

LETTER FROM IRAQ

THE LESSON OF TAL AFAR

Is it too late for the Administration to correct its course in Iraq?

BY GEORGE PACKER

Colonel H. R. McMaster, a Gulf War veteran with a history doctorate, tells his soldiers in Iraq, "You gotta come in with your ears open."



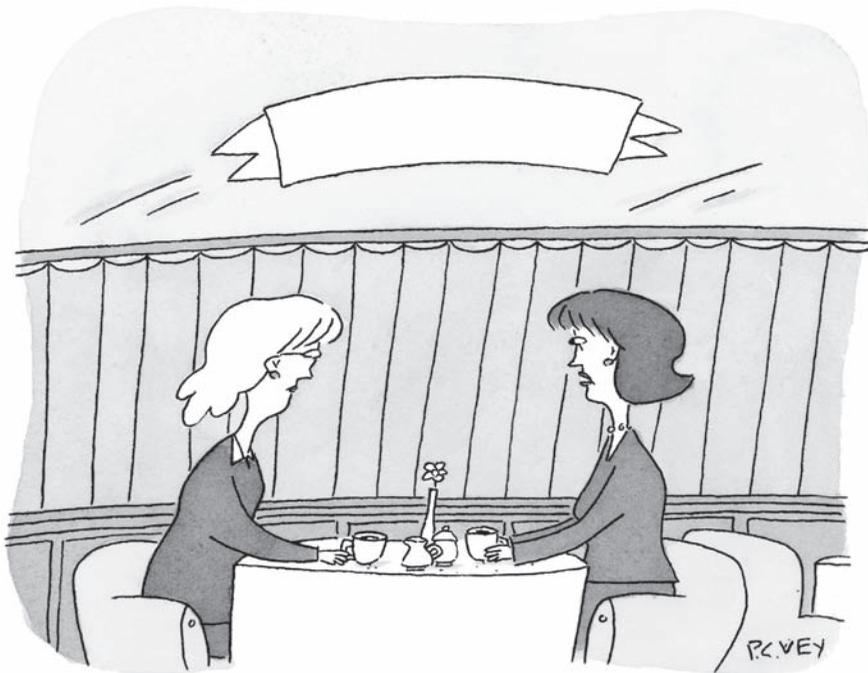
You have to really listen to people." Photographs by Samantha Appleton.

Tal Afar is an ancient city of a quarter-million inhabitants, situated on a smuggling route in the northwestern desert of Iraq, near the Syrian border. In January, when I visited, the streets had been muddied by cold winter rains and gouged by the tracks of armored vehicles. Tal Afar's stone fortifications and narrow alleys had the haggard look of a French town in the First World War that had changed hands several times. In some neighborhoods, markets were open and children played in the streets; elsewhere, in areas cordoned off by Iraqi checkpoints, shops remained shuttered, and townspeople peered warily from front doors and gates.

Since the Iraq war began, American forces had repeatedly driven insurgents out of Tal Afar, but the Army did not have enough troops to maintain a sufficient military presence there, and insurgents kept returning to terrorize the city. In early 2004, the division that had occupied northwestern Iraq was replaced by a brigade, with one-third the strength. A single company—about a hundred and fifty soldiers—became responsible for protecting Tal Afar. Insurgents soon seized the city and turned it into a strategic stronghold.

Last fall, thousands of American and Iraqi soldiers moved in to restore government control. This time, a thousand Americans stayed, and they slowly established trust among community leaders and local residents; by January, a tenuous peace had taken hold. The operation was a notable success in the Administration's newly proclaimed strategy of counterinsurgency, which has been described by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as "clear, hold, and build." Last month, in a speech in Cleveland, President Bush hailed the achievement in Tal Afar as evidence that Iraq is progressing toward a stable future. "Tal Afar shows that when Iraqis can count on a basic level of safety and security, they can live together peacefully," he said. "The people of Tal Afar have shown why spreading liberty and democracy is at the heart of our strategy to defeat the terrorists."

But the story of Tal Afar is not so simple. The effort came after numerous failures, and very late in the war—perhaps too late. And the operation succeeded despite an absence of guidance from senior civilian and military leaders



"I don't see myself bringing children into a world where I can't get a date."

in Washington. The soldiers who worked to secure Tal Afar were, in a sense, rebels against an incoherent strategy that has brought the American project in Iraq to the brink of defeat.

THE "I" WORD

Colonel H. R. McMaster, the commander of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, is forty-three years old, a small man, thick in the middle, with black eyebrows that are the only signs of hair on a pale, shaved head. His features are deeply furrowed across the brow and along the nose, as if his head had been shaped from modelling clay; but when he grins mischief creases his face, and it's easy to imagine him as an undaunted ten-year-old, marching around and giving orders in his own private war. The first time I saw him, he had a football in his hands and was throwing hard spirals to a few other soldiers next to his plywood headquarters, on a muddy airfield a few miles south of Tal Afar.

McMaster and the 3rd A.C.R. had been stationed in Tal Afar for nine months. When they arrived, in the spring of 2005, the city was largely in the hands of hard-core Iraqi and foreign jihadis, who, together with members of

the local Sunni population, had destabilized the city with a campaign of intimidation, including beheadings aimed largely at Tal Afar's Shiite minority. By October, after months of often fierce fighting and painstaking negotiations with local leaders, McMaster's regiment, working alongside Iraqi Army battalions, had established bases around the city and greatly reduced the violence. When I met McMaster, his unit was about to return home; the men were to be replaced by a brigade of the 1st Armored Division that had no experience in Tal Afar, and no one knew if the city would remain secure. (Within weeks, there were reports that sectarian killings were on the rise.)

The lessons that McMaster and his soldiers applied in Tal Afar were learned during the first two years of an increasingly unpopular war. "When we came to Iraq, we didn't understand the complexity—what it meant for a society to live under a brutal dictatorship, with ethnic and sectarian divisions," he said, in his hoarse, energetic voice. "When we first got here, we made a lot of mistakes. We were like a blind man, trying to do the right thing but breaking a lot of things." Later, he said, "You gotta come in with your ears open. You can't come in and

start talking. You have to really *listen* to people."

McMaster is a West Point graduate who earned a Silver Star for battlefield prowess during the 1991 Gulf War: his armored cavalry troop stumbled across an Iraqi mechanized brigade in the middle of a sandstorm and destroyed it. That war was a textbook case of what the military calls "kinetic operations," or major combat in relatively uncomplicated circumstances; the field of battle was almost easier, some Gulf War veterans say, than the live-fire exercises at the National Training Center, in Fort Irwin, California. After the war, McMaster earned a doctorate in history from the University of North Carolina. His dissertation, based on research in newly declassified archives, was published in 1997, with the title "Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam." The book assembled a damning case against senior military leaders for failing to speak their minds when, in the early years of the war, they disagreed with Pentagon policies. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, knowing that Johnson and McNamara wanted uncritical support rather than honest advice, and eager to protect their careers, went along with official lies and a split-the-difference strategy of gradual escalation that none of them thought could work. "Dereliction of Duty" won McMaster wide praise, and its candor inspired an ardent following among post-Vietnam officers.

In April, 2003, at the moment when General Tommy Franks's "shock and awe" campaign against the regime of Saddam Hussein appeared to be a clean victory, the Army War College's Center for Strategic Leadership approved the release of a monograph by McMaster entitled "Crack in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War." McMaster, who describes himself as "a bit of a Luddite," argued against the notion that new weapons technology offered the promise of certainty and precision in warfare. The success of the Gulf War, he wrote, had led military thinkers to forget that war is, above all, a human endeavor. He examined the messier operations of the nineteen-nineties, beginning with the debacle in Somalia, and concluded,

“What is certain about the future is that even the best efforts to predict the conditions of future war will prove erroneous. What is important, however, is to not be so far off the mark that visions of the future run counter to the very nature of war and render American forces unable to adapt to unforeseen challenges.”

In the spring of 2003, McMaster joined the staff of General John Abizaid at Central Command. Abizaid soon took over from Franks, who got out of Iraq and the military just as his three-week triumph over the Baathist regime showed signs of turning into a long ordeal. Although the violence in Iraq was rapidly intensifying, no one at the top levels of the government or the military would admit that an insurgency was forming.

“They didn’t even want to say the ‘i’ word,” one officer in Iraq told me. “It was the spectre of Vietnam. They did not want to say the ‘insurgency’ word, because the next word you say is ‘quagmire.’ The next thing you say is ‘the only war America has lost.’ And the next thing you conclude is that certain people’s vision of war is wrong.”

The most stubborn resistance to the idea of an insurgency came from Donald Rumsfeld, the Defense Secretary, who was determined to bring about a “revolution in military affairs” at the Pentagon—the transformation of war fighting into a combination of information technology and precision firepower that would eliminate the need for large numbers of ground troops and prolonged involvement in distant countries. “It’s a vision of war that totally neglects the psychological and cultural dimensions of war,” the officer said. Rumsfeld’s denial of the existence of the insurgency turned on technicalities: insurgencies were fought against sovereign governments, he argued, and in 2003 Iraq did not yet have one.

