

Watching Our Cities Fall

Remembering Ramadi, Iraq, for [Insert-Your-City-or-Village] Afghanistan

Many Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan veterans know that sick-to-your-stomach feeling that comes from watching the enemy plant his flag on the spot where your friends—American, allies, partners—bled and died.

These are my memories of Ramadi, Iraq, a city in which I earned crash-course citizenship, and where my Iraqi, Marine, and Army brothers bled and died, and where the Islamic State raised its black flag in 2015.

Commentary

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Opinions presented in this **commentary** do not necessarily reflect the analyses, opinions, or interpretations of evidence of any organization to which the author has previously belonged, or to which the author may presently belong. Thank you to my friends who provided much-needed edits.

I am writing this for a bit of catharsis and to help inform general readers. But I am mostly writing this in support of Afghanistan War veterans currently struggling to deal with Taliban victory. In these 14 pages I focus on my experience in Ramadi, briefly discuss our withdrawal from Iraq, and end with some thoughts on Afghanistan.

As I watched the Taliban raise their white flags over provincial capitals across Afghanistan—in Lashkar Gah, Herat, Kunduz, Qalat, Jalalabad, et al.—and then over Kabul in mid-2021, I remembered how it felt to watch the Islamic State raise its black flag over cities in Iraq. In particular, I kept thinking back to the mid-May 2015 moment when the Iraqi Government Center in Ramadi, Anbar Province, fell.

Watching a place you fought for, or at least risked your life to protect, fall to the enemy can be unsettling. Each veteran has a unique reaction. Some might shrug, not caring, having moved on or having expected things to fall apart. Some might be angry and cast blame on their local partners, on our political leaders, or on the American public for failing to support their mission. Others might take in these images and experience a personal defeat.

I remember taking the fall of the Government Center in Ramadi personally. Some veteran friends reacted with quiet resignation as they watched Lashkar Gah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, fall to the Taliban. Others Afghanistan War veterans who have spoken out have been furious at our failure and unsure of our strategy. Still others felt they had taken part in a lie and had abandoned Afghans in need. Others are struggling, and sometimes succeeding, to find the good in all of this badness.

None of these feelings are unique to Afghanistan. No American, British, Afghan, or other Afghanistan War veteran stands alone. There are hundreds of thousands of us who came before you, or served in parallel with you, who watched their adopted cities fall to the enemy. Many of us watched the enemy we had pledged to defeat take celebratory strolls across the ground where our friends bled and died. Many veterans fought in Afghanistan *and* Iraq, and carry at least two burdens, and probably more.

Before the West moves on from the Afghanistan disaster, veterans—Westerners, Afghans, Iraqis, Vietnamese, et al.—need to tell their stories about watching the enemy raise his flag over the hundreds of towns and cities to which we belong. All of these stories connect us and force us to put current events in context.

Our partners can tell the most meaningful stories because they have lost their actual homes, their streets. Western veterans can help translate their experiences to help Western citizens process our wars. What was it like to be there? What experiences connected us to the place that was later lost to the enemy? Why does it matter to you?

This is my story about Ramadi. I urge anyone who says any of us served without purpose, or that our friends died in vain, to read, listen, and then calmly rethink and rearticulate their position.

Earning My Ramadi Citizenship

Veterans tend to quietly measure the value of each other's combat experience based on four criteria: (1) were you in a dangerous area?; (2) were you there when it was *really* dangerous?; (3) how long were you there?; and (4) how much direct, face-to-face combat did you see?

By those criteria, my January-July 2004 tour in Ramadi (second of three Iraq tours in my second war with Iraqis) doesn't give me much combat credibility. I spent every night mostly safe and sound aboard one of many forward operating bases in our province. Thousands of other Americans were outside the wire almost all the time, many in daily combat. Infantry lance corporals deserve the real respect and credit. But our recollections and stories are richer and more powerful when they are woven together. All veterans, regardless of the nature of their experience, can and should record and share their thoughts.

