions. And which ministries proved to be so important for the Americans? Why, the Ministry of Interior, of course—with its vast wealth of intelligence information on Iraq—and the Ministry of Oil. The archives and files of Iraq's most valuable asset—its oilfields and, even more important, its massive reserves—are safe and sound, sealed off from the mobs and looters, and safe to be shared, as Washington almost certainly intends, with American oil companies."

Such concerns were already apparent in the actions of the US military at the very beginning of the war. The same General Franks who instructed US troops to take no action against looting in Baghdad or other cities gave the order March 20 for the First Marine Expeditional Force to invade Iraq a day early, because of reports, later proven largely false, that Iraqi troops were setting fire to the country's southern oilfields at Rumaila.

The Centcom chief discarded previous operational plans and potentially put many soldiers' lives at risk by acting before the air

bombardment had begun in order to safeguard the real objective of the US war, Iraq's huge oil reserves.

The most striking aspect of the outbreak of looting was the nonchalant attitude of US government officials in Washington. At a Pentagon press conference Friday, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld denounced the media for exaggerating the extent of chaos, and argued that the looting was a natural and perhaps even healthy expression of pent-up hostility to the old regime. "It's untidy," Rumsfeld said. "And freedom's untidy. And free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes."

There is no doubt the Bush administration would take a less charitable view of the "freedom" to loot if mobs were breaking into corporate offices in downtown Houston, Washington or New York City.

As in every action of the Bush administration, personal greed and profit-gouging are an important aspect. The ransacking of Iraqi government facilities, added to the devastation caused by American bombing, is part of the process of demolishing the large state-run sector of Iraq's economy, to the benefit of American companies. Already contracts have been awarded to private American firms to provide new school books, replace looted medical equipment, even train a new Iraqi police force.

In the Orwellian language of *New York Times* columnist William Safire, the US aim is to "introduce free enterprise and the rule of law"—by means of a criminal invasion, followed by widespread looting. This will set the stage for a much bigger theft: the privatization of Iraq's vast oil resources and their exploitation, directly or indirectly, by US and British oil companies.

There is more at stake, however, than rank hypocrisy or an appetite for Iraq's oil wealth. The looting in Iraq directly serves the political interests of American imperialism in cementing its domination of the conquered country.

The Bush administration is seeking to encourage the emergence of a new ruling elite in Iraq, formed from the most rapacious, reactionary and selfish elements, which will serve as a semi-criminal comprador force entirely subservient to the United States. The acquisition of property through the theft of Iraqi state assets serves to bind these elements to the US occupation forces by their own economic self-interest. As one Army officer told the *Times*, as he watched the looting approvingly, "This is the new income redistribution program."

There is recent precedent for such an operation. The first Bush administration proceeded in the same fashion when it encouraged the formation of a new capitalist elite in Russia out of layers of the Soviet-era mafia and former Stalinist bureaucrats who acquired state assets by wholesale theft. What US imperialism promoted in the 1990s in eastern Europe and the former USSR under the label "shock therapy", it is now applying in the aftermath of its "shock and awe" devastation of Iraq.



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