

QUAGMIRE

By Michael Ventura

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On April 6 of last year, a U.S. colonel announced from the battlefield: "We own Baghdad." A year later to the day, 12 Marines were killed in widespread fighting throughout Iraq. Conflict was especially fierce in the Baghdad area of 2 million people called Sadr City. A year and a day before, the people of Sadr City were "throwing flowers at the American tanks that rumbled into Baghdad and ended the rule of their longtime oppressor, Saddam Hussein" (*The New York Times*). These Shiites were among the few who fulfilled Vice-President Dick Cheney's prediction in March 2003 that American troops would be "greeted as liberators." But as I write, C-SPAN is replaying a Pentagon news conference, taped earlier today, in which Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is calling those same people "terrorists," "thugs," and "assassins."

What is Sadr City and who are these people? It is not clear from the reports whether Sadr City is named after Moktada al-Sadr, the 31-year-old Shiite invariably described as "fiery," or his father, a revered cleric assassinated by Saddam Hussein. Saddam also executed two of Moktada's brothers. Certainly these Shiites had good reason to throw flowers at American tanks a year ago. But as it became clear that the U.S. intended to occupy and control Iraq, Moktada al-Sadr became virulently anti-American. He calls his militia the Mahdi Army – a sinister name for anyone who remembers that in 1885, in the Sudan, English Gen. Charles Gordon and his troops were massacred at Khartoum by a Muslim leader who called himself the Mahdi. Because of Moktada al-Sadr, U.S. soldiers padlocked the Baghdad newspaper *Al Hawza*, al-Sadr's mouthpiece. Many warned American authorities that to shut down the paper would ignite Iraq; like so many warnings, this too went unheeded. Thousands demonstrated for days against the action, chanting "No, no America!" and "Where is democracy now?" Even a moderate Iraqi like journalist Omar Jassem said, "I guess this is the Bush edition of democracy." Out of those demonstrations arose the uprising that has, as of this writing, killed more than 30 Americans.

CNN introduced their report of the April 7 Rumsfeld news conference with this sentence: "Pentagon insists the situation is not spinning out of control." But the statements and answers of Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard Myers gave no such assurance. Asked, "Who exactly are the enemy there?" Rumsfeld answered, "It's too soon [to know]." The general said, "We don't know that kind of detail yet." A remarkable admission on the fourth day of fighting. When questioned as to the strength of the Mahdi Army, they answered vaguely: between 1,000 and 6,000. Gen. Meyer said, "This is certainly not a popular uprising. ... Sadr has a very small following."

Contrast those statements with *The New York Times* report of that same morning, which both the general and Rumsfeld had time to read – and they should have read it, since their own intelligence agencies were, as usual, uncertain. After word went out on the street that U.S. soldiers had raided Moktada al-Sadr's office, "the Khadamiya bazaar [in Baghdad] exploded in a frenzy. Shopkeepers reached beneath stacks of sandals for Kalashnikov rifles. Boys wrapped their faces in black cloth. Men raced through the streets, kicking over crates and setting up barriers. Some handed out grenades. Within minutes, this entire Baghdad neighborhood had mobilized for war. ... [The display]

showed [that] there were thousands of men and boys in just one Baghdad neighborhood ready to fight for Mr. Sadr. ... While many people – bakers, teachers, sandwich makers – hold normal jobs, when the call comes, they line up with ... the Mahdi Army. 'This man is not a firefighter,' said Lt. Mohammed Abu Kadar, tapping one of his men on the shoulder outside a fire station in Khadamiya. 'He is Mahdi Army. This man, too,' the lieutenant, a two-star officer of the Iraq Civil Defense Corps, said, grabbing another firefighter. 'He may wear this uniform, but he is Mahdi Army.' Then the lieutenant tapped his own chest. 'We may work for the government now,' Lt. Kadar said, 'but if anything happens, we work for Sadr.'"

Which means that many who are nominally employed by the U.S.-controlled Iraqi government have no loyalty to that government. This explains, in part, why so many Iraqi police simply faded away when the uprising started; it's likely that instead of disappearing, as was generally reported, a significant number joined the uprising.

This is a gruesome development for Americans in harm's way in Iraq. Once again they have been left in the lurch by the utter failure of the Bush White House and its intelligence services, who from the first have refused to accept the reality of any situation that doesn't fit Bush's expectations and dogma. Whether this uprising is put down or spreads, it reveals that 130,000 Americans cannot possibly occupy and administer a country of 25 million that is increasing hostile. With reports that Sunni and Shiite forces who are usually enemies are making common cause against us, it is clear that American soldiers must behave as if surrounded and regard all Iraqis as potential hostiles. If that's not "a situation spinning out of control," what is?

Democrat and Republican alike can only be appalled when looking at the record of White House mistakes and lies about Iraq.

The New York Times, Dec. 9, 2002: "In private, administration officials concede that there is no single piece of dramatic intelligence that Iraq has continued to try to acquire nuclear, chemical and biological weapons." Yet Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Powell constantly have said they had "solid" evidence, a phrase Bush still uses, though no WMDs have been found.

The New York Times, Dec. 31, 2002: "White House Cuts Estimate of Cost of War in Iraq [to] 50 to 60 Billion." As of April 7, 2004, the Senate estimates the cost so far has been \$124 billion.

The New York Times, Feb. 2, 2003: "At the Federal Bureau of Investigation, some investigators said they were baffled by the Bush administration's insistence on a solid link between Iraq and Osama bin Laden's network. 'We've been looking at this hard for more than a year and you know what, we just don't think it's there,' a government official said." Nevertheless, 10 days later: "Top U.S. Officials Tell Lawmakers of Iraq-Qaeda Ties."

The New York Times, April 1, 2003, as the invasion was progressing, Richard Perle, speaking for the White House: "The plan is well conceived and the forces [are] appropriate to that plan." Now we know there was no occupation plan, and the forces are spread perilously thin.

The New York Times, April 4, 2003, Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer: "The one thing that is certain is Iraq is a wealthy nation." Paul Wolfowitz: "We're dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction relatively soon." Instead they found Iraq a shattered and indigent nation. Still, on July 30, "President Bush's budget director Joshua B. Bolten ... said the total reconstruction costs would be about 7.3 billion." Now no one dares estimate the cost, it's so high.

The New York Times, July 16, 2003, Rumsfeld: "Iraq's resistance is not anything like a guerrilla war." Tell that to families of the hundreds of Americans who've died, and the thousands who've been wounded, since his statement.

The New York Times, Aug. 24, 2003, George W. Bush: "In most of Iraq there is a steady movement toward reconstruction and a stable, self-governing society." We know now that's nonsense.

The New York Times, Aug. 29, 2003: "As recently as May, the administration had hopes that by this fall it could reduce its troops in Iraq to just 30,000." But today there are 130,000, and 25,000 who were promised they'd go home soon are now being told that they must stay.

Newsweek, Sept. 1, 2003: "Before the war, the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, was publicly upbraided by Asst. Sect. of Defense Paul Wolfowitz for suggesting that 'several hundred thousand troops' could be required to stabilize occupied Iraq. 'Wildly off the mark,' said Wolfowitz." But it was Wolfowitz who was wildly off the mark. Gen. Shinseki no longer has a job, but Wolfowitz still has his.

Lies, mistakes, and arrogance are killing many combatants and civilians uselessly. "Bring 'em on!" Bush said last July, adding: "We've got the force necessary to deal with the security situation." Americans and Iraqis are dying for his pride and his hopes of re-election. Bush and his flacks tremble and rage at those who compare Iraq to Vietnam. But what else is there to compare it to?

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