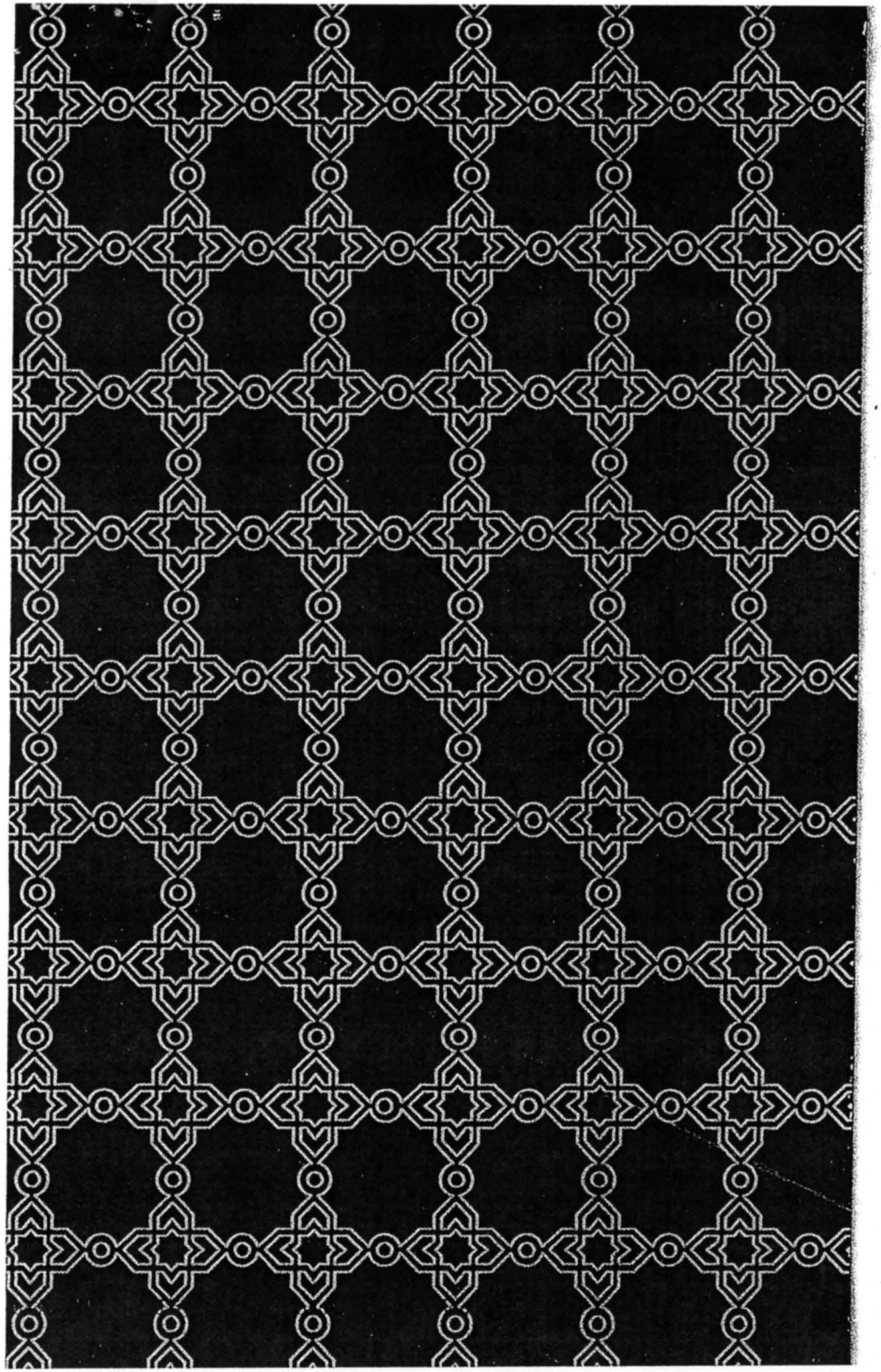

America in the Middle East: The Middle East in America

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Gertrude Bell And The Pacification Of Iraq

