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The Wayward Press

The Toppling

How the media inflated a minor moment in a long war.

by Peter Maass

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As viewers watched on television, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Leon Lambert and Corporal Edward Chin prepared to bring down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad's Firdos Square. Photograph by Alexandra Boulat.

On April 9, 2003, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan McCoy, commander of the 3rd Battalion 4th Marines, awoke at a military base captured from the Iraqis a few miles from the center of Baghdad, which was still held by the enemy. It had been twenty days since the invasion of Iraq began, and McCoy had some personal chores to take care of—washing his socks, for one. Afterward, he walked over to a group of marines under his command who were defacing a mural of Saddam Hussein. As I watched, he picked up a sledgehammer and struck a few blows himself. The men cheered. Then he began preparing for the serious business of the day: leading the battalion into the heart of the city. He expected a house-to-house brawl that would last several days.

The battalion's tanks were followed by Humvees with the barrels of M-16s pointing from every window. But only a few potshots were fired at the marines, and small groups of Iraqis and their children were on the streets waving. On the radio, McCoy's men told of being served tea. "We're not getting resistance, we're getting cakes," McCoy remarked.

As the battalion neared the center of the city, Colonel Steven Hummer, the regimental commander, ordered it to the Palestine Hotel. The hotel was in Firdos Square, but neither the hotel nor the square was labelled on McCoy's map. All he had was a grid coordinate for an area that was a square kilometre.

The hotel was filled with international journalists, and by three in the afternoon some who had remained in Baghdad during the invasion were probing the city, freed of government minders who had controlled their movements until then. A few of them ran into McCoy as he was examining his map. McCoy turned to Remy Ourdan, a reporter for *Le Monde*. "Where is this damn Palestine Hotel?" he asked. Ourdan indicated the road to take.

Not far away, Captain Bryan Lewis, the leader of McCoy's tank company, spotted a car with "TV" scrawled on its side and shouted from his turret, "Is this the way to the Palestine?" A Danish photographer named Jan Grarup pointed down the avenue—they were heading the right way. Lewis motioned for Grarup to come along, in case further directions were needed. Grarup hopped onto the turret and led the tanks to Firdos Square.

After the marines arrived, a small group of Iraqis gathered around a statue of Saddam Hussein in the middle of the square and tried to bring it down with a sledgehammer and rope. More photographers and TV crews appeared. An American flag was draped over the statue's head. Eventually, a Marine vehicle equipped with a crane toppled the statue. The spectacle was broadcast live around the world.

Some have argued that the events at Firdos were staged, to demonstrate that America had triumphed, the war was over, and the Iraqis were happy. After all, the marines had seized the only place in Baghdad where a large number of foreign reporters could be found—at least two hundred were at the Palestine. And U.S. officials were suspiciously quick to appropriate the imagery from Firdos. A few minutes after the toppling, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told reporters, "The scenes of free Iraqis celebrating in the streets, riding American tanks, tearing down the statues of Saddam Hussein in the center of Baghdad are breathtaking. Watching them, one cannot help but think of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Iron Curtain."

Propaganda has been a staple of warfare for ages, but the notion of creating events on the battlefield, as opposed to repackaging real ones after the fact, is a modern development. It expresses a media theory developed by, among others, Walter Lippmann, who after the First World War identified the components of wartime mythmaking as "the casual fact, the creative imagination, the will to believe, and out of these three elements, a counterfeit of reality." As he put it, "Men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities [and] in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond." In the nineteen-sixties, Daniel J. Boorstin identified a new category of media spectacle that he called "pseudo-events," which were created to be reported on. But Boorstin was theorizing primarily about political conventions and press conferences, not about events on a battlefield.

The 2004 documentary film "Control Room" featured Al Jazeera journalists who argued that the toppling of Saddam's statue was merely "a show . . . a very clever idea," and that Iraqis had been brought to the square like actors delivered to the stage. Skeptics have also questioned whether the crowd was as large or as representative of popular sentiment as U.S. officials suggested. Might it have been just a small group of Iraqis whose numbers and enthusiasm were exaggerated by the cameras? Did the media, which had, with few exceptions, accepted the Bush Administration's prewar claims about weapons of mass destruction, err again by portraying a pseudo-event as real? And were lives lost as a result of this error?

I had followed McCoy's battalion to Baghdad for the *Times Magazine*. I was what the military called a "unilateral" journalist, driving unescorted into Iraq on the first day of the invasion in an S.U.V. rented from Hertz in Kuwait. A few days into the war, I happened to meet McCoy at a staging area in the Iraqi desert north of Nasiriya, and he agreed to let me and a number of other unilaterals follow his battalion to Baghdad. On April 9th, I drove into Firdos with his battalion, and was at his side during some of the afternoon.

My understanding of events at the time was limited. I had no idea why the battalion went to Firdos rather than to other targets. I didn't know who had decided to raise the American flag and who had decided to take down the statue, or why. And I had little awareness of the media dynamics that turned the episode into a festive symbol of what appeared to be the war's finale. In reality, the war was just getting under way. Many thousands of people would be killed or injured before the Bush Administration acknowledged that it faced not just "pockets of dead-enders" in Iraq, as Rumsfeld insisted, but what grew to be a full-fledged insurgency. The toppling of Saddam's statue turned out to be emblematic of primarily one thing: the fact that American troops had taken the center of Baghdad. That was significant, but everything else the toppling was said to represent during repeated replays on television—victory for America, the end of the war, joy throughout Iraq—was a disservice to the truth. Yet the skeptics were wrong in some ways, too, because the event was not planned in advance by the military. How did it happen?