Ramadi and the Anbar Province Government Center

I was an intelligence officer, cultural advisor, and tribal engagement officer working out of Camp Blue Diamond. Blue Diamond (named after the First Marine Division blue diamond patch) was one of Saddam Hussein's former auxiliary palace complexes. It was an oblong strip of land running east to west, about 500 yards long and between ~100 and 200 yards wide. Blue Diamond was pinned to the Euphrates River on the south side and open to perfect, green, insurgent-friendly farmland to the north.



Created using Google Maps and National Geographic Map Maker

My primary job was to build our relationships with Iraqi tribal leaders and to help engage with the governor of Anbar Province.¹ Usually this meant hitching a ride on a convoy from our main gate, down Route Michigan, to the Government Center complex. This was where the governor and the police chief had their offices, and where the provincial council met.

Those buildings symbolized the Iraqi government in Anbar. By keeping them up and running we could claim at least a nominal hold on the whole province, no matter how badly things were going elsewhere. Often things were quite bad elsewhere, and the Government Center was a bullet magnet.²



Author at a Ramadi-area camp for internally displaced persons, 2004

My typical week consisted of about three or four road trips through Ramadi to meet with the governor and council members at the Government Center, or to drive down the side streets of Ramadi or out to local farms to meet tribal leaders. Sometimes we would patrol on foot out to meet with local leaders. About once every ten days I'd catch a longer convoy or helicopter flight to Fallujah, or Al Qa'im, or Baghdad, or Trebil for various reasons, but Ramadi was my home base.³

¹ Anbar makes up about a third of the physical space of Iraq, and at the time it had about 1.5 million people. Ramadi was a city of nearly 500,000.

² For more on the war in Anbar Province in 2004, see: Kenneth W. Estes, *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004-2005: Into the Fray*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps History Division, 2011. As of August 24, 2021: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=682897> Many books have been written about this period. If you're interested in learning more, get recommendations from your veteran friends or type in Iraq + War + Anbar in an online bookseller's search field.

³ Fallujah was the second largest city in Anbar and the focal point for the most intense combat in the war. It lies about 40 kilometers east of Ramadi. Al-Qa'im was a small city and rail hub along the western border with Syria. Baghdad is the capital of Iraq, also east of Ramadi. Trebil was a border crossing point with Jordan. Nobody was managing our 300 or so interpreters at the division headquarters so I just

Sitting with Burgis in Ramadi

I sat with the first Anbar Governor, Abd al-Karim Burgis al-Rawi, for many hours in his diwan at the Government Center. If you want to imagine the room, it looked remarkably like the Kabul palace office—I believe former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's former office—from which the Taliban held their first victory-lap press conference in 2021.

In many ways Burgis was like most other hardened middle-aged Iraqi men. He was built like a human rectangle, wore too-loose or too-tight Western suits, and had the calm, hard eyes of a man who had been numbed by decades of casual violence. But he also had kindness and a subtle, very Iraqi sense of humor.

Burgess loved to play a game I'll call, Who Is Calmer Now? I'm sure other Marines, soldiers, and civilians had the same dynamic with him. As we sat drinking sweet tea or coffee (or both), mortar or rocket rounds would start landing near, around, and sometimes in the compound. Or a big gunfight would spark up down the street, sending a few stray rifle or machinegun rounds ricocheting past his office windows. He would sit very still and let a slight grin creep up around the edges of his mouth while he stared right into my eyes. I learned quickly that I had to mirror his calm stare or lose his respect. The two of us would sit there acting like nothing crazy was happening outside the window. We'd carry on our conversation like the two coolest dudes in Iraq. I probably shouldn't have, but I loved it.



Destroyed then rebuilt for at least the first time, Ramadi Government Center in 2008—Photo credit Sergeant Jeremy Giacomino. As of August 24, 2021: <https://www.1stmardiv.marines.mil/News/News-Article-Display/Article/541470/government-center-a-symbol-of-progress-in-ramadi/>

Burgis earned his respect. He took what was probably one of the most dangerous government jobs in Iraq when the Iraqi government existed mostly on paper and when American commitment looked shaky. He lived under constant threat of death. I can't say I knew him well enough to judge all his motivations, but I know he cared deeply

started doing that job. It gave me a great excuse to get out on the road to see the whole province, and to see my buddies at Al-Asad, or Korean Village, or Camp Fallujah.

about Iraq and about Anbar. He wanted a safe, stable country for his family. Burgis did his job and stayed calm, even knowing it wasn't going to end well for him.

