Humanity Must Be Defended: War, Politics and Humanitarian Relief in Iraq, 1990-2004

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

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Iraq was the first political and humanitarian crisis to be described as a “complex emergency.” Contested claims about human suffering there—beginning shortly after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and continuing for over a decade under UN sanctions—became the justification for multiple forms of engagement and intervention by religious and secular NGOs, human rights organizations, journalists, political activists and foreign military forces. This dissertation explores how the international relief system’s “humanitarian apparatus,” together with powerful Western governments and media outlets, framed Iraq as a humanitarian problem. It provides an ethnographic description of this humanitarian apparatus (a specific, territorialized ensemble of actors, techniques, technologies and practices), focusing on international NGOs and UN agencies in Iraq from late 1990 until mid-2004. The dissertation takes up a particular problematization (Foucault)—namely, how human suffering in Iraq appeared as a problem to which “humanitarianism” was a self-evident solution—and situates this problematization temporally and institutionally, exploring the historical and contemporary articulations between national governments, multilateral organizations, humanitarian NGOs and the media.

The dissertation foregrounds the challenge of practicing “embedded anthropology” in complex, problematic and rapidly changing situations. The narrative style alternates between vivid, first-person descriptions of the author’s experiences in Iraq, dialogic conversational exchanges with various interlocutors in the humanitarian apparatus, and analytical sections that assemble the conceptual tools and equipment for an anthropology of contemporary problems. The international system of state and non-state actors, together with the norms, rationalities, rhetorical figures and forms of practice that these actors both generate and reproduce, is presented as an organizing framework for humanitarian action in Iraq as well as a site for critical anthropological inquiry.
Dedication

for Gillian, Sergio, Margaret, Rafe, and Marla,
who gave their lives in service of others
Acknowledgements

The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end. – Michel Foucault (quoted in Martin et al 1988)

Numerous people aided me personally and professionally during the seven years that gave rise to this dissertation, without bearing formal responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation in the final product. Having said that, it seems patently ridiculous to absolve everyone in such a sweeping and generic manner. We were all there; we were all engaged personally, professionally, ethically and politically. Thus we are all responsible in some shape or form for what happened (and didn’t happen) in Iraq—as well as for the multitude of conflicting opinions and contradictory viewpoints that we collectively shaped, informed, adopted or resisted around this momentous and deeply problematic conflict. To pretend otherwise would be disingenuous. The present work, then, is a contribution to these ongoing reflections and debates. It certainly does not stand outside them.

My deepest debts are to my family, who have supported my various and nefarious detours through life: Laura Lee McIntyre, Shirley and Don Gregg, Lee and Carol McIntyre, John and Jeannie Denson, Jeremy Denson and Natalie Torres, Gerald and Joanna Dettling, Cory and Deborah McIntyre, Fred and Faye McIntyre, Judy Collins, and the Ziebart clan: Larry, Tim, Lisa, George and Gracie.

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My undying love and eternal gratitude goes to Jennifer Ziebart McIntyre—my permanent partner in the adventure of life and love—who can’t wait to begin the rest of our journey together now that this phase is finally complete.
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Chapter One:
Awakenings

The legitimacy of any account depends on who tells it, what is the teller’s relationship to the experience, who counts as a “participant” and who counts as a “witness” … and how the form in which the event is recounted helps to shape the way the experience is understood. In other words, the legitimacy (import, ethical charge, or authenticity) of a story depends not only on its relationship to the experience but also on the web of interpersonal and intertextual relationships in which the story and the experience are intertwined. (Shuman 2005, 23-24)

Leaving Karbala: The End of the Beginning

I awaken in a pool of sweat with a gnawing pain in my stomach. The generator that powers the ceiling fan and overhead light has been switched off, and now, in the early hours of the morning, the air in my small, drab hotel room is muggy and still. The polyester bed sheets are twisted and tangled around me, clinging to my skin like a scratchy damp napkin. Synthetic fabrics are terribly uncomfortable in the sweltering summer heat, and this is the hottest summer I’ve experienced in my life. “You’d walk out the door and instantly feel like your brain had been shrink-wrapped,” my colleague Peter Dula joked years later as he remembered the intense Iraq heat. A few days ago the thermometer read 110° F at midnight—“and that’s before factoring in the wind chill,” our Scottish logistician had complained wryly. We scoured the markets in Baghdad looking for all-cotton bed sheets, but to no avail. Twelve years of crippling economic sanctions have deprived the Iraqi people of many imported goods, but horrible polyester bed sheets in garish floral patterns are not among them. The shops contained an astonishing variety of packaged sets, all uniformly ugly and impractical.

The pain in my abdomen sharpens for a moment, increasing my discomfort. The grilled meat and rice we gobbled down hastily for dinner the night before has started a minor revolt in my belly. It is August 2003, so the word “insurgency” has not yet caught on in general usage, but it is becoming increasingly clear that something explosive is brewing—both in my guts and out on the streets of Iraq. Two weeks ago, a minibus packed with explosives was detonated by remote control in front of the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad, killing nineteen people and wounding more than fifty. It was the first large-scale attack on a civilian target in post-invasion Iraq. “The terrorists need to know that we will not be deterred,” Secretary of State Colin Powell told reporters at a press conference in Washington, DC.

For the next ten days, it was business as usual in “Baggers”—expatriate slang for the ancient and venerable capital of Iraq. There were projects to manage,
meetings to attend, and reports to write. So on a scorching Tuesday morning, August 19, 2003, I rode with Iyyad to the United Nations headquarters at the Canal Hotel, arriving just before noon.¹

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Lying here in the early morning darkness, six days later, the events play out again in my mind, just as they have countless times since that fateful Tuesday. All the parking spaces near the compound gates were taken, so Iyyad had driven a bit further and parked our white mini-van with BINGO logos under a withered palm tree several hundred yards past the hotel complex.² The midday sun seared the tops of our heads as we walked back along the dusty shoulder of Canal Road. We passed a US Army guard post at the northwest corner of the UN compound. The camouflage netting provided scant protection from the sun, and a young American soldier stared out at us unhappily as we passed. Another soldier waved us on as we turned into the main driveway and walked towards the United Nations security kiosk. An Iraqi member of the UN security team wrote our names on the guest register and exchanged our BINGO identification cards for laminated NGO visitor passes.

We’d come to pick up Patrick, an Irish program development officer deployed by BINGO’s Emergencies Unit in London to support our teams throughout Iraq. The bus that shuttles UN and NGO personnel to and from the Baghdad International Airport hadn’t arrived yet, so I went inside to check my e-mail at the Internet café in the lobby. The V-Sat uplink at the Canal Hotel was much faster than the smaller R-BGAN satellite modem back at the BINGO office, but the terminal I was using kept crashing. Switching to another computer, I sat down next to Gillian Clarke from Christian Children’s Fund. We chatted for a few minutes as I skimmed my e-mail, and she asked if I was staying for the interagency coordination meeting that afternoon. Usually I would, I replied, but we needed to take our newest staff member back to the BINGO house and get him settled in.

When the bus finally arrived, I logged off the computer, said goodbye to Gillian, and walked outside. I had no idea that was the last time I would see her alive. At approximately 4:30 pm, a few hours after Iyyad, Patrick and I left the Canal Hotel, a massive truck bomb exploded alongside the building, killing Gillian and 21 other people, including Sergio Vieira de Mello, the top UN official in Iraq. The next six days were mostly a blur. We were all simply overwhelmed with shock and grief.

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¹ All personal names in this dissertation are pseudonyms, except where named in published sources. The deceased, however, have been spared this indignity. Using their real names seems to me an appropriate, if wholly inadequate, tribute.

² BINGO is the pseudonym for a “Big International NGO” based in the United Kingdom. As farcical as such thin attempts to shield the identity of persons and organizations may be, they are a standard part of what passes for “professional ethics” in the human sciences.
There is a creaking noise as someone adjusts their position in a bed near to mine. Jamie heaves himself upright and clears his throat roughly. I hear the soft crinkle of cellophane followed by the unmistakable metallic clang of his Zippo lighter. A flickering flame illuminates Jamie's haggard, scowling face and mop of unruly hair, casting a weird shadow on the wall for a few seconds before the lighter snaps shut. I sit up in bed as the acrid smell of burning tobacco stings my nostrils. The glowing red ember of Jamie lit cigarette hovers just a few feet away in the inky darkness, while colorful blobs ignited by the momentary flare of the lighter swirl across my vision. The walls of our hotel room aren't thick enough to block out the be-beep, be-beep of a watch alarm next door or the murmuring voices in the hallway outside. The rest of the team is stirring. It's 4:30 a.m., and we've got a long road ahead.

A cup of hot, syrupy Iraqi tea calms my stomach a little. Perhaps this is just garden variety indigestion after all, the kind that follows a rushed meal of greasy food in a dingy restaurant with dubious hygiene practices. Or maybe it's nervous tension in anticipation of the journey ahead. Highway 10—the four-lane, divided road we'll be driving along through the vast, barren deserts of southwestern Iraq—is known to be dangerous. With the arrival of the US Army 3rd Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division at the proverbial gates of Baghdad in April 2003, the formal security apparatus of the Iraqi state seemingly evaporated. The Iraqi police, border

3 Although the recent war in Iraq has been dubbed “Bush's War,” the reality of the conflict is more complex. To begin an inquiry, we can ask a deceptively simple question: when did “the Iraq war” begin? The television-viewing public might reasonably believe the war commenced on March 19, 2003, when the first cruise missiles fell on Dora Farms on the outskirts of Baghdad, followed the next day by a ground invasion from Kuwait and the “shock and awe” attacks against the Iraqi capital. (Military historian John Keegan [2005:132-164] provides a detailed account of these combat operations. For another well-researched, but much less flattering perspective, see Ricks [2007, 116-148]). Those with insider knowledge might argue that the war actually began on July 10, 2002, when a covert operations force—comprising paramilitary officers from the CIA Special Activities Division together with US, British, and Australian special operations forces, and supported by JSOC ground and air assets based at Azraq airbase in Jordan—began hunting Iraqi missile batteries in the western desert (see Woodward 2004).

Still others would point out that official US policy towards Iraq had shifted from “containment” to “regime change” in October 1998 when President Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act, and that US and British warplanes had been bombing Iraqi military targets in the southern “No Fly Zone” on a regular basis from December 1998 until September 10, 2001. (A precursor to the signing of the Iraq Liberation Act was Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s speech on Iraq at Georgetown University in March 1997, in which she suggested that “a change in Iraq’s government could lead to a change in US policy. Should that occur, we would stand ready, in coordination with our allies and friends, to enter rapidly into a dialogue with the successor regime”—quoted in Graham-Brown 1999, 65).

Pushing the date back even further, many activists and academics would argue that the United States had been waging indirect war on Iraq for over a decade through the strict economic sanctions imposed in August 1990 following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Middle East historians would add that Iraq fought a brutal and costly war with Iran from 1980–1988. So when did “the Iraq war” begin? The International Crisis Group summed up Iraq's history of conflict in a briefing paper issued
guards, and most of the regular army units abandoned their posts and went home to their families, leaving a pervasive security vacuum throughout Iraq.

For the past four and a half months since the “fall of Baghdad,” organized gangs of bandits have been preying on taxis, buses, and especially convoys of foreign journalists and aid workers, whose Toyota Land Cruisers and rented GMC Suburbs are often stuffed to the gills with valuable equipment and bundles of hard currency. Iraq remains a cash-based society; the banks aren’t wired to international networks, so credit cards are useless and ATM machines are non-existent. Tens of thousands of US dollars are being transported along Highway 10 from Amman to Baghdad every day—hidden in money belts, buried in duffel bags, and even stashed in the upholstery—and the local shaykhs of Al-Anbar province want a piece of the action. These bandits know all the tricks of the trade, to boot. They’ve been smuggling money, cartons of cigarettes, and even barrels of oil along this highway for years, under the noses of the Iraqi and Jordanian regimes.

Our journey out of Iraq began yesterday, and we’ve already avoided the worst section of Highway 10 by heading due south out of Baghdad to the Shi’a holy city of Karbala, where we joined up with members of BINGO’s central Iraq team. Along the way, we found ourselves sitting in a traffic jam in the town of Mahmoudiya, a few hours south of Baghdad. A teenage boy ran past our Land Cruiser, shouting to his friend down the road and waving a hand grenade in the air. We sat frozen in tense silence for a few moments, clear that our unarmored vehicle would provide scant protection against such an attack. Fortunately, the boy left us alone, and we arrived without further incident. Resuming our journey this morning under the cover of darkness, we’ll take a narrow two-lane road west from Karbala through the empty desert for several hours until we make a left-hand turn onto Highway 10—well past the restive Sunni towns of Fallujah and Ramadi, where much of the highway robbery occurs.

Our convoy will be comprised of five vehicles: four hard-top Toyota Land Cruisers and one Land Cruiser pick-up. They all are clearly marked with large BINGO logos on the doors and signs in Arabic identifying us as a “humanitarian organization” (munadhama insāniyyah).4 Small “no guns” stickers—a picture of an assault rifle inside a red circle with a line through it—are displayed in the windows,

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4 Koenraad Van Brabant (2000, 336) points out that the logos commonly displayed by relief agencies “are not recognized as emblems, nor do they provide any protective status from a legal point of view. Any protection gained from them is entirely dependent on the good will of the authorities or a positive profile in the community. The emblem of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, on the other hand, is recognized under international humanitarian law and does offer protection. Its use, however, is subject to very strict regulation, and misuses are considered a grave breach of law.”
indicating that the occupants are unarmed civilians. Each vehicle has a 8-foot CODAN HF whip antenna mounted on the front bumper, roof racks, and a black air intake snorkel rising up to the height of the roof. We don’t expect to ford any swollen rivers on our drive out of Iraq today, but these tricked out Land Cruisers are standard-issue BINGO equipment, outfitted with all the accessories one would need to deliver humanitarian assistance in rugged conditions anywhere in the world.

We had packed most of our gear the night before, but there are a few odds and ends that still need to be loaded. The work gives us something to do, and although exhausted and half-asleep we all manage to appear busy and focused on the task at hand. After finishing with the vehicles, the team assembles downstairs for a pre-departure briefing. All of BINGO’s remaining expatriate staff in Iraq are there, representing a range of nationalities and technical expertise: Marvin, the British-Canadian senior humanitarian program manager; Hélène, the French project coordinator for southern Iraq; Jamie, the British project coordinator for central Iraq; Colin, the Scottish logistician; Rosie, the British policy adviser; Fouad, the British-Iraqi public health engineer; Xatia, the Georgian finance manager, and me, the American media and communications officer. Patrick, the Irish program development adviser I picked up at the Canal Hotel a week before, is worried because he can’t find his passport. A few of the Iraqi staff members are present as well: Ibrahim, the logistician from Baghdad; Haydar, the logistician from Nasseriyah; and four drivers from Nasseriyah.

With everyone finally assembled, Marvin reviews our security management plan. We’re taking every precaution we can to ensure our safety, he explains. A staff roster and vehicle passenger list has been e-mailed to BINGO’s offices in Amman and London, giving the full name, nationality, passport number, blood type, radio call sign, and Thuraya satellite phone number for each member of the team. We have also written out detailed travel procedures and an emergency communications protocol. Each vehicle will travel in a fixed position for the duration of the trip. Marvin and Hélène will travel in the lead vehicle. They are the most senior staff members present, and also the most experienced field managers. Between the two of them they’ve worked in over 20 conflict zones all over the world. Jamie and Xatia will follow in the second vehicle, the one the Nasseriyah team had painted BINGO’s hallmark bright green—PANTONE® 376—a few months ago in an attempt to distinguish it visually from similar vehicles driven by Special Forces soldiers and clandestine intelligence officers operating in the same area.

