

On My Mind

Memory Loss in Iraq

by Jeffrey Garrett

When our nation attacked and quickly conquered the Iraq of Saddam Hussein—and the legitimacy of that war is not at issue here—we took on the responsibility for safeguarding the cultural legacy of human civilization housed in the museums and libraries of Baghdad. These institutions and their underground storerooms were presumed safe havens for artifacts from all over the country, sent there on the eve of war from provincial centers such as Basra and Mosul. Yet despite these lessons, read Robert Fisk's heartbreaking eyewitness account from the April 15 London *Independent*:

When I caught sight of the Koranic library burning—flames 100 feet high were bursting from the windows—I raced to the offices of the occupying power, the U.S. Marines' Civil Affairs Bureau. An officer shouted to a colleague that "this guy says some biblical [sic] library is on fire." I gave the map location, the precise name—in Arabic and English. I said the smoke could be seen from three miles away and it would take only five minutes to drive there. Half an hour later, there wasn't an American at the scene—and the flames were shooting 200 feet into the air.

What are we to say of an occupying power that stands aside and does nothing when the libraries of a nation are put to the torch? At the very least, this reflects an ignorance of the historical and cultural meaning of libraries as sites of memory. Quite apart from whatever treasures they house, libraries are monuments—"temples" would not be an exaggeration—that pay homage to a people's past and reflect their hopes for the future. (See p. 39–40.)

Conversely, the targeted or tolerated destruction of libraries denies a people the opportunity to draw from

the past and reflect knowledgeably on their place in history and the world to come. It is no coincidence that the most severe punishment inflicted in imperial Rome, reserved for acts of highest treason, was the *damnatio memoriae*: the eradication of all traces that the transgressor had ever lived. As the Iraqi people now must consider their possible futures, projections of their own identity as documented in the historical record, their

libraries could have had a powerful and beneficial influence. But we have squandered that opportunity, both for the Iraqis and ourselves.

Perhaps this was simple negligence. In light of what we now know of the priorities of our own government, at the root could also be a cynical disregard for the inventories of "soft" culture—the arts, literature, history—in favor of the accoutrements of "hard" culture, namely those measurable, material things like wealth, consumption, military and commercial power and assets. Watching a library burn and doing nothing to stop it may bring the word "barbarian" to the lips of any librarian—and indeed any thoughtful contemporary. Maureen Dowd, writing in the April 20 *New York Times*, described our leaders as "swaggering like Goths as Iraq's cultural heritage goes up in flames."

Painful retrospection

The attention paid by the American public to this catastrophic loss of memory is already ebbing, perhaps because Americans, like many peoples, prefer to look ahead rather than back, especially if the retrospection is unpleasant or painful. And

what of our own professional community? At a recent meeting of library directors and collection managers from all over the United States that I attended, the destruction of the National Library of Iraq just days before was not mentioned by any of the speakers.

When the topic did come up at lunch, it provoked a moment of embarrassed silence, and we all decided not to spoil the good feeling of the moment by dwelling on it.

Is it that the thought of all this

destruction is simply too painful to bear? Is it that we have faith that our government will somehow "return" to the people of Iraq what is theirs—a heritage that often existed only in the form of irreplaceable originals? That would be, simply put, a self-serving illusion; and, as Mary Riddell wrote in the April 20 *London Observer*, "When illusion is more seductive than facts, war can make barbarians of us all."

Yes, we must now rapidly mobilize as a profession to help Iraq and the Islamic world recover from this assault on memory. But in no way does this relieve us of the duty and the obligation—for our own long-term mental well being, among other reasons—to consider how this disaster was allowed to occur in the first place. And as we take steps to salvage what can be saved, we also need to take time: to grieve, to be angry, and to be ashamed. ♦

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