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I am hardly the first person to find analogies between the recent American invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq and the British invasion and occupation of Iraq in the 1910s and 1920s. In his new book *The Great War for Civilization*, Robert Fisk offers a number of Santayanaesque parallels between the two occupations. He reminds us of General Maude's 1917 proclamation that "our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors, but as liberators. (As William Stivers shows in his study *Supremacy and Oil*, however, the British goal was protection of its oil in Persia and exploitation of the reserves in Mesopotamia as its navy, then led by Winston Churchill, moved from coal to oil). Fisk also reminds us of Lloyd George's rationalization for staying the course in Iraq, which recalls not only the pronouncements of present U.S. leaders but also Kipling's call for the "white man" to assume his "burden." The British prime minister claimed his military was in Mesopotamia not for Britain's own benefit but to enable the development of a "land ... withered and shriveled up by oppression." "What would happen," asked Lloyd George, "if we withdrew?"[1]

And, of course, Rashid Khalidi begins his recent study of American imperial aims in the Middle East, *Resurrecting Empire*, by quoting T.E. Lawrence's 1920 call for immediate withdrawal from Mesopotamia. Fisk also cites claims by British officials in London and Iraq, such as the Civil Commissioner in 1920, Arnold Wilson, that the sources of that year's insurrection and other disturbances emanated from outside the country.

The British occupation is approached from an entirely different angle by several writers in *U.S. Policy in Post-Saddam Iraq: Lessons From the British Experience*, published in 2003 by the Brookings Institute. Their project—

based on the view that the British succeeded in invading Iraq, suppressing an insurrection, appropriating its natural resources, and establishing what the British themselves called a "native façade"—is to offer recipes for post-war nation-building based on the British experience and cautionary tales about the potential stumbling blocks of occupation. For example, Judith Yaphe in her essay "The Challenge of Nation Building in Iraq" writes that "the British created an impressive array of institutions: a monarch, a parliament, a Western-style constitution, a civil service and an army."[2] She nonetheless warns policy-makers that the task will not be easy, quoting Saddam Hussein, who in 2003 said:

> We hope that the British would tell the Americans about their experience in Iraq in 1920. The British occupiers had cannons and advanced weapons compared to what the Iraqis possessed at the time. The Iraqis were poor. They fought the British army with axes and shovels... The Iraqis defended their country and forced the occupation army to meet the Iraqis' demands for national rule.[3]

Ironically, this quote by Saddam echoes T.E. Lawrence's claim in a 1917 edition of the *Arab Bulletin* that the Arab idea of national union is nothing more than "episodic combined resistance to an intruder."[4]

My own approach is principally that of a writer of historical plays. One thing I have learned from writing and studying historical plays is that dramatizing history is a fictionalizing process that is necessarily reductionist. The most successful historical plays are the ones that, instead of trying to smooth out the narrative rough edges, find a form that grounds events in historical circumstances while also emphasizing the complexity of historiography. For example, *Mad Forest*, by Caryl Churchill; *Gross Indecency*, by Moises Kaufman; and *Copenhagen*, by Michael Frayn, interrogate not only events and their significance but the terms used to frame them.

What I'd like to do today is share some of the research I have come across in the process of writing a play about Gertrude Bell, the British writer, archaeologist and so-called Oriental Secretary of Iraq during the British occupation. I'm less interested in searching for facile analogies or unearthing cautionary tales than in offering observations about the use of language by Bell and her contemporaries and about how this language of empire in a previous period necessarily informs the vocabularies widely used to describe the current invasion and occupation of Iraq. As Orwell admonishes us in his 1947 essay "Politics and the English Language":

> In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India... can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machinegunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*.[5]

Amy Kaplan makes much the same point in "Violent Beginnings and the Question of Empire Today" when she writes that the language in current use to describe the Iraqi occupation and the so-called war on terror is "freighted with imperial meanings... for which we need better vocabularies."[6] As Kaplan does in her analysis of the term "Guantánamo," I hope in this paper to trace the genealogy of terms such as "foreign fighters," "shock-and-awe," "gassing your own people," and "bombing in Iraq."

