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Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War

What I want to speak to you about today is Iraq. I will try to draw a little bit on the experiences that I've had in Iraq and experiences that I've put in the book as well, about the situation and the way I see ordinary life in a country that I think has been at the forefront of our attention for a little more than three years now.

I first arrived there in 1998 as a reporter for the Associated Press and I went there again in 2002 with the *Boston Globe,* and then I returned in March 2003, a little bit before the invasion began. I was blessed, I think, in my time there and then especially in the aftermath, in 2004 and 2005, to work with some of the most remarkable journalists I think I've ever dealt with. Editors who were able to see the stories and understand them and fellow reporters, colleagues who worked with me in Baghdad were among, as I said, the best people I've ever met.

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When I sat down to write *Night Draws Near,* I partly felt like I was just stringing together words. My editor was George Hodgman and he contacted me in May 2003 about writing a book that would chronicle the U.S. invasion that I had been in Iraq to cover and also the people I'd met at that time. To be honest with you, when George contacted me I was, at first, reluctant. I had just joined the *Post* a few months before and at a time that seemed so crucial to both Iraq and the United States I was reluctant to leave Baghdad. I think it is important I wasn't sure what I could say about the invasion itself.

As I mulled George's proposal over in those weeks that I was staying at the Hamid Hotel in Baghdad, I soon realized that there might be a broader story to write, an account that was probably impossible in the face of daily journalism limitations–800 words, quick writing, quick deadlines. I thought that if at all possible, I wanted to write two stories, to treat two stories in much greater depth. The first one, which became the dominant narrative in *Night Draws Near*, was the way ordinary people are forced to endure times that are anything but ordinary. In the other story, what became the dominant theme were the consequences that resulted when two cultures that are so estranged are forced to occupy the same space. Today I'm going to try to describe as best as I can stories that I think are often cast in terms of black and white, and hopefully introduce an element of gray into that.

I think Iraq is a remarkably complicated country. I remember saying, after I won the Pulitzer Prize last year, that I felt like I understood the country a lot less the longer I was there. In a way, writing the book over the past couple of years is a way to come to terms with that and try to understand why that was the case. I think that process started with a man that I met back in 1998 named Wamidh Nadhme. Wamidh is a professor of political science at Baghdad University and he became a very good friend of mine in time. I remember describing him as a burly academic, 62 years of age, with short-cropped gray hair and a cough from a lifelong cigarette habit. He was a remarkable guy I first met him I was told by a colleague that Wamidh was basically the only person that I should talk to in Iraq, the reason being that he was the only one that would speak honestly. He did speak very honestly and very forthrightly. Wamidh would say things that I would always feel guilty putting in stories because I felt it would get him in trouble. You must remember that these were Saddam days when it was one of the world's worst dictatorships, I think, of the past century. There was a reason Wamidh was talking honestly. It's kind of an interesting story, which I'll share with you briefly.

Wamidh was a young member of the Baath party in the 1950s and early '60s, before he left that party and he was an exile in Cairo, Egypt. In 1959 he got a call from party operatives in Baghdad who told him he should be ready to welcome seven men who would be coming from Baghdad—
some fellow Baathists—and being a good party member he said, "Sure, I'll do that." He went to the Cairo airport, and one of

the seven men turned out to be Saddam Hussein. When he brought Saddam back to his apartment, he put him up for a couple of nights. A year and one-half later a fellow Iraqi said that he heard Saddam was having his tonsils out at the hospital in Cairo and he thought, "Well, as a fellow Iraqi I should probably go visit him and pay my respects." It turned out that Wamidh was the only person to go visit Saddam and I think it had a lasting impact, and probably explains a little bit of why Wamidh was able to talk to me the way he did in 1998. I will share a brief passage with you that talks about this experience:

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"It was really accidental," Wamidh said. "I usually don't like waking up early in the morning but I thought, you know, he's by himself, so I went to the hospital. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Saddam did not cut off my head. I think, somehow, he had good memories of me."

This is a conversation that I had with Wamidh in 2003, I think just a few weeks before the invasion itself began. Like so many Baghdadis Wamidh was trying in vain to make sense of the cacophony that surrounded him in those months before the U.S. attack.

"I won't hide my feelings. The American invasion had nothing to do with democracy and human rights. It is basically an angry response to the events of September 11, an angry response to the survival of Saddam Hussein, and it has something to do with oil interests in the area." He talked about the 1990 invasion of Kuwait and suggested that the U.S.-led attack in that instance might have been justified. But what about more than a decade of sanctions? And now another war? "It will be more destruction," he told me, "more civil war, and a nationalist war against American intervention in the internal affairs of Iraqis."

"Even if the Americans are capable of overthrowing the regime, they will face more and more resistance from factions and groups who are not necessarily pro-regime. This is not politics," Wamidh told me. He shook his head, "This is a circus."

