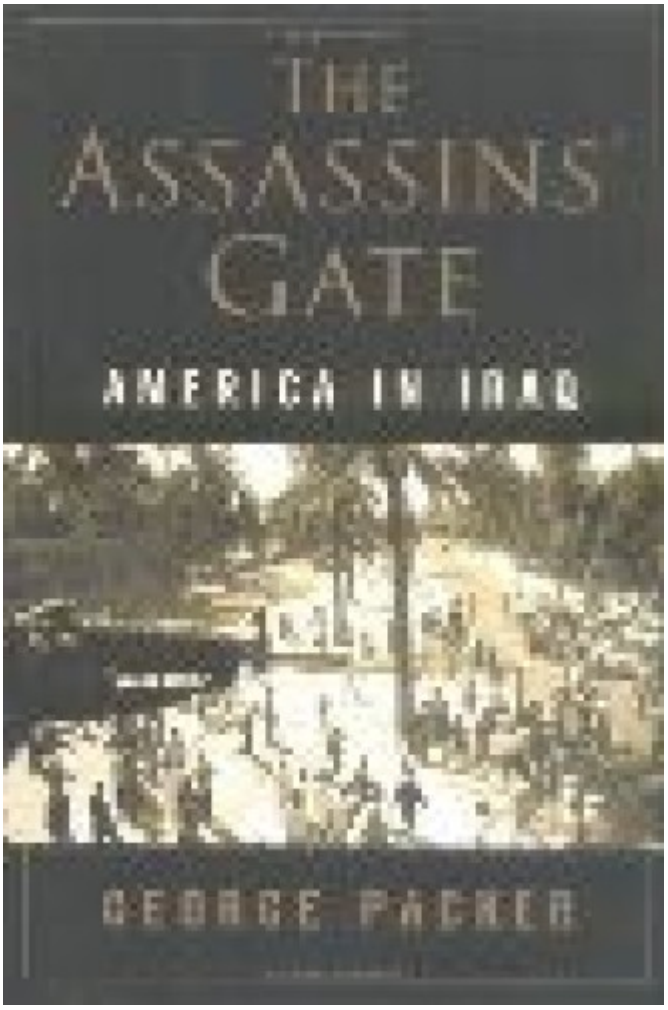
Occupational hazards

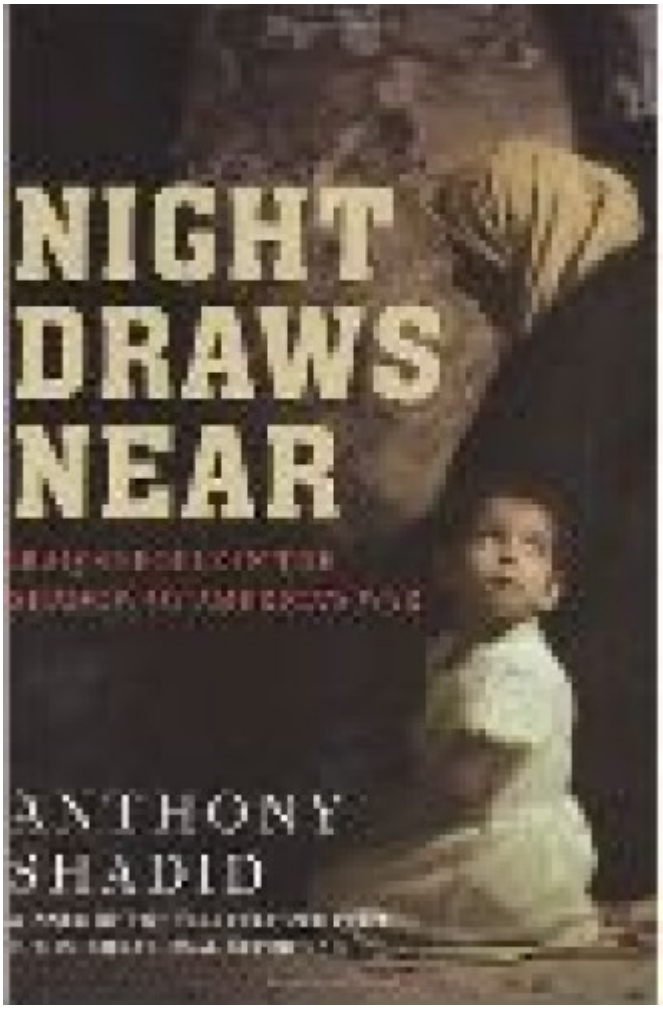
By Robert Westbrook in the December 13, 2005 issue

In Review



The Assassins' Gate: America In Iraq

George Packer
Farrar, Straus & Giroux



Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War

Anthony Shadid
Henry Holt

The Arabic word for *occupation* is *ihtilal*. In Iraq in the spring of 2003, *Washington Post* reporter Anthony Shadid observes, it was a word “shadowed by humiliation, notions of resistance, and still resonant memories of the occupation by the British eighty-five years before.”