All vehicles will have their VHF radios switched to channel 1 for short-range communication between members of the convoy. The first and last vehicles have docking stations and roof-mount antennas for Thuraya multi-band phones, which transmit voice and data via a Boeing satellite sitting in a geosynchronous orbit 22,236 miles above the desert floor. Either Marvin or Rosie will make contact with the BINGO office in Amman once every half hour while the convoy travels through Iraq, to provide a status report and updated GPS coordinates, then again once every
hour after we’ve crossed the border into Jordan. Laurent, the French logistician and security management expert who led the first BINGO assessment team to Baghdad in April 2003, will be our primary point of contact in Amman.

* * *

The sky is beginning to brighten as we roll out through the deserted streets of Karbala, and we’ve passed the edge of town long before the first rays of morning sunshine break over the horizon. Riding together in the last vehicle of the convoy, Rosie and I agree that our elaborate security protocols don’t actually protect us from danger. Careful risk analysis and good communications can only limit our exposure to potential security threats and mitigate the effects of that exposure, thus reducing our vulnerability.\(^5\) We’re still what the military calls a “soft target”—unarmed, unescorted civilians traveling in unarmored vehicles through insecure environments.\(^6\)

Rosie tells me how in early 2002 she and another female staff member were riding in an identical BINGO Land Cruiser through the jungles of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo when they were stopped at an unofficial checkpoint by two teenage boys with assault rifles. The kids were dressed in ragged, filthy clothes and stoned out of their minds on a mixture of paint thinner and amphetamines. They dragged the Congolese driver out of the vehicle and hopped inside, pointing their weapons at the two European women in the back seat. “I was sure we would be raped, or worse,” Rosie says with an ironic laugh. “Turns out they just wanted to practice speaking French for about half an hour, then they let us go.”

\(^5\) At an abstract level, the concept of “security” involves three distinct elements. First, there is something that is dangerous—a hazard or threat. Second, there is something that is endangered—something vulnerable that requires protection from the threat. Third, there is a strategic response by which to manage the vulnerability and/or mitigate the threat (a security “rationality,” together with tactics, techniques and technologies for putting it into action). The goal of the strategic response is to provide security—more specifically, to protect the vulnerable object and ensure its integrity, continuity, or survival. In the real-world practice of “security management,” the formula that is often bandied about is: risk = threat \(\times\) vulnerability. The problem is presented as how to make a given situation less “risky” (using the term in a vernacular, non-technical sense). There are things that can be done to reduce the threats, and there are things that can be done to reduce the vulnerability. In many cases, the threats are usually described as external, unpredictable, or otherwise beyond one’s control. Thus, reducing the risk requires one to reduce the vulnerability.

\(^6\) “For people who work in war zones, the risk of death or serious injury is real and ever-present. The military have a clear means to mitigate and absorb the consequences of this risk. When a serious incident occurs against civilian aid operations, however, it shakes the confidence not only of the organization affected, but of the whole aid community. The aid programme invariably loses impetus, and can come to a complete halt. When one agency reduces its presence or withdraws following an attack others often follow, either passing responsibilities over to local partners or leaving the beneficiary population to cope alone. Alternatives to withdrawal are not readily apparent. International humanitarian law (IHL) and UN conventions are designed to protect civilians, including aid workers, from violence during conflict. IHL, however, has been increasingly flouted, and the environments in which aid agencies work today bear little resemblance to the experiences of war upon which IHL was originally conceived. In fact, experience has led many to believe aid actors may be especially vulnerable in conflict situations as potential targets for violence” (Stoddard et al, 2006, 3).
The sun is high in the sky when we finally reach Highway 10, and our convoy stops briefly to refuel at a roadside turnout. Trash is strewn amongst the burned wreckage of several outbuildings, and the hulks of destroyed cargo trucks are scattered around the pavement. The “shock-and-awe” phase of US air strikes during the invasion of Iraq left thousands of ruined military and civilian vehicles in its wake, even in this remote and relatively unpopulated part of the country.

We’re afraid to stray too far away from our vehicles, as there could still be unexploded cluster bomblets from the same ordinance that destroyed these trucks lying around in the rubble and debris. So we stand around in a tight circle drinking more Iraqi-style tea from small plastic cups. The pot must have been sitting on the burner for hours, and it takes several heaping spoonfuls of sugar to mask the bitter tannins in this over-boiled brew. Hélène leans against door of the green Land Cruiser, smoking and chatting with the Iraqi drivers—all five of them speaking their own variety of heavily accented English. They have forged quite a team spirit during the previous months of working together in Nasseriyah. Convoys of trucks and tankers rumble past, carrying a steady flow of home appliances, satellite dishes and other commercial goods, heading for Baghdad.

For the next several hours of our long drive, Rosie and I work on several media messages to send to London for approval. The evacuation of all expatriate staff by one of the biggest international aid agencies in Iraq will surely make headlines once the press gets word of it. BINGO has maintained a high media profile throughout the crisis, deploying an experienced war reporter to Amman to serve as the agency’s press officer in the months leading up to the invasion. Archie Randall was interviewed on the BBC News so frequently, providing commentary and reactions to unfolding events, that it prompted an aid worker from another agency to quip: “Every time I turn on the TV, it seems BINGO is winning the war.”

Now that we’re pulling out of Iraq, it will be our job, together with the BINGO UK Media Unit in London and the BINGO Worldwide press officers in New York, Geneva, and Brussels, to manage the media reaction as best we can to protect BINGO’s brand and reputation. Two key documents must be written, signed off, and distributed as soon as possible. The first is a “reactive line,” a short statement that can be issued in response to media inquiries. In addition to highlighting the deteriorating security situation in Iraq—the ostensible reason for our withdrawal—we will also use this opportunity to communicate one of our top-line advocacy messages, namely that the United Nations should be given a stronger role in post-war reconstruction and political reforms:

BINGO believes that in order to effectively address the security situation a broader and stronger UN role is needed to pass control of Iraq to the Iraqi people as soon as possible, and to demonstrate the support of the whole international community for Iraq’s reconstruction. The UN should be allowed the lead political role in steering international support for reconstruction. We
believe that only a multi-national security force authorized by the United Nations Security Council will inspire international support and Iraqi acceptance. Only if the UN is given a stronger role in both these directions will the conditions for improved security come about.\footnote{BINGO internal document, “3 core messages for Iraqi press work,” August 26, 2003. With hindsight, it is clear that in the immediate wake of Canal Hotel bombing, the United Nations system was effectively paralyzed. A stronger role was the last thing the UN wanted. Furthermore, there was simply no capacity to take this on, even if the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority had been willing to grant the UN a seat at the proverbial table. Sergio Vieira de Mello—arguably the best man for the job in the entire UN network—had died a week before in the rubble of the Canal Hotel. With tears welling up in his eyes, Secretary General Kofi Annan privately conveyed the pervasive sense of loss and despair: “I only had one Sergio” (Power 2008, 518).}

The second document is a Q&A sheet with key talking points and carefully worded answers to the tough questions journalists are likely to be asking. As we near the border, Rosie inserts a Jordanian SIM card into her mobile phone so she can call Paula Starkley, BINGO’s chief executive in the UK. Sign-off for these particular media messages must come from the top.

One of the key elements of humanitarian practice is the movement of personnel and equipment into and out of the area of operations. Despite the “without borders” rhetoric that pervades the domain of humanitarian assistance, state sovereignty remains an inescapable reality. Much of our work is organized by the very real existence of borders and the states that maintain authority over a given territory. This requires dealing with customs and immigration officials of multiple countries, having the necessary documents—visas, permits, waybills, and carnets de passage—for each element of the assemblage.

Arriving at the Iraqi-Jordanian border, our vehicles, computers, communications equipment, and identification papers are scrutinized. The HF and VHF radios we use in Iraq are banned in Jordan, where the government claims that those frequencies are reserved for military use. Satellite telephones are also regulated.\footnote{Van Brabant (2000, 258) notes that “each country is sovereign in internal communications matters.”} Our logisticians must unbolt the whip antennas from the Land Cruiser bumpers and disconnect the CODAN radio equipment. The rest of us head to the duty-free shop to buy the maximum personal allowance of vodka, whisky, and cartons of cigarettes—another “perk” of the existence of borders.

8:00 pm. It’s after dark, and we’re still stuck at the border. One of our Iraqi drivers has been denied entry by the Jordanian officials. He overstayed his visa once before, and his immigration file has been flagged. I’ve spent hours trying to negotiate with the authorities in Arabic—a challenge for which my four years of formal language courses at the University of Texas, UCLA, and UC Berkeley left me only somewhat prepared. The Jordanian government is cracking down on the influx
of Iraqis, and no amount of arguing will dissuade them. Jamie and Colin recline on the hood of the green Land Cruiser parked amidst the orange-and-white Iraqi taxis. A pack of Gauloises cigarettes rests between them—the same brand smoked by Ian Fleming’s character, James Bond. Hélène sits alone on the hood of another vehicle, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She is frightened for what might happen to the Iraqi driver who is being sent back alone. She feels personally responsible for his safety, but there is nothing more we can do.

We finally arrive at the BINGO office in Amman at 6 a.m. on Tuesday morning, after more than 24 hours on the road. The team is totally drained, but Marvin, Jamie, Hélène, and Colin head back to one of the BINGO staff apartments to get drunk. I call in a favor from a friend and get myself checked into the Hyatt at the discounted UN rate. There’s so much information to process, but I’m strung out from the road, the stress, the frustration, and sense of loss. Maybe a good night’s sleep between 5-star sheets would help to clear my head. What had happened? So many different factors and forces led to this moment. How did we end up here? Would we ever go back to Iraq?

* * *

The foregoing narrative depicts elements of the humanitarian apparatus—a historically situated congeries of actors, technologies and practices—in a moment of retreat. It captures a thin slice of time, a day in the life of actually-existing humanitarianism. Yet this portrayal is unlike most accounts of humanitarian action for the simple reason that the standard themes, tropes and topoi of such accounts are missing altogether. No lives are being saved, no starving people fed, no child’s suffering relieved; no war wounds bandaged; no systems for storing and distributing clean water assembled, no refugee camps managed, no high-protein biscuits, blankets, shelter materials or medicines distributed. Without these commonplaces in the foreground, the narrative aims to reveal multiple layers of humanitarian practice that are often obscured by the language and imagery of “helping people.”

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9 My description of the humanitarian “apparatus” draws on Michel Foucault’s particular application of the term dispositif, a polysemous concept in his writings that provides a great deal of analytical traction. In its everyday French usage, dispositif refers to devices or tools. Foucault’s first use of the term was in an interview that he gave after the publication of Discipline and Punish (“Confessions of the Flesh,” 1977): “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (Foucault 1980, 194). Georgio Agamben provides another formulation, which nevertheless loses some of its precision as it expands to include nearly everything: “I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses ….” (Agamben 2009, 14).
Specifying this humanitarian apparatus even further—the object domains it engages, the practical, technical and conceptual operations it performs, the affective modes and ethical practices it mobilizes, the rhetorical strategies it deploys, the self-descriptions it produces—will be a necessary step towards a diagnosis of the problem of humanitarianism today. Producing this diagnosis is a primary goal of this dissertation. Another goal is to contribute to the design of equipment (analytical tools, concepts and modes of inquiry) for an anthropology of contemporary problems.

Margaret Mead used a similar vocabulary in Keep Your Powder Dry, first published in 1942: “The war is posing new problems for which there is a desperate need of solutions. [Through research in the South Pacific] I have offered certain diagnoses to Americans, who have found them, by virtue of their very strangeness, illuminating” (1965, 9-10, my emphasis). Mead wrote this particular book to highlight “the strengths and weaknesses of the American character—the psychological equipment with which we can win the war” (1965, 24). All of these terms—problem, solution, diagnosis, equipment—will be taken up and reworked (“remediated”) in the following chapters. My aim in this dissertation is driven not by patriotism and a desire to win wars, but rather by the pressing need to find a voice that expresses the inherent virtue of thinking. The overarching challenge is one of “producing anthropological knowledge anthropologically” (Rabinow 2007:5).

The Accidental Anthropologist

Floundering through mere happenings and then concocting accounts of how they hang together is what knowledge and illusion alike consist in. The accounts are concocted out of available notions, cultural equipment ready to hand. But like any equipment it is brought to the task; value added, not extracted. If objectivity, rightness, and science are to be had it is not by pretending they run free of the exertions which make or unmake them. (Geertz 1995, 3)

This project stems from my own personal befuddlement upon immersion into a foreign and exotic culture: the strange and yet wonderful world of international humanitarian relief. I participated in the humanitarian apparatus—a more precise term than “culture” for specifying this ensemble of actors, organizations, technologies, discursive and material practices, and ethical modes—both directly and indirectly from 2003 to 2006. I engaged in varying forms of professional work

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10 For Foucault, apparatuses are absolutely never “transcendental,” as is claimed by Johanna Oksala (2005, 97). Rather, they are specific articulations of technologies and procedures, strategically deployed to manage, distribute, control and regulate a set of elements—including discursive and non-discursive objects and techniques—at a particular historical conjuncture. An apparatus is thus resolutely concrete and empirical.

11 Alex de Waal, an Oxford-trained anthropologist and outspoken critic of most humanitarian aid responses and non-responses in Africa, writes disparagingly of the “humanitarian international”—“the transnational elite of relief workers, aid-dispensing civil servants, academics, journalists, and
alongside experienced practitioners of humanitarian relief in Africa and the Middle East. These “plunges into the life of the natives” (Malinowski 1961, 22) required me to learn and adopt their bizarre customs and peculiar linguistic habits. These “natives” spoke a unique dialect, and their “savage texts” were peppered with technical jargon, human rights-speak and an endless stream of three-letter acronyms: NGO, WFP, NFI, IDP, CBO, ICC, M&E, PHC, TOR, IMF, MSF, VHF, WHO, UXO, MDGs, and so on.12

My exposure to and participation in “actually existing humanitarianism” (de Waal 1997, 66) was experientially vivid, intensely personal, politically engaged and profoundly unsettling. After exiting that scene, if such a thing is ever really possible, it took me years to even begin coming to terms with Malinowski’s charge that ethnographic analysis should account for what we said we were doing, what we thought we were doing, and what we were actually doing.

