

ARTICLES

Disquieting Lessons from Iraq: A Conversation with John Agresto

Carol Iannone

John Agresto, a longtime N.A.S. supporter and member of its Advisory Board, served as president of St. John's College, Santa Fe for over 10 years. From September 2003 until the end of June 2004, he served as the Senior Adviser for Higher Education and Scientific Research, working with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under Paul Bremer in Iraq.

Agresto has taught political philosophy and American government at the University of Toronto, Kenyon College, Duke University, Wabash College, and the New School University. He also spent seven years in government service, in positions that included deputy and acting chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

In his forthcoming book, *Mugged by Reality* (Encounter), Mr. Agresto characterizes our mission in Iraq as having gone from an initial military and political success to "a turbulent spectacle of corruption, revenge, sectarian barbarism, and death." His views present a contrast to those expressed by Joseph Skelly, "A Professor at War," in our Spring 2006 issue.

***Iannone:* How did your appointment to work in Operation Iraqi Freedom come about?**

Agresto: I was asked by my friend Ed Delattre, who preceded me as president of St. John's, if I might be interested in serving in this position. Ed, in turn, had been asked by John Silber, who had been contacted by the Pentagon, I believe. I decided to do it, and contacted my friend, Don Rumsfeld, who did his best to cut through bureaucracy at the Department of Defense.

***Iannone:* What did you see as the U.S. mission when you accepted this assignment?**

Agresto: To open another front in the war on terror by helping to bring about a stable, prosperous, free and friendly Iraq.

***Iannone:* What did you hope to accomplish in your own work in Iraqi higher education?**

Agresto: To stabilize the universities; strengthen their programs wherever possible; give them some exposure to liberal rather than simply specialized education; build connections and partnerships with European and American

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universities; and, through all this, to help with the opening, or re-opening, of the Iraqi mind.

Iannone: Could you give us a little history of higher education in Iraq, before and then under Saddam, leading up to what you found when you arrived?

Agresto: This is too much to put in a sentence or two, but briefly, this is what I found: 20 universities, 46 or so vocational colleges; extreme specialization—no liberal education whatever; heavy emphasis on medicine, science, and engineering; significant political intimidation and control over what was read and taught. On the plus side, integrated (men/women) classes, no religious intimidation, and a cadre of older teachers who had studied and gained their doctorates abroad. All younger professors, however, had received their higher degrees in the highly inbred atmosphere of Iraq and neighboring Arab states.

Iannone: What were things like in Iraq when you first got there?

Agresto: Besides very hot? The most obvious thing was not its danger, though that element was present. Most apparent was the frantic pace of commercial activity—consumer goods, automobiles, electronics, and above all satellite dishes, TVs, computer equipment—anything to connect once again to the world and its treasures.

Second, however, under all this activity was the sad condition of Iraq's infrastructure. Our military managed to take out only the most obvious political/military targets. But the looting that followed the war destroyed virtually all public buildings; pillaged museums, schools, and universities; burned libraries to the ground, and so on. Ever so much was destroyed by marauding Iraqi thugs.

Third, I found what looked like general insouciant anarchy prevailing in the streets. Thousands of cars, no working stop lights, driving on sidewalks, no effective policing—just anarchy. But this was just the tip of what soon became terribly apparent—a near total collapse of all law and order. Saddam, remember, had emptied the prisons. Literally tens of thousands of rapists, thieves and murderers were now on the streets. And hardly a police force to speak of. For the criminal element, virtually every day was a feast day. And our military are warriors, not policemen.

Iannone: Could you describe more specifically the effect of the looting on the institutions of higher education particularly?

Agresto: Except for the three universities in the Kurdish region and a very few others, the universities were fundamentally stripped bare—no desks, chairs, equipment, computers, typewriters, copiers, lecterns, paper, pencils, blackboards, fans, wiring, plumbing, or books. And what couldn't be stolen, like libraries, was generally burned.

Iannone: So what were the primary needs in beginning to rebuild and reconstitute higher education in Iraq?

Agresto: They had nothing. A needs assessment we conducted concluded that simply to rebuild and re-supply the classrooms, dorms, bathrooms, labs, and libraries would run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Iannone: Did you receive the funds, the supplies, the resources that you needed?