But first let me briefly introduce Gertrude Bell. Born in 1868, she was the daughter of a wealthy industrialist from Newcastle, in the north of England. She was the second woman to graduate from Oxford, receiving a 'first' in history in 1888. After several cruises around the world and a brief stint in Bucharest, she visited Iran, where she learned Persian and eventually translated a volume of poems by Hafez. She climbed several mountains in the Alps, worked as an assistant to the archaeologist David Hogarth on a dig in Turkey, then visited Jerusalem where she began to study Arabic. In 1907 she went on an expedition to Syria that resulted in *The Desert and the Sown*, a book that made her the best-known Arabist in Britain. She also organized an archaeological expedition to Iraq (recorded in her book *From Amurath to Amurath*) and another to the Saudi peninsula, where she was held prisoner for a couple of weeks. She left an extraordinary trove of photographs from these expeditions. In 1915, she joined the newly-created Arab Bureau in Cairo with, among others, T.E. Lawrence, and in 1917, after the British invasion of Iraq, she returned there as the Oriental Secretary, the assistant to the Civil Commissioner Arnold Wilson and his successor Sir Percy Cox. She was instrumental in shifting British foreign policy from one of direct colonial control in Mesopotamia before the 1920 insurrection to one that effectively co-opted Arab nationalism by placing Faisal, son of the Sharif of Mecca and Britain's ally during World War I, on the throne of Iraq. This strategy was

solidified at the 1921 Cairo conference, which Lawrence described by saying, "Everyone Middle East is here," by which he meant, of course, everyone British. Bell helped to engineer a 1921 referendum in which Faisal, who was from the Saudi peninsula and had recently been deposed from the throne of Syria by the French, received 96% of the vote. After his coronation, Bell wrote, "When we had made Mesopotamia a model Arab state, there was not an Arab of Syria and Palestine who wouldn't want to be part of it."[7] She also founded and was appointed by Faisal the first director of the Iraq Museum, which was looted shortly after the American military arrived in Baghdad in 2003. She died of an overdose of sleeping pills in 1926 at the age of 58.

Bell is of interest to anyone who studies the occupation of Iraq not only because from 1917 to 1924 she met its cultural and political leaders on an almost daily basis but because she wrote a number of official reports and voluminous letters—which constitute almost a daily diary—to her father and stepmother in England. These writings are supplemented by other government documents from the period, many collected in the British Library.

The parallels between the language used by the British during their occupation of Iraq and the current American-led one are manifold, but I would like to focus principally on two terms: "foreign fighters" and "bombing." One of Gertrude Bell's earliest tasks, begun in the spring of 1918, soon after she returned to Mesopotamia as the Oriental Secretary, was the drawing of the borders of the incipient country. She was warned by a British missionary at the time: "You are flying in the face of a millennium of history if you draw a line around Iraq and call it a political entity. Assyria always looked to the west and east and north, and Babylonia to the south. They have never been an independent unit."[8] Later, in 1921, in a letter to her father, she writes:

We've had another problem looming over us southern border. Ibn Saud's frontier now mark[illegible] with those of the [illegible]

> Saud countered with a... claim that took in much of Syria, a large slice of Iraq and the whole of Kuwait. Sir Percy Cox... declared to ibn Saud that he would not tolerate 'these...impossible arguments. He, Sir Percy Cox, would determine the frontiers. He drew a line on the map, denying part of ibn Saud's claim and giving Sabih Beg three hundred miles less than he demanded.[10]

The borders, based on Bell's suggestion, that Cox laid down also "fixed neutral zones between Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia because Cox correctly suspected that these neutral zones contained oil."[11]

The configuration of the country in the north and east was also determined in large measure by the search for oil. According to Stivers in *Supremacy and Oil*, Lloyd George wished to "push Syria's southern border farther north so as to assure a direct link from Mosul to the Mediterranean."[12] As a result of the 1920 San Remo agreement, "The French got a share of [Mesopotamian] oil in consideration for renouncing their claim to Mosul and pledging to cooperate in the laying of the pipeline through Syria."[13] Not coincidentally, one month later the 1920 insurrection broke out along the Euphrates, in part because Iraqis became aware of the terms of the San Remo agreement. As Stivers also points out, the British strategy involved developing oil in Mosul so as "to build a client state that could pay for itself."[14]

In Bell's *Civil Administration of Mesopotamia*, written in 1920, shortly after the insurrection, she clearly lays the blame for the first rumblings of revolt at the feet of outsiders, i.e. "foreign fighters":

> News was received of a concentration at Fadghami, on the Khabur, under a native of Mosul, Jamil Beg, who was an officer in the Syrian army. He was said to be drawing munitions down the Khabur [illegible] from Turkish territory...