I didn’t set out to study the dilemmas of international humanitarian relief in messy, political conflicts. I didn’t prepare in advance by reviewing the relevant literature, formulating a research question, writing grant proposals, designing survey instruments or writing protocols for semi-structured interviews.13 I didn’t secure permission from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects to carry out a formal research project. (The fact that I found myself working in Baghdad in the wake of a massive military invasion, where the last person that “human subjects” needed protection from was a hapless graduate student-cum-aid-worker, wouldn’t necessarily have persuaded the institutional gatekeepers to grant me a waiver of this others, and the institutions they work for—and its involvement in famines in Africa” (de Waal 1997, xv). De Waal’s phrase, with its not entirely tongue-in-cheek reference to the Communist International, is useful for specifying this ensemble of actors, their social relations of production, and the ideologies and mystifications that drive their various labors. But it remains aimed at the aid workers themselves—who are nonetheless lumped together into an undistinguished mass, not unlike the proletariat—and thus misses out on other constitutive elements of the humanitarian apparatus. Nevertheless, de Waal’s formulation draws critical attention to this “international elite of the staff of international relief agencies, academics, consultants, specialist journalists, lobbyists and also, to an increasing extent, ‘conflict resolution’ specialists and human rights workers. It is a sub-group of the larger aid and development industry. A generation ago, this group did not exist: governments, UN agencies and NGOs were staffed by different kinds of people who more often disputed common assumptions than shared them. Since 1980 there has been a marked convergence towards a common culture. One consequence of this is the ease with which individuals can move between different institutions” (de Waal 1997, 65).

12 These common acronyms stand for: non-governmental organization, World Food Programme, non-food items, internally displaced persons, community-based organization, International Criminal Court, monitoring and evaluation, primary health care, terms of reference, International Monetary Fund, Médecins sans Frontières, very high frequency, World Health Organization, unexploded ordinance, and Millennium Development Goals, respectively.

13 But perhaps this is not such a departure from the disciplinary norm. As Marilyn Strathern suggests: “Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact” (Strathern 2004, 5-6).
requirement.) I didn’t take field notes, at least not in any systematic and rigorous manner. In short, I deviated entirely from the norms and forms of knowledge production in the human sciences. It is in this sense that I consider myself an accidental anthropologist—and even an undisciplined one.

In the initial pages of this chapter, I have constructed a story of departure, rather than arrival, thus inverting a now hackneyed convention that opens many classic ethnographic texts. The definitive “arrival narrative” is probably E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) preface to The Nuer. In vivid, first-person prose—largely absent from the remaining 200 pages of the book—Evans-Pritchard inscribes his journey up the Nile to a remote region of southern Sudan and his frustration with the troublesome natives who refuse to carry his heavy gear. Mary Louise Pratt writes about this conventional component of anthropological writing:

It turns up almost invariably in introductions or first chapters, where opening narratives commonly recount the writer’s arrival at the field site, for instance, the initial reception by the inhabitants, the slow, agonizing process of learning the language and overcoming rejection, the anguish and loss at leaving. Though they exist only on the margins of the formal ethnographic description, these conventional opening narratives are not trivial. They play the crucial role of anchoring that description in the intense and authority-giving personal experience of fieldwork.... Always they are responsible for setting up the initial positionings of the subjects of the ethnographic text: the ethnographer, the native, and the reader. (Pratt 1986, 31-32)

Such tales of arrival are premised on an implicit understanding that “the field” is somewhere out there, away from the routine comforts of “home.” Even if one has traveled to a far-flung region of a foreign country, the field is still somewhere beyond the limits of what is already known and comfortable. Bronislaw Malinowski, one of...

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14 The volcano gods of bureaucracy and professional ethics have since been appeased, and this dissertation research was reviewed and approved by the Office for the Protection of Human Subjects at UC Berkeley, under CPHS Protocol #2009-5-7.

15 Evans-Pritchard doesn’t tell us why the Nuer were uncooperative, but the historical context—British imperial rule in the so-called Anglo-Egyptian Sudan—gives a plausible explanation. Adam Kuper (1996, 83-84) fills in the gap in Evans-Pritchard’s account: “The Nuer were just recovering from a brutal ‘pacification’ programme, which had involved bombing their herds of cattle and hanging their prophets, and were in no mood to welcome white visitors.” For more on the erasure of colonial power relations from anthropological texts, see Asad (1973).

16 Marcus (1998) notes that Geertz’s (1973, 412-53) essay “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” provided another ideal-typical model for opening and anchoring an ethnographic text, one that could be “easily appropriated” for cultural analysis in a variety of fields: “the opening anecdote on which I focus served as a model of the kind of fieldwork story that gets the writer into the material. The rhetorical technique of opening with such a story was to become a major (and now perhaps, dully repetitive) strategy of both writing and analysis in ethnographic, historical and literary scholarship” (Marcus 1998, 127n.2).
the first academic anthropologists to argue passionately for the importance of participant-observation as a means of conducting empirical inquiry, put it this way:

The anthropologist must relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair on the verandah of the missionary compound, Government station, or Planter’s bungalow, where, armed with pencil and notebook and at times with a whisky and soda, he has been accustomed to collect statements from informants, write down stories, and fill out sheets of paper with savage texts. He must go out into the villages, and see the natives at work in gardens, on the beach, in the jungle … (Malinowski 1926; quoted in Jarvie 1969, 2)

The Secret Life of Documents

A few years before his untimely death in 1984, Michel Foucault identified two types of “subjugated knowledges.” The first includes “blobs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematizing theory” and the second refers to the disqualified “popular knowledges,” particular, local, or regional ways of knowing. Foucault called for the tactical use of critique—which for him involved a combination of genealogy and archaeology, in his special sense of those terms—to form political alliances with these disqualified knowledges, so as to eliminate “the tyranny of globalizing discourses with their hierarchy and all their privileges of a theoretical avant-garde.” This resonates strongly with a commitment to finding and foregrounding what Ranajit Guha, founding member of the Subaltern Studies collective, has called the “small voice of history” (see Guha and Chaterjee 2009). But where should an anthropologist, working in the constantly unfolding present, look in order to find these voices? What are the sources? Where do we direct our investigations? How does one conduct ethnographic research on disqualified knowledges?

Almost four years to the day after taking my first humanitarian relief job in Baghdad, I am sprawled on the futon in my studio apartment in Oakland, CA, confronting a swirl of memories. And what I have collected are no less chaotic than them memories themselves. Three large piles of miscellaneous papers, notebooks, and reports are stacked precariously in a far corner of the room, gathering dust. I amassed the bulk of the materials in this analog archive while performing different job functions for several media and humanitarian relief agencies during the years 2003–2005. A yellowed receipt and waybill discovered in yet another pile of papers I had been sorting through earlier today shows that I paid hundreds of dollars to ship the bulky, printed materials in this analog archive via KLM air freight from Amman, Jordan, to Los Angeles. Walter Benjamin famously wrote that “every passion

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See “Two Lectures” (in Foucault 1980). It is no small irony that legions of historians and literary critics in the American academy—with pretensions of becoming a theoretical avant-garde—have borrowed selectively and superficially from Foucault’s writings to produce a new “globalizing discourse.”
borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories” (Benjamin 1968, 60). What Benjamin certainly realized, but didn’t write, was that memories and ephemera weighed less than the boxes of books he was unpacking in his library.

Countless electronic files collected during the same period—thousands of e-mails, word-processing documents, PDF files, spreadsheets, PowerPoint presentations, photos, and digital audio recordings—are stored in dozens of folders and sub-folders scattered throughout the hard disks of my two laptop computers, a portable external hard drive, and an assortment of CD-R discs. Though much lighter in weight than the stacks of paper in the corner of my apartment, this digital archive is no less disorganized, unwieldy, and unapproachable. Occasionally, as I’m doing right now, I will fire up one of the computers and peer into the chaos within.

With a laptop perched on one outstretched leg and a cup of coffee balanced on the other, I open and close a series of folders on the computer. I start out looking for something specific, but as I browse and click and scroll and skim, I begin to lose my way in the morass. Soon I am wandering aimlessly through a hodgepodge of old situation reports (“sit reps”), needs assessments, newspaper articles, policy recommendations, log frames, matrices, budgets, project timelines, internal memos, media and advocacy strategies, press releases, and unfinished scraps of my own writing. Once upon a time these documents all seemed relevant and timely—even urgent—and I had devised a basic filing system so they could quickly be found again when needed. That hierarchical structure of folders and sub-folders has gradually but inevitably collapsed, as the flood of incoming documents exceeded my ability to read, digest, and file them adequately.

As a field-based communications, media and policy adviser, information had been my stock-in-trade. Upon arriving in a new country, I would get myself added to all the relevant UN, World Bank and NGO email distribution lists and began the tedious and never-ending process of reminding staff within my own organization to CC: me on important correspondence. To stay abreast of what was going on, both inside the organization and in the general operating context, I had tried to sip carefully from the fire hose of daily information. Email messages and files were being zapped around the world 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The language of these documents—and their sheer overwhelming volume—was somewhat disorienting. What to do with all this information? Skim it, then file it. Maybe I would need it someday. Browsing through these folders again, four years later, is surreal and frustrating. Surreal because their contents seem foreign yet oddly familiar, and frustrating because there are too many disparate details with no immediate way to gauge their significance.

I start to panic at the amount of random information I’ve collected and the sheer futility of ever turning it into a coherent account of what happened in Iraq. It is little wonder that Bruno Latour called documents “the most despised of all
ethnographic subjects" (1988, 54). I phone my friend and officemate Kevin, who reminds me (quite sensibly) that no master narrative is possible, nor even desirable. There is no total history. The point is not to undertake a massive reconstruction project to piece together the Truth of what happened in Iraq or even to do a critical analysis of the documents themselves in order to show how they were assembled and circulated. Kevin suggests that I should let the archive itself be a character in the story—that I use this character to show the work the documents do and don’t do, how they live and die. I’m not sure exactly what he means, but it sounds poetic and compelling. I decide to ponder that for awhile. Can the sub-folder speak?

There’s another thorny problem with my archive. Many of the electronic files belong to me, either having been created by me or acquired legitimately through my professional duties. Others are files that I have collected, sometimes without the author’s knowledge. Of course this raises many questions. The legal and ethical issues posed by my possession of this illicit data weigh heavily on my mind. I’d be hard pressed to justify a “hacker anthropology”—whether to the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at my university, or to the organizations, or to the individuals involved. What sources of information are legitimate for an anthropology of contemporary problems?

The standards for conducting ethical research with human subjects are designed to protect individuals from harm. The confidentiality clauses in the contracts I signed with various organizations are designed to protect those organizations, as well as the individuals that are employed by them. People have a right to their own secrets. But do organizations? Governments? As I read through some of the files I am reminded of a whole range of largely insignificant things that happened and the people who were involved. The documents trigger my memory, and I begin to reconstruct some of the events and encounters. In this sense, I guess they are like a certain genre of field notes—not an actual account, but the mnemonic spark that sets the mind spinning. The thing to do, then, is to write down what I

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18 A variety of more constructive approaches to an anthropology of documents is provided in Riles (2006).

19 With apologies to Spivak (1988), who would probably answer “no.” The main point of her now infamous essay, to the extent I understand it, is that if there were such things as unmediated, authentic voices—whether from people or documents—then by definition they could not be called *subaltern*. Consider for example the following passage: “One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness. Such a testimony would not be ideology-transcendent or ‘fully’ subjective, of course, but it would have constituted the ingredients for producing a countersentence [in opposition to either ‘White men are saving brown women from brown men,’ or ‘The women actually wanted to die.’] As one goes down the grotesquely mistranscribed names of these women, the sacrificed widows, in the police reports included in the records of the East India Company, one cannot put together a ‘voice’” (Spivak 1988, 297).

20 On “head notes,” “scratch notes,” and other genres of note-taking in the field, see Sanjak (1990).
remember—set the documents aside for the moment. They’re not the “truth” anyway. Of course, neither are my memories.

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The BINGO team never returned to Iraq after leaving Karbala in August 2003. The next few months were characterized by stagnation, frustration, and internal debate. Rosie took a job at BINGO’s Regional Management Centre in Nairobi, while I languished in Amman and tried to cobble together some kind of research project to revive my doctoral studies. Rosie and I kept in touch regularly by phone and Yahoo! Instant Messenger. Ethnographic research, if that’s indeed what I was doing, was a lonely but not solitary endeavor. As Emoff and Henderson note:

> When ethnographers are at work, the people with whom they have lived are at work as well, struggling with the complexities of making meaning through discourse and making sense through observation. One way to do ethnography is to explore the unfolding of ethnographic events in ways that shake the author’s faith in fixed interpretations, ways that reiterate that the meanings of events are never secure, ways that clarify that these meanings are socially produced and historically situated. Writing then becomes, in part, less the mastery of a form of knowledge and more a collection of excerpts, outtakes from a continuous conversation about what happens on the edges of multiple forms of knowledge. (Emoff and Henderson 2002, 3)

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adrian (04:19:31): do you have a minute to chat, or are you in the midst of it all?

rosie (04:20:38): sorry, was formatting numbers in document and getting confused by which ones were done and which were not. i’m done-ish on that though. how is your work plan going? have you made a timetable?

adrian (04:22:02): no timetable, as such. i started a task list and will assign dates next

rosie (04:22:14): excellent. that sounds useful. how long do you need to be in jordan for before you could move somewhere else to write up?

adrian (04:25:21): well, that’s what i’m having a hard time figuring out. i’ve lost track of just what needs to be done, which is why i started with the task list rather than the timetable. it includes a list of people i want to interview, so i can use it
like a checklist to have a better idea of when i’ll have achieved something

rosie (04:26:19): then you have the length of time per task and you can prioritise them?

adrian (04:26:27): exactly. but the overarching problem is that i’m not sure what exactly is the phenomenon that i’m investigating, so it’s difficult to feel like i’m zeroing in on something and making any progress

rosie (04:27:43): why not make a list of the options you think are before you? we could talk it through - which ones are most interesting, which ones other people have already looked at

adrian (04:28:03): the situation is forcing me into an approach that’s very different from “standard” anthropological research, if there is such a thing

rosie (04:28:26): how come?

adrian (04:28:32): well, i can’t spend a long time somewhere, just hanging out with the “natives,” for example. and WHERE exactly is the thing / event / pattern / practice that i’m studying? it’s in iraq, but also in jordan, but also in oxford, london, brussels, new york, washington ... it’s not geographically bounded at all, but i don’t have the money to chase after it. maybe i need to narrow my focus.

rosie (04:29:55): well, how about picking a type of NGO worker?

adrian (04:30:24): like pretty or ugly? french or american? opportunist or altruist?

rosie (04:31:11): no. well, french vs american maybe. why not start with the type of work, such as emergency vs development?

adrian (04:32:04): iraq is neither

rosie (04:32:20): then maybe the type of organisation? one that focuses only on one competence or one that does everything?