One day Abd al-Karim al-Burgis al-Rawi appeared on Iraqi television. His calm was broken and his cold gaze had melted. He read a formal resignation speech while clearly trying to hold back tears. Al Qaeda had kidnapped his two young sons and threatened to torture and kill them if he didn't resign. I didn't have children at the time and I could not then fully appreciate the horror of his situation. But I thought he made the right choice. As far as I know he and his boys are still alive.

Burgis wasn't my friend or my brother. He probably wouldn't even remember me today. But I was there with him in 2004 when he risked his life and the lives of his kids to help save his country from chaos.

I can still picture the Government Center like a high-resolution photograph. I remember every hallway and doorway and window, all the cracked cement and flaking paint in that building. I can feel both the cold, warped metal doors and the grain of the heavy wooden doors in my hand. I can still feel the dirt of the parking area under my boots, the crumbling cement bricks of the backyard walkways, and the institutional flooring inside. I can still smell and taste the sugary tea and coffee and fruit and kebab and roasted chicken and scallions and bread that I shared with Burgis, and many other Iraqis in that diwan before and after he left. I have sharper memories of those offices in Ramadi than I do of my childhood home. Like so many Marines who were there with me, and who came after me, I own a part of the Government Center in Ramadi.

Playing Cool and Not-So-Cool at Blue Diamond, Ramadi

Marines played their own version of Who Is Cooler Now? at Camp Blue Diamond, my Ramadi home base.

While we had intermittent periods of calm, we took incoming mortar or rocket rounds on many days, usually in the early afternoon. Some former Iraqi Republican Guard mortarmen would expertly walk light or heavy mortar rounds right down the main axis of the base, or they would line up some old Bulgarian 57mm air-to-ground rockets on homemade metal racks and launch them at varying angles to achieve the same effect.⁴ The rockets were worse because they came in flat and fast and gave one less time to duck.

But because we were in the First Marine Division—an outfit that prides itself on elan—many of us made it a habit not to duck. At least for the first few months of our deployment, if we were anywhere near then-Major General James Mattis, Brigadier General John Kelly, or Colonel Joe Dunford, most of worked hard not to flinch or dive for cover. None of us could imagine showing fear in front of or even near those men.

⁴ If you want to learn more about the various rockets shot at us in Iraq, and also in Afghanistan, see: Matt Schroeder, *Rogue Rocketeers: Artillery Rockets and Armed Groups*, working paper, Geneva, Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, 2014. As of August 24, 2021: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/182831/SAS-WP19-Rogue-Rocketeers.pdf>

There were no sandbags or concrete barriers to speak of on our base. When the fire came in, we did our best to pretend it wasn't happening.

So, if we were in a conversation with another Marine while an attack started, we stared right into each other's eyes and kept talking while quietly hoping not to get shredded. If we were feeling particularly jaunty, we might share a smile, standing straight up like idiots while perfectly good cover lay within diving distance. The real trick of the game was to speak in smooth, uninterrupted sentences as each BOOM! rippled the air between you.

We all felt cool as hell standing there while death flew randomly around our tiny base in Ramadi. It was exhilarating as long as nobody got hit. Our game became less fun over time as more and more Marines were wounded and killed. An ill-advised football game was broken up by air-burst mortar rounds that sent shrapnel into one Marine's skull. A Marine was killed by an 82mm mortar round as he walked out of a tent. Another died in a Port-a-John right on the edge of the Euphrates River. Just next door at a camp called Junction City, a large warhead rocket landed right in the middle of a formation. Nearly forty reserve Navy Seabees were felled by that one lucky round.⁵ By April 2004, living on a base in or around Ramadi had become a daily roulette spin with fate.