I think back to the past couple of years of being a reporter in Iraq and I think of some of the terms that I've heard to explain what Iraq is and what the country's like. One description is the one we just heard: "it's a circus." Other people had different descriptions. I remember one person termed it "a city of lanterns" amid all the blackouts that still reigned in Baghdad. Another person told me it was a "city of ghosts shadowed by fear." One widow that I met during the war and stayed in touch with and became friends with in the months and years that followed, described it as a city that's forsaken. Her daughter was a young girl who turned 14 during the invasion. I met her at that time, too. She kept a diary during the war and during the aftermath. It was a diary that I feel was very eloquent and often very touching in how it offered an unvarnished and very rare look at Iraq. She often referred to Iraqis as eating "dry bread with tea," and those words always stuck with me. They stuck with me because I thought of Iraq in a way as a land of dry bread with tea. Wamidh said, he was predicting what was ahead—this is before the invasion had even gotten started—he was predicting an insurgency, he was predicting guerilla war, he was predicting chaos. His words were a hint of the war that was ahead. Here's a voice that slashed color across what to a lot of us is a monochromatic landscape, and it was a voice of complexity, a complexity I think that journalists like me would soon encounter in the weeks and months that followed the invasion itself.

I think when we look back on Iraq there's no question that the repression, to a remarkable degree, defined everything that was going on in the country. I don't want to understate the depth of tyranny that reigned in Iraq before the invasion. It was without question one of the century's worst dictatorships. It was overwhelming and it was suffocating. But looking back I think absolute emphasis on these repressions, on this all-encompassing tyranny, blinded us perhaps to everything else that was there. Time and again I think we envisioned a simple two-dimensional portrait of the country. We saw this great need for aid and dreaming of freedom as they suffered under this terror. Iraq in those days, we were told, was trapped in submission and victimization. Its people were voiceless, and when the dictator was removed by force if need be, Iraq would be a free state on which we could build a new country that might serve as a beacon to the rest of the region. I think I spent my entire time in

Iraq, starting with those conversations with Wamidh, in the process of understanding how wrong that was.

The United States fashioned itself as a liberator, soon became an occupier and, I think, most important, it served as a catalyst for consequences that none of us foresaw. And I first felt that in an overpowering fashion at the end of the invasion. It was April 9, 2003, and some of you might remember that date, it was the day that Saddam fell. It was the day that a lot of people watched on TV when the statue came down. It was an incredibly dramatic moment, and I think it became almost one of those moments that, as you watch it, you realized it was going to be iconic, you realized this is going to be the lasting impression of what this event was. And I remember being confused a bit, and I would like to share a passage that describes what I sensed as I was standing on that street on that afternoon.

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"The moment had little to do with me, yet I was overwhelmed by it. For a few minutes I could barely move, stopped by a flood of emotions inspired by my role as a journalist and my identities as an American and as an Arab-American. I gazed at the tanks, their engines whirring; I glanced around me, at a crowd seized by jubilation, confusion and unease. I stared at the U.S. flag atop a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, fluttering proudly, and I looked at the myriad emotions on the faces of those around me—Iraqi and American—intersecting the street in this most fabled Arab capital. It was the convergence of cultures across an immense chasm, brought together in Baghdad, their fates inextricably linked as long as their presence was intertwined. As a journalist, I understood I would see such a moment only once in my lifetime. Even then, I had a feeling that I would be covering the repercussions of this event for the rest of my career. At that instant, I was overcome by the story, by its magnitude alone. I asked myself how I could ever hope to capture such an event with a few hours of reporting and a few more hours of writing. My emotions as an Arab-American were more complicated, but abstract. Here was Baghdad, an ancient city whose name evoked a proud, enduring memory, fallen to a foreign army. I felt neither anger nor joy; in a way, I felt grief. Not at Saddam's demise, but rather at the fate of a city, a destiny that brought about its conquest in the name of its liberation.

"I was in awe of the power of my country, America. What other nation, driven by ideology, its existence not threatened, could conquer an entire country in a matter of weeks? As a reporter abroad and as an expatriate, I often felt divorced from U.S. politics, removed from its debates. I could no longer enjoy that anonymity. My country had taken over another country, and I was watching it happen. The United States now controlled Iraq's destiny; we would now decide its fate. And we understood remarkably little about it. Deep down I worried that we would never try to know it either. At best, we would try to force it into our construct and preconception of what a country should be. At worst, we would not care, giving in to overly emotional impressions distorted by differences in language, culture and traditions, and by conceit. In between, the ambiguity that so defined Iraq for me—the uncertainty, the ambivalence, and the legacy of its history—would become too complicated to unravel."