In October of that year, a classified National Intelligence Estimate warned that the insurgency was becoming broad-based among Sunni Arabs who were unhappy with the American presence in Iraq, and that it would expand and intensify, with a serious risk of civil war. But Rumsfeld, President Bush, and other Administration officials continued to call the escalating violence in Iraq the work of a small number of Baathist “dead-

enders” and foreign jihadis. For Rumsfeld, this aversion became a permanent condition. Over Thanksgiving weekend last year, he had a self-described “epiphany” in which he realized that the fighters in Iraq didn’t deserve the word “insurgents.” The following week, at a Pentagon press conference, when the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Corps General Peter Pace, said, rather sheepishly, “I have to use the word ‘insurgent,’ because I can’t think of a better word right now,” Rumsfeld cut in, “‘Enemies of the legitimate Iraqi government’—how’s that?”

The refusal of Washington’s leaders to acknowledge the true character of the war in Iraq had serious consequences on the battlefield: in the first eighteen months, the United States government failed to organize a strategic response to the insurgency. Captain Jesse Sellars, a troop commander in the 3rd A.C.R., who fought in some of the most violent parts of western Iraq in 2003 and 2004, told me about a general who visited his unit and announced, “This is not an insurgency.” Sellars recalled thinking, “Well, if you could tell us what it is, that’d be awesome.” In the absence of guidance, the 3rd A.C.R. adopted a heavy-handed approach, conducting frequent raids that were often based on bad information. The regiment was constantly moved around, so that officers were never able to form relationships with local people or learn from mistakes. Eventually, the regiment became responsible for vast tracts of Anbar province, with hundreds of miles bordering Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria; it had far too few men to secure any area.

A proper strategy would have demanded the coordinated use of all the tools of American power in Iraq: political, economic, and military. “Militarily, you’ve got to call it an insurgency,” McMaster said, “because we have a counterinsurgency doctrine and theory that you want to access.” The classic doctrine, which was developed by the British in Malaya in the nineteen-forties and fifties, says that counterinsurgency warfare is twenty per cent military and eighty per cent political. The focus of operations is on the civilian population: isolating residents from insurgents, providing security,

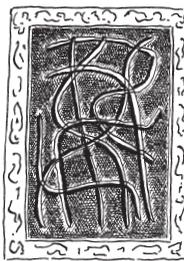
building a police force, and allowing political and economic development to take place so that the government commands the allegiance of its citizens. A counterinsurgency strategy involves both offensive and defensive operations, but there is an emphasis on using the minimum amount of force necessary. For all these reasons, such a strategy is extremely hard to carry out, especially for the American military, which focusses on combat operations. Counterinsurgency cuts deeply against the Army’s institutional instincts. The doctrine fell out of use after Vietnam, and the Army’s most recent field manual on the subject is two decades old.

The Pentagon’s strategy in 2003 and 2004 was to combat the insurgency simply by eliminating insurgents—an approach called “kill-capture.” Kalev Sepp, a retired Special Forces officer, who now teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School, in Monterey, California, said of the method, “It’s all about hunting people. I think it comes directly from the Secretary of Defense—‘I want heads on a plate.’ You’ll get some people that way, but the failure of that approach is evident: they get Hussein, they get his sons, they continue every week to kill more, capture more, they’ve got facilities full of thousands of detainees, yet there’s more insurgents than there were when they started.” In “Dereliction of Duty,” McMaster wrote that a strategy of attrition “was, in essence, the absence of a strategy.”

During the first year of the war, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez was the commander of military operations in

Iraq. He never executed a campaign plan—as if, like Rumsfeld, he assumed that America was about to leave. As a result, there was no governing logic to the Army’s myriad operations. T. X. Hammes, a retired Marine colonel who served in Baghdad in early 2004,

said, “Each division was operating so differently, right next to the other—absolutely hard-ass here, and hearts-and-minds here.” In the first year of the war, in Falluja and Ramadi, Major General Charles Swannack, of the 82nd Airborne Division, emphasized killing and capturing the enemy, and the war grew worse in those places; in northern Iraq, Major General David Petraeus, of the



101st Airborne Division, focussed on winning over the civilian population by encouraging economic reconstruction and local government, and had considerable success. “Why is the 82nd hard-ass and the 101st so different?” Hammes asked. “Because Swannack sees it differently than Petraeus. But that’s Sanchez’s job. That’s why you have a corps commander.” Lieutenant General Sanchez, who never received his fourth star, remains the only senior military official to have suffered professionally for the failures of the Iraq war. (He is now stationed in Germany.)

From his post in Central Command, McMaster pushed for a more imaginative and coherent response to an insurgency that he believed was made up of highly decentralized groups with different agendas making short-term alliances of convenience. By August, 2004, Falluja had fallen under insurgent control, Mosul had begun to collapse, and Najaf had become the scene of a ferocious battle. On August 5th, General George Casey, Sanchez’s successor, signed the Operation Iraqi Freedom campaign plan. The document, which was largely written on Sanchez’s watch, remains classified, but Kalev Sepp described it to me in general terms. (In early 2004, McMaster had recruited him to be an adviser on Iraq.) Sepp said, “It was a product that seemed to be toning

itself down. It was written as if there were knowledge of this bad thing, an insurgency, that was coming up underfoot, and you had to deal with it, but you had to be careful about being too direct in calling it an insurgency and dealing with it that way, because then you would be admitting that it had always been there but you had ignored it up to that point. It did not talk about what you had to do to defeat an insurgency. It was not a counterinsurgency plan.”

In the fall of 2004, Sepp went to work under Casey in the strategy division of Multi-National Force Iraq, MNF-I. In Baghdad, a small group of officers, led by an Army colonel named Bill Hix, worked with Sepp and two analysts from the RAND Corporation to turn the campaign plan into a classic counterinsurgency strategy that focussed, above all, on the training of Iraqi security forces, with American advisers embedded in Iraqi units and partnerships between the two armies.

By November, 2004, MNF-I had outlined a strategy, and the military command in Baghdad finally had a plan for fighting the insurgency. Much time had been lost, and putting the plan into effect in numerous units was a formidable task. Counterinsurgency, by its nature, is highly dependent on local knowledge and conditions. Changes had to be made at

the level of the platoon, the company, and the battalion; the campaign plan helped officers catch up with what some local commanders had already learned to do.

By then, Colonel McMaster had arrived in Fort Carson, Colorado, and he had assumed command of the 3rd A.C.R. He had just a few months to get the regiment ready for its second deployment to Iraq. The unit ended up in Tal Afar—a place that was being called the next Falluja.

A WAR FOR PEOPLE

In Colorado, McMaster and his officers, most of them veterans of the war’s first year, improvised a new way to train for Iraq. Instead of preparing for tank battles, the regiment bought dozens of Arab dishdashas, which the Americans call “man dresses,” and acted out a variety of realistic scenarios, with soldiers and Arab-Americans playing the role of Iraqis. “We need training that puts soldiers in situations where they need to make extremely tough choices,” Captain Sellars, the troop commander, said. “What are they going to see at the traffic control point? They’re possibly going to have a walk-up suicide bomber—O.K., let’s train that. They’re going to have an irate drunk guy that is of no real threat—let’s train that. They’re going to have a pregnant lady that needs to get through the checkpoint faster—O.K., let’s train that.” Pictures of Shiite saints and politicians were hung on the walls of a house, and soldiers were asked to draw conclusions about the occupants. Soldiers searching the house were given the information they wanted only after they had sat down with the occupants three or four times, accepted tea, and asked the right questions. Soldiers filmed the scenarios and, afterward, analyzed body language and conversational tone. McMaster ordered his soldiers never to swear in front of Iraqis or call them “hajjis” in a derogatory way (this war’s version of “gook”). Some were selected to take three-week courses in Arabic language and culture; hundreds of copies of “The Modern History of Iraq,” by Phebe Marr, were shipped to Fort Carson; and McMaster drew up a counterinsurgency reading list that included classic works such as T. E. Lawrence’s “Seven Pillars of Wisdom,” to-



“You’ve lived many lives, all as an accountant.”

gether with “Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife,” a recent study by Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, a veteran of the Iraq war.

Sellars told me, “I don’t know how many times I’ve thought, and then heard others say, ‘Wish I’d known that the first time.’” The rehearsals in Colorado, he said, amounted to a recognition that “this war is for the people of Iraq.” Sellars, who grew up in a family of lumber millers in rural Arkansas, described it as a kind of training in empathy. “Given these circumstances, what would be my reaction?” he asked. “If I was in a situation where my neighbor had gotten his head cut off, how would I react? If it was my kid that had gotten killed by mortars, how would I react?”