Three days earlier, Marine Regimental Combat Team 7, under the command of Colonel Hummer, arrived at the Diyala Canal, which loops around eastern Baghdad. The center of the city was less than eight miles away, but the regiment did not have orders to seize it. The plan was to stay along the Diyala and send small units on quick raids into the city.

The task of planning the raids was given to two majors on the regiment's staff, John Schaar and Andrew Milburn. Until Diyala, they had not even examined a map of the city, but they quickly concluded that the raids were a bad idea. "We did a little study and thought this was really stupid," Schaar told me not long ago. Raiding units risked becoming trapped in the city, creating an Iraqi version of "Black Hawk Down." Schaar and Milburn also concluded that Iraqi forces could not withstand a direct assault by the regiment; for nearly three weeks, the regiment had blasted through every Iraqi unit in its path.

They then divided central Baghdad into twenty-seven zones, with each battalion responsible for occupying four or five zones (several low-priority zones were unassigned). Schaar and Milburn had received from divisional headquarters a list of about thirty sensitive sites—a hodgepodge that comprised embassies, banks, detention centers, potential nuclear facilities, and hotels, including the Palestine. The most important targets were in four central zones across the Tigris River from the Republican Palace, which the Army had already seized. Schaar recently sent me a photograph of the twenty-seven-zone invasion map. The map has six thumbtacks marking key targets. One of them, in the central zones, was the Palestine Hotel.

According to Schaar, there was never any doubt about which battalion would be assigned the central zones. "Three-four"—McCoy's battalion—"got tagged to that because they were the sharp guys," he told me.

Bryan McCoy, who has a stocky build and a blunt Oklahoma manner, became known as the regiment's toughest battalion leader. During the drive to Baghdad, McCoy mentioned Sherman's famous dictum that war is cruelty. "My idea of a fair fight," he said, "is clubbing baby harp seals." When McCoy returned from Iraq, he disdained the well-equipped fitness center at the regiment's training base, in California, and built a prisonlike gym that had no air-conditioning or fancy exercise machines, the better, he believed, to accustom his men to the rigors of battle; they weightlifted with sandbags.

The Marine Corps is the smallest branch of the U.S. military and the most precarious, because one of the key missions it fulfills—amphibious landings—does not require a separate branch. The Army knows how to conduct amphibious landings, and has done more of them in the past century than the Marines. Moreover, the future of warfare is not likely to revolve around landings on the shores of Tripoli. As McCoy remarked to me one day, "Our existence is always threatened."

This circumstance makes the Corps particularly aware that it must be successful in the halls of Congress as well as on the fields of battle. For that reason, perhaps, marines tend to be friendlier toward the media than other branches of the military; they recognize the value of good stories and images. It is not surprising that the most famous war photograph in American history—the flag-raising at Iwo Jima—depicts marines.

McCoy, who has written a monograph on military leadership, "The Passion of Command," understood the importance of the media. That was one reason he had agreed to let me and ten other unilateral journalists follow his battalion, which already had four embedded journalists. The reporters worked for, among others, the Times, Time, Newsweek, the Associated Press, and several photography agencies. McCoy occasionally joined us for coffee in the morning, giving us briefings about the battles along the way to Baghdad, and he made it clear to his men that we were to be welcomed. When he threw a grenade at an Iraqi position one day, a photographer was at his side, and the photograph was widely disseminated.

McCoy heard about the Palestine Hotel from the journalists in his battalion. One of the photographers, Gary Knight, of

Newsweek, had mentioned it to him on several occasions, because a colleague was having a hard time there; Knight's editors wanted McCoy to know that journalists at the hotel were in peril. "As we got closer to Baghdad, it got ramped up," Knight recalled last year. "It was, like, 'Can you try and persuade the marines to get to the Palestine Hotel?'"

The photographer Laurent Van der Stockt, working with me for the Times Magazine, also mentioned the Palestine to McCoy, often while sharing his stash of Cuban cigars with him. Van der Stockt would tell the Colonel what he was hearing from Remy Ourdan, with whom he spoke almost every day on his satellite phone. Ourdan had stayed at the Palestine throughout the invasion, hiding his phone behind a ceiling panel and using it surreptitiously at night or in the early morning, when he would crouch on his balcony and talk in whispers to his editors in Paris.

On the morning of April 9th, as McCoy was washing his socks, Van der Stockt wandered over while talking to Ourdan on the sat phone. Ourdan told Van der Stockt that Iraqi forces had abandoned the center of Baghdad. For the first time, there were no security forces at the Palestine or in the area around it.

"Colonel, my friend at the Palestine Hotel is saying there is nobody in front of us—the city is empty," Van der Stockt said.

McCoy nodded but said the battalion wouldn't get to the center so fast. The Army had met fierce resistance in the western part of the city. The next few hundred yards were of far greater importance to him than a hotel several miles away. Besides, marines do not take orders from French journalists.

Van der Stockt told Ourdan that they wouldn't be seeing each other that day.

"But tell the Colonel that Baghdad has fallen!" Ourdan said. "There is no more resistance. The city is open!"