The tribal warriors, fighting in separate formations under their own leaders, displayed courage, coordination and ingenious military tactics."[16] General Aylmer Haldane, the military commander in Iraq, took this organization and sophistication as proof that "the rebels must be led by ex-Ottoman officers versed in organized warfare."[17]

Flash forward to September 12, 2005. According to *The New York Times*, "thousands of frightened families fled Tal Afar," a town near the Syrian border, in advance of an American-led assault. According to Major General Rick Lynch, some insurgents tried to escape by tunnel "but were caught at checkpoints, some wearing wigs and dressed as women. 'The rats know we're closing in on them,' he said." In the assault "[a]bout 40 people *described as insurgents* [my emphasis] by the military were killed when a building was bombed from the air"[18]

A month later *The Times* publishes another article claiming that during a firefight the previous summer, several Syrian soldiers were killed. "[T]he exact location of the clash, along *the porous and poorly marked border* [my emphasis]," could not be learned. The same article also quotes sources who suggest that U.S. Army intelligence units have been operating inside Syria, ostensibly to "choke off the routes that foreign fighters use," although it also quotes sources who assert that the "vast majority of insurgents battling American forces are Iraqis, not foreign *jihadis*."[19]

To sum up this brief analysis of the concept "foreign fighters": 1) The largest force of "foreign fighters" in Iraq in the 1920s was the British with their Indian levies, and today it is the U.S. military. Moreover, the U.S. military is apparently also operating in Syria, another foreign country. 2) European colonialists drew the current borders of Iraq less than a hundred years ago. Their decisions about borders were driven by political self-interest and economics, especially the economics of oil. 3) In Iraq during the late 1910s and 1920s, and in particular during the 1920 insurrection, there were numerous claims of foreign interference and foreign direction of the insurrection. Then as now, many of these claims were unfounded, but it is true that a number of Iraqi officers who were based in Syria and who had served in the Turkish army and were thus automatically excluded by the British from participation in the creation of Iraq did take up arms against the British, just as many Iraqi officers—excluded from service because they served under Saddam Hussein-have joined the current insurgency. It is generally acknowledged that Paul Bremer's decision to disband the Iraqi army was one of many serious misjudgments made by the U.S. occupying force. 4) The

border between Syria and Iraq is long, porous, and in many places unmarked. This is a border across which people have passed for centuries. Moreover, the U.S., which has far more resources and sophisticated means than Syria, is, for example, unable to control its own border with Mexico. 5) According to top U.S. officials and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, at least 90 per cent and probably closer to 95 per cent of the members of the current insurgency in Iraq are Iraqis. 6) Finally, there have been various suggestions, most notably by Leslie Gelb, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations and an ardent supporter of the invasion of Iraq, that Iraq be divided into three ethnic mini-states: the Kurdish north, the Sunni center and the Shi'a south. This plan, a recapitulation of the pre-World War I Ottoman *wilayets*, would have the effect of leaving the central "Sunni" state without any oil resources. Thus, at the same time U.S. officials express their outrage at the intervention of "foreign fighters" who traverse the borders staked out by their imperial predecessors, serious policymakers in the U.S. are contemplating re-drawing these borders once again.

I would next like to examine several related terms and phrases: "gassing his own people," "weapons of mass destruction," "exit strategy" and "shock-and-awe." But let me begin with a headline one often sees nowadays in the Western media: "Bombing in Iraq." The term is used almost exclusively to denote a car bomb or a so-called IED, "Improvised Explosive Device," or roadside bomb. That is, bombs that are used by insurgents against the U.S. military, their Iraqi allies or civilians. It is hardly ever used to describe bombs dropped from the air or delivered by artillery shells.