By the time two squadrons of the 3rd A.C.R. reached the outskirts of Tal Afar, in the spring of 2005, the city was being terrorized by *takfirin*—Sunni extremists who believe that Muslims who don’t subscribe to their brand of Islam, especially Shiites, are infidels and should be killed. The city was central to the strategy of the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; Tal Afar had become a transit point for foreign fighters arriving from Syria, and a base of operations in northern Iraq. Zarqawi exploited tribal and sectarian divisions among the city’s poor and semiliterate population, which consists mostly of Turkomans, rather than Arabs, three-quarters of them Sunni and one-quarter Shiite. The mayor was a pro-insurgent Sunni. The police chief, appointed by the government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, was a Shiite. His all-Shiite force was holed up in an area of high ground in the middle of the city known as the Castle, which is surrounded by sixteenth-century Ottoman ramparts. Unable to control the city, the Shiite police sent out commandos (McMaster described them as a “death squad”) to kidnap and kill Sunnis. Outside the Castle, radical young Sunnis left headless corpses of Shiites in the streets as a warning to anyone who contemplated cooperating with the Americans or the Iraqi government. Shiites living in mixed neighborhoods fled. “The Shia and Sunni communities fell in on themselves,” McMaster said. “They became armed camps in direct military competition with one another.”



“We’re making progress—he set off the motion detector this morning.”

McMaster’s point man in the effort to stabilize the city was Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hickey, a squadron commander. Hickey, a good-looking man who has soft brown eyes and an aquiline nose, almost never raises his voice and seems as ordinary and steady as McMaster is intellectually restless and gregarious. He’s the father of two girls, and it’s easy to picture him at a parent-teacher conference. His soldiers spoke of him with reverence; a major in the squadron described Hickey as “the sort of quiet man who feels things very deeply,” and Jesse Sellars spoke of his “tactical patience.” Last summer, while American and Iraqi soldiers moved block by block into the city, encountering heavy resistance that often took the form of three-hour firefights, Hickey began to study the local power structure. For several months, he spent forty or fifty hours a week with sheikhs from Tal Afar’s dozens of tribes: first the Shiite sheikhs, to convince them that the Americans could be counted on to secure their neighborhoods; and

then the Sunni sheikhs, many of whom were passive or active supporters of the insurgency.

“The Shia freaked out,” Hickey told me inside his cramped headquarters, in a derelict cluster of cement buildings behind the crenellated ramparts of the Castle. “Don’t we give you information? So why are you meeting with the Sunnis?’ ‘Because I’m trying to be balanced. I’m trying to stabilize your city. If I just talk to you, I’m not going to stabilize your city.’ We tried to switch the argument from Sunni versus Shia, which was what the terrorists were trying to make the argument, to Iraqi versus *takfirin*.”

Hickey’s first attempts to persuade Sunnis to join the Tal Afar police force yielded only three recruits, but he did not give up. In painstakingly slow and inconclusive encounters, each one centering on the same sectarian grievances and fears, Hickey tried to establish common interests between the Sunnis and the Shiites. He also attempted to drive a wedge between nationalist-minded Sunnis and extremists, a distinction

that, in the war's first year or two, American soldiers were rarely able to make; they were simply fighting "bad guys." At the highest levels of the Administration, the notion of acknowledging the enemy's grievances was dismissed as defeatist. But in Tal Afar I heard expressions of soldierly respect for what some Americans called the Iraqi resistance. "In a city that's seventy-five per cent Sunni, if you approach it from a point of view of bringing in or killing everyone who's had anything to do with the insurgency you're bound to fail," Major Michael Simmering said. "Imagine how many people in this town have picked up a rifle and taken a shot at coalition forces. Do we really want to try to arrest them all?" Lieutenant Brian Tinklepaugh explained, "You can't sever your ties with anyone—even your enemy. People with ties to the insurgents have us over for tea."

Hickey, during his conversations with sheikhs, was educating himself in the social intricacies of Tal Afar's neighborhoods, so that his men would know how a raid on a particular house would be perceived by the rest of the street. ("Effects-based operations," a term of art in counterinsurgency, rolled off the tongue of every young officer I met in Tal Afar.) He was also showing his soldiers what kind of war he wanted them to fight. It required unlearning Army precepts, under fire. "The tedium of counterinsurgency ops, the small, very incremental gains—our military culture doesn't lend itself to that kind of war," Jack McLaughlin, a major on Hickey's staff, told me. "There are no glorious maneuvers like at the National Training Center, where you destroy the Krasnovian hordes. It's just a slow grind, and you have to have patience."

At the same time, the 3rd A.C.R. engaged in frequent combat; ultimately, the regiment lost twenty-one soldiers in northwestern Iraq, and one platoon suffered a casualty rate of forty per cent. Last September, Colonel McMaster staged a push into Surai, the oldest, densest part of the city, which had become the base of insurgent operations; there were days of heavy fighting, with support from Apache helicopters shooting Hellfire missiles. Most of the civilians in the area, who had been warned of the coming attack, fled ahead of the action (un-

known numbers of insurgents escaped with them), and though many buildings were demolished, the damage to the city wasn't close to the destruction of Falluja in November, 2004. "There are two ways to do counterinsurgency," Major McLaughlin said. "You can come in, cordon off a city, and level it, à la Falluja. Or you can come in, get to know the city, the culture, establish relationships with the people, and then you can go in and eliminate individuals instead of whole city blocks."

After McMaster's offensive, Hickey and a squadron of a thousand men set up living quarters next to Iraqi Army soldiers, in primitive patrol bases without hot water, reliable heat, or regular cooked meals. One afternoon, I walked with Hickey a hundred yards from his headquarters—past soldiers on guard duty warming themselves over a barrel fire—to the mayor's office, in the Castle. The new mayor, Najim Abdullah al-Jabouri, is a secular Sunni Arab and a former brigadier general from Baghdad, who speaks no Turkmen, Tal Afar's main language. The city was so polarized that the provincial authorities had turned to an outsider to replace the corrupt former mayor and win a measure of confidence from all sides. Najim, a chain-smoker, wore a dark suit and a purple shirt without a tie; his face was drawn and he had dark pouches under his eyes. On his wall hung a photograph of him with McMaster. The Mayor had written a letter to Bush, Rumsfeld, and Congress asking them to extend the 3rd A.C.R.'s deployment in Tal Afar for another year.

"If a doctor makes an operation and the operation succeeds, it's not a good thing to put the patient under the care of another doctor," the Mayor told me. "This doctor knows the wound, he knows the patient." He added, "Hickey knows my children by name."

I asked what would happen if, as before, the Americans withdrew from Tal Afar.

"What? No American forces?" The Mayor could hardly comprehend my question. "It will take only one month and the terrorists will take over. At a minimum, we need three years for the Iraqi Army to be strong enough to take control of the country—at least three

years. You can't measure the Army only by weapons. It's building people, too."

The Mayor had once been tempted to join the insurgency. He lost his military career in 2003, when L. Paul Bremer III, the administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority—the American occupation government—dissolved the old Iraqi Army. "Bremer gave the order that whole families die," he said. "I decided that if my children died I would pick up my gun in revenge." But the dynamic in Tal Afar, where the U.S. Army seemed to be cleaning up after its own mistakes, had improved his opinion of the Americans. "I began to work with the Americans here and saw a new picture. I thought before that all Americans, like Bremer and the people we saw on TV, were killers and turned guns on Iraqis. But when I worked with them and saw them more, I realized they were different. Before, we were just sitting and watching Al Jazeera and believing it. Now I see it's a lying network."

The intensity of the Mayor's attachment to the Americans was understandable. They were in the same position, outsiders trying to hold the city together and persuade its tribes and sects to find a common national identity. I once saw Hickey ask a group of police trainees at a new station whether they were Sunni or Shiite, and when they started to answer he said, "No—Iraqi!" Hickey had seen the Mayor demonstrate the lesson to an elementary-school classroom.

Down the hall from the Mayor's office was a small conference room dominated by a thirty-foot table. Along each side, behind clouds of cigarette smoke, Tal Afar's notables sat grimly in tribal dress and business clothes: Sunnis on one side, Shiites on the other. It was only the second time the two groups had met in the Castle. The Mayor had told me that cold drinks were among his main negotiation tools, and everyone was sipping a Pepsi or a Sprite. The Mayor took his place at the head of the table. On the wall behind him hung a giant Iraqi flag.

The meeting soon deteriorated. There were complaints about the slow pace of rebuilding, the uneven distribution of contracts, the lack of government funds, and the inability of Shiite families who had fled Tal Afar to return to the mixed neighborhoods. "The rebuilding is some-

thing horrible,” the Mayor said, in agreement. “But it contains a wonderful thing: it’s not accepted by both sectors. So that’s proof they can be united.”

Shiite sheikhs accused the Sunnis of tolerating the presence of terrorists, and Sunni sheikhs accused the Shia of making unwarranted generalizations about them. “This is our second meeting, and we’re

me, after a while we won’t ask this question.”

After listening to the complaints of the Sunnis, a Shiite sheikh lost his temper and stood up to face the other side of the table: “The people who are fighting—where do they come from? They don’t pop up from the ground. Some of you know who they are.” The

a roadside bomb had happened to go off near a taxi in which he was riding. He hadn’t seen a judge in a month, and hadn’t seen a lawyer at all.

Next door to the cell, in an unlit room whose roof had partially caved in, offering a view of the starry desert sky, several policemen were trying to stay warm around a petrol burner. With one exception, they



Iraqi security forces are dependent on the American military’s supply system for uniforms, equipment, and even food.

saying the same things,” a Shiite sheikh complained. “What is the point?”