The battalion moved out, and, to McCoy's surprise, faced little opposition. Simon Robinson, a reporter for Time, was in the back of McCoy's vehicle when the regiment's commander, Colonel Hummer, ordered the battalion to the Palestine. Robinson vividly recalls the order, because it prompted him to lean forward to remind McCoy that reporters were there. When he did, he saw a satisfied expression spread over McCoy's face.

"He was fully cognizant that he was about to move into an area where there were a lot of journalists and there were going to be opportunities," Robinson told me.

In 1999, Marine General Charles Krulak wrote an influential article in which he coined the term "strategic corporal." Krulak argued that, in an interconnected world, the actions of even a lowly corporal can have global consequences. "All future conflicts will be acted out before an international audience," Krulak wrote. "In many cases, the individual Marine will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well."

At Firdos Square, it was a thirty-five-year-old gunnery sergeant, Leon Lambert, who bore out Krulak's thesis. Lambert's background was typical of that of many youths who enlist in the military. His father was a car mechanic with five children. Leon had to get a dishwashing job when he was twelve. One of his brothers joined the Army, another the Air Force. Lambert went for the Marines. By 2003, after almost sixteen years of service, he commanded an M-88 Hercules, a tow truck for tanks that is equipped with a crane.

At 4:30 P.M., as the M-88 rumbled into Firdos not far behind the lead tank, Lambert noticed the statue of Saddam. Installed a year earlier to celebrate the leader's sixty-fifth birthday, it was the sort of totem that American troops had been destroying across Iraq. On the first day of the invasion, I had watched in the Iraqi border town of Safwan as a Humvee dragged down a billboard of Saddam. Erasing the symbols of regime power is what conquering armies have done for millennia.

Lambert radioed his commander, Captain Lewis, whose tank was carrying the Danish photographer.

"Hey, get a look at that statue," Lambert said. "Why don't we take it down?"

"No way," Lewis responded. He didn't want his men distracted.

There was no hostile fire, or even hostility, other than some shouts from American and West European "human shields," who had remained in Baghdad to symbolically stand in the way of the invaders. The Iraqi forces had fled. Lewis's tanks blocked the streets leading to Firdos while armored personnel carriers disgorged the infantry, which fanned out. Within minutes of the marines' arrival, Firdos had been secured.

When McCoy's Humvee stopped in front of the Palestine, he was surrounded by reporters. In addition to the journalists at the hotel, others who had followed U.S. troops to Baghdad began pulling up in their dusty S.U.V.s. One of the reporters, Newsweek's Melinda Liu, introduced McCoy to the hotel's manager, who nervously greeted his new boss and led him into the hotel. Striding inside, McCoy held his M-16 at the ready.

Outside, a handful of Iraqis had slipped into the square. Lambert got on the radio and told Lewis that the locals wanted to pull down the statue.

"If a sledgehammer and rope fell off the 88, would you mind?" Lambert asked.

"I wouldn't mind," Lewis replied. "But don't use the 88."

Higher authorities were unaware of these developments. McCoy, Hummer, Rumsfeld, President Bush—they hadn't a clue about the chain of events that Lambert had triggered with a wink, a nod, and a sledgehammer.

One after another, Iraqis swung Lambert's sledgehammer against the statue's base. In a much photographed moment, a former weight lifter got into the action, but only a few inches of plaster fell away. The rope, thrown around the statue's neck, was not sufficient to topple it, either.

"We watched them with the rope, and I knew that was never going to happen," Lambert told me recently. "They were never going to get it down."

At the Palestine, McCoy briefly talked with reporters in the manager's office. Then he walked outside to Firdos Square and saw Lambert's rope flopped around the statue's neck as various Iraqis futilely wielded the sledgehammer. Cameras were everywhere. "A military operation was developing into a circus atmosphere," McCoy recalled when I interviewed him last spring at his home in Tampa, where he serves at Central Command.

Other commanders had already concluded that toppling the dictator's likeness might help get the point across and had tried it elsewhere. A few days into the war, British tanks mounted a raid into the heart of Basra, in the south of the country, where they destroyed a statue of Saddam. The Brits hoped the locals, seeing a strike against a symbol of regime power, would rise up against Saddam. As the British military spokesman, Colonel Chris Vernon, told reporters, "The purpose of that is psychological." The statue was destroyed, but the event wasn't filmed and drew little attention. Similarly, on April 7th, after Army soldiers seized the Republican Palace in Baghdad, their commander, Colonel David Perkins, asked his men to find a statue that could be destroyed. Once one was found—Saddam on horseback—a nearby tank was ordered to wait until an embedded team from Fox News got there. On cue, the tank fired a shell at the statue, blowing it up, but the event had little drama and did not get a lot of TV coverage. No Iraqis were present, and just a few Americans, and the surrounding landscape was featureless.

The situation at the Palestine was different. "I realized this was a big deal," McCoy told me. "You've got all the press out there and everybody is liquored up on the moment. You have this Paris, 1944, feel. I remember thinking, The media is watching the Iraqis trying to topple this icon of Saddam Hussein. Let's give them a hand."

McCoy also considered the "buzzkill," as he phrased it, of not helping. "Put your virtual-reality goggles on," he continued. "What would that moment have been if we hadn't? It would have been some B reel of Iraqis banging away at this thing and eventually losing interest and going home. There was a momentum, there was a feeling, this atmosphere of liberation. Like a kid trying to whack a piñata and he's not going to get it with a blindfold on, so let's move the piñata so he can knock it. That was the attitude—keep the momentum going."

