

THE AMERICAN EMPIRE PROJECT

# WE MEANT WELL

HOW I HELPED  
LOSE THE BATTLE  
FOR THE HEARTS  
AND MINDS OF  
THE IRAQI PEOPLE

PETER VAN BUREN

---

## Help Wanted, No Experience Necessary

---

The reconstruction of Iraq was the largest nation-building program in history, dwarfing in cost, size, and complexity even those undertaken after World War II to rebuild Germany and Japan. At a cost to the US taxpayer of over \$63 billion and counting, the plan was lavishly funded, yet, as government inspectors found, the efforts were characterized from the beginning by pervasive waste and inefficiency, mistaken judgments, flawed policies, and structural weaknesses. Of those thousands of acts of waste and hundreds of mistaken judgments, some portion was made by me and the two reconstruction teams I led in Iraq, along with my goodwilled but overwhelmed and unprepared colleagues in the State Department, the military, and dozens of other US government agencies. We were the ones who famously helped paste together feathers year after year, hoping for a duck. The scholarly history someone will one day write about Iraq and reconstruction will need the raw material

of failure, and so this war story will try to explain how it all went so wrong.

As a longtime Foreign Service Officer (FSO), I was sent by the Department of State to Iraq for one year in 2009 as part of the civilian Surge deployed to backstop the manlier military one. Along with a half dozen contractors as teammates, I was assigned to rebuild Iraq's essential services, to supply water and sewer access as part of a counterinsurgency struggle to win over the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. It was Vietnam, only better this time around, more T. E. Lawrence than Alden Pyle. I was to create projects that would lift the local economy and lure young men away from the dead-end opportunities of al Qaeda. I was also to empower women, turning them into entrepreneurs and handing them a future instead of a suicide vest. A robust consumer society would do the trick, shopping bags of affirmation leading to democracy.

Executing all this happiness required me to live with the Army as part of an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team (ePRT) on a Forward Operating Base (FOB, rhymes with "cob"). I spent the first six months on FOB Hammer in the desert halfway between Baghdad and Iran before moving to FOB Falcon just south of Baghdad for another half a year. In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, the United States established massive military bases throughout Iraq. Some, like the grows-like-crabgrass Victory Base (the military has little sense of irony), were as big as cities, with thousands of personnel, a Burger King, samba clubs, Turkish hookah bars, and swimming pools. Some were much smaller, such as FOBs Hammer and Falcon, with a couple of hundred soldiers each, Army food, and portable latrines.

My work with the ePRTs involved traveling off the FOBs

to commute to the war. Unlike so-called fobbits, who spent most of their tour on base, I spent a lot of time outside the wire. I was to meet with Iraqis, hand them money for the projects we hoped would spring up, and then assess the results of our spending. Despite endless applications of money and violence prior to my arrival, the United States had failed to pacify Iraq, undertaking projects and holding elections in an endless loop of turning points and imagined progress. “Fuck ‘em and feed ‘em” was the cynical way it was referred to in Vietnam, dropping bombs at night on an area where we dropped food during the daylight hours, destroying history after dark and reconstructing it by day. In Iraq my predecessors evolved nicer ways of describing what we were trying to do, such as “counter-insurgency” or “civil capacity building.” Regardless of the label, the one constant was that I could travel nowhere without an armored vehicle and armed soldiers for protection. Some of the soldiers on the FOB drove us around and pulled security for my team and me. The soldiers didn’t seem to mind the task, as it was easy duty, albeit a bit boring, the day-to-day of imperial policing. We spent hours stuck in armored vehicles, a tedium that made golf seem like a contact sport, shared the futility of reconstructing things while they were still falling apart, and became close to one another in the intense but temporary way of relationships formed in war, like twelve months of one-night stands.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. This story really began in the early 1990s, as I sat ignorant in Taiwan processing tourist visas as a brand-new Foreign Service Officer while Saddam invaded Kuwait. Iraq had since then been continuously under siege by the United States. During Desert Storm we destroyed large portions of its infrastructure. We had gone out of our way