Standing on this vantage point, talking to you all today, I think my sense is that the U.S. experience in Iraq, the story that I've covered for the past couple of years, is a microcosm of America's broader struggle with the Arab world. It's a battle that, I think, is generational, and it's about a battle that spins around the axes of religion, culture and identity. And as I said in the beginning of the talk, I think it's a battle that is being waged by two cultures that are in a way so estranged that they can't occupy the same space. I actually believe that, but I also believe something else. I don't know if the Americans in Iraq were ever actually able to acknowledge that point. It sounds simple, but as Americans they thought like Americans. More often than not, Iraqis didn't.

In reporting for the *Post* in Iraq and in gathering the material that went into the book, I tried to force myself in a strange way to no longer be an American but instead to be a journalist in the true meaning of the word. I had to listen and not to judge, I had to hear and not to lecture, and through that I think I saw a window on a country that was being reshaped as each day passed. As a journalist I saw moments I might not have seen otherwise. I think back to covering a militia that was loyal to a young Shiite cleric. His militia, called the Mahdi Army, fought the Americans twice in 2004. The Americans saw the battlefield in those days, as something very logical, very understandable. They looked at it in tactical terms and they understood what would constitute a victory. They weren't the rules of the Mahdi Army of the Shiite militia that I was covering. The Mahdi Army constantly rewrote the notion of winning and losing; they never thought they would win; winning really didn't

matter to them; fighting itself was a victory, and in that calculus, in that arithmetic, there was no such thing as defeat.

I remember back to the summer of 2003 when I was in Western Iraq. I was in a town called Albu Alwan which is near Fallujah, which I think a lot of people here will recognize as being the city that became kind of a symbol of the insurgency in a way, and which was later pretty much destroyed in an offense last year. There was a man I was interested in reporting on, but by the time I reached the village he had died. So I talked to his family and I tried to understand why he would kill himself in an attack on an American convoy. I heard a lot of different explanations for that. Some people said it was all about money; some people said the Baathists had offered him hundreds and hundreds of dollars to carry out this attack if he would do it. Other people said it was religion; they said he was inspired by faith, that he saw it as his religious duty to fight the occupation; some people said it was nationalism, that day after day he'd seen the American convoys traveling along the road that overlooked his house and that had finally driven him to act.

In the end I didn't know and as I sat down to write this story I had no idea what the true explanation was. It might have been a little of each; it may have been none of the above. But what struck me in reporting that story was that it didn't matter in the end, it didn't matter what the village thought was his motivation. Almost without exception, in a small village near Fallujah everyone considered him a martyr, and as a martyr he was considered a hero.

Another story I'm going to share with you is the story about a father that I met who had to kill his son. It was a tribal justice, a choice that I don't think any of us will ever face, obviously, but more important it's a choice that I don't think anybody can really imagine. This story happened in a place called Thuluyah, which is a small village along the Tigris River near Baghdad in a region that is dominated by Sunni Arab Muslims. I want to share a little background with you. This man's name was Sabah. He was a young guy in his early 20s and he had helped the Americans pinpoint suspected insurgents. He had followed the American troops into the village and pointed out suspects. Dozens were arrested and in the process of the raid a few people were killed. The villagers were outraged and they blamed Sabah, the young man, for those deaths. They went to his father and they said, "Either you kill your son or we're going to kill the rest of your family."

A few weeks later the father made a decision. He led his son, together with another son, behind the house, past groves of oranges and tangerines, past orchards of figs, almonds and vineyards. His father raised his rifle and fired two shots. The accounts when I talked with the family differ at that point. Some people say he collapsed after firing these two shots, and that his other son then raised his rifle and fired three more shots, one of them striking Sabah in the head and killing him.

I want to share with you what happened when I met the father a few weeks later, when I was working on this story:

"In a simple hut of cement and cinder blocks I sat with Sabah's father as he nervously thumbed black prayer beads, his pace quickening as the minutes passed. We sipped tea. Two overhead fans lazily churned the oven-like air. Each word of conversation was labored. Silently I replayed the question I had formulated: Had he killed his son? I already knew the answer. But when the opportunity arrived, I couldn't ask. Even as a journalist, in a job that celebrates provocation and whose standards require confirmation, I couldn't muster the courage to broach the question. In a moment so tragic, so wretched, there still had to be decency. I didn't want to hear him say yes. I didn't want to humiliate him any further. In the end, I didn't have to. The father's words, deepened by age and grief, were soft, almost a whisper. He dragged on a locally-made cigarette, as he sat cross-legged on the floor. His eyes glimmered with faint traces of tears, shimmering. 'I have the heart of a father, and he's my son,' he told me, his eyes cast to the ground. 'Even the prophet Abraham didn't have to kill his son.' He stopped, steadying his voice. 'There was no other choice.'"