Moreover, as in the rest of the Arab world, the term called to mind for Iraqis the most explosive *ihtilal*: the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. As Shadid says, “The images are persistent: hulking Caterpillar bulldozers demolishing homes of stone and concrete in the squalor of Gaza; American-built Apache helicopters hovering over West Bank villages along rocky, terraced Palestinian hills; imposing Merkava tanks crashing across refugee camps as haunted faces in black-checked

kaffiyehs watch them pass."

Nonetheless, in May of that year, the U.S. secured sweeping formal authority from the UN Security Council to serve as the principal "occupying" power in Iraq, and the U.S. ambassador to the UN, John Negroponte, declared that "the council has taken decisive action to help the Iraqi people." This was not the way many Iraqis greeted the news.

As ever more sophisticated roadside bombs daily shatter the American *ihtilal*, we are finally getting some books that help us to understand and explain such cultural blindness and the disaster it helped occasion in Iraq. And none better than those by Shadid and George Packer.

Packer's *Assassins' Gate* is the narrative of a blind man stumbling into half-light in the face of the realities exposed by the war and the occupation—an exceptional mix of memoir, history, reportage, political argument and *cri de coeur*. Packer, who reported on the war for the *New Yorker*, describes himself at its beginning as a member of the "camp of ambivalently prowar liberals." He remains in this camp today, though his ambivalence has deepened profoundly—and productively.

"The Iraq War," Packer says, "started as a war of ideas," and he opens with a superb account of the thinking of intellectuals and government para-intellectuals who supported the war. (He is sadly dismissive of and largely silent about those who opposed the war, reducing them to little more than an alliance between Gore Vidal and Pat Buchanan.) We meet the usual suspects on the neoconservative right (Robert Kagan, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz) and the hawkish left (Paul Berman, Christopher Hitchens, Michael Ignatieff), who came together in a commitment to make Iraq by force of arms the beacon of Middle Eastern democracy.

Among these ideologues, Packer was himself most influenced by Berman, whose notion that Saddam Hussein's regime was but one of the latest manifestations of 20th-century totalitarianism he finds convincing. He also crafts a sympathetic portrait of Wolfowitz, whom he terms the "intellectual architect of the war." Packer, like many others on the prowar left, came to this position as a "human rights interventionist" who was more than willing, despite the dangers, to make use of American military power as the instrument for toppling oppressive regimes and bringing human rights to those denied them.

The neoconservatives favored a reverse of this formula. Gripped by “national messianism” and visions of a “benevolent global hegemony” for the U.S., they saw the forceful promotion of democracy and human rights as an instrument of American power. Jumping in bed with the likes of Perle made Packer nervous, but he backed the war nonetheless: “The administration’s war was not my war—it was rushed, dishonest, unforgivably partisan, and destructive of alliances—but objecting to the authors and their methods didn’t seem reason enough to stand in the way.”

But the single most influential voice that Packer heard as the war clouds gathered was that of his friend Kanan Makiya, an Iraqi exile. Makiya had surfaced briefly in the public eye in the U.S. during the Gulf War as the pseudonymous author of a widely read account of Saddam’s horrors, *Republic of Fear*. Makiya had long urged American policy makers to take up the sword of Iraqi liberation, and in the Bush administration he finally found an audience disposed to agree. His influence was even greater on the prowar left, where he established himself as the Tom Paine (and James Madison in waiting) of a liberal-democratic revolution in Iraq. If Ahmad Chalabi, Makiya’s friend and sometime collaborator, was the neoconservatives’ guide to Iraq, Makiya served this role for Packer and others among human rights hawks.

After he departed for Iraq and began to see for himself the daunting dimensions of the democratization project it presented, Packer grew increasingly skeptical about Makiya’s grasp of Iraqi reality. After three weeks in the country, he says, he “had already begun to realize that most of my ideas about the place were going to be of no use”—ideas that he had picked up largely from Makiya. By the end of his tour of duty, he had no doubt that his friend was a dreamer and that “at times, his vision of Iraq had been so at odds with what I saw and heard there that dreaming began to seem irresponsible and dangerous.”