to make a mess, using clever tools such as cruise missiles that spat metallic fibers to short out entire electrical systems we would have to reconstruct. In the years that followed Desert Storm, three US Presidents bombed and rocketed Iraq, running up the bill we would later have to pay. Sanctions meanwhile kept Saddam fat and happy on black-market oil profits while chiseling away Baghdad's cosmopolitan First World veneer and plunging most of Iraq's population into poverty. Events in Iraq ebbed and flowed through the US media over the years but the storm never ended for most Iraqis. It was a seamless epic as the war of 1990–91 continued through the no-fly zones and the sanctions of the nineties, to be capped off by the 2003 invasion and the ensuing years of occupation.

The script for the 2003 invasion did not include an extended reconstruction effort. It instead imagined Americans being greeted as liberators like in post-D-day France, with cheerful natives rushing out to offer our spunky troops bottles of wine and frisky daughters. The Bush administration ignored the somber prewar predictions of the State Department, cut it out of the immediate postwar process, and instead whipped together a blended family of loyal interns, contractors, and soldiers to witness the complete implosion of Iraqi civil society. Things got steadily worse in Iraq as the early Coalition Provisional Authority and military efforts at reconstruction failed, the UN was bypassed, and the security situation discouraged even the hardiest NGOs. By about 2005, the White House saw the need to kick the war into higher gear, sending in the increased deployment of troops known as the Surge, while the Pentagon dusted off the old books from Vietnam for tips on counterinsurgency philosophy. There was originally in the military about as much enthusiasm for reviving counterinsurgency as there

might have been for reinstating horse-borne cavalry charges and cutlasses. We were back in a Vietnam kind of war. It wasn't enough just to kill people and destroy villages. We had to win over the ones still alive, get them to adopt a democratic system and become our allies. Victory would be ours not when we pacified Iraq militarily but when the country was stable enough to stand on its own. This was counterinsurgency, hearts and minds, soft power, whatever you wanted to call it. In the improvisational spirit of the whole war, it was decided that the State Department had better get involved in a big way. State would rebuild and reconstruct Iraq, win over the people with democracy, and then we could all pack up for home.

The vehicle for these accomplishments would be State Department–led Provincial Reconstruction Teams like the ones I served on. PRTs harkened back to the failed Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program in Vietnam, in which State, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and military personnel theoretically worked together to improve the lives of local people and so distance them from the insurgents. In practical terms, PRTs were locally located State Department outposts, usually in or near big cities like Baghdad, Mosul, and Erbil. The first PRT popped up in Baghdad in the spring of 2006. The Secretary of State herself flew in for one of the grand openings in Mosul. At the peak in 2007, there were thirty-one PRTs and thirteen ePRTs in Iraq, a few run by stalwart allies like South Korea and the British.<sup>2</sup> (Unlike an ePRT, which lived tightly enmeshed with the military, a regular PRT stood apart from the military, with its own contracted mercenary security.) By 2009, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams had shrunk in number to sixteen and were All-American, though a former Italian journalist still headed

the one in Dhi Qar, where they had a wood-burning pizza oven and enjoyed red wine with dinner, no doubt easing the strain of war. The teams would leave Iraq after the soldiers did, this time the mission truly accomplished.

The Department of State wanted a lot from its reconstruction teams, as expressed in its vision statement.<sup>3</sup> The teams were “aligned with” the key US priority of:

. . . promoting stability and development at the provincial level to support a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq that is integrated into the global economy. By assisting Iraqis in strengthening the capacity of their government institutions and civil society, the PRTs deepen cooperation at the local level, build stronger relationships, encourage economic diversification and foreign investment, foster the development of transparent and accountable governance, promote rule of law, confront corruption, deliver essential public services, improve public health and promote stability and community development.

But saying so couldn't make it true. The whole of reconstruction was plagued by problems from the start.