Captain Lewis, the tank commander, walked over to McCoy and asked whether the marines should finish the job for the Iraqis. McCoy asked if the Iraqis had requested help; Lewis told him they had. A marine asked whether the battalion was authorized to tear down statues; McCoy responded that it would not be a problem.

He got on the radio with Colonel Hummer, who had set up a regimental command post behind the partially destroyed Information Ministry, to update him on the events. Hummer did not have aerial reconnaissance from Firdos, or even a TV. While the rest of the world was watching the scene in the square, the colonel who authorized its climax was blind to the event.

Hummer, in a phone interview recently, explained what happened: "I get this call from Bryan and he says, 'Hey, we've got these Iraqis over here with a bunch of ropes trying to pull down this very large statue of Saddam Hussein.' And he said, 'They're asking us to pull it down.' So I said, 'O.K., go ahead.' And I didn't think much of it after that."

Before signing off, Hummer instructed McCoy to make sure no one got killed by falling debris.

McCoy then issued a brief order to Lewis: "Do it." He also told Lewis not to get anyone killed in the process.

The M-88, with its crane, was the perfect tool. Lambert, who had started everything by handing out the sledgehammer and the rope, was told to finish the job.

Before dawn on September 11, 2001, a twenty-one-year-old second lieutenant named Tim McLaughlin arrived at the Pentagon, where he was a general's assistant. After taking care of some paperwork, he went down to the gym, changed into running clothes, and jogged across Memorial Bridge, along the Jefferson Memorial, until he heard a deep, soft thud. He rushed back to the Pentagon. As people streamed out of the building, McLaughlin made his way into it. The corridors were deserted and were filling with smoke; he could barely see his hand.

A few days later, as a personal token of appreciation for his service in the military, a congressional staffer who worked for Senator Charles Schumer and was a friend of the McLaughlin family presented McLaughlin with a flag bought at the Senate stationery store. Two years later, when McLaughlin was packing to leave for Iraq under McCoy's command, he put the flag in his duffel.

During the invasion, McLaughlin tried to raise the flag several times. On the first attempt, he was preparing to hoist it on top of a building but realized that there was too much shooting going on. Another time, Lambert's M-88 rolled over the flagpole that McLaughlin was about to use. McLaughlin's efforts became an inside joke in his tank company. When McCoy ordered the toppling in Firdos Square, Captain Lewis told McLaughlin to fetch his flag for the mother of all flag pictures. Soon it was handed up to Corporal Edward Chin, who had climbed atop the M-88's crane and was hooking a chain around the statue's head.

"I remember thinking, What am I going to do?" Chin told me. "I didn't want to just wave the flag." At that moment, the wind blew the flag and it stuck to the statue's head. "That worked for me. I later realized the flag was upside down. That is actually a symbol of distress."

McCoy, too busy to keep an eye on the statue, wasn't looking when the flag went up. People watching TV from their sofas in America saw it before he did. When he finally looked up, his first thought was Oh, shit! An American flag would seem like a symbol of occupation. He instantly ordered it taken down.

Around this time, McCoy's superior, Colonel Hummer, got an urgent order from his commander, Major General James Mattis, who had apparently received an urgent order that Hummer assumes originated at the Pentagon.

Get the flag down. Now.

With the breeze keeping the flag in place, Chin had returned to his rigging work. As he was finishing up, he took the flag down of his own volition. It had been on display for just a minute and a half. There had not been time for the orders to reach him.

One of the battalion's lieutenants, Casey Kuhlman, had also realized that the American flag would not be a welcome symbol for Iraqis and other Arabs. Kuhlman had acquired an Iraqi flag during the invasion. "I grabbed it and started going up to the statue," he recalled. "And I didn't get but ten or twenty metres when an older Iraqi man grabbed it from me and it sort of got passed through the crowd and then went up. I thought, My souvenir is gone. But this is a little bit better than a souvenir."

His flag helped create one of the Firdos myths.

Staff Sergeant Brian Plesich, the leader of an Army psychological-operations team, arrived at Firdos after the sledgehammer-and-rope phase had begun. He saw the American flag go up and had the same reaction as Kuhlman: get an Iraqi flag up. Plesich, whom I interviewed last year, told his interpreter to find an Iraqi flag. The interpreter waded into the crowd, and soon an Iraqi flag was raised.

Plesich assumed that the Iraqi flag had got there because of his initiative, and in 2004 the Army published a report crediting him. The report was picked up by the news media ("ARMY STAGE-MANAGED FALL OF HUSSEIN STATUE," the headline in the Los Angeles Times read) and circulated widely on the Web, fuelling the conspiracy notion that a psyops team masterminded not only the Iraqi flag but the entire toppling. Yet it was Kuhlman who was responsible for the flag. Plesich's impact at Firdos was limited to using the loudspeakers on his Humvee to tell the

crowd, once the statue had been rigged to fall, that until everyone moved back to a safe distance the main event would not take place.

By the time it was over and the sun was setting at Firdos Square, Sergeant Lambert and his M-88 crew had become so famous that even Katie Couric wanted an interview. Lambert had to hide from the spectacle he had unleashed.

“God’s honest truth,” Lambert told me. “We went inside the 88, we locked the hatches, and the only time we would come out was when we were directed to.”