As Seymour Hersh writes in a recent *New Yorker* piece, "[t]he American air war inside Iraq is perhaps the most significant—and underreported—aspect of the fight against the insurgency."[20] He quotes a Marine Corps press release during the 2004 assault on Fallujah that describes "[f]lying missions day and night" and says "the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing alone had dropped more than five hundred thousand tons of ordnance."[21] Elsewhere, Hersh points out that "we don't have reporters at the air bases. We don't know what's going on with the air war," but he does claim that recently, in preparation for a reduction of U.S. ground forces in Iraq, the air bombing has "gone up exponentially" in the so-called Sunni Triangle.[22] According to the British group Iraq Body Count, as of March of 2005 almost 25,000 civilians had been killed since the U.S.-led invasion two years earlier. Of those, 53% (approximately 13,000) were killed by explosive devices and of that number 64% (8,500) were killed by air strikes. By contrast 8% of the 25,000 (approximately 2,000) were killed

by vehicle (i.e. car) bombs.[23] A 2004 study by the British medical journal *Lancet* placed the number of civilian deaths attributable to the invasion and occupation much higher, at 100,000. The leader of that study said, "Violence accounted for most of the excess deaths and air strikes from coalition forces accounted for most of the violent deaths."[24]

In his 1990 study *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force 1919-1939*, David Omissi analyzes the decisive role played by the RAF in the control of colonial Iraq, especially in the period following the failed 1920 insurrection. As he points out, Winston Churchill, a strong proponent of air-power as a cheap and efficient form of "policing" Iraq, advocated a small protected garrison in Baghdad coupled with the use of airplanes to disperse asphyxiating gases that would cause "discomfort or illness but not death" to dissident tribesmen. When confronted with evidence that officially non-lethal gas could cause blindness and kill women and children Churchill persisted. "I do not," he wrote, "understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poison gas against uncivilized tribes."[25] Although the RAF did conduct dozens of bombing raids in Iraq in the 1920s—sometimes to punish, other times to create shock and awe—they did not drop chemical weapons. During the 1920 insurrection, however, the British army used mustard gas artillery shells against insurgents to "excellent moral effect."[26]

Flash forward again to a November 17, 2005 article in *The Independent*. In it, the authors refer to an article in the March-April edition of *Field Artillery* by three U.S. soldiers who participated in the 2004 assault of Fallujah who write that:

> WP [i.e. White Phosphorus] proved to be an effective and versatile munition. We used it for screening missions... and, later in the fight, as a potent psychological weapon against insurgents in trench lines and spider holes... We fired 'shake and bake' missions at the insurgents using WP to flush them out and high explosive shells (HE) to take them out.[27]

According to the BBC, "White phosphorus is a spontaneously flammable chemical used for battlefield illumination. Contact with particles causes burning of skin and flesh. Use of incendiary weapons is prohibited for attacking civilians," according to Protocol III of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, which the U.S. has not signed.[28]

In a recent documentary on RAI, the Italian network, a former marine who took part in the assault on Fallujah said, "I heard the order to pay attention

because they were going to use white phosphorus on Fallujah. Phosphorus burns bodies, in fact it melts the flesh all the way down to the bone... I saw the burned bodies of women and children. Anyone within a radius of 150 meters is done for."[29]

When first confronted with reports of the use of white phosphorus in Fallujah, American officials denied its use. As the evidence became irrefutable, the strategy of U.S. officials shifted. Colonel Barry Venable, a Pentagon spokesman, defended its use, claiming it was used exclusively against "enemy combatants" and denied that white phosphorus is a chemical weapon. It is, he said, "an incendiary weapon."[30]

The defense of these claims took on a certain urgency since top U.S. officials had offered Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons on his own people as a rationale for invading Iraq. In fact, Paul Wolfowitz, the former Undersecretary of the Defense and one of the principle architects of the invasion of Iraq, admitted that "we settled on the one issue that everyone could agree on, which was weapons of mass destruction as the core reason [...]."[31] As a November 29, 2005 *New York Times* editorial points out: "one of the many crimes ascribed to Saddam Hussein was dropping white phosphorus on Kurdish rebels and civilians in 1991."[32]