21 Marcus (1998) discusses the rich possibilities and potential pitfalls of “multi-sited” ethnographic research.
adrian (04:32:21): NGOs are in Iraq to be relevant. Nobody wants to be left out of the biggest story of the year.

rosie (04:32:30): Ok, so you have middle ground, but Iraq is development feigning an emergency. Darfur is getting massive attention because it is so political. Somaliland gets very little because there is no government. Eritrea gets nothing, donors pull out.

adrian (04:33:21): The game that NGOs are playing is part of what interests me. The international system that they pretend to be separate from, but that they actually are firmly a part of.

rosie (04:33:34): Definitely ... that we are all political, and motivated by politics ... attention spans are important, and how they all work together to mean no country ever gets attention for as long as it is needed, which is bollocks. Impartial aid, my arse!

adrian (04:34:30): I'm also very interested in the fact that NGOs often deploy a very apolitical rhetoric in the midst of what is manifestly a political crisis. This much is clear: I don't wanna rehash arguments about development, or about civil society, or the standard bullshit about NGOs, which is soooooooo far from the reality of our work.

rosie (04:37:01): I think how they are part of the system is interesting. Then you could look at whether Arab ones are implicated in the same way. Which I reckon they are, but I do not know.

adrian (04:37:35): Another problem is that ethnographic writing relies on description. It's analytical, of course, but still descriptive. "Being there" is key—but in the case of humanitarianism, where is "there"?

rosie (04:38:14): Isn't "there" about working with these people and communities.


rosie (04:38:31): The NGOs, the government that they aren't part of, the politics at the UN they aren't part of.

adrian (04:39:08): The problem for me is. How to be a part of this thing. Anthropologists traditionally call it "participant observation."
rosie (04:39:42): *why is that a problem for you?*

adrian (04:40:02): because the phenomenon isn’t something i can easily participate in. the people i most want to observe don’t want an anthropologist hanging around, pestering them with awkward questions.\textsuperscript{22}

rosie (04:39:45): *oh, ok.*

adrian (04:41:05): also because they move around a lot.\textsuperscript{23} but i think the more basic problem is that this research seems impossible right now, which is why i’m trying to break it down, even though i don’t always know what “it” is. i can honestly say that there’s not much point in my being here in jordan .. i could just as easily be in nairobi .. or london. the only advantage to being here is that i can meet face to face with some of the people we know from iraq

rosie (04:43:58): *mmm. well, why not make sure you see everyone there is to see in the next few weeks then leave jordan for a bit? you need to decide what you talk them about though. i have a phone call starting in 3 minutes upstairs. i’ll be gone for yonks. can you do me a favour while you are on line?*

adrian (05:00:45): yes

rosie (05:01:03): *download the Darfur crisis funding overview from the UN website and email it to me .. none of the computers in Nairobi will allow me to access it*

adrian (05:01:13): k. i’m on it

\textsuperscript{22} In an original and influential article, Laura Nader provides a precise formulation of the problem of access for anthropologists seeking to study “up” in the United States: “The powerful are out of reach on a number of different planes: they don’t want to be studied; it is dangerous to study the powerful; they are busy people; they are not all in one place, and so on” (Nader 1974, 302). Two paragraphs later, however, she seemingly dismisses the issue: “Anthropologists have had problems of access everywhere they have gone; solving such problems of access is part of what constitutes ‘making rapport’. In view of our successes among peoples of the world who have been incredibly hostile, it is rather surprising that anthropologists could be so timid at home…” (302). George Marcus (1998, 105-131) unpacks the entanglement of “rapport” and “complicity” in the contemporary mise-en-scène of anthropological fieldwork.

\textsuperscript{23} Tracking mobile subjects may pose certain research challenges, but James Clifford notes that “the people studied by anthropologists have seldom been homebodies. Some of them, at least, have been travelers: workers, pilgrims, explorers, religious converts, or other traditional ‘long distance specialists’ ” (Clifford 1997, 17).
Two weeks later, my cell phone rang. It was Jamie, calling from Oxford, where he was now a Programme Manager for Oxfam: “Pack your bag, sweet cheeks! Darfur is on fire. We’ve got a job for you in Sudan.” The chance to work on the front lines of a “real” humanitarian crisis appealed to me. Making sense of Iraq would have to wait.

I arrived Khartoum in June 2004, where I took a position as Oxfam’s communications officer for the crisis in Darfur. What began as a six-week consulting contract turned into a multi-year assignment. My role expanded rapidly as the situation deteriorated into what Mukesh Kapila, then UN Resident Coordinator for Sudan, called “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.”24 Jan Egeland, the Undersecretary for Humanitarian Affairs, would make similar claims in the coming months.

I soon became Oxfam’s primary field-based media spokesperson on the crisis in Darfur. My job required close contact with program teams in the field, and at times I even had a role in managing the operational aspect of our work. In September 2005, I led a 13-person team from two international NGOs and the UN World Food Programme on a three-day exploratory mission into rebel-controlled areas of North Darfur. Our objective was to assess the humanitarian needs and explore the possibility of providing aid in these rural areas. Through observation, structured interviews and focus group discussions, team members systematically evaluated the major sectors of humanitarian assistance: water and sanitation, primary health care, nutritional status, hygiene, food security, livelihoods, education and “protection.”

While the technical specialists (engineers, nurses, food/market analysts) conducted their assessments, I wandered through the village with one of our Sudanese staff, interviewing people in Arabic (and having the staff member translate from Fur) to gather local information and personal testimonies. In village after village, the story was the same: groups of armed men on horseback, at times supported by Antonov planes or helicopter gunships, had attacked the village, burned houses, murdered men, raped women, abducted children, and made off with livestock and household goods.

Most of the attacks in this area occurred in late February 2004. In the village of Shakshaku, for example, I was told that 1600 people fled during a joint raid by

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24 Interview with The Economist, May 15 (2004). This phrase has been used to describe many different crises in recent years: Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Asian tsunami. The rhetoric of a “worst crisis” bears further critical investigation.
Janjaweed militia and Sudanese government troops on February 27. During the raid, 187 huts were burned; livestock, stored grain and personal belongings looted; two men disappeared and several others were killed; as many as 20 girls (the villagers could not agree on an exact number) between the ages of 9-21 were sexually assaulted, with three of the survivors reported to be pregnant; 15 children were abducted by the Janjaweed, although four had since managed to escape from captivity.

In the course of my work in Sudan, I traveled several thousand kilometers overland through all three Darfur states and interviewed hundreds of people in dozens of camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). This was essentially the same story I heard everywhere. The specific details varied from place to place, but the basic points of the narrative were frighteningly consistent. “First came the helicopters, then the men on horses. My [husband / wife / brother / sister / child] was murdered in front of my eyes. The Janjaweed burned my village. They threw children and babies into the flames.”

Over time, I became increasingly troubled by these stories, the factuality of which was impossible to assess. Stories circulate and take on a life of their own. They are not, or at least not always, simple referential statements that recount “what happened,” even when spoken in a first-person eyewitness account. It seemed clear that a frame (Goffman 1974) was emerging in Darfur in mid-2004. Amy Shuman provides an insightful and sensitive discussion of generic narratives—“how people come to tell the same story about their experience, of how one person’s narrative can typify other’s experiences, and of how that narrative can not only represent but also legitimize the experience” (Shuman 2005, 58).

One explanation is that people experienced similar difficulties, and so their stories are alike. This is compounded by time spent in camps, where they share narratives with other refugees, resulting in stories that “have been communally shaped by experiences of recounting events in the camps” (58). Ginsburg (1992) identifies how communal stories can be motivated by a desire to please the interviewers and give them what they are looking for. Caruth (1995) shows how narratives of personal and historical trauma obligate both the listener—the person who “collected” the story—and the reader to be a witness to the account (see also Laub 1992). This raises ethical/political questions about ownership of experience and the right to interpret it, along with linguistic questions about the status of reported speech, metacommunicative repertoires (Briggs 1986), and culturally specific conventions for representing experience.

What made these narratives so troubling was not only their striking similarity to one another, but also the fact that they described events that were rarely, if ever, witnessed by members the international community. One exception is Brian Steidle, a former US Marine who served for six months with the African Union’s ceasefire monitoring mission in Darfur. Steidle was often very close to scenes of violent action,
but even he never witnessed a Janjaweed raid firsthand—despite a rather close call in the village of Jayjay in January 2005 (see Steidle and Wallace 2007, 219). For the rest of us, these gruesome acts of violence, no matter how recent, always happened somewhere off-camera. What remained were their effects: burnt huts, scarred bodies, horrific stories, and hollow stares.  

* * *

I finally returned to UC Berkeley in January 2006 to resume the PhD in socio-cultural anthropology I had shelved three and a half years before. I was road-worn and world-weary after what was by far the most rootless and unsettling period of my life. In my erstwhile role as a humanitarian media, advocacy and policy worker, I had circulated between far-off zones of violence and privation and the (also far-off) hallways, antechambers, conference rooms and offices of an international system that purports to respond to, and ultimately prevent, such violence and privation. I had traveled lightly, living out of a carry-on suitcase and tattered rucksack, as I shuttled between the deadly streets of Baghdad, the dusty alleyways of Khartoum and the deepest depths of Darfur. Months of 16-hour workdays in remote locations were punctuated with short research and lobbying trips to hubs of global influence.

One week I would be writing a story about widows and orphans in Kalma, an overcrowded camp for displaced people in South Darfur, the next week meeting with Sudanese government officials, high-ranking diplomats, or political advisers from a variety of international organizations and United Nations agencies. I had coordinated media relations and crisis communications for a major international aid agency, giving hundreds of live interviews and background briefings to major print, radio and TV stations from all over the world. I had interviewed displaced and war-affected people and negotiated with local officials, tribal leaders, and various armed factions. I had written speeches to be delivered to the UN Security Council and influenced political advisers to the governments of Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States during closed-door advocacy meetings in Ottawa, Brussels, London, New York and Washington DC.

It was thrilling work, but it came with a price. Many fellow aid workers died during my tour through the arena of humanitarian action—from acquaintances like Sergio Vieira de Mello, Martha Teas, Chris Klein-Beekman and Gillian Clarke (who died in the Canal Hotel bombing in 2003), to colleagues like Rafe Bullick (killed by a landmine in Darfur in 2004) and Margaret Hassan (abducted and murdered in Baghdad in 2004), and close friends like Marla Ruzicka (killed by a suicide bomber in Iraq in 2005). These personal losses—along with the sheer magnitude and complexity of the human drama that formed the backdrop of my experiences in Iraq,

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25 The Darfur crisis will be discussed further in follow-up project that is beyond the scope of the present dissertation.
Sudan and other global (dis)locations—had taken a toll on me. The primary effect was numbness and disillusionment.

For many years I struggled to pierce the veil of emotional detachment and get to the root of the experiences I’d had in Iraq and Sudan. I felt disconnected and far removed from the scene of the action. Much later it began to dawn on me that my personal sense of detachment wasn’t a problem of poor memory or distance in space and time. Rather, the detachment had been there all along, even in the field. The detachment wasn’t a barrier to some deeper, more fundamental experience. It was the experience itself.

I have no pretense that the analysis offered here, informed not only by thought and reflection but also by documents and interpretive frameworks not available to me at the time, is anything but a partial (or even skewed) account based on the limits of my own professional and personal engagement with the humanitarian apparatus and the conceptual tools I have crafted or appropriated to guide my reconstruction. Some of the lacunae in my personal understanding of “what happened” in Iraq have been filled by additional materials gathered and studied after the fact. Other gaps remain, including those in my personal experience of traumatic events that I either witnessed firsthand or narrowly—and sometimes inadvertently—avoided. When suicide bombers and kidnappers murder your friends in Baghdad, or a landmine takes the life of a colleague in Darfur, how do you turn such events into knowledge? The notion that “being there” somehow provides a fieldworker with direct and unmediated access to the true nature of things is inaccurate and irresponsible, if not downright laughable. The volatile relationship between trauma, memory and language leaves us to grapple with the possibility that some events are simply incomprehensible—especially to those directly caught up in and impacted by them.26

Trauma, and the possibility of representing traumatic events, have become topics of much discussion in recent historical and literary scholarship. Informed by a broad range of psychoanalytic theory, but especially Sigmund Freud’s later work on trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, many scholars (e.g., LaCapra 1994) struggle to come to terms with the traumatic “limit events” that seem to defy human understanding. Indeed, the notion of trauma is linked to a larger conception of the very “possibility of history” (Caruth 1996, 115 n.5), when traumatic events can scarcely be experienced let alone represented.27

26 Freud’s discussion of traumatic neurosis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is relevant here, as is Lacan’s reading of Freud’s account of the dream of the burning child. The literature on trauma also addresses the issue of “displacement,” arguing that trauma cannot be experienced directly but that it speaks through other forces and other voices. New forms of speaking require new forms of listening.

27 The idea that trauma lies beyond the limits of experience comes from Freud’s “train wreck” example in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As Cathy Caruth explains: “What is truly striking about the accident victim’s experience of the event, and what in fact constitutes the central enigma revealed by
One of the primary concepts in writings on trauma is the notion of deferral. This is sometimes figured in narrow Freudian terms as “latency” (Caruth 1996, 16-18, 70-1), but a broader definition of traumatic deferral is provided by Dominick LaCapra (1998, 8) as “the deferred recognition of the significance of traumatic series of events in recent history, events one might will prefer to forget.” LaCapra is writing specifically about the Holocaust, but I argue that his theory of historical trauma is by no means exclusive to the Jewish experience in Europe. Such an argument deals directly with questions of ethics and identity, as LaCapra continues:

The traumatic event has its greatest and most clearly unjustifiable effect on the victim, but in different ways it also affects everyone who comes into contact with it: perpetrator, collaborator, bystander, resister, those born later. Especially for victims, trauma brings about a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it. (1998, 8-9)

* * *

What is presented in this dissertation is an unapologetically incomplete picture—an *ex post facto* reconstruction (Dewey 1921) and *remediation* (Rabinow 2007) of partial notes, imperfect memories, assorted documents and scattered e-mails. These fragments, or “residual statements” (Foucault 1972), reflect the particular dimensions of humanitarian aid work I was involved with or the aspects I have been able to grasp, however distantly, “after the fact” (Geertz 1995).

The notion of situated knowledge (Haraway 1991), once a useful corrective to pompous, masculinist claims of scientific objectivity, has become rather blasé these days. But it bears repeating that the account presented here is inherently contestable and would undoubtedly emerge quite differently in both form and substance from someone else’s pen. Such is the politics of knowledge.

Freud’s example, is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather the fact that the victim of the crash was never fully conscious during the accident itself: the person gets away, Freud says, “apparently unharmed.” The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully know, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all.” (Caruth 1996, 17)

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28 Foucault’s discussion of “residual statements” is a helpful corrective to attempts to salvage or recover some coherent and meaningful version of the past: “To say that statements are residual (*émancipants*) is not to say that they remain in the field of memory, or that it is possible to rediscover what they meant; but it means that they are preserved by virtue of a number of supports and material techniques (of which the book is, of course, only one example), in accordance with certain types of institutions (of which the library is one), and with certain statutory modalities (which are not the same in the case of a religious text, a law, or a scientific truth). This also means that they are invested in techniques that put them into operation, in practices that derive from them, in the social relations that they form, or, through those relations, modify” (Foucault 1972, 123-24). I will return to Foucault’s discussion of statements (*énoncés*) in Chapter Two.
Broadly speaking, humanitarianism can be defined as any activity aimed at the betterment of humankind. “Humanitarians” are thus people concerned with the welfare and well-being of others, who have devoted themselves to charitable causes. They raise or donate funds, manage or direct projects, participate in some way in “helping people.” Aid workers are a subset of this group, specifically those that participate in overseas direct assistance programs. In the ideal-typical view, they are seen as scruffy, Peace Corps types with beards and sandals/boots—missionaries, mercenaries, and misfits, as the saying goes. They are taken by many to be low-paid, deeply committed individuals willing to risk their own lives and forgo the comforts of home to help others and make a difference.

This stereotype obscures the complex reality “on the ground”—a phrase that aid workers are quite fond of. In the course of my research, I met aid workers of all ages, from dozens and dozens of countries, from every socioeconomic class. Their motivations were diverse. Some liked the thrill and adventure; some preferred the loosely structured lifestyle, free from societal conventions and the constraints of parental authority; some were in it for money, or for the opportunity to sleep around. Whatever may be said about the “charitable impulse,” it is surely insufficient to account for the full range of this phenomenon. Suffice it to say, humanitarian action has multiple dimensions. It is symbolic as well as practical; both dimensions are nevertheless forms of practice.