Agresto: We received virtually nothing. The Administration's hope was that the "international community" (which obviously had little interest in helping us with military or security matters) would help rebuild the schools, hospitals, universities, museums, and so on. But the international community, by and large, had no interest. So, except for our ability, through Jerry Bremer, to put pressure on the new Iraqi finance ministry to pay for some of the most needed repairs, and a little bit of "found money" we managed to beg from the military, we had no funds. USAID (United States Agency for International Development) spent about \$25,000,000 on a few "partnerships" with American universities and consortia—which, someday, will surely be a swell idea—but other than providing a few desks and handling a few random projects—gave us nothing. But I do have to add, while I'm blaming the U.S. government, USAID, and the international community, that the Iraqis themselves were of limited service to themselves. My office was interested in getting the universities to reopen, having desks and books and lab equipment. But the average Iraqi professor was far more interested in keeping his job and getting a salary increase than in improving the education of students. And they often showed a mindset that was privileged, hierarchical, and inegalitarian.

Iannone: And the students. Were they eager to see reform of the educational system?

Agresto: At first, yes, but over time we began to see more and more students, primarily male, turning to religious extremism.

Iannone: What might be your activities on an average day, or in an average week?

Agresto: Once or twice a week I'd visit the Ministry, to confer with the Minister. Three or four times a week, I'd visit one of the universities, usually the ones in Baghdad, but a few times a month I'd make it out to some of the other universities. I tried to get a handle on various problems, find out what the felt needs were, try to arrange for professors to visit universities either here (which was difficult) or in Europe (which was easier.) We reestablished the Fulbright exchange program for the first time in many years, so we'd meet regularly with students. Sometimes, rarely, we'd get to talk curricular or research issues with professors or deans. Sometimes we simply worked with the Ministry and university staffs on such basic things as how to rebuild an admissions office or file a budget report or beef up security or count applications and enrollees. Once a month I met with all 20 university presidents to help them set uniform policies—how to select presidents and deans, how to insulate the universities from heavy-handed central control, how to promote academic freedom, how to keep sectarian and political intimidation at bay, and so on.

At nights, we often went out to dinner to restaurants, at least early on. Early on, we'd also have lunch out with Iraqi friends, or with students in ice cream

shops, and so on. Later, it was safer going to our translators' houses. But towards the end, let's say after March 2004, even that was getting dicey, but we sometimes did it anyway.

Iannone: In general, how did you handle the danger? Did you lose any of the people who worked closely with you?

Agresto: A soldier connected to my office was killed just before I arrived, and a few civilians and Iraqis I worked closely with were killed after I left, but no one in my office died in the nine months I was there. Which is nothing short of miraculous, since we handled the dangers in a rather nonchalant manner.

Sure, we varied our routes every time we left the Green Zone. And we never left at the same time. At first, we went out only with military escorts. Soon, it became clear that we were putting soldiers at risk simply because we wanted to go talk with a dean; and we were also more obvious targets if we went out with them. So we took to going out in, basically, the Iraqi jalopies our translators drove. So long as I kept my mouth shut, I could pass for an Iraqi. And so long as you didn't wear a seat belt. A seat belt was a dead give away, so to speak, that you were an American. Then again, chances of being killed on the roads of Iraq by bad drivers was higher than being blown up by an IED, so I'm not sure what that accomplished.

Iannone: You did not carry a gun? Could you have had a gun if you had wanted one?

Agresto: I still carry in my wallet my official "weapons card" that authorizes me to carry both a pistol and an AK-47. But I never carried a gun or learned how to use one. My having a gun would have no threat to our enemies; it would only have been a danger to my friends.

Iannone: So, what in your view happened to our high hopes for Iraq? You have characterized the situation there now as a "disaster." You say in your forthcoming book that we didn't understand Iraq and, perhaps more importantly, that we didn't understand ourselves as we undertook the mission of bringing democracy there. Please explain.

Agresto: Wait! It took me a whole book to explain! Suffice it to say, first, that we terribly misjudged the strength of the Saddam and Ba'ath factions we thought we had defeated. We didn't defeat them: they retreated, and came back as insurgents. We never killed them; they never surrendered. Yet, strangely, we proclaimed we had won.