One day I helped to carry a wounded Marine to a medevac helicopter. He and his buddies had been working on our water purification plant when a shell landed and ripped open his leg. He stared up at me from the stretcher, expecting some cool reassurance or wisdom from a Marine officer. I couldn't think of anything useful to say as we walked him to the landing zone, so I said, "Keep smiling!" His look of fear transformed to one of pure hatred as he laser focused on my profound stupidity. I feel that I helped take his mind off his wound.

Our Iraqi partners lived with near constant threat of dismemberment and death. Most Americans who survived the fighting in Ramadi had close, or closer calls with death. One day I was walking across the base and a single 57mm rocket slammed into the ground on the other side of a thick stone wall about thirty feet in front of me. It was too late to duck so I froze for a moment and then quickly walked into a building. Big chunks of shrapnel had splashed up and pocked a long stretch of the other side of the wall. Normally, about twenty Marines would have been lined up to get their clean laundry right at that time, but our Iraqi laundryman (along with the barber and other Blue Diamond Iraqi workers) had been kidnapped.

It felt personal for one three-day stretch. I had fallen into a habit of driving out in town in the morning, returning for lunch, working out at about 1:00pm, and then heading to the shower at (as I recall) about 2:15 or so before returning to work. My timing sucked. That week the insurgents decided that their shooting times were 2:15 to 2:20.

On the first day that week I was showering in the unprotected, thin aluminum-walled sanitation trailer. Mortar rounds started slamming into the base, first to my east, then

⁵ Eric Barton, "The Deadliest Day," *Miami New Times*, December 30, 2004. As of August 24, 2021: <https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/the-deadliest-day-6342261>

nearby, then to my west towards our main headquarters. There was nowhere for me to go, so I stood there naked in the plastic shower stall waiting for the attack to end. It is not fun to be naked while people are trying to kill you.

The next day I was in the same trailer, same time of day, and had just stripped down to get in the shower. Our neighborhood mortarmen did their thing, east to west. This time I dove face down onto the perforated rubber matting on the floor. I lay there in the green shower floor slime left by 100 Marines, waited for the attack to end, then cleaned off and went back to work.

On the third day my antennae were up. Half in jest, I started thinking that maybe the insurgents were applying psychological warfare to make me afraid of showering. Not wanting to give in to insurgent intimidation, I followed my same routine. This time I was flip-flopping my way to the shower while trying to pin a way-too-small brown towel around my waist, and while holding my shower kit in my other hand. A team of insurgents drove a big dump truck past the eastern wall and fired a rocket propelled grenade lengthwise, east to west, down Camp Blue Diamond. The rocket flew about fifteen feet over my head and slammed into a nearby building. I involuntarily dropped my towel and stood there, naked again, feeling chilled.

After about three months of that kind of routine, most of us started diving for cover when the rounds landed. I hugged the ground in Ramadi many times.

On the Road in Ramadi

Ramadi was, at various points during the war, the most dangerous city in Iraq.⁶ Snipers shot Marines and soldiers standing post at the Government Center, and at small bases around the city. High-intensity direct fire ambushes were common. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were everywhere. We took heavy casualties in and around Ramadi from 2004 through 2007.⁷

I was lucky. I was never hit by an IED despite many hairy drives in an unarmored Humvee or open-bed truck along Route Michigan or down Ramadi's spooky narrow side streets. Too many Marines had been blown up once or several times. If they survived they would come back through the gate half deaf and not talking. Sometimes they had the blood of their friends soaked into their uniforms.

⁶ This short but rich article captures some of the sweep of the conflict in Ramadi from 2003-2016: Elizabeth McLaughlin and Justin Fishel, "After ISIS: Inside the Iraqi City Left in Ruins," *ABC News*, May 13, 2016. As of August 24, 2021: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/isis-inside-iraqi-city-left-ruins/story?id=39073778>

⁷ By 2006, the Government Center was the focal point for almost daily insurgent ground attacks and what effectively became conventional combat. Marines and soldiers routinely called heavy artillery fire, aerial bombs, and laser-guided missiles into the buildings the insurgents used to launch their attacks. One building was simply referred to as Swiss Cheese because of all the rounds it had absorbed. I remember in 2006, standing aboard Camp Fallujah, watching a huge long-range missile—the kind of missile designed to take out entire conventional artillery units—erupt from its launcher and fly into the lower atmosphere on its way to downtown Ramadi.