“Sitting here is the point,” the Mayor, relentlessly cheerful, said; I was beginning to understand his look of exhaustion. “It’s wonderful that you are at least sitting together. We’re supposed to have a meeting of the reconstruction committee, but the important thing is we should reconstruct ourselves—then everything will be easier.”

A Sunni sheikh demanded, “If you want to make things better, why do you ask people applying to be police whether they are Sunni or Shiite? Asking will only consolidate the problems.”

“We want to create a balance between Shiite and Sunni,” the Mayor answered. “If the Sunnis come, believe

sheikh’s father had been ambushed and killed on the way to a reconciliation meeting with a Sunni tribe. “Only Shia have these problems,” he said.

That night, I visited the jail at a police station between Hickey’s headquarters and the Mayor’s office. Forty-seven prisoners were squeezed into a cell so tight that they had to take turns sleeping; four or five others were crammed into the latrine. When a guard slid aside a plywood sheet covering the cell’s barred door, the prisoners, dazed and wide-eyed, protested their innocence and asked for blankets. One boy said that he was twelve years old. A fat, middle-aged man who claimed to be a teacher from Mosul told me in fluent English that he’d been arrested because

were Shiites. Police work was the only job they could find, they said; Sunnis had taken their old jobs. The chief, whose name was Ibrahim Hussein, said, “My wife and children can’t leave the house.” A slight young cop named Hassan said that seventy members of his tribe had been killed by terrorists, including a cousin whose corpse turned up one day with the head severed.

The policemen offered me the only chair in their squalid little room. One of their colleagues was sleeping under a blanket on the cement floor. It was bitterly cold. They said that they wanted the Americans to leave Tal Afar and create a perimeter around the city to keep terrorists out; inside the city, they said, the Americans were preventing the police



"Would you mind if my new friend Ted joins us?"

from eliminating the terrorists, releasing most prisoners after just a few days. The men had been trained for two months in Jordan, and I asked whether they had been instructed in human rights. They said that they had studied the subject for a week.

"What about the rights of the guy who gets kidnapped and beheaded?" Hussein said. Hassan added, "If the Americans weren't here, we could get more out of our interrogations."

"You mean torture?"

"Only the terrorists."

"How do you know that they're terrorists?"

"Someone identifies them to me. We have evidence. The innocent ones, we let go."

"How many terrorists and sympathizers are there in Tal Afar?"

Hassan considered it for a moment. "A hundred and fifty thousand." This was approximately the number of Sunnis in the city.

When I got up to leave, the police-

men begged me to ask Colonel Hickey for blankets and heaters.

The Tal Afar police were better informed about local realities than either the Americans or the Iraqi Army, but they were ill-trained, quick to shoot, likelier to represent parochial interests, and reluctant to take risks. "There are some police that would go after the Sunnis," Chris Hickey said. "So, yes, we are a constraint on them. Their heads not there yet." A soldier in the squadron, who was departing on a mission with Iraqi policemen to distribute food packages in a mixed area, went further: "These guys are worthless."

The American patrol bases around the city stand next to Iraqi Army battalion headquarters; this allows for daily conversations among counterparts in the two armies and frequent sharing of information. The Americans are not just training an Iraqi Army; they are trying to build an institution of national unity before there is a nation.

Hickey and other Americans spoke highly of Lieutenant Colonel Majid Abdul-Latif Hatem, an Iraqi battalion deputy commander. One evening, Colonel Majid invited me into his spartan quarters on the grounds of Tal Afar's granary, across a marshy field from the American patrol base. A Shiite from Nasiriya, in the south, he had a comically large handlebar mustache and mirthless eyes under droopy eyelids. In the corner of the room was a cot with a military blanket; on the wall was a map of his battalion's area of operations. As he began to talk, an orderly prepared tea in a blackened brass pot.

Colonel Majid, who had been in Tal Afar for a month, had an unsentimental view of the city's problems. "If we evacuated Tal Afar of Shiites or of Sunnis, it would be a calm, lovely city. The main issue in Iraq now is the sectarian one: one group wants to destroy the other group. The people need a long, long time, so that they can learn democracy, because they were raised on a sectarian basis. Second, to get rid of the problems we should divide Iraq into three parts: Sunni, Shiite, and Kurd. If there is one Iraq on the map, but inside the people are divided, what's the point of being one? The people are tired of war and instability—they just want to live in peace, even by dividing. The time of Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad is past. There are no more miracles."

Colonel Majid took out a piece of white paper and carefully drew the outline of Iraq, then carved it into sectors. "This area is Shiite," he said. "This area is Sunni: Mosul, Tikrit, Samarra, Anbar. Take oil from here"—he pointed to Basra and Kirkuk—"and give some of it to here. The Sunnis will have to accept. If the oil was in their area, they would ask for division."

I asked if the American and Iraqi armies could prevent a civil war.

"At any moment, there will be war between the two sects," he said. "I want to tell you the *truth*." He repeated the word in English. "Right now, you are observing the men of the Iraqi Army, and seeing what's on the outside. But I know the interior of them. My men are not coming here for nationalist beliefs, for one Iraq. They are here because they need work. So don't be surprised if they stand and watch killing between the people here."

We drank tea and talked, and, as the night wore on, Colonel Majid disappeared into the darkness; I could see only his mustache, his eyes, and the orange glow of the petrol burner. I asked if Iraq could be divided without huge population transfers and terrible bloodshed.

"How much do the Americans spend on their army every month here? Six billion dollars. One billion of this can build houses or apartment complexes in the south, for the Shia here up north. You have to offer many things if you're going to move people: transportation, houses, jobs. It's a very complicated situation, and I'm not George Washington to arrange everything for you.

"God says: no one can change the people if they don't change themselves. America is the biggest power in the world, but it cannot get control over the explosions here and the insurgency. It cannot change the way people think." He added, "Saddam Hussein brought all of us to the point where we all hate Iraq."

I asked if Iraqi minds could change over time.

"Maybe," Colonel Majid said. "But it will take years."

In Tal Afar, I began to imagine the Americans as sutures closing a deep wound. If they were removed too quickly, the wound would open again, and there would be heavy bleeding; at the same time, their presence was causing an infection in the surrounding flesh. This was a dilemma that required careful timing. It was also possible that the wound was too deep ever to be repaired. This would be less a dilemma than a defeat.

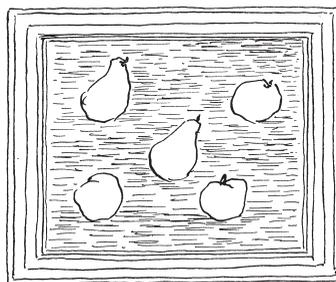
The Americans' achievement in Tal Afar showed that, in the war's third year, individuals and units within the Army could learn and adapt on their own. On my last night in the city, Colonel McMaster sat in his makeshift office and said, "It is so damn complex. If you ever think you have the solution to this, you're wrong, and you're dangerous. You have to keep listening and thinking and being critical and self-critical. Remember General Nivelle, in the First World War, at Verdun? He said he had the solution, and then destroyed the French Army until it mutinied."

During the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's final weeks in Iraq, morale

was remarkably high. Some soldiers expressed, almost under their breath, a reluctance to leave. Many of them had established strong bonds with Iraqis and didn't want to abandon the work they had done together. They brought gifts for the Iraqis' children when they returned from leave. The Iraqi Army units in Tal Afar had been watching McMaster's men carefully, and were showing signs of competence, taking the lead in small operations, learning to win the trust of local civilians, and often proving more adept than the Americans at securing good intelligence. They still faced enormous logistical problems—they lacked armored vehicles and a reliable system of paying salaries, and their Ministry of Defense was so weak and corrupt that Iraqi soldiers still depended on the American military's supply system to eat and to stay warm. As for the Iraqi police, they resembled less a neutral security force than a faction in the city's conflicts. Nonetheless, the American soldiers in Tal Afar felt that they had achieved something. At the headquarters of Hickey's squadron, in the Castle, young officers who, in the war's second year, had concluded that the cause was lost now talked about a fragile success.

"If we're not stupid, and we don't quit, we can win this thing," Major McLaughlin said. "History teaches you that war, at its heart, is a human endeavor. And if you ignore the human side—yours, the enemy's, and the civilians'—you set yourself up for failure. It's not about weapons. It's about people."

"If we are smart enough to see this through, we can win it," Major Simmering said. "If we're not careful, we could destroy everything we've done in the last six months in a matter of minutes by doing something stupid—taking an action that could alienate the Sunni population. It takes months to make somebody like you; it can take just a minute to



make them hate you." All the soldiers worried about what one general in Iraq called a "rush to failure." As Simmering put it, "There's a lot of political pressure back home to turn this over to the Iraqis."