Like many secular Iraqis, Makiya, an Enlightenment universalist, idealized the modern, coherent Iraqi nation of the 1970s. During his exile, that nation had been transformed by decades of war, brutality, poverty and Islamic ferment into a much different place—a place seething with fractious ethnic and religious bitterness among and between the Sunni, Shi‘a and Kurds. (“The weakest idea in Iraq,” Packer remarks, “was the idea of Iraq itself.”) Makiya was not the best guide the prowar left could have chosen to lead them into Iraq, for “Iraqis, it turned out, were not who he had thought they were. They were not Kanan Makiya.”

Packer's disillusionment with Makiya's guidance is nothing compared to his alienation from his erstwhile allies in the Bush administration, and the heart of his book is a searing firsthand account and indictment of the postwar occupation. It quickly became apparent to Packer that the masters of the American state had given little careful thought to how to go about democratic state-building in the wake of the war. The result was chaos, crisis and violent revolt. Reluctant to evoke Vietnam analogies, Packer nonetheless found it hard to resist them as he traveled with American troops, "moving half blind in an alien landscape, missing their quarry and leaving behind frightened women and boys with memories."

In the face of this disaster, Packer turns bitterly on Bush and his minions, charging them with betraying the shared vision of a free and democratic Iraq by failing to figure out how to build it or really trying to do so. He reserves his sharpest barbs for those in the administration (Donald Rumsfeld above all) who he believes were never committed to the long, tough, expensive commitment that nation-building would require. They, he suggests, overruled the "idealists" such as Wolfowitz, who themselves wimped out in the end and lacked the courage of their convictions.

Instead of relying on State Department planners who knew something about Iraq and the challenges it presented to postwar reconstruction, Bush turned to Rumsfeld aide Douglas Feith and his elves at the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, who could not have cared less. (Colin Powell, Packer notes, described Feith as "a card-carrying member of the Likud Party," and General Tommy Franks nominated him as "the fucking stupidest guy on the face of the earth.") Packer laments that "if there was never a coherent postwar plan, it was because the people in Washington who mattered never intended to stay in Iraq."

But if Packer is bowed, he is not broken. The occupation was terribly ill-conceived and mismanaged, but he still thinks it was a good idea in the service of a worthy ideal. Had Bush tried, he could have rallied the nation behind a shining moral cause instead of trying to get by with prevaricating about WMDs. Instead of succumbing to partisan bitterness after 9/11, the administration could have harnessed the patriotic fervor that followed to "frame the new war against Islamist radicalism as a national struggle" and forged the Iraq war into "a truly national cause" instead of conducting it "from the beginning like the South Carolina primary." And instead of the hapless antiwar movement we got, we could have had a "thoughtful opposition that could hold the Bush administration to its own promises . . . in a real effort to make Iraq a success."

Those unmoved by this counterfactual scenario, indeed those horrified by it, can still profit enormously from Packer's book. One need not relish the thought of a war cabinet of Berman, Hitchens, Ignatieff and Makiya to appreciate either his telling account of the war's ideological origins or his account of its descent into chaos.

Packer observes, damningly, that what was most absent from American postwar planning was any consideration of the Iraqis themselves, of their history, their culture, their complicated sense of themselves. As Anthony Shadid says, "Repression determined much of what happened in Iraq before the war. But the nearly absolute emphasis on the all-encompassing tyranny blinded many Americans to everything else that was there. Time and again, we envisioned, or were given, a simple, two-dimensional portrait of a country, waiting for aid, and dreaming of freedom as it suffered under the unrelenting terror of a dictator. Iraq, we were told by our leaders in Washington and others, was trapped in a relationship of submission and victimization; its people were voiceless, deprived of the power to determine their own destiny. Once the dictator was removed, by force if need be, Iraq would be free, a tabula rasa on which to build a new and different state."

Shadid, who deservedly won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, conveys a multidimensional Iraq in a brilliant, moving, haunting portrait of a people under siege. If Packer's book helps us begin to understand why and how we have come undone in Iraq, Shadid's riveting stories are a good place to begin to assess the price that the Iraqis have paid for it.

Of Lebanese-American descent and fluent in Arabic, Shadid takes us to places few other reporters have ventured, least of all those embedded with American troops or hunkered down in Baghdad's Green Zone. He remained in Baghdad during the early weeks of the war and put himself on the wrong end of American bomb attacks. He visited the hospitals where civilians lay wounded and dying. He befriended the desperately poor family of Karima Salman, a widowed mother of eight children, and followed their travails over months as they struggled to weather the difficult life that the occupation imposed upon them.

Shadid provides a translation of the remarkable diary of Karima's 14-year-old daughter, Amal, who "never spoke of the war in political terms. There was only a young girl who did not understand why people were dying." He even ventured to the dangerous heartland of the Sunni insurgency, where a father was compelled by tribal custom to kill his own son for informing to the Americans.

