

# CounterPunch

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Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

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## OUR LITTLE SECRETS

### BAGHDAD'S GREEN ZONE PROMPTS IRAQI FURY

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

The US army is paralyzing the heart of Baghdad as it builds ever more elaborate fortifications to protect its bases against suicide bombers.

"Do not enter or you will be shot," reads a notice attached to some razor wire blocking a roundabout at what used to be the entrance to the 14 July bridge over the Tigris. Only vehicles with permission to enter the Green Zone, where the occupation authorities have their headquarters, can now use it. Iraqis who want to cross the river must fight their way to another bridge through horrendous traffic jams.

Gigantic concrete slabs, like enormous gray tombstones, now block many roads in Baghdad. They are about 12 feet high and three feet across and for many Iraqis have become the unloved symbol of the occupation. Standing side by side, they form walls around the Green Zone and other US bases, with notices saying it is illegal to stop beside them.

It is the ever-expanding US bases and the increasing difficulties and dangers of their daily lives which make ordinary Iraqis dismiss declarations by President George Bush about transferring power to a sovereign Iraqi government as meaningless. As Mr Bush and Tony Blair were speaking this week about a new beginning for Iraq, the supply of electricity in the country has fallen from 12 hours a day to six hours. On Canal Street yesterday, close to the bombed-out UN headquarters, there was a two-mile long line of cars waiting to buy petrol.

Salahudin Mohammed al-Rawi, an engineer, dismisses the diplomatic maneuvers over Iraq at the UN in New York and the G8 meeting in Georgia as (**Green Zone** continued on page 2)

## Special Reagan Memorial Edition

### Cartoon Bubbles and the Challenger

BY ALEXANDER COCKBURN

They keep talking about Reagan being a "big picture" man, indifferent to petty detail. The phrase gives a false impression, as though Reagan looked out at the world as at some Cinemascope epic, a vast battlefield where, through those famous spectacles (one lens close-up, for speech reading, the other long-distance) he could assess the global balance of forces. Wrong. Reagan stayed awake only for the cartoons, where the global balance of forces were set forth in simple terms, in the tiffs between Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, or Tom and Jerry.

When he became president, and thus "commander in chief", the Joint Chiefs of Staffs mounted their traditional show-and-tell briefings for him, replete with simple charts and a senior general explicating them in simple terms. Reagan found these briefings way too complicated and dozed off.

The Joint Chiefs then set up a secret unit, staffed by cartoonists. The balance of forces were set forth in easily accessible caricature, with Soviet missiles the size of upended Zeppelins, pulsing on their launchpads, with the minuscule US ICBMs shrivelled in their bunkers. Little cartoon bubbles would contain the points the Joint Chiefs wanted to hammer into Reagan's brain, most of them no doubt to the effect that "we need more money". Reagan really enjoyed the shows and sometimes even asked for repeats.

I have boundless faith in the American people, but it was startling to see the lines of people sweating under a hot sun waiting to see Reagan's casket. How could any of them take the dreadful old faker seriously? The nearest thing to it I can

think of is the hysteria over Princess Di. In its way, the "outpouring" reminds me of what, nearly 20 years ago, I termed "news spasms", expertly fuelled by the imagineers in the Reagan White House.

These spasms – Nuremberg rallies really – were totalitarian in structure and intent, obsessively monopolistic of newsprint and the airwaves, forcing a "national mood" of consensus, with Reagan (in this reprise, his casket) as master of ceremonies. Particularly memorable spasm events included the downing of KAL 007, the destruction of the US Marine barracks outside Beirut, the Achille Lauro hijackings and the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle of January 28, 1986.

In fact it was the White House that had doomed Christa McAuliffe and her companions to be burned alive in the plummeting Challenger. The news event required the Challenger to go into orbit and be flying over Congress while Reagan was delivering his state of the union address. He was to tilt his head upward and, presumably gazing through the long-distance half of his spectacles, send a presidential greeting to the astronauts.

On launch morning it was freezing in Florida and it looked as though the mission would be postponed.

But NASA was having its arm twisted by the White House to stay on schedule. The Challenger was launched with that notorious O-ring fatally compromised by the cold.

The day after the crash there was one brief news item in, I think, The Washington Post, about the possibility of pressure on NASA, then silence. The White House news managers successfully iced the story. (**Reagan** continued on page 5)

(**Green Zone** continued from page 1)  
an irrelevant charade. He said: "At the end of the day they cannot cheat the Iraqi people because the Iraqis are in touch with the real situation on the ground."

For many people in Baghdad the real situation is very grim. Twenty years ago Abu Nawas Street on the Tigris used to be filled with restaurants serving mazgouf, a river fish grilled over an open wood fire and a traditional Baghdadi delicacy.