The Palestine was built in the early nineteen-eighties for tourists, who were then visiting Iraq in large numbers, and it was run by the Méridien hotel chain. After Iraq invaded Kuwait, in 1990, and was slapped with international sanctions, the Méridien got rid of its outlaw franchise. The Palestine, with more than three hundred rooms and seventeen floors, stayed open under state control but was outclassed by the Al Rasheed Hotel, which stood on the other side of the Tigris and was surrounded by government ministries and Presidential palaces. For years, the Al Rasheed was favored by foreign journalists who wanted to be close to the action, but they moved out just before the invasion, to get away from the bombs that would presumably destroy the government district. When the Shock and Awe campaign began, a couple of hundred reporters watched from their balconies at the Palestine.

Like everyone else, Pentagon officials viewed TV reports from Baghdad which often noted that the Palestine was the point of broadcast. It was at the hotel that the Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, known as Baghdad Bob, held many of his extravagant press conferences.

During the aerial bombardment of Baghdad, the Palestine was not hit, and, once ground troops had moved into the city, most commanders in Baghdad were made aware of the Palestine’s do-not-bomb status. But the commanders failed to convey the information to the soldiers in every unit, and this caused the casualties that contributed to the dispatch of McCoy’s battalion to Firdos Square.

On April 8th, the day before McCoy’s battalion arrived at Firdos, an Army tank that was on the Al Jumhuriya Bridge, over the Tigris, fired a shell at the Palestine, killing two journalists and injuring three others. The tank’s crew mistakenly thought that a camera aimed at them from a balcony was a spotting device for Iraqi forces. Journalists at the Palestine were outraged; some thought it was a deliberate attack on the media. Subsequent investigations by the military and reporters found that although key officers on the ground, including brigade and battalion commanders, knew that the Palestine should not be fired on, they did not know the hotel’s precise location, because, as McCoy was to learn, it wasn’t marked on their maps. The tank’s crew did not know that journalists were in the building.

The killings increased media pressure on the Pentagon to insure the hotel’s safety; calls and e-mails to Pentagon officials reached a furious pitch, and at a Pentagon press conference a few hours after the attack the Palestine was a major topic. The media demanded that the Pentagon see to it that no further harm came to the journalists at the Palestine.

Some journalists considered the hotel to be a death trap. When the photographer Seamus Conlan came across American troops in the hours before McCoy’s battalion showed up, he asked for a rescue mission. “I was sure that today was going to be the day that we got killed by Saddam’s enraged and retreating militiamen,” Conlan later wrote. “A Marine officer assured me that every journalist in Baghdad was telling him the same thing.”

The media have been criticized for accepting the Bush Administration’s claims, in the run-up to the invasion, that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The W.M.D. myth, and the media’s embrace of it, encouraged public support for war. The media also failed at Firdos Square, but in this case it was the media, rather than the government, that created the victory myth.

Because the world’s media were based at the Palestine, television networks had the equipment to go live the moment the marines arrived there. It was certainly a legitimate and dramatic story—proof that Baghdad was falling under American control. But problems with the coverage at Firdos soon emerged, including the duration, which was non-stop, the tone, which was celebratory, and the uncritical obsession with the toppling.

One of the first TV reporters to broadcast from Firdos was David Chater, a correspondent for Sky News, the British satellite channel whose feed from Baghdad was carried by Fox News. (Both channels are owned by News Corp.) Before the marines arrived, Chater had believed, as many journalists did, that his life was at risk from American shells, Iraqi thugs, and looting mobs.

“That’s an amazing sight, isn’t it?” Chater said as the tanks rolled in. “A great relief, a great sight for all the journalists

here. . . . The Americans waving to us now—fantastic, fantastic to see they’re here at last.” Moments later, outside the Palestine, Chater smiled broadly and told one marine, “Bloody good to see you.” Noticing an American flag in another marine’s hands, Chater cheerily said, “Get that flag going!”

Another correspondent, John Burns, of the Times, had similar feelings. Representing the most prominent American publication, Burns had a particularly hard time with the security thugs who had menaced many journalists at the Palestine. His gratitude toward the marines was explicit. “They were my liberators, too,” he later wrote. “They seemed like ministering angels to me.”

The happy relief felt by some journalists on the ground was compounded by editors and anchors back home. Primed for triumph, they were ready to latch onto a symbol of what they believed would be a joyous finale to the war. It was an unfortunate fusion: a preconception of what would happen, of what victory would look like, connected at Firdos Square with an aesthetically perfect representation of that preconception.

Wilson Surratt was the senior executive producer in charge of CNN’s control room in Atlanta that morning. The room, dominated by almost fifty screens that showed incoming feeds from CNN crews and affiliated networks, was filled with not just the usual complement of producers but also with executives who wanted to be at the nerve center of the network during one of the biggest stories of their lives. Surratt had been told by the newsroom that marines were expected to arrive at Firdos any moment, so he kept his eyes on two monitors that showed the still empty square.

“The climax, at the time, was going to be the troops coming into Firdos Square,” Surratt told me. “We didn’t really anticipate that Hussein was going to be captured. There wasn’t going to be a surrender. So what we were looking for was some sort of culminating event.”