Second, we failed as an occupying power to quell unrest, restore law and order, bring criminals to justice, and restore any semblance of peace and security to a people under attack. To say "Freedom is untidy," as my friend Donald Rumsfeld said, is not only wrong, it made the Iraqis wonder what it was they had just bought into.

Third, we talked about all we were going to do—electricity, clean water, sewers, clinics, you name it. Yet little happened. Under perfect conditions, America can build the best and finest systems. Under the conditions as they

were in Iraq—with its arson and looting and without any real semblance of order—so much of what we promised or said we would do failed. As one of the finest and most pro-American of the Iraqi professors said to me, “We once thought you had the wand of Moses in your hands. Now we see you don’t.”

Fourth (it gets worse), we talked all the time about freedom and democracy. Yet we had precious little knowledge of *how* to bring a stable, mild, moderate, middle-class, and above all free democracy to Iraq. We had, it seemed, scant idea as to what made our own democracy lasting and liberal. Other than holding elections and writing some kind of constitution, we had little idea as to what kind of civic institutions might precede democracy, what character a people might need to have to make democracy work, or what kind of political institutions were needed to make democracy just. We acted as if democracy were natural—just get rid of the tyrant, hold elections, and look: a democracy! We acted as if democracies are easy. Sorry, tyranny is easy; democracies are hard. Sorry to say, we’re now acting under the fortune-cookie philosophy of Spread Democracy Everywhere. And then one day we’ll wonder why oppression has spread and the enemies of liberty have ascended, but under the protection of elections and democratic forms.

Fifth, we simply had no notion not only of the horrors, but also the attraction, of Islamic extremism. We generally have a benign view of religion. We always insist that those who kill infidels or torture in God’s name have somehow “hijacked” their religion. We consistently failed to understand that not all religions have the same view as we do of peace, of brotherhood, or of justice. Islam in general, and parts of Islam in particular, are not post-Enlightenment faiths. But why would they be? We desperately kept looking for the supposed “moderates” among the clergy in Iraq. Moderate as compared to what? Just because we believe that God wants everyone to enjoy equal rights, or that killing Jews or stoning apostates is wrong, doesn’t mean that our beliefs are shared in other faiths.

We have so tamed and, in a sense, marginalized religion in the West that we consistently underestimate its ferocity and strength. Watch.... we will continue to worry that Iran will extend its influence into Iraq. Fair enough. But it’s not Iran as Iran that will take over Iraq but the Shiite fanaticism that rules Iran. Soon there will be the rule of Shiite theocrats, under the guise of democratic forms and elections, ruling a large swath of the Middle East, from Iran through Iraq through south Lebanon.

Sixth, as I mentioned above, we didn’t, I think, realize, the attraction of extremism and fanaticism, especially among the youth, and especially among a people who have so little stability and order in their lives. We don’t understand either killing for God or dying for God. But others do. They understand right well that the real life is not this one but the one to come. And if God seems to you to demand death, even your own death, well, that’s a small price to pay for justice and eternal life.

What all the above adds up to is not so much a misunderstanding of “Iraqi culture,” but a misunderstanding of the nature of religious passion, of common human emotions and desires, of the human fear of chaos and the desire for security—that is, a misunderstanding of human nature itself; a misunderstanding of what pre-modern societies armed with modern armaments are like; and a misunderstanding of our own democratic forms and our own technological limits.

In going to Iraq, we thought that we would be promoting democracy with all its trappings—toleration, equality, rights, freedom. Instead, we are probably far along in empowering rabid sectarian rule under the forms of democratic government.

***Iannone:* Terrible! Are there specific U.S. policies that we can point to as especially mistaken?**

Agresto: I hesitate to talk of erroneous policies because then the assumption is that if only we had changed this or that “policy” that things would be better. We read this all the time. “If only we had not de-Ba’athified so thoroughly,” “If only we had handed over power sooner,” “If only we had not disbanded the army,” and so on. What we did wrong, where we went wrong, was so much greater than any policy. We misunderstood religion, we misunderstood human nature, we misunderstood the prerequisites of liberty and liberation, we misunderstood democracy. What went wrong was not a failure of policy; it was a massive failure of understanding.

Even the idea that more troops would have made a difference is mistaken. Yes, in some cases, for some purposes, more soldiers would have helped. But it would not have fixed the problem without a change in vision and in policies. We would have had to use them differently—shooting looters, enforcing security, guarding the thousands of miles of borderland, and policing neighborhoods.