Everyone had their own way of dealing with the IED threat. Some would constantly scan ahead, looking for a telltale lollipop disturbance in the road, or an errant barrel or trash pile that might hide a few big 152mm artillery rounds wired up to blast Americans as they drove past. Some guys were just born cold and genuinely weren't bothered by the possibility of being blown to pieces, burned, or maimed. They were the exception. Most of us had to make some accommodation with fear.

I found the best way to convoy through Ramadi was to start the drive by accepting my own death. I'm sure other veterans have articulated this approach.

For Marines who could pull it off, accepting death temporarily gave us the same kind of enviable calm as our icy (or unnaturally cheerful) semi-sociopathic brothers. I usually sat in the back seat of a Humvee and pointed my rifle out the window. I wanted the window open because at the time I figured I would rather die outright than eat a face full of hot metal and flying (not-even-remotely-bulletproof) glass, maybe live in agony for a few minutes, and then die.

In that state of acceptance, the disturbances in the road, the barrels, the suspicious animal carcasses, and the piles of trash would come into bright contrast and everything in the background would fade out. As we drove by what I thought had to be an IED I would calmly say to myself, "ah, here it comes..." and then wait in a placid state, fixing my eyes on the spot as we drove by. Every time something didn't explode I felt like I had won a little game. After about the 100th little win I just became numb and stopped paying attention.

I spent over six months of my life driving around Ramadi, or down the longer roads to other rough places. Other Americans probably racked up a couple of years there and lived far more dangerous lives. But we all own those roads along with the Iraqis who lived and died in Ramadi.

Iraqi Friends in Ramadi

While we were fighting insurgents in Iraq, we were also trying to help build up the Iraqi government and make Anbar Province a better place to live. I played a small role in helping with aid programs, handing out soccer balls, assessing refugee camps, and conducting surveys of the population. But for the most part I tried to help by building relationships with Iraqis in and around Ramadi.

For months I engaged in cold, quid pro quo conversations with Iraqi leaders. They wanted something out of me (or really, my boss, Major General Mattis), and I wanted them to cooperate with the government. It was a dull, pointless dance from which neither side gained much.

Real change came when mostly non-Ramadi Al Qa'ida took their abuse of the population too far. They started murdering people for money, forcing local women to marry their fighters, and killing local children. That was too much for many Iraqis. I watched men I had known and not liked, and who had not liked me, risk their lives to defeat Al Qa'ida in Ramadi. Many Iraqi men I knew and respected, with whom I had

shared tea with at the Government Center, or in their homes, or at Blue Diamond, died fighting back for our loosely collective cause.

One man I knew, Sheikh Nasr al-Fahadawi, reportedly held Al Qa'ida leaders at gunpoint in his basement so Iraqis could have safe elections in Anbar.⁸ I knew Nasr. Nasr didn't like Americans. He told me as much right to my face. But over time he had come to believe that we were there to help. A month after he took his bold stand against Al Qa'ida, Nasr was murdered.

Governor Burgis' boys were kidnapped. Later governors were killed or came to work every day under constant threat of death. Tribal leaders who pledged to work with us were killed, and their families were killed, because they teamed with outsiders and because they dared to challenge the ultra-violent Al-Qa'ida criminals who dominated Ramadi.

I remember at the time, and later, when so many American and British politicians denigrated our Iraqi partners. They suggested or stated outright that Iraq was hopeless and lost, and that Iraqis would never fight for themselves. In 2006, then-Senator Joseph Biden suggested Iraq should be split into thirds and that Iraqis should be left to fend for themselves after a fixed-in-time American withdrawal.⁹ A year later, Senator Harry Reid stated publicly that the war in Iraq was lost. When I re-read his statement while writing this article, I felt a surge of the same emotions I had felt upon first hearing Reid publicly quit on our behalf.