On that day, Baghdad was violent and chaotic. The city was already being looted by swarms of people using trucks, taxis, horses, and wheelbarrows to cart away whatever they could from government buildings and banks, museums, and even hospitals. There continued to be armed opposition to the American advance. One of CNN’s embedded correspondents, Martin Savidge, was reporting from a Marine unit that was taking fire in the city. Savidge was ready to go on the air, under fire, at the exact moment that Surratt noticed the tanks entering Firdos Square. Surratt vividly recalls that moment, because he shouted out in the control room, “There they are!”

He immediately switched the network’s coverage to Firdos, and it stayed there almost non-stop until the statue came down, more than two hours later. I asked Surratt whether, by focussing on Firdos rather than on Savidge and the chaos of Baghdad, he had made the right call.

“What were we supposed to do?” Surratt replied. “Not show what was going on in the square? We did the responsible thing. We were careful to say it was not the end. At some point, you’ve got to trust the viewer to understand what they’re seeing.”

The powerful pictures from Firdos were combined with powerful words. On CNN, the anchor Bill Hemmer said, “You think about seminal moments in a nation’s history . . . indelible moments like the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that’s what we’re seeing right now.” Wolf Blitzer described the toppling as “the image that sums up the day and, in many ways, the war itself.” On Fox, the anchor Brit Hume said, “This transcends anything I’ve ever seen. . . . This speaks volumes, and with power that no words can really match.” One of his colleagues said, “The important story of the day is this historic shot you are looking at, a noose around the neck of Saddam, put there by the people of Baghdad.”

A visual echo chamber developed: rather than encouraging reporters to find the news, editors urged them to report what was on TV. CNN, which did not have a reporter at the Palestine, because its team had been expelled when the invasion began, was desperate to get one of its embedded correspondents there. Walter Rodgers, whose Army unit was on the other side of the Tigris, was ordered by his editors to disembark and drive across town to the Palestine. Rodgers reminded his editors that combat continued and that his vehicle, moving on its own, would likely be hit by American or Iraqi forces. This said much about the coverage that day: Rodgers could not provide reports of the war’s end because the war had not ended. But he understood the imperatives that kept CNN’s attention pinned on Firdos Square. “Pictures are the mother’s milk of television, and it was a hell of a picture,” he said recently.

Live television loves suspense, especially if it is paired with great visuals. The networks almost never broke away from Firdos Square. The event lived on in replays, too. A 2005 study of CNN’s and Fox’s coverage, conducted by a research team from George Washington University and titled “As Goes the Statue, So Goes the War,” found that between 11 A.M. and 8 P.M. that day Fox replayed the toppling every 4.4 minutes, and CNN every 7.5 minutes. The networks also showed the toppling in house ads; it became a branding device. They continually used the word “historic” to describe the statue’s demise.

Anne Garrels, NPR's reporter in Baghdad at the time, has said that her editors requested, after her first dispatch about marines rolling into Firdos, that she emphasize the celebratory angle, because the television coverage was more upbeat. In an oral history that was published by the Columbia Journalism Review, Garrels recalled telling her editors that they were getting the story wrong: "There are so few people trying to pull down the statue that they can't do it themselves. . . . Many people were just sort of standing, hoping for the best, but they weren't joyous."

Gary Knight, the photographer who followed McCoy's battalion to Baghdad, had a similar problem, as he talked with one of his editors on his satellite phone. The editor, watching the event on TV, asked why Knight wasn't taking pictures. Knight replied that few Iraqis were involved and the ones who were seemed to be doing so for the benefit of the legions of photographers; it was a show. The editor told him to get off the phone and start taking pictures.

Robert Collier, a San Francisco Chronicle reporter, filed a dispatch that noted a small number of Iraqis at Firdos, many of whom were not enthusiastic. When he woke up the next day, he found that his editors had recast the story. The published version said that "a jubilant crowd roared its approval" as onlookers shouted, "We are free! Thank you, President Bush!" According to Collier, the original version was considerably more tempered. "That was the one case in my time in Iraq when I can clearly say there was editorial interference in my work," he said recently. "They threw in a lot of triumphalism. I was told by my editor that I had screwed up and had not seen the importance of the historical event. They took out quite a few of my qualifiers."

British journalists felt the same pressure. Lindsey Hilsum, the Baghdad reporter for Britain's Channel 4 News, was instructed by her editors to increase her coverage of Firdos even though she believed the event was trivial. She told the authors of a study titled "Shoot First and Ask Questions Later" that the toppling was a small part of a nine-minute story that she transmitted to London on April 9th; in her view, it was "a small, symbolic event for American television." As she put it, "In London, where they had been watching, they said, 'No, you have to make that section much larger.'"

Robert Capa once said, "If your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough," and generations of journalists have followed his maxim. But the opposite can also be true: the farther away you are, the better you can see. At Firdos Square, the farther from the statue you were, the more you could understand.

Very few Iraqis were there. If you were at the square, or if you watch the footage, you can see, on the rare occasions long shots were used, that the square was mostly empty. You can also see, from photographs as well as video, that much of the crowd was made up of journalists and marines. Because of the lo-fi quality of the video and the shifting composition of the crowd, it's hard to give a precise number, but perhaps a quarter to a half consisted of journalists or marines. The crowd's size—journalists, marines, and Iraqis—does not seem to have exceeded several hundred at its largest, and was much smaller for most of the two hours. The Iraqis who were photogenically enthusiastic—sledgehammering the statue, jumping on it after the toppling—were just an excitable subset of all Iraqis there. "I saw a lot of people watching with their arms crossed, not at all celebrating," Collier noted.