***Iannone:* What was the effect of all this on attitudes in the universities?**

Agresto: University personnel were on our side when we first entered Iraq, but by the time I left, there was strong feeling against us. Of course the problem of occupation was part of it—the sometimes unavoidable ill-treatment from our soldiers. The uneasy state of transition the universities were in was also a factor—the old ways were dying, but what would replace them? The fact that we were able to deliver so little by way of improving the awful physical conditions of the universities, especially after the looting, contributed mightily as well. But the rise of religious extremism among many of the students, as I mentioned before, this was the chief factor in the universities turning against us.

***Iannone:* Do you think we overstated the readiness of the Iraqi people for freedom and democracy?**

Agresto: Yes. As I say in the book, the first and most obvious thing about this liberation was that we were in the position of liberating them, we were not joining them in their own liberation. Were they happy to be free of Saddam?

Yes, overwhelmingly yes. Did they want to live “freely”? Some did. Many more, as we discovered, wanted to live not freely and by their own lights but righteously, under the yoke of God’s law, under the rule of religious authorities or those who would take direction from religious authorities.

But the real question is not whether all men desire to live freely. I think that’s an open question. (Though I saw not one “Live Free or Die” bumper sticker in all of Iraq.) The real question is, do all men desire *their neighbors* to live freely? And there the answer is clearly no.

Iannone: Do you believe, though, that the longing for freedom, democracy, and self-government is universal, as the Administration asserts, following the view of many neoconservatives?

Agresto: If you think that all men naturally love freedom, then all you think you have to do is throw off 30 years of unrelenting tyranny and freedom will blossom. But 30 years of crushing tyranny along with decades of socialism and the dependency it breeds, may actually have an *effect* on people. It may actually change how people view themselves and the world—and not for the better.

We talked about bringing democracy, freedom, and prosperity to a long subjugated nation—and had no idea of how idle and vain such talk was without the will, first and foremost, to protect and secure persons and property. We were blind to the truth that security must precede freedom; precedes even the *hope* of freedom. The right-wing notion that a people who prefers security to freedom deserves neither is not only silly but dangerous. Without order and security, without police on the streets and criminals behind bars, the enjoyment of all rights and liberties is constantly at risk. One would have thought conservatives knew this since they vociferously support the right to bear arms and insist on the right to be personally secure in our homes and in public.

Iannone: Some supporters of the mission say that we managed to foster democracy in Japan and Germany after World War II, and therefore we can do it again in Iraq. What do you say to that?

Agresto: Iraq is different. (If you don’t believe it, just go look.) OK. In Germany and Japan, we won. We were building on a people of different character. In Germany and Italy we had Christianity, modernity, a history of democratic forms. Japan was closer in character to Iraq—but, among other helpful things, we got the Emperor to tell the Japanese people to relent. If we hadn’t gotten the Emperor’s agreement to order his people to surrender, who knows how long the war with Japan would have lasted, and with how many killed. If we could get Allah to tell the Iraqis to submit to a new way of life, all would yet be well.

Iannone: What do you think when supporters of the mission in Iraq say that our democracy was far from perfect at the outset, and perhaps even now, so who are we to judge the Iraqi effort at this time?

Agresto: First, who says ours isn’t perfect? Second, of course, if what we achieved was an Iraq that looked like England in the 1920s, we’d all be happy.

What we have instead, however, is a nation, under democratic forms, that is unable to contain religious mayhem, that is busy exterminating the professional, middle, and intellectual classes, that has begun to impose medieval Islamic law under the protection of a new constitution, that has little concept of the rule of law, that is arbitrary and illiberal, and that is dangerous to American and global security and world peace. If anyone thinks that what the Iraqis have today is anything like what we or any other democratic country had even two centuries ago, I welcome him to go into Firdos Square in Baghdad any afternoon and give a speech on any subject.