"A GOOD-ENOUGH SOLUTION"

From Tal Afar, I flew by helicopter to an airfield a few miles north of Tikrit, called Forward Operating Base Speicher. The headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division, Speicher is an "enduring FOB"—one of a handful of gigantic bases around Iraq to which American forces are being pulled back, as smaller bases are handed over to the Iraqi Army. Speicher has an area of twenty-four square miles and the appearance of a small, flat, modular Midwestern city; there is a bus system, a cavernous dining hall that serves four flavors of Baskin-Robbins ice cream, a couple of gyms, and several movie theatres. At least nine thousand soldiers live there, and many of them seemed to leave the base rarely or not at all: they talked about "going out," as if the psychological barrier between them and Iraq had become daunting. After three months on the base, an Army lawyer working on the Iraqi justice system still hadn't visited the Tikrit courts. A civil-affairs major who had been in Iraq since May needed to consult a handbook when I asked him the names of the local tribes. A reporter for the military newspaper *Stars & Stripes* had heard a bewildered sergeant near Tikrit ask his captain, "What's our mission here?" The captain replied sardonically, "We're here to guard the ice-cream trucks going north so that someone else can guard them there."

Much of the activity at an enduring FOB simply involves self-supply. These vast military oases raise the spectre of American permanence in Iraq, but, to me, they more acutely suggested American irrelevance. Soldiers have even coined a derogatory term for those who never get off the base: "fobbits." I spent two days at Speicher without seeing an Iraqi.

After Tal Afar, it was dismaying how little soldiers at Speicher knew about the lives of Iraqis. When I drove with the civil-affairs major into Tikrit, we stopped along the way at an elementary school,

just outside the base. The major wanted to see if the teachers had pursued his request to have the children become pen pals with kids at an elementary school in his home town, in California. It sounded like a fine idea, but two nervous female teachers who received us in their office gave a number of reasons that the children hadn't yet written letters. The major pressed them for a few minutes, and then he was ready to let the project go. As soon as he left the room, the women showed me a thick stack of pictures that their students had drawn for the children in California, along with a letter from the teachers asking for school supplies and "lotion for dry skin." The letter concluded, "Good luck U.S.A. Army." But the women were too frightened to give the bundle to the major; a relationship with an elementary school in America could make them targets of local insurgents. All this was lost on the major. The teachers said that they rarely saw American soldiers anymore.

Speicher provides a more representative picture of the American military's future in Iraq than Tal Afar. The trend is away from counterinsurgency and toward what, in Washington, is known as an "exit strategy." Commanders are under tremendous pressure to keep casualties low, and combat deaths have been declining for several months, as patrols are reduced and the Americans rely more and more on air power. (During the past five months, the number of air strikes increased fifty per cent over the same period a year ago.) More than half the country is scheduled to be turned over to Iraqi Army control this year. This is the crux of the military strategy for withdrawal, and it is happening at a surprisingly fast pace. President Bush has always insisted that the turnover and "drawdown" will be "conditions-based"—governed by the situation in Iraq and by the advice of commanders, not by a timetable set in Washington. But everywhere I went in Iraq, officers and soldiers spoke as if they were already preparing to leave. A sergeant in Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, said, "We'll be here for ten years in some form, but boots-on-the-ground-wise? We're really almost done." He said that the U.S. Army doesn't allow itself to fail, and when I suggested that Iraq hardly looked like a victory the sergeant

replied, "So you adjust the standard of success. For me, it's getting all the Joes home. It's not that I don't give a damn about what's going on here. But that's how it is."

A field-grade officer in the 101st Airborne said, "The algorithm of success is to get a good-enough solution." There were, he said, three categories of assessment for every aspect of the mission: optimal, acceptable, and unacceptable. He made it clear that optimal wasn't in the running. "We're handing a shit sandwich over to someone else," the officer said. "We have to turn this over, let them do it their way. We're like a frigging organ transplant that's rejected. We have to get the Iraqi Army to where they can hold their own in a frigging firefight with insurgents, and get the hell out." The Iraqi national-security adviser, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, who chairs a high-level committee in Baghdad on American withdrawal, gave the same forecast that was mentioned by a planner on General Abizaid's staff, at Central Command: fewer than a hundred thousand foreign troops in Iraq by the end of this year, and half that number by the middle of 2007.

In other words, "conditions-based" withdrawal is a flexible term. The conditions will be evaluated by commanders who know what results are expected back in Washington. I suggested to Senator Chuck Hagel, the Nebraska Republican, who has been a critic of the Administration's war policy, that this sounded like a variation on the famous advice that Senator George Aiken, of Vermont, gave President Johnson about Vietnam, in 1966: declare victory and go home. "In a twenty-first-century version, yes, probably," Hagel said. "It won't be quite that stark." The Administration, he said, is "finding ways in its own mind for back-door exits out of Iraq." He added, "We have an election coming up in November. The fact is, we're going to be pulling troops out, and I suspect it'll be kind of quiet. We're going to wake up some morning, probably in the summer, and all of a sudden we'll be forty thousand troops down, and people will say, 'Gee, I didn't know.'"

A senior military officer defended Generals Abizaid and Casey, and said that they would not simply bow to pressure from Washington. "I don't think

commanders are so ambitious that they're willing to sell their men and their endeavor up the river so they can tell their bosses what they want to hear." But he admitted that there was considerable pressure for withdrawal, saying, "A blind man on a dark night can see people want the recommendation to be drawdown." The pressure is partly driven by the strain on the military, and partly by the fear that thousands of junior officers and senior sergeants, who face future deployments, may quit if the war extends many more years. Divorce rates among Army officers have doubled since the war began. The Army is so short-staffed that it has promoted ninety-seven per cent of its captains. "If you're not a convicted felon, you're being promoted to major," a Pentagon official said.

As Americans pull back to the isolated mega-bases, further reducing the daily death toll, Iraq will likely become a lighter burden for Republicans in Congress and for the Administration. A number of American officials, both civilian and military, along with Sunni politicians in Tal Afar and Tikrit, told me that this scenario was not only inevitable but healthy. Contact between Americans and Iraqis had led to mistakes, deaths, and mutual exhaustion.

But a good-enough counterinsurgency is really none at all. There is no substitute for the investment of time, effort, and risk that was so evident in Tal Afar. The retreat to the enduring FOBs seems like an acknowledgment that counterinsurgency is just too hard. "If you *really* want to reduce your casualties, go back to Fort Riley," Kalev Sepp, the Naval Postgraduate School professor, said. "It's absurd to think that you can protect the population from armed insurgents without putting your men's lives at risk." The policy of gathering troops at enormous bases, he added, "is old Army thinking—centralization of resources, of people, of control. Counterinsurgency requires decentralization."

Some military leaders are feverishly trying to institutionalize the hard-won knowledge from cities like Tal Afar, in time to make a difference in this war. At the training base in Taji, just north of Baghdad, there is now a counterinsurgency academy where incoming officers attend classes taught by those they've come to relieve. (Jesse Sellars told me

that his main lesson to his successors was to educate themselves and their soldiers about the Iraqis.) Sepp sat in on a class led by General Casey, after which a newly arrived brigade commander said, "This is the first time I've been told my primary mission is to train Iraqi forces." Until then, he had thought that his mission was to kick down doors and haul people in. Many commanders in Iraq still think so.

In the first year of the war, Major General David Petraeus achieved a temporary success when, as a divisional commander in northern Iraq, he applied the basic ideas of counterinsurgency. He is now a lieutenant general and commander of the Combined Arms Center, at Fort Leavenworth, in Kansas. Petraeus is overseeing a group of active-duty and former officers in the writing of a new joint Army/Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual. "It is, as with many things in life, much easier to explain than to do," he told me. "But it is very important to get that basic understanding right again, and the power of a field manual is its ability to communicate relatively straightforward concepts. The basic concepts and principles are not rocket science or brain surgery, but they can be very hard to apply." Counterinsurgency begins, he said, when military leaders "set the right tone."

In February, I attended a two-day workshop at Fort Leavenworth, where the authors of the draft heard suggestions from an assembly of critics. Petraeus had invited not just military and civilian officials but academics, journalists, and human-rights activists, and the workshop was co-sponsored by the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, at Harvard's Kennedy School—in keeping with the draft manual's claim that counterinsurgency is twenty per cent military and eighty per cent political. Also in attendance was Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, a British general who had just published an article in *Military Review*, out of Fort Leavenworth, which delivered an attack on the American military's cultural ineptitude in fighting the Iraqi insurgency. Aylwin-Foster, who had served under Petraeus in 2004, when Petraeus led the training mission in Baghdad, told me, "It seemed to be an enigma, the U.S. military as an entity. They're po-

lite, courteous, generous, humble, in a sense. But you see some of the things going on—if I could sum it up, I never saw such a good bunch of people inadvertently piss off so many people." When Aylwin-Foster's article appeared, in December, General Peter Schoomaker, the Army chief of staff, ordered it to be sent to every general in the Army; I saw it on a number of desks in Iraq.

The question hanging unasked over the workshop at Fort Leavenworth was whether it was already too late to change the military's approach in Iraq. When Kalev Sepp discussed the field manual with students in his class on insurgency at the Naval Postgraduate School, a Special Forces captain said, "If this manual

isn't written soon, you'll have it ready just in time to give one to each soldier leaving Iraq."

CIVIL WAR?

Just as the Americans have begun to learn how to fight a counterinsurgency war, they find themselves in the middle of a growing civil conflict, and what succeeds in the former may backfire in the latter. Training Iraqi security forces and turning responsibility over to them makes sense if the Americans are trying to buttress an embattled government against insurgents; but, as sectarian violence rises, with the police and the Army dominated by one group, the Americans



"I hope you don't mind, but I stuck in a little prayer for General Motors."