Closeups filled the screen with the frenzied core of the small crowd and created an illusion of wall-to-wall enthusiasm throughout Baghdad. It was an illusion that reflected only the media's yearning for exciting visuals, and brings to mind a famous study carried out more than half a century ago, when General Douglas MacArthur, who had just been relieved of his command by President Truman, visited Chicago for a parade and a speech that were expected to attract enormous public support. The study, conducted by the sociologists Kurt and Gladys Lang, found that the Chicago events, as experienced by people who attended them, were largely passionless. But for television viewers the events were dramatic and inspiring, owing to the cropped framing of what they saw.

The Lang study illuminates another distortion that occurred in Baghdad: the extent to which listless crowds lit up when cameras were turned on. In Chicago, the Lang researchers saw crowds shift to the places that cameras pointed toward; people were taking their cues from the lenses. "The cheering, waving, and shouting was often but a response to the aiming of the camera," the study noted.

Just after 5 P.M. local time, Fox News showed about a dozen Iraqis walking into the empty square; these were the first civilians on the site. They were followed and surrounded by an increasing number of journalists; within a minute of the Iraqis arriving at the statue's base, journalists appear to nearly outnumber them. In the first act of iconoclasm, two plaques on the statue's base were torn off by the Iraqis and hoisted in front of the photographers and the cameramen, in much the same way that a prizefighter raises a championship belt above his head as pictures are snapped.

Would the Iraqis have done the same thing if the cameras hadn't been there? At key moments throughout the toppling, the level of Iraqi enthusiasm appeared to ebb and flow according to the number and interest of photographers who had gathered. For instance, when Lambert's sledgehammer made its first appearance, photographers clustered around as

one Iraqi after another took a few shots at the base. Not long afterward, many photographers and cameramen drifted off; they had got their pictures. The sledgehammering of the statue soon ceased, too.

An hour after the first Iraqis entered the square, the toppling was at a standstill, because the rope and the sledgehammer were useless. Neither Iraqis nor journalists cared any longer. Many of the Iraqis had moved into the street and gathered around the Humvee that carried Staff Sergeant Plesich and his psychological-operations team, because loudspeakers on Plesich's Humvee were broadcasting in Arabic. These were the first words in Arabic that the Iraqis had heard from their occupiers, and the Iraqis were indeed cheering.

But the area around the base of the statue was virtually empty. Though TV anchors talked excitedly about the statue, Iraqis at the square were no longer paying attention to it. Then Lambert's M-88, having received a green light from Colonel McCoy, lumbered into view, entering from the left of the television screen. On Fox, journalists can be seen hurrying toward the M-88 and the deserted statue. Iraqis do the same, like bees returning to a hive. By the time the M-88 reached the statue's base, the crowd of Iraqis, journalists, and marines had reassembled for the next act. As the Lang study noted of the MacArthur celebrations, "The event televised was no longer the same event as it would have been if television had not been there."

The journalists themselves, meanwhile, were barely photographed at all. The dramatic shots posted on Web sites that day and featured in newspapers the next morning contained almost no hint of the army of journalists at the square and their likely influence on events. One of the most photographed moments occurred when the statue fell and several dozen Iraqis rushed forward to bash the toppled head; there were nearly as many journalists in the melee, and perhaps more, but the framing of photographs all but eliminated them from view.

"It's one thing if you don't want a photographer in the picture and there's one photographer in a crowd of a thousand," Gary Knight, who now directs the Program for Narrative and Documentary Studies, at Tufts University, told me. "But when you've got three hundred journalists sitting on vehicles, sitting on tanks, it's really important contextually to include that information. Most of the imagery that was published didn't have that context, and so it was misleading."

At the square, I found the reality, whatever it was, hard to grasp. Some Iraqis were cheering, I later learned, not for America but for a slain cleric, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, whose son Moqtada would soon lead a Shia revolt against American occupation. I met an apparently delighted Iraqi who spoke English, and he told me that his name was Samir and that he felt "free at last." About an hour later, after the statue came down, Samir was cornered by a group of men who accused him of being a spy for Saddam and were shouting, "Kill him!" A marine had to intervene to save his life.

The subsequent years of civil war, which have killed and injured hundreds of thousands of people, have revealed the events at Firdos to be an illusionary intermission between invasion and insurgency. For instance, one of the stars of the spectacle—the weight lifter who sledgehammered the statue—was Khadim al-Jubouri, a motorcycle mechanic who had worked for Saddam's son Uday but had fallen out of favor and spent time in prison. When he heard that American troops had arrived, al-Jubouri went to Firdos Square. As anniversaries of the event come around, he gets interviewed by journalists. In 2007, he told the *Washington Post* that, since the toppling, seven relatives and friends had been killed, kidnapped, or forced to flee their homes. Al-Jubouri was happy when the sledgehammer was in his hands, but since then his life had deteriorated. "I really regret bringing down the statue," he told the *Guardian*. "Every day is worse than the previous day."

Among the handful of studies of Firdos Square, the most incisive was George Washington University's, led by Sean Aday, an associate professor of media and public affairs. It concluded that the coverage had "profound implications for both international policy and the domestic political landscape in America." According to the study, the saturation coverage of Firdos Square fuelled the perception that the war had been won, and diverted attention from Iraq at precisely the moment that more attention was needed, not less. "Whereas battle stories imply a war is going on, statues falling—especially when placed in the context of truly climactic images from recent history—imply the war is over," the study noted.