Most politicians—right, left, and center—didn't know or chose not to acknowledge or care about all the brave Iraqis who fought and died to stabilize their country. Shallow generalizations served a political purpose back home. Worse, these politicians used their assessments of Iraq to justify American withdrawal and to put a fig leaf over our own—over *their* own—shambolic will to fight. Over the years, many Iraqis evolved beyond quid pro quo thinking, and many American leaders did not.

Despite being repeatedly let down by American political will, the Iraqis I knew came to respect us. I came to respect and like them. I have spent more than a decade after my last tour in Iraq interviewing the same men I worked with or fought against in Ramadi, eating in their now humble homes, hearing their stories, finding out periodically that another one of them has been killed while fighting to make his country safe.

When I hear Western political leaders today denigrate Afghan security forces and condemn Afghans for lacking the will to fight, I am drawn back to similar generalizations made about Iraqis. I think about my Iraqi friends who fought and died

⁸ If you want to learn more about the Iraqis and read more American thoughts on the war in Anbar, see the two-part *Al-Anbar Awakening* series published by the U.S. Marine Corps History Division. Both reports are free PDFs available at <https://www.hqmc.marines.mil>. Search for Al-Anbar Awakening, authors are Timothy S. McWilliams and Kurtis P. Wheeler.

⁹ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., and Leslie H. Gelb, "Unit through Autonomy in Iraq," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2006. As of August 22, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/01/opinion/01biden.html> A decade later I offered some opposing thoughts: Ben Connable, "Partitioning Iraq: Make a Detailed Case, or Cease and Desist," *War On The Rocks*, May 16, 2016. As of August 22, 2021: <https://warontherocks.com/2016/05/partitioning-iraq-make-a-detailed-case-or-cease-and-desist/>

for their province, and for their city, Ramadi, and I am drawn even closer to them and to the city itself.

American Blood and Death in Ramadi

Instead of trying to remember all of the Marines I knew who were maimed or died in Ramadi, I'll focus on one: Jorge Molinabautista. I met Jorge during our movement up from Kuwait to Ramadi. He was on Mattis' "jump" command post (the Jump), a couple of light armored vehicles spiked with antennae designed to get the general around Anbar. Jorge worked for the rotating handful of officers who ran the Jump. He spent long, dangerous hours on the roads to and from Blue Diamond.

I spent several nights talking with Jorge, or sat with him at chow, catching up on events and hearing about his family. He had three young sons. He was a kind, thoughtful, cheerful man. Jorge was one of those guys who was always happy to see me and other Marines, even in his worst moments. I was always happy to see him as well, even if it was just to wave hello as he brought his Marines in from another road trip.

Working the Jump was probably one of the most dangerous jobs in the First Marine Division. Insurgents of all stripes knew who was riding in those two antennae-topped vehicles. They very badly wanted to kill a Marine general. I believe over 60% of the Marines on the Jump were killed or severely wounded in 2004.

One Jump officer was shredded by a barrel full of explosives. According to a Marine who was still wide-eyed in awe as he relayed the story to me, that lieutenant calmly exited his vehicle after the explosion, accounted for all his Marines, radioed in the attack, and continued to lead while the meat from his arm hung down, exposed to the bone. The young Marine said to me, "That's a real Marine officer." After reconstructive surgery the lieutenant went on to become a Marine pilot.

Jorge was not so lucky. On May 23, 2004, insurgents detonated an IED between his Jump vehicle and a passing Army vehicle. He was killed instantly. Here is a summary of Jorge's obituary:¹⁰

Jorge A. Molinabautista wanted to become a Marine since his childhood. "He believed in what he was doing," said his sister, Connie Molina. "He was so proud. He's a hero." Staff Sgt. Molinabautista, 37, of Rialto, Calif., spent 13 years in the Marine Corps and had trained as a drill instructor at Camp Pendleton, Calif., where he was based. He was killed May 23 by hostile fire in Iraq's Anbar province. He had asked the Marines to change his last name from Molina to Molinabautista to honor his mother, Maria Bautista, and the military accommodated his request. Molinabautista is survived by his wife, Dina, and three sons.