For the first years of the war, the military had run reconstruction on its own, albeit haphazardly. The Army conceptualized the work as doing a few favors for the locals, such as vaccinating farm animals or handing out candy, enough to tame the wilderness. State had a much bigger mandate, nothing less than raising up an economically sound, democratic Iraq. The

differences in mission and approach would dog the PRT program for its entire sad life.

Complicating matters was that the reconstruction effort was fragmented and understaffed. By July 2007, sixty-two US government agencies were involved in the project. When General David Petraeus took over the war in Iraq, his advisers identified eight major coordination bodies at the Embassy in Baghdad. “We have an underdeveloped Iraqi bureaucracy and an overdeveloped US bureaucracy,” one Petraeus adviser observed. On the ground we were spread far too thin for so daunting a mission. The East Rasheed ePRT, for example, had to serve a population the size of Detroit with a staff of six. The ePRT in southern Baghdad had eight people from State embedded with 3,700 soldiers tending to one million Iraqis.

Raw number of personnel aside, properly staffing the PRTs and ePRTs with the right mix of people proved to be the greatest challenge of all. The Department of State struggled to field adequate numbers of qualified employees from among its own ranks, forcing the creation of an army of contractors, called 3161s after the name of the legislation in 5 USC 3161 that created their hiring program. They were supposed to be SMEs (pronounced smee, not s-m-e), subject matter experts, a term that became a part of the war’s large lexicon of ironic phrases. “Iraq is not for amateurs,” said Ambassador Chris Hill in Baghdad, though it was mostly amateurs whom the State Department found.<sup>4</sup> The main criterion for hiring seemed to be an interest in living in Iraq for a year with a \$250,000 salary and three paid vacations, and so that took a front seat to any actual skills. In the enthusiasm to staff up, most of these people were hired without interviews, directly off their often wobbly résumés.

Though some of the 3161s turned out to be talented, it was more by luck, personal pluck, or accident than by design. State assigned people roles based on merit badges earned: a former local council member became a senior governance adviser, while a female gym teacher from the Midwest morphed into a women's empowerment programmer. Imagine the old Andy Hardy movies, where the kids' enthusiasm was supposed to make up for the lack of costumes and props.

The need for 3161s to live on a military base also skewed hiring toward former military, nearly self-defeating the idea of providing a civilian side to the reconstruction. The Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) in its review of the PRTs' first year of operation found an Army veterinarian developing agriculture programs, an aviation maintenance manager as a PRT coleader, and advisers to Iraqi provincial governors who included a former Navy submariner, an ultrasound technician, and a Drill Sergeant. PRTs were short of personnel who could best assist Iraqis in developing the capacity to administer the economy, establish the rule of law, and foster good governance, often because the 3161s didn't know how to do these things either. Language was also a problem, as almost none of the 3161s spoke any Arabic. As the State Department did not provide language training, the grand total of Arabic speakers among the 610 PRT personnel deployed in mid-2007 was 29.

Added to the mix were a few genuine State Department FSOs. The first wave was a rare bunch, folks interested in adventure, danger junkies, a few serious Arabists eager to try out their skills. However, with only several thousand FSOs worldwide (even today there are more military band members than FSOs) and embassies and consulates to staff all around the

world, State quickly ran out of the relatively small pool of happy few volunteers. What to do?

The Vietnam CORDS program was the last time the Department of State “directed” Foreign Service Officers into positions abroad that they did not want to take. The program’s name was invoked in whispered conversations all over Foggy Bottom as the Department tried to drum up the next wave of volunteers for Iraq. A small minority of FSOs objected politically to doing anything to support the Bush wars of choice, but really, most of us were just unsure of our role, untrained in how to survive in war, and unclear what the point was anyway. FSOs thus initially stayed away. For political reasons, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was loath to ask Congress for additional, new Foreign Service Officer positions. With the volunteer pool empty and no new FSOs forthcoming that could be tasked to Iraq, all that was left was option number three, to deploy a carrot and stick against existing personnel. This is where I came in.