The study examined CNN, Fox, ABC, CBS, and NBC from March 20th to April 20th, cataloguing the footage used each day, what the footage showed, and what was said by anchors and reporters. The study focussed particular attention on Fox and CNN, because they broadcast non-stop news. It found that, in the week after the statue was toppled, war stories from Iraq decreased by seventy per cent on Fox, sixty-six per cent on ABC, fifty-eight per cent on NBC, thirty-nine per cent on CBS, and twenty-six per cent on CNN, even though, in that same week, thirteen U.S. soldiers were killed and looting was rampant.

The George Washington University study and other examinations of Firdos—like "Ugly War, Pretty Package," a book by the Boston University associate professor Deborah Jaramillo—suggest that the bullishness of the post-Firdos era

stemmed, at least in part, from the myth created at the square. Without the erroneous finality of the statue falling, this argument goes, the notion of “Mission Accomplished” would have been more difficult to assert; the Bush Administration would have had a harder time dismissing an insurgency that, for a fatal interlude, it all but ignored. Conventional wisdom blames the failure in Iraq on the Coalition Provisional Authority, which has been heavily criticized for its inept management of the occupation. But if the C.P.A. inherited a war rather than a victory, the story of what went wrong after Firdos needs to be revised.

In a way, statue topplings are the banana peels of history that we often slip on. In 1991, when pro-democracy forces led by Boris Yeltsin stood up to a coup by Soviet hard-liners in Moscow, a crowd outside K.G.B. headquarters forced the removal of a statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, who had led the K.G.B.’s notorious predecessor, the Cheka. The statue was lifted off its pedestal by a crane; its demise seemed to symbolize the end of Soviet-era oppression. Yet within a decade a K.G.B. functionary, Vladimir Putin, became Russia’s President, and former K.G.B. officials now hold key political and economic positions.

Throughout the nineteen-nineties, Svetlana Boym, a Soviet-born professor of comparative literature at Harvard, visited the Moscow park where Dzerzhinsky’s statue was left on its side, neglected and stained with urine. But over the years, as the power of the security state revived, the statue became the object of fond attention; eventually, Dzerzhinsky was raised to his feet and placed on a pedestal in the park. By studying a statue at not just a dramatic moment but during the course of its existence—construction, toppling, preservation—one can sometimes trace a nation’s political evolution, but it takes patience. In “The Future of Nostalgia,” Boym’s book on history and memory, she described Soviet-era monuments serving as “messengers of power . . . onto which anxieties and anger were projected.” The Princeton architectural historian Lucia Allais, who has examined the destruction of monuments during the Second World War, mentioned to me one of the most famous topplings ever—of the statue of King Louis XV in Paris, in 1792, during the French Revolution. The action was portrayed by its authors as a liberation from the power of the monarchy, but they put in its spot a symbol of a new sort of power: the guillotine. These monumental destructions “are usually acts of monumental replacement, which hide continuities of power . . . behind the image of rupture,” Allais wrote to me in an e-mail.

Not long ago, Tim McLaughlin, the officer whose flag was placed on the statue at Firdos, unpacked a wooden trunk that stored his military gear after he left the Marines to attend law school. We were at his childhood home, in Laconia, New Hampshire. McLaughlin is tall and large, but his head seems small for his frame, like a child’s on a grownup’s body. He majored in Russian at Holy Cross, and his favorite story, by Chekhov, is about a widowed carriage driver who can find no one to share his sorrows with; at the end of a cold night, the driver pours out his heartache to his loyal horse.

In the trunk, McLaughlin found a copy of the U.S. Constitution that was on his Pentagon desk on September 11, 2001; it was stained with ash from the fire. He pulled out a sealed envelope that had a Marine Corps insignia on the front. Inside was a letter to his parents, to be opened in the event of his death during the invasion. It was a reminder of the dread that gripped the McLaughlin household in those days.

McLaughlin had kept a list of notable events during the invasion. One day’s entry said, “Killed lots of people.” Another day: “Drove through house.” Yet another: “Lunch w/ villagers.”

He opened a diary from which silty grains of sand sprinkled out. On one page, exhausted from fighting and lack of sleep, he had written “disoriented” or “disorienting” four times.

The flag that McLaughlin carried to Iraq lay on the bed, folded in the military manner, crisp and tight. It was returned to him after it was taken down from the statue at Firdos Square; his parents had fetched it from a safe-deposit box at the local bank for my benefit.

“It’s just a flag,” McLaughlin said, unfolding it. “A whole lot of fuss has been made over it, but it’s not the most important thing to me.”

The diaries explain why:

Company volley into buildings. Killed 4 soldiers trying to run away. . . .

My position is good to cut off back door exit. Kill dismounts in grove (3-7?) then 1 swimming across canal. 2 just about in canal. . . .

Covered canal w/.50 cal—killed 2 more.

McLaughlin also wrote of shooting at a fast-moving car that he considered suspicious. After his bullets killed the driver, McLaughlin realized that an innocent man had perished. A few days later, wishing to avoid the same mistake, McLaughlin didn't fire when he spotted a group of suspicious Iraqis just ahead of the battalion. Moments later, the Iraqis got off the first shots in an ambush that killed a marine.

The war icons that McLaughlin cares about are not made of metal. They are made of flesh and blood. ♦

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