Humanitarianism is usually expressed as a response to the problem of human suffering. Both the problem and the solution present themselves as self-evident. The language of “helping others” is its own justification. Violence and deprivation cause suffering, thus humanitarian action is necessary to alleviate suffering. Throughout this dissertation I argue that the discourses and practices of humanitarianism are neither stable nor self-evident, although an ever-present rhetoric of “helping people” gives the appearance that things are the same.

One step towards clearing up the conceptual muddles in the vast literature on “humanitarianism” is a necessary clarification of terms. Following Rabinow, who on this point follows John Dewey and Richard McKeon, we can distinguish three aspects of a term: “I use the word ‘term’ to designate the combination of a word, a concept, and a referent. It is very frequently the case that while a word may remain the same over long periods of time, the concept and the referent initially associated with the term change. This transmutation of elements internal to the term is masked by the continued use of the word; such masking has often led to semantic and philosophic confusions.” (Rabinow 2006, 1)

How did humanity, figured as suffering, become a problem to which humanitarianism was seen as the self-evident solution? It’s worth reviewing the story aid workers tell themselves about themselves—Clifford Geertz’s definition of a
“myth”—about the origins of humanitarianism. According to this narrative, modern humanitarian action traces its origins to Henri Dunant’s encounter with the horrific aftermath of war on the battlefield at Solferino, which led his founding of the Red Cross movement in the 19th century (Forsythe 2005). Most private, voluntary relief organizations were created between 1919 and 1950, between World War I and the Korean War. Save the Children Fund was created in 1919 to help European children orphaned and impoverished by the First World War. Oxfam was formed in 1942 to protest against the famine and deprivation caused by the Allied blockade of Nazi-occupied Greece (Black 1992). Contrary to current belief that “humanitarian advocacy” is a recent innovation, many of these agencies were campaigning organizations from the beginning.

In the 1960s, the International Committee of the Red Cross identified the seven “fundamental principles” of the Red Cross movement: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.29 In the specific language of the Red Cross, humanity is both an object (“humankind”) and an attitude towards that object—sometimes described as “charity,” with its particular Christian baggage, or sometimes merely as “a sentiment of active goodwill” toward humankind. The Red Cross movement upholds the principle of humanity as the fundamental basis of humanitarian action: human life is something to be respected and protected, and human beings are to be treated humanely. Note that there are two different things at stake: human life itself, and the quality of one’s life. The goal of humanitarianism is primarily “saving lives” and “reducing suffering,” but also assuring humane treatment. These three goals form the humanitarian imperative: 1) to prevent and alleviate suffering, 2) to protect life and health, and 3) to assure respect for the human person (Pictet 1979, 18-27).30

29 “The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is the world’s largest humanitarian network, with a presence and activities in almost every country. The Movement incorporates the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (the International Federation), as well as National Societies in 186 countries.” http://www.redcross.int/EN/history/, accessed October 13, 2008.

30 Similar principles are expressed in The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, a set of voluntary principles developed and agreed by eight of the world’s largest disaster response agencies in 1994. It is interesting to note that in these principles, the dignity of human persons is not always presumed to be in crisis. People can suffer and still have dignity. Aid workers are often told that their representations of people should not portray them as “victims” but as dignified, albeit suffering, people. Item 10 in The Code of Conduct states: “In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified humans, not hopeless objects. Respect for the disaster victim as an equal partner in action should never be lost. In our public information we shall portray an objective image of the disaster situation where the capacities and aspirations of disaster victims are highlighted, and not just their vulnerabilities and fears. While we will co-operate with the media in order to enhance public response, we will not allow external or internal demands for publicity to take precedence over the principle of maximizing overall relief assistance. We will avoid competing with other disaster response agencies for media coverage in situations where such coverage may be to the detriment of the service provided to the beneficiaries or to the security of our staff or the beneficiaries.”
Three new assemblages emerged in the 1970s: multinational corporations, mercenaries, and “operational” humanitarian aid agencies. An implicit challenge to state sovereignty was integral to all three. New forms of “operational” humanitarianism gained prominence in response to civil wars and famines in several African countries. Famine became political—a technique of war, which is to say, politics by other means. Media images of malnourished children mobilized public financial support and political activism. The “refugee” became a privileged site of humanitarian action (Maalki 1995). The touchstone for all this was the civil war in Biafra, Nigeria from 1967–1970 (see Finucane 1993). The experience of French doctors responding to the Biafra conflict led them to establish Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in 1971. Bernard Kouchner and other doctors who were working for the French Red Cross in Biafra grew frustrated with the Red Cross’s refusal to speak out about the horrific abuse of civilians by parties to the conflict, adhering to a strict principle of confidentiality. The “without borders” movement developed a stance that upheld a commitment to témoignage in addition to independent direct action to save lives and relieve suffering.

MSF developed a radical, interventionist form of humanitarian action that posed a direct challenge to state sovereignty, famously expressed as the “the right to intervene.” The notion of le droit d’ingérence—sometimes le devoir d’ingérence, the right or duty of states to intervene (or interfere) in the affairs of other states—was articulated by philosopher Jean-François Revel in 1979. When Kouchner and others broke away from MSF to found Médecins du Monde, they extended this concept to non-governmental humanitarian organizations, arguing for the right to provide assistance to alleviate suffering without the consent of the state. The basic premises of this concept were developed during a 1987 conference organized by international law professor Mario Bettati and Médecins du Monde under the name “The Right to Intervene.” It proclaimed the right of victims to receive assistance and the obligation of states to contribute to relief efforts and humanitarian aid programs (see Bettati and Kouchner 1987; Bettati 1991; 1992; 1995; 1996).

In the 1980s, the global rise of non-profits, NGOs and other private, voluntary organizations provided new avenues for ordinary citizens to participate in international affairs. The NGO worker emerged as a new breed of political animal.

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31 Tony Vaux points to the central role of media representations (or what I would call “remediations”) in mobilizing an international response to the conflict in Biafra: “Oxfam rose to national prominence during the Biafra war, which was the first humanitarian disaster to be seen by millions of people and also the first to be the subject of systematic distortion. Overwhelmed by images of starvation and by public outcry, Oxfam’s director ordered a plane of relief supplies into Biafra without undertaking a proper investigation on the ground. The truth behind the Biafra famine proved murky. The secessionists had used a public relations company to exaggerate the suffering. Oxfam found itself accused of fueling a pointless conflict” (Vaux 2001, 15, my emphasis). For more on the public relations angle of the Biafra conflict, see Davis (1972; 1976).

32 The meaning of “ingérence” is rather ambiguous in French. See Breitenbauch (2003) for an interesting semantic and discursive analysis.
Some scholars sneer at this phenomenon. Hardt and Negri, for example, whose book *Empire* was all the rage among intellectual hipsters on the Berkeley campus when I returned from the field, characterize such organizations as the “mendicant orders” of global Empire (2000, 32). Yet Hardt and Negri, along with David Rieff (2002), make sweeping claims about international relief organizations but provide little in the way of empirical detail. We need to take aid workers more seriously.

Following the unexpected collapse of the Soviet empire, the United States entered a new era of global dominance. The question of sovereignty appeared very different after the fall of the Soviet Union. The relationship between states and non-state actors shifted. New problems emerged and new solutions became possible. During the decade of internal armed conflicts that followed the Cold War, the problem of human suffering was reframed as an issue of US foreign policy. Thus, the 1990s was the decade of “humanitarian intervention” (e.g., Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Goma, Kosovo). Yet the American vision of economic and cultural expansion (through globalization, nation-building, and other “soft” forms of imperialism) did not go unchallenged.

The ragtag militia fighters of Muhammad Adid in Somalia posed a direct and deadly challenge to America’s military presence in Somalia. Operation Restore Hope, in which US Army Rangers and elite Delta Force operatives were deployed to protect UN food convoys and stabilize the violent situation in Mogadishu, had an explicitly “humanitarian” justification. The military operation had disastrous results, and US policy shifted again. What followed were the notable non-interventions that showed the limits of the so-called New World Order (e.g., Rwanda, Srebenica). The Rwanda genocide was a key event that mobilized a new kind of actor to take new kinds of action. For the first time, people were talking about the “failure of the international community” (see Barnett 2001; Melvern 2009). In the mid-1990s, the major humanitarian agencies began to establish “policy shops” for advocacy and lobbying.

33 The events of September 11, 2001, are not a break from this trend, but the continuation of it. Non-state actors once again posed a direct challenge to the presumed invincibility of the United States.

34 Civilian aid workers take a more critical view, claiming that the military “appropriated” the rhetoric of humanitarianism to justify military action.

35 These activities continue to the present day, with much energy now focused on getting states signed up to the notion of the “responsibility to protect,” which puts sovereignty in question yet again. The following quote is from a confidential draft campaigning strategy circulated in April 2006 by a major international NGO: “At September 2005’s UN World Summit, world leaders made a historic commitment recognizing their collective responsibility to protect [R2P] civilians from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, where the national government – which has primary responsibility – is manifestly failing in this regard. This was a crucial step in building international agreement that sovereignty brings responsibility; that governments must not leave their own citizens unprotected from the worst crimes humanity can commit; that the rest of the world must not turn a blind eye but be ready to take action to save human lives. Agreement on the Summit’s Outcome Document was hard won, and masked underlying, ongoing opposition from powerful...
In the context of the “Global War on Terror,” diplomatic and military responses to the appearance and production of new enemies and threats are changing the nature of armed conflict. War and peace are being problematized in a different way. For example, the little-understood concept of “Shock and Awe”—more properly termed Rapid Dominance—was conceived in the mid-1990s as an alternative to the then-current American defense doctrines of “overwhelming or decisive force,” “dominant battlefield awareness,” and “dominant maneuver.” In a post-Cold War world, the authors of a policy paper on the topic predicted, a new configuration of military strategy, force structure, technology would replace the older “force against force” idea of the battlefield, where a large, highly trained, and well-equipped military would materially overwhelm the opposing force. The strategic aim of Shock and Awe is to “break the will of the adversary.” This requires “capabilities to maximize the core characteristics of (1) knowledge of self, adversary, and environment, (2) rapidity, (3) brilliance in execution, and (4) control of the environment” (Ullman and Wade 1996, 58).

In addition to “firepower and steel,” the US military is putting an increased emphasis on intelligence gathering, working with local communities and doing other “humanitarian” projects. This entails an increased emphasis on the Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations component of the missions. The military is currently reorienting and reorganizing the training of these specialties, trying to incorporate lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, Iraq has failed to produce critical self-reflection by civilian aid agencies, many of whom have labeled the crisis response “unique” (e.g., Donini, Minear and Walker 2004; Graham-Brown 1999, 324-25). In both the early to mid-1990s as well as in 2003-2004, most NGOs simply moved on to the next crisis without reflection.

Some might argue that shift is occurring in the domain of humanitarianism. The dilemmas and challenges of realities on the ground are resulting in a new emphasis on security. For civilian humanitarian agencies, this includes “protection” for vulnerable populations and “safety and security” for aid workers. For governments to any assault on the prerogatives of sovereign governments to do what they wish within their territory.” Vocal opponents of the R2P framework include China, India, Pakistan, Russia and the United States.

36 Conversations with a variety of sources indicate that this is happening throughout all branches of the military, but especially at the unified US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, FL and at the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, NC—not exactly the kind of places that generally welcome inquiries from curious anthropologists.

37 “Protection” emerged in the 1990s as an explicit kind of “rights-based programming” for humanitarian agencies. It focuses on three things that people should be protected from: violence, coercion and deprivation. That’s pretty all-inclusive, since even food distributions can be carried out in a “protection framework” (i.e., to reduce deprivation). In practice, however, most “protection advisers” (a new job title that has rapidly proliferated in the aid industry) really only talk about violence, and sometimes about coercion .. they tend to leave deprivation part to the food advisers, the water and sanitation engineers, and the public health specialists. What I think might be happening is a shift from “suffering” to “protection” to “security”—although suffering and protection will not disappear off the
government and military humanitarian actors, “winning hearts and minds” is linked to a strategic logic of friends, enemies and battlefield victory in Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond. Divergent activities and agendas are converging behind a common vocabulary of charity, benevolence and moral virtue. For many first-order observers, this convergence is the source of uneasiness and concern.38

This dissertation asks the following questions: What discourses and practices are operating in the domain of humanitarianism today? What are the problems for which humanitarianism is seen as a self-evident solution? What figures of “the human” are being produced and circulated? What shifts in truth games and power relations are occurring, and what forms of political and ethical engagement are being taken up? What linkages are emerging between humanitarianism and the global security apparatus? What techniques of self-formation are being practiced by humanitarian actors? What passions, motivations and commitments orient their work?

In short, this dissertation identifies changes in both the object and subject of humanitarianism in the contemporary world, using the case of Iraq as a lens to make these changes visible. It seeks to develop a critique of the universal and self-justifying rhetoric of altruism without resorting to cynicism or denunciation. In so doing, it inquires into what positions might be available from which to think the politics and ethics of humanitarianism differently.

It’s high time to challenge humanitarian “common sense.”39 What is needed is not another authoritative “insider” account telling us how what humanitarianism really is. What is needed is a contingent, situated, reflective account. An interpretive analytics. An adventure in fieldwork and philosophy. An anthropology of contemporary problems.

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38 This convergence is not new. There is a well-known “revolving door” between government / non-government agencies. Andrew Natsios, to cite one prominent example, a retired colonel in the US Marines, served as Vice President of World Vision before returning to government service as the head of USAID. The USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and the DFID Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU), later renamed the Stabilisation Unit, unambiguously combine military and civilian resources. Iconoclastic aid pioneer Fred Cuny was an early and outspoken advocate for new disaster preparedness models that blended government and private sector capacities; see the multi-volume Relief Operations Guidebook published by International Technical Consultants in Emergency Management (Intertect), Cuny’s Dallas-based firm, between 1973 and 1977; and also Cuny (1983).

39 The notion of “common sense” as a jumble of inchoate and incoherent conceptions and dispositions relies on the writings of Antonio Gramsci. (Bronislaw Malinowski had an altogether different term for this kind of socially sanctioned and socially productive nonsense—“magic.”) Gramsci points to the need to historicize common sense in order to understand “the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (Gramsci 1971, 324).
This dissertation offers an alternative view of the humanitarian apparatus. To this end, it constitutes a different object and creates a new distinction, a concept of humanitarianism that doesn’t rely on simplistic first-order distinctions such as humanitarianism vs. politics, or aid workers vs. the military. This analytical object—“humanitarian equipment”—is laid out in the next chapter.
Chapter Two:
Toward an Anthropology of Contemporary Problems

New Objects, New Distinctions

In the mid-1980s, George Marcus and Michael Fischer called for a new object of anthropological inquiry:

What we have in mind is a text that takes as its subject not a concentrated group of people in a defined community affected in one way or another by political-economic forces, but “the system” itself—the political and economic processes spanning different locales, or even different continents. […]

Pushed by the holism goal of ethnography beyond the conventional community setting of research, these ideal experiments would try to devise texts that combine ethnography and other analytic techniques to grasp whole systems, usually represented in impersonal terms, and the quality of lives caught up in them. (Marcus and Fischer 1986, 91)

Exactly what “other analytic techniques” Marcus and Fischer were suggesting remained unclear. They opened new lines of inquiry and proposed experimentation with different forms of representation, but didn’t provide all the necessary tools. As Kim Fortun notes in referring to the Marcus and Fischer book, the “textual strategies for bridging micro and macro levels of analysis remained to be worked out. There were no models for writing the disaster” (Fortun 2001, 10). Furthermore, Marcus and Fischer’s notion of “cultural critique” was premised on the existence of a mosaic of “cultures” that remained the primary site and object of anthropological analysis. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson point out, this way of thinking “assumes an already existing world of many different, distinct ‘cultures’ and an unproblematic distinction between ‘our own society’ and an ‘other’ society” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 42). They offer an extended critique of the implicit spatialization devices that structure much anthropological knowledge, suggesting that an attention to the political location of one’s work is at least as important as its geographic locale:

Fieldwork reveals that a self-conscious shifting of social and geographical location can be an extraordinarily valuable methodology for understanding social and cultural life, both through the discovery of phenomena that would otherwise remain invisible and through the acquisition of new perspectives on things we thought we already understood. Fieldwork, in this light, may be

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40 Marcus (1998) extends this vision further, calling for strategically situated, multi-sited ethnographic research that is embedded in and yet analytically turned toward the world system or some other “whole.”

