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HOW MEDIA GET IRAQ WRONG

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 Archives

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July 2, 2004 -- IRAQ veterans often say they're confused by U.S. news cover age, because their experience differs so greatly from what journalists report. Soldiers and Marines point to the slow, steady progress in almost all areas of Iraqi life and wonder why they don't get much notice — or in many cases, any notice at all.

Part of the explanation is Rajiv Chandrasekaran, the Baghdad bureau chief for the Washington Post. Chandrasekaran's crew generates a relentlessly negative stream of articles from Iraq. Last week, he had a Pulitzer-bait series called "Promises Unkept: The U.S. Occupation of Iraq."

The grizzled foreign-desk veteran — who until 2000 was covering dot-com companies — now sits in judgment over a world-shaking issue, in a court whose rulings echo throughout the media landscape.

He finds the Bush administration guilty. Such a surprise. Before major combat operations were over, Chandrasekaran was *already* quoting Iraqis proclaiming the U.S. operation a failure.

Reading his dispatches from April 2003, you can already see his meta-narrative take shape: Basically, that the Americans are clumsy fools who don't know what they're doing, and Iraqis hate them. This meta-narrative informs his coverage and the coverage of the reporters he supervises, who rotate in and out of Iraq.

How do I know this? Because my fellow Marines and I witnessed it with our own eyes. Chandrasekaran showed up in the city of Kut last April, talked to a few of our officers and toured the city for a few hours. He then got back into his air-conditioned car and drove back to Baghdad to write about the local unrest.

"The Untouchable 'Mayor' of Kut," his article's headline blared the next day. It described a local, Iranian-backed troublemaker named Abbas Fadhil, who was squatting in the provincial government headquarters. He had gathered a mob of people with nothing better to do, told them to camp out in the headquarters compound, and there they sat, defying the Marines of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade.

Chandrasekaran was very impressed with the little usurper: " 'We thank the Americans for getting rid of Saddam's regime, but now Iraq must be run by Iraqis,' Fadhil thundered during a meeting today with his supporters in the building's spacious conference room. 'We cannot allow the Americans to rule us from this office' . . . Fadhil has set up shop in an official building and appears to have rallied support across this city of 300,000 people.

"The refusal of Marine commanders to recognize Fadhil's new title has fueled particularly intense anti-American sentiments here," Chandrasekaran continued. "In scenes not seen in other Iraqi cities, U.S. convoys have been loudly jeered. Waving Marines have been greeted with angry glares and thumbs-down signs."

Readers must have concluded that Kut was on the verge of exploding, ready to throw out the despised American infidel invaders and install their new "mayor" as their beloved leader.

What utter rubbish. In our headquarters, we had a small red splotch on a large map of Kut, representing the neighborhood that supported Abbas Fadhil. When asked about him, most citizens of Kut rolled their eyes. His followers were mainly poor, semi-literate and not particularly well-liked. They were marginal in every sense of the word, and they mattered very little in the day-to-day life of a city that was struggling to get back

on its feet.

We knew the local sentiment intimately, because as civil affairs Marines, our job was to help restore the province's water, electricity, medical care and other essentials of life. Our detachment had teams constantly coming and going throughout the city, and Chandrasekeran could have easily accompanied at least one of them.

Since he didn't, he couldn't see how the Iraqis outside of the red splotch reacted to us. People of every age waved and smiled as we rumbled past (except male youths, who, like their American counterparts, were too cool for that kind of thing.) Our major security problem was keeping friendly crowds of people away from us so we could spot bad guys.

None of those encouraging things made it into the article. Nor did anything about how we had been helping to fix the city's problems as soon as we arrived. Just a quick-and-dirty sensationalistic piece about a local Islamist thug bravely going toe-to-toe with the legendary U.S. Marines. The general reaction to Chandrasekeran's article was either laughter or dumb bewilderment.

Soon afterwards, a Marine commander met privately with Fadhil and told him he would be forcefully removed if he did not leave the government building. Fadhil, chastened, asked if he could slither into exile without the appearance of coercion, so he could save face. The commander agreed. Suddenly faced with a real confrontation, the "mayor" had backed down, and he left without any riots or bloodshed. The Americans took over the office that Fadhil said we should never occupy.

The Post didn't cover any of that, either.

Don't take my word for it that the Post's reporting is substandard and superficial. Take the word of Philip Bennett, the Post's assistant managing editor for foreign news. In a surprisingly candid June 6 piece, he admits that "the threat of violence has distanced us from Iraqis." Further, "we have relied on Iraqi stringers filing by telephone to our correspondents in Baghdad, and on embedding with the military. The stringers are not professional journalists, and their reports are heavy on the simplest direct observation."

Translation: We are reprinting things from people we barely know, from a safe location dozens of miles away from the fighting.

Bennett flatly concedes that they have a "dim picture" of what is happening in Iraq (not that you would know it from the actual news articles he approves for publication). "The people of Iraq . . . are leading their country, and ours, down an uncertain path. This is a story waiting to be told."

Waiting to be told? They have four or five full-time reporters there at any given time. What are they doing, if they're not telling the story of Iraq's new birth?

Bennett might have added that not only are the reporters "distanced" from Iraqis, they're distanced from Iraq itself. Covering it from Baghdad is like covering California from a secure bunker in south-central Los Angeles.

Chandrasekeran's meta-narrative admits of no ambiguity. For him and his reporters, they report in straightforward, declarative sentences, with none of the caveats that Bennett mentions. The Americans are still bumbling, the Iraqis continue to seethe. So it shall be in The Washington Post — until Iraq succeeds and they can no longer deny it, just like journalists were forced to admit reality at the end of the Cold War. Or else their words will have their effect, and Western journalists have to flee the country as it disintegrates.

Since I saw Rajiv Chandrasekaran's integrity up close, I haven't believed a word he writes, or any story coming out of the bureau he runs. You shouldn't, either.

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[Home](#)

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