"I dropped twelve pounds the first week and kept it off!"

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could also be arming one side of an approaching civil war.

On February 22nd, the Shiite shrine in Samarra was bombed, almost certainly by elements of Al Qaeda; its golden dome was destroyed. The sectarian violence that followed was widely interpreted as the first definitive sign that Iraq was coming apart, but Baghdad and the mixed towns around it had already shown clear symptoms of civil war. In the capital, Shiite families were being driven out of Sunni neighborhoods by a campaign of threats and assassinations. Young Sunni men were being rounded up by Shiite militiamen, some of whom wore police uniforms; they disappeared into secret prisons or turned up on the street, bound and shot to death.

Dora, a middle-class neighborhood of Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians in southern Baghdad, has become the epicenter of the low-grade civil war. A businessman from Dora told me that it began with the killing of barbers: Sunni extremists believed that shaving a man's beard was against Islam, and they extended the ban to Western-style haircuts. "After the barbers, they went on to the real-estate agents," the businessman said. A fatwa was issued, declaring that in the time of the Prophet there was no buying or selling of property. Then an ice vender was

shot dead on the street because ice wasn't sold in the seventh century.

The next targets were grocery-shop owners, exchange-shop owners, clothing-shop owners. "At first, they were giving reasons, but then things developed, and they started killing for no reason," the businessman said. Every day in the heart of Dora, around the Assyrian Market, a list of intended victims—mostly merchants, and always Shiites—circulates by word of mouth. Within a few days, people on the list who don't take precautions are shot to death in broad daylight. Police at the local stations don't get involved, and American soldiers rarely enter the district, though the businessman said that he goes to sleep at night to the sound of gunfire, helicopters overhead, and bombs dropping, as if he were on the front line of a battle. "Dora is out of the government's control," the businessman said, and Shiites who can afford to escape are leaving.

A senior Iraqi official who has access to classified intelligence said that the campaign of violence is part of a strategic effort by Sunni insurgents to "shape the battlefield": to clear the district of potential enemies and use it as a staging area for attacks in Baghdad. Dora has an oil refinery and a power plant, and it lies along the route from the Sunni-

dominated tribal areas south of Baghdad to the heart of the city. The killings in Dora, the official said, are part of a trend away from attacks on American and Iraqi military units, which expose insurgents to great risk, toward killings of local officials and ordinary citizens, intended to undermine the public's confidence that the government can protect it. In January, he said, there were seven hundred of these murders, the highest number of the war up until that month. "So 2006, maybe, will be the year of assassinations and infrastructure attacks," the official said.

The killings have created an atmosphere of sectarian hysteria that residents of Baghdad have never known before. Fear and hatred of one's neighbor are expressed in extreme language. I met a Shiite butcher, Muhammad Kareem Jassim, who owns a small shop on a busy thoroughfare, the doorway obstructed by the hanging carcasses of skinned lambs. His brother was also a butcher, with a shop in Dora. One morning in January, the brother was cutting meat for two women customers when a man walked into the shop, asked the women to excuse him, came up to the counter, and said, "Good morning." The brother looked up, said, "Good morning," and was shot in the face and killed. His grown son rushed into the room, shouting, "Daddy, Daddy!" and he, too, was shot dead. A second brother, also a butcher, came running from an adjacent shop with a carving knife in his hand; he was also killed.

When I sat down, ten days later, to talk with Jassim, a stout, bearded man in his fifties, he was hyperventilating with rage. "Dirty fuckers, sons of bitches—they have no faith, no religious leaders, since the time of Omar and Abu Bakr until now," he said of Sunnis, going straight back to the seventh century. "The only reason for this is that we are Shia." He expressed great bitterness that Sunni religious and political leaders rarely condemn the killings of Shiites, and he despaired of being protected by American or Iraqi security forces. The butcher's shoulders heaved, and he said, "If our religious leaders gave a fatwa, there would be no more Sunnis in Iraq anymore! Because everybody now has a broken heart. I wish I could catch them with my hands and slaughter them. I could do it—I'm a butcher."

In the past year, Shiites have begun to engage in deadly retaliatory strikes against Sunnis. Many ordinary Shiites have lost patience with the calls for restraint from religious leaders like Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. And Shiite party militias have taken up kidnapping and assassination, creating widespread fear among Sunnis for the first time.

The Iraqi Islamic Party is the country's largest Sunni party. Its headquarters, in western Baghdad, has a human-rights office with pictures on the walls of Sunni corpses bearing marks of torture allegedly inflicted by Shiites. While I was in the office, an elderly couple arrived in a state of panic. A week before, at six in the morning, fifteen commandos had broken into their house and taken their grown son from his bed. Since then, the parents had been unable to get any information about him. The woman described the commandos as members of the Badr Corps, the largest Shiite militia in Iraq, which was formed during the Iran-Iraq War by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. One of its leaders, Bayan Jabr, is now the Minister of the Interior; Sunnis accuse him of allowing Shiite militiamen to infiltrate Iraqi police forces. Sunnis routinely call Shiite politicians like Jabr "Iranians." The mother cried, "In all my life, I never saw something like this. They are coming from Iran, the Persian people—Iran, which is trying to get the nuclear bomb to destroy the world."

A Party official, Omar Hechel al-Jabouri, told the old couple that he would contact the Interior Ministry about the case, in order to prevent their son from being tortured or killed. Every day, he said, a hundred people come to his office with complaints, so many that he has taken to sleeping on a cot in a corner of the room. "Our brothers, the Shia, are very smart in crying about their suffering," he said. "We others are not as smart." (An American Embassy official told me that in Iraq each side has perfected its own "victimology.")

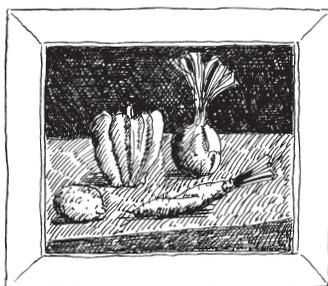
American troops have been struggling to purge Shiite militiamen from the Iraqi police and recruit Sunnis, with the goal of making it a non-sectarian force. Major General Joe Peterson, who is leading the police-training effort, said that the goal was to have two hundred thousand police trained and equipped by the end of the year. (As of mid-March, a hundred

and thirty thousand had been trained.) "We captured a Shiite death squad last week," he said. "There are guys going out in the middle of the night." The squad, which was out to avenge the death of a member's relative, included twenty-two employees of the Interior Ministry. "We have some very bad groups out there who are bent on insuring that the government fails," he said.

An American intelligence official said that he considers the increasingly aggressive Shiite militias a bigger long-term threat to Iraq than the Sunni insurgency. These groups raise the prospect not just of a Sunni-Shiite civil war but also of an intra-Shiite fight, between the Badr Corps—widely perceived as a front for Iran—and the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr, the radical Iraqi populist. When I asked Colonel McMaster what Americans could do if a full-scale Iraqi civil war breaks out, he said, "Not a whole hell of a lot."

PLAN B

Fort Leavenworth has a Center for Army Lessons Learned. There is no equivalent at the White House or the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Last November, the Pentagon issued D.O.D. Directive 3000.05, which declared that "stability operations," or peacekeeping and security maintenance—which Rumsfeld had denigrated in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, questioning why the Pentagon had such a division—were now "a core U.S. military mission that the Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct and support." The directive went on, "They shall be given priority comparable to combat operations." In the obscure world of "stability ops," D.O.D. 3000.05 was a historic, if belated, document. Careful readers noticed that it was signed not by Rumsfeld but by his deputy Gordon England. In February, Rumsfeld released his Quadren-



nial Defense Review, a congressionally mandated report setting out long-term military policy. Its language seemed unassailable, focussing on the need for greater capability in civil affairs, military policing, cultural and language expertise, and counterinsurgency, all as part of what the document called "the long war" against global terrorism. But in its budget choices, which reveal the real priorities of the Defense Secretary, the Iraq war had hardly registered. Instead of cutting back on hugely expensive weapons programs in order to build more troop divisions—Iraq has made it painfully obvious that a larger army is necessary for fighting counterinsurgency wars—the review favored the fighter jets and carriers that are the lifeblood of military contractors and members of Congress.

It's an open secret in Washington that Rumsfeld wants to extricate himself from Iraq. But President Bush's rhetoric—most recently, in a series of speeches given to shore up faltering public support—remains resolute. For three years, the Administration has split the difference between these two poles, committing itself halfheartedly to Iraq. (Through every turn in the war, the number of troops in Iraq has remained remarkably stable—between a hundred and fifteen thousand and a hundred and sixty thousand.) In 2006, maintaining the status quo no longer seems viable. The midterm elections and the President's flagging popularity will force Bush to make a choice: either he will devote the rest of his Presidency to staying in Iraq or he will begin a withdrawal.