My side of State was removed from the high-level WikiLeaks things ambassadors did and changed very little between administrations. We worked with Americans who were victims of crime abroad, helping them get home. We took care of folks who got arrested and evacuated people caught up in earthquakes and coups. This was the benign side of empire, the ability to care for our citizens pretty much anywhere in the world. Despite the enthusiasm for the new PRT idea at the higher levels, the rank and file of the State Department like me were unsure if this was right for us. We were ready to hop in after the shooting was over but would do what we could to avoid a fight. Yes, 9/11 had changed everything, we’d heard that, but the concept of inserting us into the middle of a war did not sit well.

Things got serious after State changed personnel rules to make it nearly impossible to get promoted without an Iraq (or Afghanistan, now also Pakistan) tour and added some financial incentives such as special danger pay. With these carrots and sticks, discord was tamped down, the conservative pundits were put back in their cages (Michelle Malkin in particular suggested someone should slap the “weenie and whiner FSOs” who refused to serve in Iraq), and the FSOs were lined up for the surging PRT program without anyone’s having to be forced to go, sort of.<sup>5</sup>

I had never served in the Middle East and knew nothing about rebuilding past the Home Depot guides, but people like me were what the Department had been dealt to play this game. The new rules boxed me into serving or seeing my career flatline. Less cynically, despite my reservations about the war, I still believed in the idea of service (love the warrior, hate the war) and wanted to test myself. I also needed the money, and so the nexus of duty, honor, terrorism, and my oldest daughter’s college tuition (hopefully there’ll be another war when my youngest is college age) led another FSO into semivoluntarily joining The Cause. Between war and peace lies reconstruction and I would try to do my part.

But first, training, or so I thought. Despite the enormity of our task and the stated importance to the interests of the United States, preparation for PRT duty was amazingly brief, all of three weeks. Week One was five days of what we called Islam for Dummies, a quick overview of the religion with some pointers on “Arab” culture (dudes kiss, no serving bacon, no joking about God). Some mention of Sunnis and Shias was made but

the conflict came off more like a sports rivalry than open warfare. The instructor was former military and sounded a lot like Dr. Phil, which was very comforting. It felt like we would be holding an intervention for the war, forcing it to confront its shortcomings—“Tell him, tell him to his face, you are a bad war. You disappointed me, war.” Dr. Phil also gave us our only Arabic language training, ninety minutes of handy phrases and greetings.

Week Two was an overview of the simple spreadsheets and database we’d use to track millions of dollars of project grants, plus a negotiating session where a local Iraqi American was called in to pretend to be a town mayor. He asked for a bribe and then gave me permission to build a dam (in Iraq I never built any dams and there were no mayors in the small towns I visited). Since the class included both longtime State employees and our new contractor colleagues, we all sat politely through a dreary session on how an embassy works. Since there was nothing Middle Eastern in the neighborhood, the class went out as a group to lunch at a Chinese restaurant. Really good pork buns.

Week Three took place at an undisclosed location in West Virginia where we learned defensive driving skills (none of us ever drove on the streets of Iraq) and had a weapons familiarization course (all FSOs in Iraq were unarmed). The last time I punched someone was in junior high school. I was never in the military. I had at that moment never fired a weapon. A Real Man with a biker beard, angry tats, an NYPD baseball cap, and serious sunglasses loaded a weapon (I called them guns then) and carefully placed it in my hands. He kept his own veined, masculine paws on the cold steel, helped me aim it at a very nearby target, and then told me to pull the trigger. He did this for our group of about twenty-five State Department employees.

After each shot, without looking at the target or the shooter, the Man said, “Hit, good shot,” and took the weapon back to prepare for the next person.

After only fifteen school days I was fully trained to lead an ePRT in the midst of a shooting war. Missing from the training was any history of the war and our policy, any review of past or current reconstruction projects, any information on military organization, acronyms, and rank structure, any lessons learned from the previous years’ work, or any idea of what the hell a PRT was and what our job was going to be. They never told us anything about what we were supposed to do once we got there. What we did get was a firm handshake from Dr. Phil and a ride to the airport. I was off to Iraq.