41 This last sentence refers to Blanchot (1986).
understood as a form of motivated and stylized dislocation. Rather than a set of labels that pins down one’s identity and perspective, location becomes visible here as an ongoing project. (Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 36-37)

For well over a century, the academic discipline of anthropology has defined itself in terms of a stable, coherent object (“culture”), a loose set of empirical research practices (“fieldwork”), a geographically displaced but epistemologically uninterrupted subject position (“the ethnographer”) and a specialized written genre (“ethnography”). All these terms have been challenged and questioned throughout the history of the discipline. The emphasis has shifted from a nomothetic study of capital-c “Culture” (Tylor 1871) to a comparative analysis of “cultures” in the plural (Boas 1911; Benedict 1934, Kroeber and Kluckhon 1952) to “the cultural” as a key diacritic of difference (Appadurai 1996). In the late 1970s, the myth of fieldwork was ruptured by several thoughtful accounts of fieldwork (Rabinow 1977; Dumont 1978). And in the 1980s–90s, critiques of ethnographic authority put forth by participants at the Santa Fe seminar that preceded the publication of Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986) brought renewed attention to the way anthropologists represent others, revealing the unstated assumptions and rhetorical strategies that operate in the construction of ethnographic texts. Yet despite years of reflection and self-criticism, most anthropologists still assume that “doing anthropology” still equates to some sort of fieldwork, followed by some sort of “writing culture.”

42 Fredrik Barth makes the interesting observation that on the Torres Straits Expedition (1898), widely regarded as a turning point in the history of British anthropology, the islands themselves had imposed new empirical methods and analytical categories on the field researchers: “Data were interconnected with each other by virtue of their local association and separated from ‘similar’ facts—similar, that is, as defined by the investigators’ categories and archives—from everywhere else. The island-hopping anthropologist was led to make the most of his few weeks on an island by maximizing the amount of documentation he collected, however haphazardly, from a particular community and place. The object of anthropological investigation had come to be no longer culture generally, but particular local cultures” (Barth et al, 2005, 13).

43 “Resisting ideas of culture that tempt us to think of actual social groups as cultures, I have also resisted the noun form culture and suggested an adjectival approach to culture, which stresses its contextual, heuristic, and comparative dimensions and orients us to the idea of culture as difference, especially difference in the realm of group identity” (Appadurai 1996, 13).

44 James Clifford describes this genre of as texts that are “concerned with the representation of a specific research situation (a series of constraining times and places) and (in somewhat fictionalized form) a sequence of individual interlocutors” (Clifford 1988, 42). Rabinow’s Reflections is by no means the first insider account of anthropological research, as demonstrated by the list of fifteen other books on fieldwork listed in his bibliography. Writing elsewhere, Clifford describes such “fieldwork accounts” more generally: “Variously sophisticated and naïve, confessional and analytic, these accounts provide an important forum for the discussion of a wide range of issues, epistemological, existential, and political. . . . Ethnographic experience and the participant-observation ideal are shown to be problematic. Different textual strategies are attempted. For example, the first person singular (never banned from ethnographies, which were always personal in stylized ways) is deployed according to new conventions. With the ‘fieldwork account’ the rhetoric of experienced objectivity yields to that of the autobiographical and the ironic self-portrait. . . . The ethnographer, a character in a fiction, is at center stage” (Clifford 1986, 14).
Doctoral students in anthropology at American universities follow a typical path in the course of earning their degree. The normal trajectory includes two to three years of graduate seminars and language courses. At the University of California, Berkeley, this culminates in the writing of “field statements” on three topics related to the student’s research, each one supervised by a member of the faculty. These written papers form the basis for the oral examination—a three-hour exercise in disciplinary power that students prepare for with equal parts excitement and terror. After successfully completing their exams and advancing to candidacy, students head off to “the field”—an epistemological and experiential black box, shrouded in mystery and folklore, where the real anthropology is presumably waiting to happen. “Human beings,” Alfred Kroeber famously observed, “must ordinarily be observed as they are,” and indeed where they are—in situ, in other words, rather than in the laboratory or under experimental conditions. “The phenomena concerning man have to be taken as they come and laboriously sifted and re-sifted afterward, instead of being artificially simplified in advance, as by the experimental method” (Kroeber 1923, 4). But what to do in the field? “Keep notes and survive” (Geertz 1995, 2) is the kind of advice one gets from professors and peers about anthropology’s paramount rite de passage.

After returning from fieldwork, students are expected to enter directly into the final phase of their apprenticeship: writing up. The assumption is that a set of inscription practices provides the core activity that links all these diverse experiences together into a form of knowledge production. From “pre-texts” (reading notes, seminar papers, field statements, research proposals), to field notes, to dissertation chapters, to published monographs, the figure of “anthropologist as hero,” in Susan Sontag’s phrase, emerges as a solo adventurer who is “in control of, and even consciously exploiting, his [sic] own intellectual alienation” (1994, 74). The trauma of fieldwork is overcome to achieve a “hard-won impassivity” (72). Sontag’s anthropologist “acts out a heroic, diligent, and complex modern pessimism” (81). The proper ethic to maintain is a Protestant one, characterized by a sense of duty, moral seriousness, fortitude; in short, anthropology as a vocation.

The “fieldwork / writing up” couplet is ill-suited to an anthropology of the contemporary. As a substitute for these worn out and often unsuitable notions, I offer a preliminary inventory of practices to organize the “work” (labor, Arbeit) of anthropology today: object work (ontological)—distinguishing the forms, modes, positions and relations of various elements in an object domain; concept work (intellectual)—specifying the terms, concepts and analytics; self work (ethical)—engaging in techniques and practices to constitute oneself as the subject of knowledge, practice, and experience; care of the self and others; taking an existential risk. This work on oneself is what Foucault calls “spirituality,” that is, “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth” (Foucault 2005: 15; see also Rabinow 2009). All three domains of work can be taken up
reflexively as sites for inquiry and reconstruction (Dewey 1938; 1948). All three call for the assembly of “equipment.”

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On the shelves of the anthropology library at UC Berkeley, a copy of Paul Rabinow’s *Marking Time* (2007) sits exactly next to Radcliffe-Brown’s *Method in Social Anthropology* (1958). It is an interesting juxtaposition. Both men spent important years at the University of Chicago; both were influenced deeply by French thought—Radcliffe-Brown via Emile Durkheim, and Rabinow through a sustained engagement with Michel Foucault. Radcliffe-Brown regarded social anthropology as a branch of natural science (see 1965, 188-89), and he sought to construct “a more rigorous battery of concepts to order the ethnographic materials” (Kuper 1996, 35). His primary concern was to distinguish social anthropology from ethnology—which he called “conjunctural history” and regarded as completely unscientific. Rabinow, too, has rejected ethnography (*ethnos* + *graphos*) in favor of interpretive analytics (*anthropos* + *logos*, as Rabinow’s puts it). In truth, although their hardback covers are pressed tightly against each other, the chasm between these two books couldn’t be wider. Each slim volume represents a distinct tradition in the production of anthropological knowledge—Radcliffe-Brown’s “structural functionalism” and Paul Rabinow’s “anthropology of the contemporary.” Yet both texts wrestle with two central questions: what is the nature of this object, “the human,” and what forms of empirical inquiry are appropriate to engaging with it?

The notion that defining the object of analysis is a necessary first step toward defining the “science” appropriate to the study of that object has a venerable tradition in the human sciences. Ferdinand de Saussure, for example, stated in the opening pages of the *Cours de linguistique general* (1986, 6) that one of the primary aims of linguistics is “to delimit and define linguistics itself”—in this case, as the science of *langue* or linguistic structure. Saussure identified the challenge of studying linguistic phenomena: “The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object” (Saussure 1986, 8). Thus, defining the objects of analysis is not an inert fact but an active procedure and a form of position-taking. In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu calls for “an objectification of the interest to objectivize” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 260), declaring that the process of object construction is never

45 Radcliffe-Brown distinguished between “idiographic” and “nomothetic” forms of research and analysis: “In an idiographic enquiry the purpose is to establish as acceptable certain particular or factual propositions or statements. A nomothetic enquiry, on the contrary, has for its purpose to arrive at acceptable general propositions. We define the nature of an enquiry by the kind of conclusions that are aimed at.” (Radcliffe-Brown 1965, 1)

46 Saussure is clear that the perspectival construction of an object does not make it any less real: “The signs comprising a language are not abstractions, but real objects. Linguistics studies these objects and the relations between them.” (Saussure 1986, 101)
impartial or disinterested. “What is at stake,” he asserts, “is how far the objectifier is willing to be caught up in his work of objectification” (Bourdieu 1990, 19). Bourdieu insists that the work of objectifying one’s relationship to the object is essential, for it alone defines “the proper relation to the object which is one of the most decisive conditions of truly scientific practice in the social sciences.” (1990, 15)

Bourdieu identifies the importance of this central insight: “And it may be that the objectification of the generic relationship of the observer to the observed which I endeavored to perform . . . is the most significant product of my whole undertaking…” (1990, 15). Bill Hanks agrees that to objectify is to be caught up in the world one is objectifying: “The challenge is to enter into the process of objectification with your eyes wide open and without forgetting that we, too, are part of the world we describe—as both objects and objectifiers” (Hanks 1996, 14). He nicely characterizes objectification itself as a temporal practice in an ongoing present: “Objectification inheres in practice as it unfolds, and it becomes a kind of practice itself, when you pull it in to the foreground and set about doing it in earnest. Each step forward has with it a return. The past is recast in the consequences of the present, which would have been different without the past. And so forth.” (Hanks 1996, 305)

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Saussure’s initial operations are a form of critique, in the Kantian sense—a reflexive mode of rational inquiry that applies reason to itself in order to establish the legitimate boundaries of knowledge. Saussure’s boundary-work, at once rational and relational, is inseparable from his larger project, which identifies an object of study and specifies the procedures necessary for its analysis. Reading sequentially through the Cours—which Harris (1987, xvi) argues is the only appropriate way to approach a text that places so much emphasis on syntagmatic relations—we find that Saussure constructs his account of language and linguistics through a series of fundamental dichotomies. The first of these divisions identifies “linguistic structure” (langue) as the proper object of Saussure’s new science. Speech (parole) is historically prior but analytically subordinate. It is individual, intentional, and heterogeneous, while langue, as “the social product of our linguistic faculty” (Saussure 1986, 9), is a conventional, collective and relatively homogeneous system of signs. The system is a concrete, coherent whole that exists beyond the reach of individuals speakers (in the sense that they are unable to alter it directly) while nonetheless being “localized” in each individual’s brain.

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48 The fact that the text of the Cours was not directly authored by Saussure but was assembled by his students need not detract from this argument. The form of the text is structured according to the mode of thinking which characterizes its content, and this mode of thinking will forever be called “Saussurean” regardless of his actual role in the production of the text. Moreover, we can follow Michel Foucault (1972, 23-26) in questioning the commonsense “unities”—the author, the book, and the oeuvre—which appear self-evident but that actually result from an interpretive operation. Thus, the designation of a collection of texts (“the Cours”) by the sign of a proper name (“Saussure”) introduces a false sense of immediacy, homogeneity, and autonomy into what is actually a complex network of references operating in a field of discourse. Foucault writes: “The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network” (Foucault 1972, 23).
The Statement and the Archive

To describe statements, to describe the enunciative function of which they are the bearers, to analyze the conditions in which this function operates, to cover the different domains that this function presupposes and the way in which those domains are articulated, is to undertake to uncover what might be called the discursive formation. (Foucault 1972, 115-16)

Let me announce once and for all that I am not a structuralist, and I confess, with the appropriate chagrin, that I am not an analytic philosopher. Nobody is perfect. (Foucault 1997, 176).

Roughly midway through *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault states that his goal is not “founding a theory”—although he admits that to be a worthwhile task at which he has been consistently unsuccessful—but rather “to establish a possibility” (1972, 114-15, orig. italics). In seeking to chart this new terrain of possible research, Foucault began this text by specifying the positions he would not occupy, a set of negative operations reminiscent of Saussure’s first two chapters of the *Cours*. And like Saussure, Foucault seeks to specify both a set of objects and the analytical methods appropriate to their study—although he diverges from Saussure in his insistence that these methods should not be seen “as a science, or even as the beginnings of a science” (206). These objects are variously characterized as statements, events, rules of formation, discourses, domains, discursive or enunciative fields, positivities, and discursive formations.

The “horizon” of these interlocking concepts is the archive, and the method for uncovering them is archaeology. This term implies a process of digging through sedimented layers to reveal the truths buried deep within the system. But Foucault is very clear that archaeology “does not relate analysis to geological excavation. It designates the general theme of a description that questions the already-said at the level of its existence” (131). Archaeological analysis is thus a radical departure from the conventional methods and commonsense “unities” of the history of ideas. It is not interpretive or hermeneutical, and it renounces that discipline’s fixation on origins, continuities, coherences, identities, linear developments, and authorial intentions. As Foucault (1972, 140) succinctly states, archaeology “is not a return to

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49 Clifford Geertz disparages this relational approach in his 1978 review essay on Foucault in the *New York Review of Books*: “Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same,” [Foucault] writes in the introduction to his one purely methodological work, *L’Archéologie du Savoir*, itself mostly a collection of denials of positions he does not hold but considers himself likely to be accused of by the ‘mimes and tumblers’ of intellectual life. . . . Whoever he is, or whatever, he is what any French savant seems to need to be these days: elusive” (quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, xviii).
the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object.”

In linking the terms “discourse” and “object,” Foucault might seem at first to be heading in the direction of the sémiologie formulated by Emile Benveniste—a framework which, through its attempts to specify the relations between language and other semiotic systems, is centrally concerned with the relation between language and non-language. Indeed, many of Foucault’s “keywords” (cf. Williams 1983), including statement, enunciation, domain, and discourse, are given a more limited and technical sense in Benveniste’s (1985) efforts to define the minimal elements of a system of signs and a typology of relationships across semiotic systems. Foucault clearly remains interested in revealing the “relations between discursive formations and non-discursive domains” (1972, 162)—a project he advances more successfully in his later work on power, knowledge, and the body—but the archaeological method outlined in this text privileges the discursive while simultaneously breaking with the established methods of linguistic analysis:

The question posed by language analysis of some discursive fact or another is always: according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made? The description of the events of discourse poses a quite different question: how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another? (Foucault 1972, 27)

This passage contains a number of important signposts for what follows. First, it indicates that the “rules” Foucault will analyze are not those of grammar but those establishing the conditions of emergence for particular statements. Second, it suggests this is an empirical project, not merely an abstract conceptualization. Foucault aims for an approach that can describe the “facts of discourse” (29)—not the formal structure of language or the laws for constructing statements, but their existence and the rules that govern their appearance.