In "Dereliction of Duty," McMaster's book on Vietnam, he described how Lyndon Johnson's top generals allowed the President to mire American troops in Vietnam with no possible strategy and no public candor. He wrote, "As American involvement in Vietnam deepened, the gap between the true nature of that commitment and the President's depiction of it to the American people, the Congress, and members of his own Administration widened. Lyndon Johnson, with the assistance of Robert S. McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had set the stage for America's disaster in Vietnam." In *Tal Afar*, I told McMaster that there were more than a few echoes of the Iraq war in his book. He

laughed and said, "I can't even touch that."

A President who projects a consistently unrealistic message of success to the public; a Defense Secretary who consolidates power in his office and intimidates or ignores the uniformed military; senior generals—Tommy Franks, John Abizaid, Ricardo Sanchez, Richard Myers, and now Peter Pace, Myers's successor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs—who appear before congressional committees and at news conferences and solemnly confirm that they have enough troops to win: the parallels between Vietnam and Iraq, in terms of the moral abdication of leaders, are not hard to see. In one sense, though, the two wars are inversely analogous: in Vietnam, Johnson claimed to be staying out while he was getting in; in Iraq, something like the opposite is happening.

It isn't easy to know how much unwelcome information reaches the President. On December 16th, the day after elections for a constitutional government in Iraq, a group of senators and representatives met with the President and his top national-security advisers in the Roosevelt Room at the White House, while General Casey and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, joined in from Baghdad on a large video screen. According to Senator Joseph Biden, the Delaware Democrat, who had flown back from Iraq that morning, Vice-President Cheney was characteristically sanguine about the war, saying, "It's been a great election, Mr. President—we're well on our way." The President talked at length about the need to continue fighting terrorism. When it was Biden's turn to speak, he said, "With all due respect, Mr. President, if every single Al Qaeda-related terrorist were killed tomorrow, done, gone, you'd still have a war on your hands in Iraq." On the video screen, Khalilzad and Casey nodded. When the discussion turned to the need for a political solution, with non-sectarian heads of the Defense and Interior Ministries, Rumsfeld began nodding vigorously—as if to say, Biden thought, "Hey, this is Condi's problem. This ain't my problem."

Condoleezza Rice now finds herself trying to win the kinds of fights with Rumsfeld that Colin Powell lost long ago. As Secretary of State, she has begun to repair alliances that Powell was help-

less to keep the Administration from shredding. By most accounts, Stephen Hadley, her replacement as national-security adviser, is a weak figure in the White House, and Cheney's influence has waned in the second term, allowing Rice to consolidate foreign-policy decision-making in her department, as Powell never could. But Rumsfeld remains a formidable bureaucratic force. Recently, Rice and Rumsfeld have battled over the question of how to protect Iraq's infrastructure. Insurgents have become so adept at hitting pipelines, power stations, and refineries that fuel and electricity shortages have become nationwide crises; meanwhile, some Iraqi Army units and tribes that are being paid to guard these facilities are collaborating in the destruction. At the State Department, these attacks have become a full-time preoccupation. One official there described the strategy of Sunni insurgents this way: "The one thing we can do is strangle Baghdad, the crown jewel of Iraq. You don't have a country without dealing with us. You may have the oil in the north, Kurds—but how are you going to get it out?" For several months, Rice has tried to force a decision on whether to commit American troops to protecting key sites. Rumsfeld has resisted, and—as with so many issues in Iraq—the White House has made no decision.

The Defense Secretary has even ob-

TROY

We had a drink and got in bed.
That's when the boat in my mouth set sail,
my fingers drifting in the shallows of your buzz cut.
And in the sound of your eye
a skiff coasted—boarding *it*
I found all the bric-a-brac of your attic gloom,
the knives from that other island trip,
the poison suckle root lifted from God knows where.
O, all your ill-begotten loot—and yes, somewhere,
the words you never actually spoke,
the woven rope tethering
me to this rotting joint. Touch me,
and the boat and the city burn like whiskey
going down the throat. Or so it goes,
our love-wheedling myth, excessively baroque.

—*Meghan O'Rourke*

jected to soldiers providing security for the small reconstruction teams that Khalilzad wants to establish in provincial capitals. (Rumsfeld insists that private contractors be used instead.) Final word on the mission has been held up at the White House for months. An Administration official said that the delay showed how badly reality can be "disconnected from the President's rhetoric of Iraq as the most important thing on the planet." The official went on, "Certain people at the Pentagon want to get out of Iraq at all costs." He added, "These provincial reconstruction teams should be resolved in an afternoon. But Rumsfeld doesn't want to do it, and nobody wants to confront him."

As a State Department official was preparing to leave for Baghdad recently, a colleague told him, "When you get there, the big sucking sound you'll hear is D.O.D. moonwalking out of Iraq as fast as it can go. Your job is to figure out how we can fill the gap." But the State Department has nothing like the resources—money, equipment, personnel—of Defense. It is having trouble persuading enough foreign-service officers to risk their lives by filling the vacant slots at the Embassy in Baghdad or on ministerial-assistance teams, even though raises are being offered; for a brief period, the State Department considered re-activating, for the first time since Vietnam, a policy of forced assignments.

In 1970, at the height of the pacification program in Vietnam, the U.S. reconstruction teams included seventy-six hundred civilians and military officials; in a country the size of Iraq, that would mean eleven thousand people, but barely a thousand positions are planned for the provincial teams in Iraq. The Administration asked an increasingly skeptical Congress for just \$1.6 billion in reconstruction funds for the coming year, which means that, though the output of electricity, water, oil, and other utilities still falls well short of prewar levels, the major reconstruction effort in Iraq is now over.

In February, I met Secretary Rice in her office at the State Department. On one wall was an old recruiting poster, in which the pointing figure of Uncle Sam is saying, "We're at War. Are You Doing All You Can?" I asked Rice whether she would alert the President if she saw a rush to disengage from Iraq. "If I thought there was a drawdown that was going to endanger our ability to deliver a foundation for stability that outlasts whatever presence we had—absolutely, I would," she said. She quickly added that this isn't happening, and that the President won't allow it to happen: "Even though there is violence, there is a process that is moving, I think rather inexorably, actually, toward an outcome that will one day bring a stable Iraq."

Rice admitted that the American public is "uneasy" about Iraq. Speaking in her precise, academic manner, she analyzed one or two of the Administration's mistakes. But she kept falling back on the strategy of hope. I asked in several ways about the danger of civil war; her answer was that Iraq won't have one, because Iraqis don't want one. And when she turned to the larger questions about the President's legacy in the Middle East, Rice sounded almost mystically optimistic: "I think all the trends are in the right direction. I can see a path where this turns out as we would want to see it turn out." She narrowed her eyes. "I can see that path clearly."

At the Embassy in Baghdad, Khalilzad gave me the impression that he worries about the focus and staying power of the Administration, as if his own sense of urgency had to be constantly signalled to Washington. As the military draws down, he said, he isn't certain that the

American effort will be redoubled in other crucial areas, such as education, or on the provincial teams. He was blunt about his fears for 2006. The U.S. will stay engaged in Iraq on one condition, he said. "The condition is whether we, the people who have responsibility here and in Washington, project to the American people that we know what we're doing; that we have reasonable goals, that we have good means to achieve those goals, and that we're making progress. I think the American people lose confidence when they think either the war is not important or we don't know what the hell we're doing. So it behooves us, those of us who believe that we know what we're doing, to communicate to the American people that there is a strategy that can produce results, and to communicate it effectively, without hyping." He added, "Happy talk is not the way to gain the confidence of the people."

The American strategy is for Khalilzad to push the Iraqi factions toward a government of national unity, so that political compromise will drain away support for the violence, while the Iraqi security forces become capable national institutions. Considering that just a year ago Sunni Arabs stood completely outside the political game, and the Iraqi Army was only a few months into a serious training program, the strategy has been at least partly success-

ful; the high Sunni turnout in the December elections was a tribute to Iraqis' political maturity and Khalilzad's skills as a broker. But if a government forms and the violence—whether sectarian, insurgent, criminal, or some indistinguishable mixture of them all—continues at this extraordinary level, or even intensifies, the U.S. will have played its last card. Then there will be no more milestones to celebrate, only the incremental effort of fighting an insurgency and rebuilding a failed state, without the prospect of a dramatic turn that could restore the support of the American public. People with experience in insurgencies talk about five, eight, ten years.

Recently, Senator Biden noticed a change in the tone of Administration officials. After the Samarra mosque bombing, Stephen Hadley, the national-security adviser, called him to say that perhaps Iraqi leaders had "looked over the precipice" of civil war and would now pull back. What Biden heard in Hadley's voice was not the unshakable conviction normally expressed by White House officials. It was something closer to "wistfulness," he said—a prayer more than a belief.

In recent remarks, the President and Administration officials, such as Cheney and Rumsfeld, have made it clear that, in the case of an American defeat, they will have a Plan B ready: they will blame the press for reporting bad news. They will



"We structured the deal so it won't make any sense to you."

blame the opposition for losing the war. In mid-March, on "Face the Nation," Cheney, who has offered consistently rosy forecasts on Iraq, was asked whether his statements had deepened public skepticism about the war. "I think it has less to do with the statements we've made, which I think were basically accurate and reflect reality, than it does with the fact that there's a constant sort of perception, if you will, that's created because what's newsworthy is the car bomb in Baghdad."