¹⁰ As of August 24, 2021: <https://thefallen.militarytimes.com/marine-staff-sgt-jorge-molina-bautista/257306>

Jorge's blood is still in the Ramadi ground. He owns part of that city, and so does his family. They all paid for it. So do Jorge's Marines, and the Marines he worked for and who cared for him, and so do the rest of us who counted him as a friend.

Watching Ramadi Fall

Iraqis could never really count on our help, even as we promised it to them over the years. Various American political leaders—Republicans and Democrats—tried to extract us from our Iraq war, sometimes by gaslighting or by applying half-measures, and sometimes directly. Barack Obama pulled the plug in late 2011, withdrawing all American troops despite the existence of a public U.S. assessment that the Iraqis were not ready to defend their country alone. In October 2011, he said this:¹¹

I can report that, as promised, the rest of our troops in Iraq will come home by the end of the year. After nearly nine years, America's war in Iraq will be over...The last American soldier[s] will cross the border out of Iraq with their heads held high, proud of their success, and knowing that the American people stand united in our support for our troops. That is how America's military efforts in Iraq will end.

Actually, we left Iraq holding our collective breath, fingers crossed, trying not to look back. Most of us knew that we were leaving too soon and that disaster would probably follow. American troops went back in a few years later in a reluctant acknowledgment of reality. President Obama went on in his 2011 speech:¹²

So, to sum up, the United States is moving forward from a position of strength. The long war in Iraq will come to an end by the end of this year. The transition in Afghanistan is moving forward, and our troops are finally coming home. As they do, fewer deployments and more time training will help keep our military the very best in the world.

We did not leave from a position of strength. We left from a position of collective mental weariness and a collective desire to forget about Iraq. As many forecasted, the long war in Iraq—all nine years of it at the time—did not come to an end for either the Iraqis or for the Western nations that left them behind. In 2014, the Islamic State attacked and seized about one-third of Iraq.

¹¹ Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq, Washington, D.C.: The White House, October 21, 2011. As of August 24, 2021: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq>

¹² Obama, 2011. In 2014, Obama blamed the Iraqi state and the Iraqi people for his withdrawal decision, and also for the rise of the Islamic State. He stated, "...they could not pass the kind of laws that would be required to protect our troops in Iraq." That is the thinnest of excuses. Obama's efforts to push through a residual presence were anemic. Arguably, given all of his public statements on Iraq, they were purposefully anemic. See: Barack Obama, Statement by the President on Iraq, Washington, D.C.: The White House, August 9, 2014. As of August 24, 2021: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/09/statement-president-iraq>

Despite some short-lived but valiant efforts by Iraqis to defend the city, including one police commander I had helped to install as the National Guard commander in 2004, the Islamic State seized Ramadi in May 2015.¹³

They hoisted their black flag right over the government center, over the rooftops where so many Marines had died, over the offices where I and hundreds of other Americans had met with Iraqi leaders, over the city that we had risked our lives to protect. Then, once they had collected all the photos and videos they needed, the Islamic State fighters lit our building on fire and watched it burn.

I heard about the fall of Ramadi before I saw any of the photographs. My initial reaction was cold and somewhat bitter. I remember thinking to myself, this is what we all deserve for our weak policies. But when I saw images of that death-black flag flying over what I felt was my building, my city—our building, our city—my reaction changed. Bitterness gave way to sadness and anger. I remembered everyone from my time in Ramadi, in 2004 and later during part of my 2006 tour. I felt that we had all been betrayed by our political leaders, and I felt like I had personally failed.

However, I never felt that the Iraqis had let us down. I knew why the Iraqi police fled. I knew why so many Anbaris stood back while the Islamic State flooded in. I understood their anger, their sense of disenfranchisement, their feelings of helplessness as they tried to earn the respect and support of their own government, and as they were let down by their closest ally. I knew because I had spent years listening to them and trying to empathize with them, even when empathy was difficult to generate.