Returning to Omissi's study, at the Cairo conference in 1921, Churchill began to institute his plan of shifting military control of Iraq to the RAF. This scheme had the dual motive of significantly reducing the cost of imperial control of Iraq and of assuaging the critics of the British presence there. In 1922, as the British press became almost universally hostile to the occupation of Iraq, military control of the supposedly sovereign country was shifted to the British air force. Churchill, who foresaw the 1920 insurrection as a harbinger for the demise of the British Empire, intended this drawdown in ground troops as an exit strategy. What control by the RAF came to entail—besides the obvious dropping of bombs on so-called recalcitrant tribes and other resisters—can be culled from a 1924 letter by Bell. By this time, her duties had shifted from Oriental Secretary to Director of the Iraq Museum:

> The most interesting thing which happened during this week was a performance by the R.A.F., a bombing demonstration. It was even more remarkable than the one we saw last year at the Air Force Show because it was much more real. They had made an imaginary village about a quarter of a mile from where we sat on the Diyala [(Sirwan)] dyke and the two first bombs, dropped from 3000 ft, went straight

> into the middle of it and set it alight. It was wonderful and horrible. They then dropped bombs all round it, as if to catch the fugitives and finally firebombs which even in the bright sunlight, made flares of bright flame in the desert. They burn through metal, and water won't extinguish them. At the end the armoured cars went out to round up the fugitives with machine guns... It's an amazingly relentless and terrible thing, war from the air.[33]

As Omissi makes clear, such performances were not limited to overseas venues. Air control of Iraq was part of an extensive propaganda project that was profoundly racist in character and also organized for domestic consumption. As Omissi writes, the Hendon Pageant—an annual air force tournament begun in 1920 to make Britons more air minded and which drew tens of thousands of spectators—introduced in 1922 an "Eastern Drama":

> A fort whose towers rose to 100 feet was erected from the wings of obsolete machines, and this was defended by a tribe of airmen, suitably dressed and blackened, known as 'Wottnotts.' Forced landings, emergency repairs and armoured cars were all featured but the finale was the spectacular destruction of the fort by incendiary bombing. In 1927 a similar scene was enacted, this time involving the rescue of a party of European women and children from the inhabitants of the village of 'Hunyadi Janos in Irquestine.' At this stage the air force clearly felt little need to disguise the human losses caused by its operations, for the attacks were directed 'on the village and the natives.[34]

Since we are living in an era in which foreign fighters in Iraq means Arabs, not Americans; death by bombing almost exclusively deaths caused by insurgents; gassing and burning Iraqi civilians exclusively the crimes of Saddam Hussein; the defense of freedom means kidnapping, unlimited detention without charge or trial and the torture of overwhelmingly non-European, non-white, Muslim detainees; and the U.S. government is publicly discussing a reduction of ground troops that will almost certainly be accompanied by an escalation of aerial bombardment, it is certainly worthwhile to consider the ramifications of the pacification practiced by Gertrude Bell's contemporaries.

I certainly do not wish to cast myself as a defender of British imperialism, but unlike the contemporary imperialists, Gertrude Bell at least learned the language, read the literature, lived for years in this part of the world, studied the archaeology, founded the Iraq Museum and insisted on keeping many of the treasures found by Wooley at Ur. And when she died in 1927 she left a bequest of fifty thousand pounds to the museum. When the U.S. military arrived in Baghdad in 2003, they left the Museum unguarded (though, of course, they immediately posted guards at the oil ministry) and hundreds of the items Bell had helped to collect were stolen or destroyed. Asked about the looting in Baghdad, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's response was, "Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things... Stuff happens."[35]

I would like to close with a passage from another of Bell's letters, written during the final stages of so-called "pacification" after the 1920 insurrection, which expresses well the terrible contradiction confronting the current occupying force in Iraq and all imperialists:

> We are greatly hampered by the tribal rising which has delayed the work of handing over to the Arab Govt. Sir Percy, I think rightly, decided that the tribes must be made to submit to force. In no other way was it possible to make them surrender their arms or teach them that you mustn't lightly engage in revolution, even when your holy men tell you to do so... Nevertheless it's difficult to be burning villages at one end of the country by means of a British army, and assuring people at the other end that we really have handed over responsibility to native ministers.[36]

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