The focus of archaeology, in Giorgio Agamben’s (1999, 139) concise formulation, is “not the text of discourse but its taking place.” Foucault outlines a mode of engaging with specific instantiations of discourse in their “raw, neutral state” (1972, 27), before they have been organized, interpreted, or absorbed into a preconceived unity. He seeks “to restore to the statement the specificity of its occurrence” (28), adding that “the statement is always an event that neither the language (langue) nor the meaning can quite exhaust” (28).

The “statements” (énoncés) Foucault has been referring to are the significant units of a discursive field, both written and spoken, which are characterized by their

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50 Summarizing his earlier work, Foucault notes that madness, for example, can not be characterized by “its secret content, its silent, self-enclosed truth” (32).
“repeatable materiality” (102). They are composed of linguistic elements, but they are not sentences, propositions, or utterances. The statement is not a structure (or a structural unit) but a function (87). The relation of a statement to what it states is not the relation of signifier to signified, a sentence to its meaning, or a proposition to its referent. (89) Its “correlate” is neither a individual object nor a “state of things or a relation capable of verifying the proposition” (91). Rather, the correlate of a statement is “a group of domains in which such objects appear and to which such relations may be assigned.” Foucault terms this group of domains a “referential”:

The referential of the statement forms the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the authority to differentiate between individuals and objects, states of things and relations that are brought into play by the statement itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and delimitation of that which gives meaning to the sentence, a value as truth to the proposition. It is this group that characterizes the enunciative level of the formulation, in contrast to its grammatical and logical levels. . . . (Foucault 1972, 91)

Whereas speech for Saussure (1986, 19) is “the sum total of what people say,” Foucault is interested in not just any statements, but primarily in what Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983, 48) term “serious speech acts.” Foucault calls them effective statements in his definition of a discursive field: “this field is made up of the totality of all effective statements (whether spoken or written), in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them” (1972, 27). A statement is not produced by an “author” but rather emanates from a “subject position,” which Foucault characterizes as “a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals” (95). Foucault’s displacement of the “transcendental subject” sets the stage for his later work on techniques of the self and the process of subjectification: “discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined” (55).

As stated above, the horizon against which such discourse-objects will emerge is the “archive,” an unspoken system of rules and constraints that governs the appearance of events in discourse. The archive is “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements” (Foucault 1972, 130). It occupies a space between langue and parole—that is, between the set of rules for constructing possible sentences and the “corpus” of sentences that have actually been said. The principle of the archive is the “historical a priori,” a phrase Foucault uses to indicate the temporal nature of truth and the historicity of the given: “An a priori not of truths

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51In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault declares that statements are not speech acts, a claim that Dreyfus and Rabinow attribute to his misunderstanding of speech act theory. Foucault later modified this view following an exchange of letters with John Searle, to whom he replied: “I was wrong in saying that statements were not speech acts, but in doing so I wanted to underline the fact that I saw them under a different angle than yours” (quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 46).
that might never be said, or really given to experience; but the a priori of a history that is given, since it is that of things actually said” (127).

With the archive situated in a mediating position, signification cannot be reduced to the opposition of langue/parole. Without obviating the role of signs, the archive shifts their function. The signs of a discourse produced in and through the archive do not merely represent things in the world. They are deployed in the “field of discursive events” (27) and generated in the very same practices that constitute their objects: “Of course, discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this more that renders them irreducible to the language (langue) and to speech” (49). With these pieces in place, Foucault can provide a more precise definition of discursive practice:

It must not be confused with the expressive operation by which an individual formulates an idea, a desire, an image; nor with the rational activity that may operate in a system of inference; nor with the “competence” of a speaking subject when he constructs grammatical sentences; it is a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function. (Foucault 1972, 117)

It is all too easy to get lost in The Archaeology of Knowledge and to find oneself wandering aimlessly through its tangle of desolate, depopulated streets. The rarefied atmosphere of archaeological analysis supports no life; it is largely devoid of bodies, and thus of pain, pleasure or desire. The discursive formations that are the targets of its operations belong to the so-called “sciences of man” (e.g., psychiatry, medicine, economics, ethnology, and linguistics), but Foucault aims to show in their dispersion (and eventual dissipation) that the emergence of “Man” as a figure of knowledge is merely a discursive effect of social and signifying practices enunciated in the domain of science. Such practices—not unlike archaeology, it must be noted—constitute their very object. This approach yields some provocative claims, such as Foucault’s concluding statement in The Order of Things (1970, 387) that once the discursive regularities of the human sciences crumble, “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.” Yet worked through to its (il)logical conclusions, archaeological analysis runs into some problems.

Dreyfus and Rabinow attribute the methodological failure of archaeology to Foucault’s insistence on the “pure description of discursive events” (Foucault 1972, 27). This requires a him to attempt a “double phenomenological bracketing” (Dreyfus

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52Thus Foucault’s famous claim in The Order of Things: “Before the end of the eighteenth century, man did not exist. . . . He is a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with his own hands less than two hundred years ago” (1970, 308). This mutually constituting relationship is what Foucault terms the “analytic of finitude” (315): man’s double bind as both the subject and the object of his knowledge.
and Rabinow 1983, 90) in order to suspend both truth and meaning. One result of this “phenomenology to end all phenomenologies” (94) is that it denies the archaeologist any legitimate basis for forming judgments or politically effective critique. Another is the near total exclusion of the archaeologist-as-subject from the subject of archaeological analysis. A third problem is one of context and the relations between linguistic and non-linguistic objects and practices:

Since at this stage he is committed to the view that discursive practices are autonomous and determine their own context, Foucault cannot look for the regulative power which seems to govern the discursive practices outside of the practices themselves. . . . The result is the strange notion of regularities which regulate themselves. (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 84)

Foucault retains the archaeological method throughout his later work, but subordinates it to genealogy—a diagnostic approach that grounds the analysis in a conjuncture of problems in the present. Foucault also deals more directly with the linkages between discursive and non-discursive practices, deploying the concept of “technology” to analyze how particular knowledge practices or “truth games” are linked to “specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.” Foucault identifies four major types of these technologies:

(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” (Foucault 1997, 225)

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53 But if one wishes to describe the enunciative level, one must consider that existence [of language] itself; question language, not in the direction to which it refers, but in the dimension that gives it; ignore its power to designate, to name, to show, to reveal, to be the place of meaning and truth. . . . In the examination of language, one must suspend, not only the point of view of the ‘signified’ (we are used to this by now), but also that of the ‘signifier’ (Foucault 1972, 111).

54 There is of course a certain absurdity (based, at least for some commentators, on a deliberate misrecognition) in the all-too-common, casual reference to “the early” or “the late Foucault,” given his own vigorous critique of the arbitrary and analytically impoverished “unities” of the author or the oeuvre as noted above.

55 Elsewhere Foucault (1997, 177) states that the first three (i.e., the techniques of production, signification, and domination) were derived “according to some suggestions of Jürgen Habermas”—a rare moment of generosity toward this longstanding opponent.
Whereas The Archaeology of Knowledge was concerned almost exclusively with technologies of signification, Discipline and Punish (1977) analyzes the programs, strategies, and techniques of domination and the “microphysics” of power (1977, 26). With the celebrated insight that power is productive as well as repressive, Foucault shows how the process of subjectivation (assujétissement) develops through a “political technology of the body” (24). Foucault’s analyses of the panopticon and other practices of carceral discipline situate the body as a primary locus of “power-knowledge relations.” The techniques and tactics of power exercised on the corporeal body produce a corpus of knowledge:

The carceral network constituted one of the armatures of this power-knowledge that has made the human sciences historically possible. Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination-observation. (Foucault 1977, 305)

The History of Sexuality, Vol. One (1978) begins the exploration of technologies of the self, a theme that remained central throughout Foucault’s later writings. In his work on ethics and the problem of modernity, Foucault turns Max Weber’s notion of asceticism on its head to describe not the denial of self in the “rejections of the world” (Weber 1968, 323-59) but the care of the self and the techniques of self-fashioning (Foucault 1988, 1997). These writings all continue to explore the articulation of the body and history that Foucault identified in a 1971 article, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”:

The body is the surface of the inscription of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of the dissociation of the Me (to which it tries to impart the chimera of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body. (Foucault 1998, 375-76)

Habitus and History

In his analyses of “social reality,” Pierre Bourdieu consistently opposes theoretical modes of knowledge, which he indicates with the plural, to “the practical mode of knowledge which is the basis of ordinary experience of the social world” (1990, 25), usually written in the singular. Practices do not rely on conscious, theoretical knowledge, but on practical sense and an intuitive “feel for the game.” Thus, the logical coherence of practices as observed, diagrammed, and interpreted by the scientific researcher does not provide the justification or impetus for their existence. Practices are by definition practical—they are actions and relations that engage with the world and “do things” in it, if for no other reason than that it’s “the right thing to do.” That being said, we must also note that Bourdieu is not offering a
refurbished functionalism where the meaning of a practice is defined by its function within the system. He states that practices “may have, strictly speaking, neither meaning nor function, other than the function implied in their very existence, and the meaning objectively inscribed in the logic of actions or words that are done or said in order to ‘do or say something’ (when there is ‘nothing else to be done’), or more precisely in the generative structures of which these words or actions are the product” (1990, 18). The genealogical model of kinship, for example, seeks only to discover and document the formal properties of the system and thus fails to account for the “practical use” of kinship and the variety of strategies deployed in negotiating marital exchanges:

one cannot really account for the social uses of kinsmen and kinship unless one has objectified the objectifying relationship and seen what it hides. . . . In short, one has quite simply to bring into scientific work and into the theory of practice that it seeks to produce, a theory—which cannot be found through theoretical experience alone—of what it is to be ‘native’, that is, to be in that relationship of ‘learned ignorance’, of immediate but unselfconscious understanding which defines the practical relationship to the world. (Bourdieu 1990, 18-19)

It might seem a bit paradoxical that Bourdieu is working toward a “theory” of experiences that are characterized primarily by their lack of theoretical actions and orientations. Bourdieu clearly states that constructing a theory of practice (or achieving a practical mastery of theory) does not make one a better practitioner. This aligns his approach to a certain extent with phenomenology: “The mode of knowledge that can be called ‘phenomenological’ sets out to reflect an experience which, by definition, does not reflect itself” (1990, 25). Resolving (or, better, dissolving) the paradox requires nothing more than the realization that Bourdieu does not claim to transcend the “outsider” position but, rather, argues that it is necessary to understand what this position entails—its limits and possibilities:

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One of the questions that troubled Ferdinand de Saussure remains a central problem for Pierre Bourdieu. Saussure (1986, 72) asks: “How are social institutions handed down from generation to generation?” Bourdieu seeks to account for a “history” that in its primary instantiation is neither representational nor remembered. Indeed, this history—embedded in the structured and structuring dispositions of the habitus—must be forgotten or at least “misrecognized” in order to exist as such. It is a tacit set of “practical schemes, opaque to their possessors” (1990, 12) which both generate and regulate the practices of human agents. In this sense Bourdieu’s habitus is a bit like Saussure’s langue: it is a pre-established system of possibilities and constraints where “what can be chosen is already determined in advance” (Saussure 1986, 71).
The habitus is binding on the community and individuals alike, and it also binds them together. Like *langue* it “cannot therefore be treated simply as a form of contract,” because it operates without intentionality and thus “eludes the control of our will” (Saussure 1986, 71). And lest there be any remaining doubt about the appropriateness of the comparison, Saussure explicitly refers to “linguistic structure” (*langue*) as a “set of linguistic habits” (1986, 77) and a “set of habitual relations” (1986, 126). The processes that begin in childhood to instill the habitus also apply to *langue*: “the individual needs an apprenticeship in order to acquaint himself with its workings: as a child he assimilates it only gradually” (Saussure 1986, 14).

We must pause for a moment to clarify Bourdieu’s use of the term “structure.” Its referent is not so much a static object as an ongoing process, and the word simultaneously designates an action and the thing that both acts and is acted upon. Structures are the elements in the system that have been structured and continue to structure other elements. The system is grounded in these “objective structures,” and they are the source of its regularity and continuity. Indeed, they produce the systematicity of the system itself. Bourdieu’s system is not an abstract conception like the absolute space of classical geometry (see Lefebvre 1991), but the universe of lived experiences and practical engagements in which differently situated actors compete for access to scarce resources in order to accumulate material and symbolic capital.

The system comprises multiple economies—interlocking, nested, or homologous “fields of struggle differing both in the stakes and scarcities that are generated within them and in the forms of capital deployed in them” (1990, 51). Each field is defined by and organized around a “fundamental principle” that structures it as “the space of positions and the space of the position-takings” (Bourdieu 1993, 30). These social positions are “both occupied and manipulated by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups, or institutions” (Bourdieu 1993, 29), and there is a dialectical relationship between the field of positions and the dispositions of the agents. This is the *habitus*—a term which, like “structure,” designates a relation and a process, not simply a thing. The habitus allows Bourdieu to account for reproduction—both of the producers and of the system they produce (and that also produces them)—without resorting to the language of rules. It is “incorporated history”: the presence of the past that dwells in and through the corporeal body. Conditioned by the objective conditions that characterized its emergence, the habitus structures the present in anticipation of a contingent future that is nonetheless delimited by the possibilities it has inherited from the past.

**Learning to Co-Labor: Anthropology in the “Labinar”**

“We’re not totally reinventing the field of anthropology,” the Professor reminded the fifteen graduate students sitting around a large table. “This is not revolutionary. You don’t have to invent everything. Again, this is a move away from individual genius.” The group was assembled in the conference room at Molecular
Sciences Institute in Berkeley, CA. It was a follow-up to a previous graduate seminar, in which the students had spent the semester reading Foucault’s *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005) and discussing biopower, biopolitics, ethics and care of the self. The group was experimenting with various kinds of aesthetic practices and techniques—modes of engaging with thinking and inquiry into contemporary problems such that a certain kind of practice became available and a certain kind of knowledge became possible. Following Foucault, the question was then posed: what transformations to the subject of anthropological knowledge would be necessary, such that new approaches to critical, pressing, urgent problems—bio-security threats, Avian flu, terrorism and so on—would be possible?

The Professor was keen to distinguish the “history of the present” from the “anthropology of the contemporary.” But what is the “contemporary”? As an adjective, contemporary describes the heterogeneous relations between subjects, objects, events, practices, and problems. These relations occur in non-metric space, a virtual domain that may include, but is not strictly limited to, actual spatial-temporal relations. Contemporary is thus distinguished from “contemporaneous” and “coincident,” terms for things that coexist in time or space but have no other relationship. By contrast, subjects, objects and problems are “contemporary” by virtue of the associative relations between them, rather than by mere spatial or temporal proximity to each other. “Consider a late-model car,” Rabinow wrote in *French DNA*, where he first raised the specter of the contemporary. “The ensemble is contemporary only by assemblage, by its design, by its finish, sometimes only by the slickness of the advertising surrounding it” (Rabinow 1999, 167).