***Iannone:* Do you think that these reconsiderations came to you in hindsight or was it possible to see what wasn't working fairly early in the project?**

Agresto: The signs were there early on—for instance, the unwillingness of ordinary Iraqis to join in their own liberation—but they were small. But as the signs turned inexorably in one direction, we increased our happy talk, our optimism, our belief that there were no problems that more and quicker democracy couldn't cure. For example, take all the silliness in the last presidential election where we kept hearing that all we needed to do was “stand up” an Iraqi civil defense force and “integrate” the sectarian militias into national service. As if people give up their religious or ethnic objectives because they changed uniforms. Now the worst crimes are committed by the Iraqi police. Or when we said that what was needed was to bring Sadr “into the political process.” Now he has as large a voting block as any other in the National Assembly, controls ministries, and remains a member of the Shiite party list that selected the current prime minister. In addition, he uses his militias to kill his opponents, and he attacks Americans and others from an effective position of strength within the government.

***Iannone:* What is the situation of women now in Iraq? And in the universities? Are they able to attend freely?**

Agresto: Sorry to say, I now think that the situation for the average woman has now become worse than it was under Saddam. Under Saddam, women were often raped and killed for political reasons or for the sexual satisfaction of men in power. Now the rapes, beatings, and killings are generally for sectarian rather than political reasons. I'm told by my Iraqi friends who are still there that, unlike just five years ago, today no prudent woman goes out without the veil, that classes are again segregated by sex, that the great inequalities of Islamic law are again being applied, that rapes are a tool of the sectarian militias, and open and innocent interactions between young men and women are hardly possible.

***Iannone:* I know that many of the soldiers you met were exceptional people who accomplished much good, especially in Civil Affairs.**

Agresto: Yes, the level of dedication to the mission at hand—the liberation of Iraq from Saddam and the construction of a free, prosperous, and peaceful Iraq—and the personal, everyday bravery that it entailed, was spectacular. But

I did see some bad soldiers too, and it raised thoughts in my mind that we might need to reconsider how we recruit for our armed forces. Some of the soldiers were brutish, some thought only of safety rather than the mission. And of course some were young, scared, unprepared, especially when they were caught in situations where it was hard to know who was friend or foe.

Speaking politically, the right is wrong when it simply says “Support Our Troops.” Our troops, both at the command level and in the field, make policy—and we have to have conscious and critical oversight over what’s coming down. If support means “protect,” yes, absolutely. If support means accept and defend without criticism or, worse, without leadership sensitive to our public policy goals, then we have to be more careful than that.

But the left is wrong when it says that war or military service brutalizes young men and makes them bad people. Military service seems to me not to change a person’s character, but to magnify it. A person, man or woman, of good character, brave, patriotic, eager to serve—that person shines. But the ignorant, the morally confused, the vicious, the self-centered, the unsteady—all their faults and vices seem to be underscored and to grow.

***Iannone:* Why have the Kurds done so well? Why are they exempt from the many peculiarities that are making self-government so hard for the Iraqis? They also lived under Saddam, and suffered very badly under him at that. They are also Muslim. What’s the difference?**

Agresto: The differences are truly amazing. There was no looting or arson in Kurdistan. Sunni, Shi’a, and Christian get along with few problems. Free enterprise flourishes. Why? Why do some people have a different character? Yes, the Kurds are not Arabs but Kurds. A different race of people with a different (Indo-European) language. But race and language don’t make for character. A different history? Yes. One that rewarded spunk and independence of spirit. A different horizon—one that prizes personal independence and prizes the independence of your people. This latter is important.

The Kurds are a patriotic people *par excellence*. They will fight and die for their neighbors and for the Kurdish people, and they did fight alongside the coalition troops. As others will sacrifice all for Allah (though not for their neighbor, especially if that neighbor is different), the Kurds will sacrifice all for Kurdistan. This makes all the difference in the world. They work together and form a fairly cohesive community. What do they look forward to? Not simply the personal rewards of the next life but the tangible rewards of this life and the happiness of their friends and neighbors. Finally, yes, they take their religion seriously, but they are far more secular and modern in their interpretations of it. I met many sincere Muslims in Kurdish Iraq, including those who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca; yet, I never once met a religious zealot or fanatic among them.

***Iannone:* You imply that the Arab Iraqis lacked many of these elements, especially the ability to serve something larger than themselves?**

Agresto: Yes, as contrasted with the Kurds, among the Arab Iraqis there was more of a culture of individual self-interest and less of a sense of serving a larger cause. They display a tendency to lie low and avoid danger. That's why it's been so difficult standing up an army and a responsible national guard.