I think those words that his father said to me that day are words that I will probably never forget—that even the Prophet Abraham didn't have to kill his son. I think in reporting in Iraq I've come across these choices that are choices that I would never want to make and choices that I don't think should have to be made. Iraq is, in many ways, as I said earlier, in the words of the widow that I met, forsaken, abandoned, and I think it's little understood. All too often perspectives are forced into predetermined narratives, and when most voices don't fit, I think

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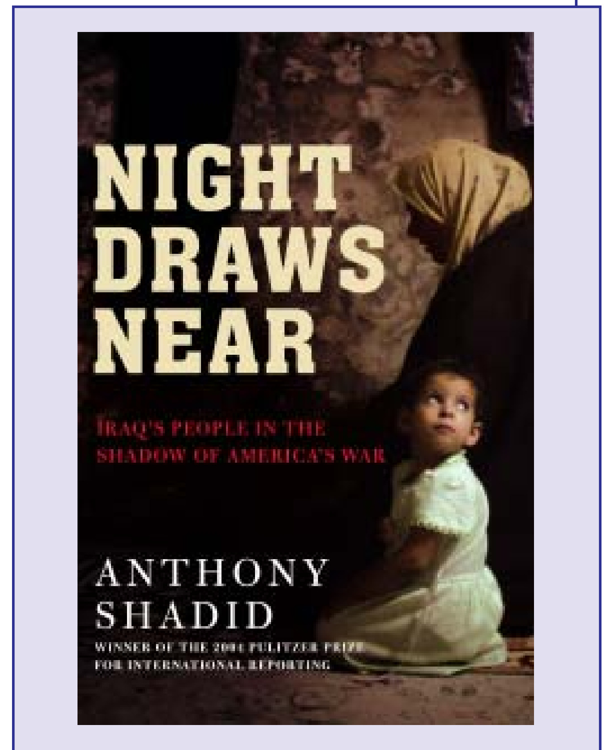
they're ignored.

Working for the past few years in Iraq I've come to cringe at a certain level at words like "liberation" and "democracy." I understand how words like "transparency" have become the butt of jokes. What do those terms mean in Iraq? In some ways, I'm not sure who that narrative is supposed to be directed at and I'm not sure who that narrative is supposed to serve.

I want to close with a passage from a diary of the young girl that I mentioned earlier in my talk. Her name is Amal, she turned fourteen, as I said, during the U.S. invasion. The passage of her diary is not in the book. It's something that I just came across a few weeks ago when I was spending time with her family. It doesn't offer any conclusions nor does it offer any answers to the questions raised today. I don't think it really tells us something that we don't know. What I think is striking is that it was an unvarnished window on this country that I covered for two years and still don't understand. It asks questions, it offers insights, it's filled with contradictions, and I think, like her country itself, it is haunted by loss. I think in a country where the word "liberation" can sometimes be abused, here was an instance where I thought it really mattered.

Amal's voice was a voice of an Iraq that few of us saw, that few of us heard. It was an Iraq that was forever changed in ways good and I think bad. It was a voice that I tried very modestly to convey in the book *Night Draws Near*. I want to read these words. I'm always struck by this passage because I think—I probably should let the words speak for themselves—but I was struck by this passage by how much it says that's gray, that not one person is at fault, not one person is a hero, that sentiments contradict, that they conflict, but together they make up a portrait of what the country is today. In her words:

"This morning did not begin with the cries of the rooster as usual but with the sounds of bombs and explosions in our neighborhood. At around seven in the morning a huge explosion shook the area, targeting the mosque, which is opposite the apartment building in which I live. For a moment I thought I had died, and then I realized I was not dead, that I was still scared. In a moment the police car was burned and those inside were dead, burned. A young man who only recently announced his engagement died along with a good old man who lives in the neighborhood, and a Kurd who owns a shop in a small shopping center here. This is the first time in my life that I have seen with my own eyes a real scene like this—not through the news. It's a true disaster, which I will never forget as long as I live. Glass was shattered and scattered all over the bodies. Then the of relatives who came looking for them, families, brothers, mothers and so on, all came searching and crying out loud, "My son, my brother, father, where are you?" and they would start asking anyone, like someone who had lost something that left no trace. Finally, after about eight hours an American military truck loaded with water bottles came over and an American woman soldier was distributing the water bottles at the same place where the explosion took place. People then lined up in a long line in front of the American truck and received the water. It was a scene that was hard to describe, as if Iraqis were beggars standing in line in a humiliating way. During the dispensing of water bottles the American woman soldier gave a camera to the translator to take a few pictures. Afterwards the people marched in a funeral procession women were crying and full of grief on their faces, seemed bewildered and not able to understand why so many people have to die."



Thank you.

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