These days Abu Nawas is largely deserted and is used mainly by American armored vehicles thundering down the road. Shahab al-Obeidi is the manager of the Shatt al-Arab restaurant, where dark gray fish swim in a circular pond decorated with blue tiles. They may survive a long time. Mr Obeidi confesses that business is not good. These days Abu Nawas can only be entered from one direction and culminates in an American checkpoint.

We asked to see the owner of the restaurant and Mr Obeidi explained that he "fled to Syria 40 days ago after his son was kidnapped and he had to pay \$20,000 to get him back". A problem, frequently mentioned by Iraqis, is that US security measures appear to be solely directed at providing security for Americans. For Iraqis, life in Baghdad is still very dangerous. Mr Obeidi said that "in the past 75 per cent of our business was in the evening". Now he closes the Shatt al-Arab at 6pm and goes home. One night

he stayed open a little later for some customers who were having a good time, but when he presented the bill they responded by pulling out their pistols and firing volleys of shots into the ceiling and through the windows. Mr Obeidi pointed to numerous bullet holes still awaiting repair.

The reason why Abu Nawas is sealed off is that at the end of the street are the Palestine and Sheraton hotels, where many foreign company employees as well as journalists stay. A few hundred yards away is Sadoun Street, once a main four-lane artery in central Baghdad, but now reduced to two lanes opposite a side street leading to the Baghdad Hotel. This was attacked by a suicide bomber last year, without much damage to the hotel, which was universally believed by Iraqi taxi drivers to be a center for the CIA. About 30 shops within the cordon sanitaire around the hotel now face ruin. Nadim al-Hussaini, who has a shop selling large air conditioners, says: "My business has completely disappeared, first 30 to 40 per cent when they put up a concrete barrier and 100 per cent when they closed the road." In theory he should get compensation from the Coalition Provisional Authority, but so far he has seen no sign of it.

Next door, Zuhair Tuma owns a cafe which is not so badly affected because he still has his regular customers, smoking hubble-bubble pipes and playing dominoes. He was a little more understanding about why the road had been closed, saying: "I don't want to get blown up any more than the Americans do. But the real solution is simply for the Americans staying at the hotel to leave it."

The same could be said of the thousands of American officials and soldiers in central Baghdad. Had they based themselves on the outskirts of the capital they would have been less visible. But, cut off as they are in their compounds from real Iraqi life, they probably do not know and may not care about the sea of resentment that surrounds them.

## TROY, NOW AND THEN

### BY JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

"The true hero, the true subject, the center of the Iliad, is force. Force as man's instrument, force as man's master, force before which human flesh shrinks back. The human soul, in this poem, is shown always in its relation to force; swept away, blinded by the force it thinks it can direct, bent under the pressure of the force to which it is subjected. Those who had dreamed that

force, thanks to progress, now belonged to the past, have seen the poem as a historic document; those who can see that force, today as in the past, is at the center of all human history, find in the Iliad its most beautiful, its purest mirrorforce is what makes the person subjected to it into a thing."

Simone Weill, *L'Iliad ou le Poeme de la Force*, 1939

Like Briseis dragged off to Agamemnon's tent, I was hauled down the road and forced to watch Troy...the movie.

Even before the opening credits had finished their scroll, it dawned on me (with not-quite-rosy-fingers) that the director, Wolfgang Peterson, was not working from the Richmond Lattimore translation of blind Homer's epic recounting the rage of Achilles and the collateral damage left in his wake. But that's fine by me. Lattimore's interpretation of Homer may be the liveliest rendition in the English language, but I'd read it so many times there was nothing new to be gleaned from the story. And besides I prefer Alexander Pope's version, executed in the merciless march of heroic couplets. Alas, no couplets here, either--heroic or otherwise.

I fully expected to be able to watch this film unfold in my sleep. But imagine my surprise when Menelaus (who started the whole mess after he refused to take the herbal concoction that passed for Viagra in the Hellenistic period in order to keep his young and randy bride happy) and mighty Ajax got whacked in the first major fracas between the forces of the Peloponnese and Ilium. Major characters getting axed in the first reel. Was this the Iliad or The Sopranos?

By the way, in Homer's account red-bearded Menelaus (perhaps kin of the Wandering Celt, who had found his way down to sunny Lacedaemon), is the only fair-skinned person in the whole sweeping drama, aside from "white-armed" Hera. In Peterson's version, all the players look like they stepped out of an audition for a remake of Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* and, for some reason, utter their lines in mock-Elizabethan accents, like players in a production of *Titus Andronicus* as staged in Pocatello.

My spirits lifted immediately. With Ajax and Menelaus dead, perhaps now the Trojans had a fighting chance! Think how history could have changed. The enchanting Trojan women would be saved from their cruel fate. Aeneas, burdened by the weight of Anchises, wouldn't have to flee the burning citadel. The Roman Empire would never rise, decline and fall. The Etruscans would still control Tuscany...instead of the

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