Let me hasten to say that there are many exceptions to this rule. There are newly trained Iraqi soldiers willing to fight for their country. There are the translators and office workers driving into the Green Zone every day to work. There are many Iraqis, especially women, who are devoting themselves to human rights, women's rights, humanitarian aid. Unfortunately, however, they are the exceptions that prove the rule. The Iraqi army experienced mass defections—five thousand from the armed services in Mosul in just one day! Some Iraqi recruits have taken money from insurgents to turn in their comrades. Some have sold their uniforms to the insurgents, or joined the police in order to kill their religious opponents.

I guess I'll rile up the academic multiculturalists no end with observations such as these. The only culture an observer can safely make a negative comment about these days is American. I once mentioned in a talk back here in the States that one problem in establishing the substance of democracy in Iraq is that the Iraqis do not "know how to be a community," and that they value self-interest over national interest. A member of the audience called this "ugly ethnocentrism." But we shouldn't be surprised. We know that many academics would rather have ideology than truth, and would rather wield labels such as "racist" or "ethnocentrist" than face facts.

***Iannone:* Of course it's not just the multiculturalists who contribute to these misconceptions, is it? The right has also advanced the idea that our ideals our universal, and that all people long for our values and have the capacity to realize them, and that it is racist or condescending to say otherwise.**

Agresto: To address this issue would actually take pages. Do all people deserve freedom? Yes. Universally? Yes. Do all people "desire" freedom. No. Do all people know how to make freedom politically real? Hell, no! Do some people kiss their chains? You bet. Are all men created equal? Yes. Everywhere? Yes. Have more than the smallest fraction of humanity acknowledged this truth? No.

***Iannone:* Some argue that the absence of long lines of people wishing to leave Iraq is a good sign. Also, some say that most of the country is peaceful, that it's just a few stubborn areas that are violent. Do you have any thoughts on these observations?**

Agresto: The figures I have are very different. Perhaps a third of Iraq's professional class has already fled. Thousands upon thousands have been murdered. The ancient Christian communities in and around Basra and southern Iraq have been emptied. Virtually all the Iraqis I know pray to come here, but Homeland Security makes that impossible. And Europe for some is just as hard. Damascus? Beirut?! Amman? Perhaps these words from one of the translators we had to leave behind will do:

We're still in Baghdad, where else to go to? No place on the sphere is willing to accept Iraqis, I suppose we're considered potential threat, especially after the Amman explosions, not to say what we're doing in our own country, flying a 1,000-year-old gold-cladded dome high in the sky and turning it to debris is a shameful example of what I'm stating. Any way, I don't blame the world for looking down to us. [My wife] and I have to wait and see, trying to figure what to do.

What is it about us that we have this overarching desire always to believe that things are getting better? The situation in Iraq is not getting better. Do I need to be blunt? The fact is, we fought and died in this war, and Iran has won it. It occupies the southern half of Iraq; supplies the insurgency with sophisticated IEDs that kill our men and women every day; it's backing up the political parties that won the last election, including Sadr's faction and Hezbollah that hold six ministries between them; and it supplies men, money and material to the murderous sectarian militias. While it expresses itself politically and militarily, its rule is religious. Its closest analogue is the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, though here it's Shi'a not Sunni fanaticism.

How does this manifest itself in the universities and schools? Well, from May 2003 until I left in June 2004, my best guess is that about three dozen professors were killed in Iraq, mostly for political reasons (they were generally Ba'athists) and I think all by their students. Sounds bad? Well, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* had a piece this past June titled, "Iraq's Intellectuals Are Marked for Death." It claimed that, simply in 2005, there were 296 university professors and staff members murdered, including 80 from the University of Baghdad alone. And the Ministry of Education in Iraq—that is the ministry over elementary and secondary schools—reported that 311 teachers and 64 students under the age of twelve were killed just in the four months preceding March 2006, with over 400 schools attacked. The only difference from before (beyond of course, the magnitude) is that my sense is that most of these killings were now for religious more than political reasons. But, at the university level, still primarily by students, or students backed up by the religious militias.

If they're not lining up at the borders to leave, it's because they've already left, are in hiding, or are dead.

Iannone: What are your thoughts about our mission now? Do you have any ideas about what the Administration should do now?