Perhaps the most dramatic effect of the fall of Saddam was the explosive outpouring of religious fervor and political Islam it released. Shadid's account of the culture and politics of revived Shi'ite piety is particularly deep and telling. Not least, he offers a compelling and sympathetic portrait of Muqtada Sadr as an uncertain yet fearless young man, thrust by the assassination of his charismatic father, Mohammed Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, into the leadership of a powerful underground "street movement" that the elder Sadr had built over the course of the 1990s.

Muqtada Sadr, Shadid argues, represents a populist, nationalist impulse that stands defiantly against not only the American occupation but the more conservative, Iranian-leaning Shi'ite establishment led by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Dismissed initially as a minor thug by American experts, Sadr has made the occupation authorities pay for underestimating him and his followers—and, Shadid suggests, will probably continue to do so.

Iraq, as Shadid portrays it, was no tabula rasa in March 2003, and is even more complicated now—"variegated, contradictory, endlessly confusing." Standing outside Abu Ghraib prison in October 2002 to watch the release of thousands of prisoners freed by Saddam's prewar mass amnesty, he caught a sense of the turmoil bubbling just below the surface of dictatorship and repression, "a glimpse of tensions entrenched over decades, even centuries, by deep-seated grievances and the narrative of a complicated history." It is these tensions, these grievances and this history that he expertly unveils. Skeptical of generalizations about Iraq or its people, he ventures few, preferring to convey again and again the "bitter complexity of even one conversation."

One of the advisers to the American occupation, Noah Feldman, recounts in his book *What We Owe Iraq* that a chill crept over him when he realized that the books his colleagues were reading on the plane to Baghdad in the spring of 2003 were not about Iraq but about the American reconstruction of Germany and Japan after World War II. One wishes that he had been able to place *Night Draws Near* on their tray tables, though had he done so, they might have shouted to the pilot to turn the plane around.

Packer says he could find no Iraqis who thought that life was better under Saddam than under the American occupation, but Shadid talked to many who said so. (Again and again, they reminded him that Saddam had restored their electricity in a mere two months after the Gulf War.) Moreover, he found evidence that for some Iraqis

who hold no brief for Saddam the war itself was unjust. Two middle-class men in Baghdad told him that the invasion “was an insult. It was not Saddam under attack, but Iraq, and they insisted that pride and patriotism prevented them from putting their destiny in the hands of another country.”

The question that such interviews, and both these books generally, raise most pointedly is whether or not an American war to liberate Iraq from Saddam Hussein could have been waged without being followed by an occupation that stirred Iraqi resentment and insurgency. Is the calamity we now face a matter simply of the obvious blindnesses and incompetence of the Bush administration, as Packer contends? Or is there an inherent tension—which invites calamity—between national self-determination and those “humanitarian military interventions” that go beyond putting an end to extreme human rights disasters and extend to liberal-democratic state-building?

Packer criticizes the American occupation authorities for opting for control when they should have been more concerned about legitimacy. But how can an occupying power exercise any control at all over a people eager for self-determination without threatening its legitimacy? And if it cannot exercise control, why remain as an occupying power? Indeed, why embark on a nation-building war in the first place?

Many of the Iraqis who spoke to Shadid drew a sharp distinction between liberation and occupation, which indicates that they, like Packer, believe that one might proceed without the other. But where does one begin and the other end? In the early weeks of the war in Iraq, “liberation” simply as negative freedom from restraint produced chaos and anarchy. If liberation means something more positive than this, then how is a liberator to know when liberating has become occupying? And how does one ensure that peoples as different as Americans and Iraqis will draw the distinction in the same fashion?

Alas, for the Iraqi people, and for the American people, the time for such questions in this case has passed. Whatever lies ahead for Iraq (should such a nation survive), it is surely not the dreamworld of Wolfowitz and Makiya.

“If Baghdad’s soul is loss,” Shadid concludes, “its mood always seemed to be *ghamdih*”—ambiguity. This ambiguous mood is captured in the remarkable photograph by Andrea Bruce Woodall that graces the jacket of his book. In it a woman and a beautiful little girl sit on a floor in near-darkness, silhouetted against a rough-hewn wall. The woman in head scarf and dark cloak stares downward in

profile, her face completely obscured. The child, in a pretty yellow, embroidered dress, looks upward and wide-eyed into light coming from beyond the frame behind her. She seems drawn to something outside the shadows that shroud everything and everybody in the scene. What it might be is left uncertain, as *ghamdih*. May it, at least, be hope.