In Congress, there has been remarkably little public pressure on the Administration from Republicans or Democrats to take drastic action, at least until the formation of the Iraqi government is complete. Among Republicans, though, the anxiety over Iraq is barely concealed—midterm elections are now seven months away—and has been expressed partly through criticism of the Administration on other national-security issues, such as wiretapping and the Dubai port controversy.

"Most Republicans know that they're connected to Bush and his fortunes and his poll numbers," Chuck Hagel said. "Iraq has been consistently the No. 1 issue in the polls." Since the call for withdrawal, several months ago, by Representative John Murtha, the Pennsylvania Democrat, members of his party

seem to be content to watch in silence as the Administration destroys its domestic standing over Iraq. Three years into the war, there is still no coherent political opposition.

"There's an old saying in politics: when your opponent's in trouble, just get out of the way," Senator Barack Obama, the Illinois Democrat, told me. "In political terms, I don't think that Democrats are obligated to solve Iraq for the Administration." He added, "I think that, for the good of the country, we've got to be constructive in figuring out what's going to be best. I've taken political hits from certain quarters in the Democratic Party for even trying to figure this out. I feel that obligation. I'll confess to you, though, I haven't come up with any novel, unique answer so far."

After the Samarra bombing, when the prospect of civil war was added to an intractable insurgency, many Democrats and Republicans concluded that Iraq was lost. Conservatives like George F. Will and William F. Buckley, who, for philosophical reasons, never held out much hope for Iraq, have given up on the reconstruction. But most politicians remain paralyzed between staying and leaving, unable to decide which is the lesser evil. The deaths of more Americans and the spending of billions more dollars offer no promise of success be-

yond the prevention of wider chaos and, perhaps, a slow consolidation of the Iraqi state. Yet an American withdrawal would leave behind killings on a larger scale than anything yet seen; Iraqis from every background expressed this fear. Baghdad and other mixed cities would be divided up into barricaded sectors, and a civil war in the center of the country might spread into a regional war. The Shiite south would fall deeper under Iranian control, Kurdistan would try to break away, and the Sunni areas would go the way of Tal Afar at its worst. This is where comparisons to Vietnam do not apply: in Southeast Asia, the domino theory turned out to be false, but Iraq in the hands of militias and terrorists, manipulated by neighboring states, would threaten the Middle East and the U.S. for many years. The truth is that no one in Washington knows what to do.

A former Administration official said, "All of us—not just the Administration but Congress and the American people—own the problem of Iraq. But I'm afraid we're going to cut. We're unwilling to make the sacrifice and spend the political capital." He summed up the three years of the Iraq war as three successive kinds of failure: "There was an intellectual failure at the start. There was an implementation failure after that. And now there's a failure of political will."

Beyond the White House, various analysts have offered alternative strategies, all of them based on the notion that 2006 is the year in which Iraq's long-term future, for better or worse, will be decided. Barry Posen, a political scientist at M.I.T., has offered a more radical proposal than any officials have dared to entertain. In a recent article in *Boston Review*, Posen concluded that a unified, democratic Iraq is highly unlikely and that American interests require a strategic withdrawal over the next eighteen months. Posen is known as a foreign-policy realist; when I met him at his office at M.I.T., he said, "I've been depicted as a villain. I just want the American polity to consider all sides of the equation before undertaking armed philanthropy." Posen has decided that America can afford to leave behind a civil war in Iraq—one that we will "manage" on our way out, so that its result will be, in his words, "a hurting stalemate." If one side seems about to win, the U.S. can tip

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE ALIVE

The 461st Month

You might find yourself taking all your mail and dumping it down the incinerator chute. Don't worry—it's normal.



The 543rd Month

During this month, it's possible that you will hate everyone you've ever met. This will pass.



The 612th Month

Don't be alarmed if you should suddenly start to wonder—no, REALLY wonder—about everything. It's very common in your condition.



the board in the other direction. "We managed a civil war in Bosnia from the outside," Posen said. "Whether we knew it or not, we were generating a hurting stalemate." In the end, after much violence, Iraq's factions will conclude that no one can win, and then they will come to their own arrangement.

Posen's version of withdrawal is realpolitik with a vengeance, offering the cold comfort of hardheaded calculations rather than grand illusions; but it's difficult to imagine how America, without troops in Iraq, could control events on the ground any better than it can now. When I asked Posen about the moral obligation to Iraqis, who will surely be massacred in large numbers without American forces around, he replied, "No one talks about the terrible things that can happen if we stay the course. The insurgents are trying for a Beirut Marine-barracks bombing." He added that he doesn't imagine his ideas will be heard in Washington. "These people are stubborn. A rational person would think that they've learned something about the limits of American power. They've learned nothing."

Kenneth Pollack, who served on the National Security Council under President Clinton—and whose book "The Threatening Storm" made an influential case for the war in 2002—recently led a small group at the Brookings Institution in writing a detailed report on a new strategy for Iraq. It calls for the Administration to shift the focus from the pursuit of insurgents in the Sunni heartland and, instead, to concentrate overstretched American and Iraqi forces in cities where the reconstruction effort is still somewhat popular—providing security while allowing economic development to flourish. This strategy, known in counterinsurgency doctrine as the "ink spot" approach (because zones of security gradually spread out from population centers), has also been proposed by the military expert Andrew Krepinevich. It was put into practice in Tal Afar. Pollack's proposal demands that, in spite of intense political pressures at home, there be no troop withdrawals anytime soon, since the total number of American and Iraqi forces is now only half of what experts say is required to secure the country. It also counts on a level of international help

that the Bush Administration has never shown the ability, or the desire, to muster. In a sense, the report asks the country to offer the same commitment and imagination, to take the same risks and make the same sacrifices, as the soldiers in Tal Afar.

"PARADISE"

On a quiet street in eastern Baghdad, behind a garden with lawn chairs arranged in rows, there is a small, unremarkable two-story building. A sign in front, which says "Al Janna Center," is barely visible from the street, for reasons of safety. Al Janna means "Paradise," and Dr. Baher Butti, who directs Al Janna, had been warned by anonymous fundamentalists that paradise cannot be found on earth.

Dr. Butti is a psychiatrist and a secular Christian in his mid-forties, a small, stoop-shouldered man with thinning hair and an air of stoical gloom. I first met him in the summer of 2003, and on each subsequent visit to Iraq I looked him up. Over the past three years, he has grown increasingly skeptical about the motives of the Americans, Iraqi politicians, religious leaders, and the country's neighbors. Yet he pursued with great persistence an idea that had first come to him after the fall of Saddam: he wanted to open a "psycho-social rehabilitation clinic" that would rebuild the humanity of his countrymen. Dr. Butti believed that, after decades of dictatorship, wars, sanctions, and occupation, Iraqis need to learn to talk, to think, to tolerate. He had registered his proposal for the clinic with the occupation authority and successive Iraqi ministries, but none of them had given him support. Last year, a Baghdad newspaper owner donated funds, and in January the Al Janna Center finally opened.

In the waiting room, brightly colored abstract paintings by patients hung on the walls. Up a narrow flight of stairs, there were several small meeting rooms where Dr. Butti planned to hold lectures, poetry readings, computer-training courses, and women's mental-health group meetings. The center was humble and barely furnished, but, amid the grinding ugliness and violence of Baghdad, it felt like an oasis of calm. "If we gain humanitarian care for our patients, then the re-

bound will be a humanitarian movement in all the society," Dr. Butti said. "This place is not just a scientific institute. It's also a place for literature and arts. We are trying to educate people about communication."

Dr. Butti lives in Dora, the mixed neighborhood in south Baghdad that has been particularly violent. "There are no direct clashes in the streets, but when every day you have one or two of your acquaintances killed, this is civil war," he said. Most of his friends and colleagues are leaving Iraq, along with much of the country's professional class.

When we sat down in his office, with cups of tea, he said, "Let me tell you about my own conflict." His conflict was simple: to stay or to leave. Last May, his young daughter was badly injured when her school bus was hit by a suicide car bomb. After that, his wife, who is also a doctor, insisted that the family move to Abu Dhabi. Yet Dr. Butti has finally achieved something tangible in Iraq, and to leave now would be like abandoning a child. "I feel like someone who's been cut from the roots," he said.

Dr. Butti's decision depends on what happens in the next few months, and on the formation of a new government. He doesn't have much hope for improvement any time soon, but he is looking for some sign of stability. "Or it will go into a civil war, and all will be lost, and there will be nothing to be done here anymore. It's either this year or none." He added, "Not one of the Iraqis believes that you Americans should leave tomorrow. Even the Sunni leaders—they announce it in the media, but that's for, let's say, public use. They know that we can't have the American Army leaving the country right now, because, excuse me to say, George Bush did a mess, he must clean it." He shrugged and smiled, in his pained way. "We are attached in a Catholic marriage with our occupiers. It's not possible to have a divorce."

He walked me outside into the sunlit garden. On the street, a car passed by slowly. For an hour, I had forgotten to be afraid, and now that we were saying goodbye I was reluctant to go. In the past we had always shaken hands, but on this occasion Dr. Butti kissed my cheeks, in the Iraqi way. Perhaps he felt, as I did, that we might not meet again for a long time. ♦