Agresto: First of all, we cannot leave at this time or any time soon. There are still things that only America or the "multinational force" under our leadership can do, and that forecloses our full disengagement. The capture of Saddam and the elimination of his two monstrous sons could only have been done by our forces. Likewise, only the American military had the intelligence capacity necessary to track down Zarqawi and the air power to kill him. In addition, our presence helps shelter the government and its personnel from attack, retards the foreign insurgency, and may even, to a lesser extent, moderate the sectarian militias. Moreover, it's under American supervision and with Ameri-

can funds that so much of the building and rebuilding of the infrastructure of Iraq is being carried out.

The pundits who try to say that we are the irritant in Iraq, that if only we would leave, the Iraqis would then begin building a united and peaceful nation, are totally wrong. On the contrary, our departure would give anarchy, mayhem, and civil war its best chance.

Sadly, perhaps tragically, Iraq may be a failure from which we cannot so easily extricate ourselves. The need for continued American support for both security and development under seriously adverse conditions may seem terrible, and yet that is the reality of the situation.

Iannone: Do you feel you accomplished at least something toward advancing higher education in Iraq?

Agresto: Absolutely, yes. First, we kept the universities open, showed them that there was a world of freedom that was higher than political control, helped them say in their own words that political and religious intimidation were antithetical to all they prized and hoped for, showed them the possibilities and promise of a more liberal education, shamed them a bit into having at least some concern for their undergraduate students, and gave them some examples of active rather than simply passive learning. Has this survived? Yes, in the Kurdish region. I am currently on the Board of Trustees of a new “American University” in Kurdish Iraq, where the faculty and administration are determined to see these principles flourish. In Arab Iraq, I’m afraid what we accomplished will have to remain in memory. Perhaps someday all these principles will re-emerge; but I’m afraid no time very soon.

Iannone: Please tell us more specifically why higher education is faring so much better in Kurdistan.

Agresto: Education in Kurdistan is faring infinitely better than in the rest of Iraq. There are three universities in the area, the largest in Erbil with maybe 15,000 students. All three universities’ presidents came to me and Jerry Bremer after liberation and said, in effect, there is no political liberation without the liberation of the mind. Unless people think for themselves, they will always be led and never lead. Second, that there’s no intelligent democracy without intelligent citizens and no future democracy without intelligent statesmen. (As Dave Barry used to say, “I am not making this up.”) They were solidly Jeffersonian in their understanding that democracy needed intelligent citizens and educated, far-sighted leaders.

Still, the education they have today is highly specialized, and mostly lecture-memorize-repeat. But they want this to change. They very much want a system of higher education where students might actually choose their own fields of study rather than have it put upon them by grades or class rank.

They have some sense that freedom means freely choosing what you want to make of yourself in this world. And, *mirabile dictu*, they actually think it might be good for students to take an active part in their own learning—discussing,

questioning, challenging. Only in Kurdistan did I have a professor tell me he “taught like an American.” When I asked him what he meant, he said, “I let students ask questions in class.”

Had the Coalition Provisional Authority been able to stay in Iraq longer, I would have devoted all my energies to setting up three more or less liberal arts universities in the Kurdish region. Still, as it stands now, we are working hard to make one of them a reality. I’m on the board of trustees of what we hope will become the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani, perhaps the prettiest town in all Iraq, up in the northern mountains. I’m the chair of the academic committee of the board and we hope, within a year, to have our first entering class. Maybe I’ll send your readers reports as we move along.

Iannone. We’ll look forward to that. Thank you, John, for your honest, thoughtful, informative, and disturbing insights.

for reasoned scholarship in a free society

The National Association of Scholars (NAS) is an organization of professors, graduate students, college administrators, independent scholars, and trustees committed to rational discourse as the foundation of academic life in a free and democratic society. The NAS works to enrich the substance and strengthen the integrity of scholarship and teaching, persuaded that only through an informed understanding of the Western intellectual heritage and the realities of the contemporary world, can citizen and scholar be equipped to sustain our civilization’s achievements. In light of these objectives, the NAS is deeply concerned about the widening currency within the academy of perspectives that reflexively denigrate the values and institutions of our society. Because such tendencies are often dogmatic in character, and indifferent to both logic and evidence, they also tend to undermine the basis for coherent scholarly dialogue. Recognizing the significance of this problem, the NAS encourages a renewed assertiveness among academics who value reason and an open intellectual life.