Patient, Persistent, Presence

Throughout my time in Iraq, as our friends were wounded and died, as our political and military leaders flailed about trying to understand our war, we applied a phrase (really, a mantra) that bears repeating for both Afghanistan and Iraq. We knew we couldn't change Iraq in a few years, and we knew that we needed to develop Iraqis' trust gradually, over time. So, in Anbar Province, in Ramadi, we applied *patient, persistent, presence*. Our focus was not replicated at higher echelons of power.

When we left Iraq in late 2011, we demanded that the Iraqis bear a weight they could not hope to bear without substantial, fundamental social change. That change would have taken, and will still take, decades. As President Obama said in 2009, hope for the future of Iraq rested “upon an emerging foundation.”¹⁴ I agreed with him then, and I wish he had applied a policy that better reflected this understanding of the war in Iraq.

I also ask President Obama, and our current president, and future presidents to bear in mind that the foundations of stable, enduring states do not emerge neatly in six years,

¹³ Tim Arango, “ISIS Fighters Seize Government Headquarters in Ramadi, Iraq,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2015. As of August 24, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/16/world/middleeast/isis-fighters-seize-government-headquarters-in-ramadi-iraq.html>

¹⁴ Quoted in: Jaime Fuller, “How Obama Talked About Iraq, From 2002-2014,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2014. As of August 24, 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/06/19/how-obama-talks-about-iraq-before-and-after/>

or even twenty years. Meaningful societal change and enduring stability require patient, persistent, presence from those who are trying to help. And quitting doesn't seem to generate the political payoff some of our presidents seek.

Freedom Is In the Bank and Flags Come and Go

In 2021, Iraq's war against the Islamic State is ongoing. But Ramadi has been retaken. For now, the rebuilt Government Center is back in Iraqi government hands. Iraq is still a chaotic, broken, bankrupt, and poorly functioning democracy. But it is a democracy.

From 2003 through 2021, millions of Iraqis have lived with far greater freedom than they ever would have experienced under Saddam Hussein. Because of the sacrifices Americans and our allies made in Iraq, and because of the sacrifices of so many of our Iraqi partners, millions of people have experienced years of imperfect but real freedom. Those years can never be taken away.

Sometimes it seems impossible to imagine national unity in places like Iraq or Afghanistan. But in 2021, positive Iraqi nationalism is emerging. Protests against the government are in many ways nationalist protests. Iraq's national flag has evolved into a powerful national symbol, not for the government, but for the people. We are witnessing the leading edges of societal change in Iraq that so many thought to be impossible just over a decade ago.

If you don't believe genuine Iraqi nationalism is possible, I urge you to watch this video. It is anecdotal and not scientifically representative of all Iraqi sentiment. Iraq remains badly fractured in many ways. But these are real Iraqis expressing their real feelings about their country.

YouTube: Fifty People, One Question, Iraq, by Mohammed Khalil
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WaowmyawDk>

Afghanistan's Future is Not Written

Iraq and Afghanistan are different countries with different cultures; these are different wars. But like we did in Iraq, we gave millions of Afghans a real taste of freedom. All of Afghanistan has fallen to the Taliban. But while all the cities fought for are now under dictatorship, these self-inflicted defeats do not carry the permanence of death for millions of living Afghans whose future is now uncertain. Nothing in Afghanistan is written in stone.

We are already seeing some Afghan civilians risking their lives to protest against the Taliban, using Afghan national flags (flags that so many experts thought to be valueless) as thin shields against Taliban bullets. Early reports of some Taliban military defeats are filtering in, though these are too raw to be assessed or extrapolated from.

No matter what happens next in Afghanistan—whether or not yet another post-Taliban Afghan government is able to raise its flag over the cities we have lost, or if a decentralized state emerges—nobody can take away the twenty years of imperfect,

chaotic, uneven, but also real freedom the veterans of the Afghanistan war helped to provide to millions of Afghans.

Nobody can take away, or should seek to devalue, the sacrifices all of the coalition allies made alongside their Afghan partners. Even if they would like to do so, nobody can take away the often dangerous, but freer years these veterans gave to so many people across Afghanistan.

I hope Afghanistan War veterans—non-Afghan and Afghan alike—get to see the day when their cities are liberated and when the people they fought to protect can live more peaceful and independent lives under a flag of their choosing.