As a noun, “the contemporary” is more than just a neutral temporal marker. It is not an epoch, as in “the modern.” Nor is it simply equivalent to “today” as a point of transit between yesterday and tomorrow. Rather, the contemporary appears in the world as a shifting set of relations between past, present, and future. These relations may of course occur in time, but more importantly they entail a distinctive conception of time and temporality. The contemporary is the domain (of subjects, objects, relations, events, and practices) in which past realities and future possibilities are present in the form of problems. The contemporary is thus a “moving ratio” (Rabinow 2007, 2), a virtual problem-space that encompasses the recent past and the near future. Although the contemporary invokes or re-works the past, its primary orientation is toward the future. This future is both contingent and problematic precisely because it requires a response in the present and because multiple responses are possible. Each response changes the possible futures as well as

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56 The notion of non-metric space as a topological continuum comes from Manuel Delanda’s (2004) discussion of metric (“extensive”) and non-metric (“intensive”) geometries in the ontology of Gilles Deleuze.

57 An example is Comte de Lautréamont’s “chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table,” where the elements are co-present but remain incongruous. They have no relationship other than juxtaposition.
alters the relationship between the present and the past. The entire configuration is thus in motion.

What is at stake in the present is part of the object itself. The future of the biosciences is “contemporary” because what will happen in the next 20 years occurs now as a problem to which multiple responses are possible. Rwanda and Darfur are contemporary because there is a third term, “genocide” (as both concept and object), that links the past and the future as a problem requiring an immediate response. Social security, synthetic biology, and California earthquakes (e.g., “the Big One”) are contemporary problems because uncertain futures call for urgent action in present. These are just a few examples of objects in the world that people are working on in a contemporary mode. And of course some of those objects are themselves modes (e.g., emergency preparedness).

“We’re a group of people interested in the near future,” the Professor exclaimed.58 “There may be something about this object which is shaping our future that requires collaboration.” The “labinar” was premised on a calculated disruption of the typical graduate seminar. The stated intention was to develop a model for collaborative work on a common problematization, while allowing individual participants to conduct inquiry into specific problems.59 The sessions would be highly structured and rigorously managed in order to maximize opportunities for productive, scientific work. Malinowski had proposed something similar in his diary, writing out a “plan for organizing strictly scientific discussions” at the Royal Anthropological Institute:

Elimination of the hybrid, semipopular meetings without any discussion, neither popularizing science, nor giving any definite results. Needed: definitive formulation of basic problems, and working together; everybody, or at least the representative men, taking part in the discussion.” (Malinowski 1967, 116-117)

A primary goal was build a set of critical tools and terms—“to take some concepts from Deleuze and Luhmann and make them into Deweyian workable things,” the Professor explained. Simply put, concepts are tools. The notion of “concept work,” then, has multiple dimensions—it involves both the design and elaboration of a concept itself, as well as the use of that concept to inform and guide inquiry into concrete cases, problems or situations. “We need more vehemence, but it’s not enough to be a Leftist denunciator,” the Professor insisted. “We’re genuinely

58 I can’t resist pointing out that Radcliffe-Brown said something similar: “as between looking back over the past and looking forward to the future, I have a temperamental preference for the latter” (1958, 42).

59 Rabinow (1999, 119) once noted the existence of “profound cultural slippage around the term ‘collaboration,’” without at that time proposing a more specific alternative. For a more recent treatment, see Rabinow (2006).
interested in the science [of synthetic biology], and this requires changing the stance of anthropological knowledge. It requires being a ‘specific intellectual’ and having some degree of competence with the material. That’s the price of admission to the table.”

The labinar adopted a nested, recursive cycle: Orientation → Inquiry → Diagnosis. “This is a non-hermeneutic circle,” the Professor explained. “We don’t want to get into ‘culture.’ Our goal is not to go ‘deeper.’” During the initial weeks of the experiment students spent a lot of time in the orientation phase, developing concepts and a shared analytical vocabulary out of our individual projects. The group engaged in an experimental form of practical knowledge work—Wissensarbeitsforschung, or “knowledge-work-research,” was the Professor’s million-dollar word for it.

Playing off the multiple valences of the word “experiment” in French, this project was both empirical and experiential. The ethical stakes were high as we sought to assemble paraskeuē (“equipment”) appropriate to the task at hand. “One does not acquire discourses for the purpose of improving one’s mind, Frédéric Gros wrote in the “Course Context” to Foucault’s lectures, “but in order to prepare oneself for events. The knowledge required is not what enables us to really know ourselves, but that which helps us to act correctly with regard to circumstances.” (Gros 2005, 527). The ultimate goal is to see whether or not we could do anthropology differently and meet the contemporary world in all of its complexity and contingency.

**Equipment**

The concept of “equipment” (Greek: paraskeuē, “to equip or prepare”) draws on Foucault’s study of ancient Greek ethics, especially Stoic techniques for the “care of the self.” Aiwha Ong defines ethics “in the ancient Greco-Roman sense of a practice of the self, or normative techniques in self-care for attaining a particular mode of being” (2006, 21-22). She also refers to an “ethical regime”—“a style of living guided by given values for constituting oneself in line with a particular ethical goal” (Ong 2006, 22). Equipment brings domains of knowledge, ethical modes (relations to oneself and others), and affect into a practice. It is neither state- nor territory-oriented, but problem-oriented. Equipment involves forms of care and modes of subjectivation—that is to say, techniques of self-formation. It is constructed, taken up, and reworked in problematic situations.60 It is “the element of transformation of logos into ethos” (Foucault 2005, 327).

I want to briefly sketch out three forms of humanitarian equipment—classical, modern, and contemporary—each with different objects, techniques, truth claims, ethical modes, and affects. These three “equipmental platforms” (Rabinow & Bennett

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60 Rabinow: “the site of the trouble and of its resolution is the problematic situation” (2003, 16-17).
are ideal types, a la Weber, not temporal distinctions or historical epochs. They can be found operating simultaneously in any given humanitarian response. “Classical humanitarian equipment” is organized around **bodies**; its object is the wounded, sick or malnourished individual; its techniques and practices include triage and emergency medical and nutritional interventions; and its ethical modes include compassion and care. “Modern humanitarian equipment” is organized around **populations**; its objects are plans, projects, surveys and statistical data (e.g., crude mortality rates, prevalence and incidence of disease); its techniques and practices are drawn from public health, epidemiology, engineering, and project management; and its ethical modes include vigilance and efficiency. “Contemporary humanitarian equipment” is organized around **publics**; its objects are images and texts; its techniques and practices are drawn from the visual arts, media work, advocacy campaigns and political lobbying; and its ethical modes include persuasion and urgency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OBJECT</th>
<th>CLASSICAL</th>
<th>MODERN</th>
<th>CONTEMPORARY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CENTRAL ELEMENTS</td>
<td>wounded, sick, or malnourished individuals</td>
<td>plans, projects, surveys</td>
<td>images and texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFFECT</td>
<td>compassion, care</td>
<td>techno-managerial efficiency, vigilance</td>
<td>urgency, persuasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHETORIC</td>
<td>“relieving suffering”</td>
<td>“saving lives”</td>
<td>“people and governments must do more!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNOLOGY</td>
<td>surgical equipment, medicine, blankets, Plumpy’Nut</td>
<td>latrines and water tanks, height/weight scales, MUAC tape, spreadsheets, GPS</td>
<td>digital camera, laptop, satphone, Blackberry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRACTICES</td>
<td>TRIAGE / EMERGENCY MEDICINE medical, nutritional care</td>
<td>PUBLIC HEALTH engineering, assessments, camp management, surveys, IDP registration</td>
<td>REMEDIATION story writing, media work, lobbying, campaigns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Matrix of “humanitarian equipment”

**Remediation**

The central practice of contemporary humanitarian equipment is “remediation,” a term that names specific operations through which pre-existing elements and figures are selected, refashioned and assembled in ways that alter their form and shift their medium. Remediation enables a simultaneity of practice and result. It presents a problem and its solution together as a single package—that is, it makes them contemporary.

The term comes from studies of new media. New media frequently borrow “techniques, forms, and social significance” from other media, refashioning and “repurposing” those forms and embedding them into new compositions and arrangements (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 68). In a recent study of the remediation of
money, analyzing how people take up and rework printed currency as a medium of political communication in post-Suharto Indonesia, Karen Strassler extends this analytical vocabulary to other object domains—a move that exemplifies the practice of remediation:

Bolter and Grusin use “remediation” to describe relations between “old” and “new” media, but the concept, I suggest, can also be fruitfully applied to the dynamic relations among temporally synchronous media positioned differently within a given media ecology. Remediated within other media, money takes on forms of authorship, authority, and authenticity and moves along circulatory pathways that are specific to those media and that may counter, bring into view, or reenvision the workings of money itself. Yet these reworked forms of money are never fully severed from the logics, material properties, and historical vicissitudes of actual money. (Strassler 2009, 73-74)

Armed with a Thuraya satellite phone, a digital camera, and a laptop computer, the humanitarian press officer arrives at a distant scene of destruction. There is a sense of urgency to her task—she must get to the scene of the earthquake, tsunami, or conflict as soon as possible. The field of humanitarian advocacy is saturated with—even constituted by—practices of mediation and remediation. The production and circulation of remediated objects, elements and forms is central to a set of operations intended to influence various audiences, including policy makers and the public. What is being remediated in this case are figures of anthropos: the poor, the sick and the vulnerable “human thing,” the refugee, the malnourished child.61

Remediated media objects—artifacts, images, texts—provide a sense of authenticity precisely because they carry the echo of their original forms. “To be compelling,” Teri Silvio writes, “a new media product must capture the psychic and social experiences of a particular time and place” (Silvio 2007, 286).62 Remediation also incorporates the notion of reform, improvement and amelioration—the notion of making something “better”—a notion that is especially suited to humanitarian and political advocacy.

61 On figures and figurations see Auerbach (2003, 73). Classic examples of this genre include Michael Buerk’s television reporting from Ethiopia during the 1984 famine. In 2004, I was driving with BINGO’s Regional Media and Advocacy Coordinator to visit farming communities in the Jordan Valley, when she exclaimed: “Where are the poor people? We need some good pictures of poverty.” In Darfur, a team of photo journalists from a major British newspaper were frustrated during their visit to Abu Shouk camp on the outskirts of El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur. They were being swarmed by young children, grinning and laughing, that didn’t fit the image they wanted to capture: “we can’t print photos of smiling kids.”

Problematization

“It is not the ‘actual’ interconnections of ‘things’ but the conceptual interconnections of problems which define the scope of the various sciences. A new ‘science’ emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discovered which open up significant new points of view.” (Weber 1904, 68)

Everyone in the anthropology “labinar” had an individual research project they were working on, whether it was Avian flu, terrorism experts, health care in Mozambique, humanitarian action in Darfur, end of life technologies in Thailand, child protective services in the United States, AIDS in Vietnam. But the stated goal was to move away from the details of individual projects and towards something that underlies them or provides a broader framework for understanding what’s going on in these domains. The premise was that we were operating now in a generalized biosecurity atmosphere (see Collier, Lakoff and Rabinow 2004). That there was a set of converging problems around the human, the vital, and the social. And that all of these projects could illuminate something about the conditions in which these particular problems occur as problems to which diverse solutions are possible.

Over the course of the experiment—which lasted five months from January to May 2006, and continues albeit in a different form—we concluded that our common “problematization” concerned dynamic relations between the human, the vital and the social, the organization of these relations around and through knowledge practices and power relations, including apparatuses of government and expertise, and the reformulation of these relations in temporalities of uncertainty marked by potential, future, dangerous events.  

Thus, the problem of humanitarianism today arises within a particular “problematization”—a non-metric space within which certain problems appear as problems to which a range of solutions appear possible. Michel Foucault wrote about problematization: “The work of a history of thought would be to rediscover at the root of these diverse solutions the general form of a problematization that has made them possible, even in their opposition. Or what has made possible the transformation of the difficulties and obstacles of a practice into a general problem for which one proposes diverse, practical solutions. This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems to which diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problematization and the specific work of thought.”

As Paul Rabinow explains, “A problematization is both a kind of general historical and social situation … as well as a nexus of responses to that situation.

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63 Deleuze: “Events are incorporeal transformations which are expressed in statements and attributed to bodies.” (Thousand Plateaus, 86)
Those diverse but not entirely disparate responses, it follows, themselves form part of the problematization as it develops or unfolds ... over time” (Rabinow 2003, 19). This concept is not totalizing, and not epochal. Neither David Harvey’s (1989) “space-time compression” nor Anthony Giddens’s (1990) “space-time distanciation” provide much conceptual traction or analytical distinctions to inform empirical inquiry.

* * *

The event that has shaped the problem space of humanitarianism more than any other is not 9-Eleven, Biafra, or even the founding of the Red Cross movement in the 19th century. Rather, it is the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, in which a group of warring parties came together to create a new world system defined by the relationship between states. In a lecture to students in 1917, Max Weber noted that “the decisive means for politics is violence.” He added that “the modern state is a compulsory association which organizes domination,” and gave his classic definition of the state as “the entity with a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a territory” (Weber 1968). And despite a long tradition of discussions and predictions about the so-called “withering away of the state,” initiated by Karl Marx in his “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1878), there remains a continuing proliferation of repressive power and techniques of domination.

In his brilliant “archaeology” of development, Wolfgang Sachs notes that the discovery of global poverty after World War II, measured in terms of annual per capita income, “was nothing more than the result of a comparative statistical operation, the first of which was carried out only in 1940” (Sachs 1990, 9). Sachs is referring to the pioneering work of Colin Clark, a British-born economist whose Conditions of Economic Progress (1940) was the first work of international economics to compile, analyze and compare the national income accounts of major countries.64 Poverty, it seems, was to be an indicator of unequal relations between states.

Once this econometric operation was adopted, refined and applied more widely, using the World Bank’s 1948 definition of poor countries as those with an annual per capita income below $100, two-thirds of the world’s population became “poor” almost overnight. The domain that scholars have termed “the social” (Donzelot 1979, 1988; Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991) became the site for a variety of interventions in health, hygiene and education. State bureaucracies, international financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations alike began to devise a range of strategies for “poverty reduction.” Escobar provides a lucid account of this complex phenomenon, noting that

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64 For a posthumous reappraisal of Clark’s work, see Arndt (1990). For a critical evaluation of comparative statistical analyses of “global hunger” see Poleman (1996).
the notions of underdevelopment and Third World were the discursive products of the post-World War II climate. These concepts did not exist before 1945. They emerged as working principles within the process by which the West—and, in different ways, the East—redefined itself and the rest of the world. By the early 1950s, the notion of three worlds—the free industrialized nations, the Communist industrialized nations, and the poor, nonindustrialized nations, constituting the First, Second, and Third World respectively—was firmly in place. Even after the demise of the Second [with the collapse of the Soviet empire], the notions of First and Third Worlds (and North and South) continue to articulate a regime of geopolitical representation. (Escobar 1995, 31)

Global poverty thus emerged simultaneously as a concept, a problem and the object of a new problematization. As such, “poverty brought into existence new discourses and practices that shaped the reality to which they referred” (Escobar 1995, 24). The terms “Third World” and “poverty” became synonymous, Escobar notes, and “that the solution was economic growth and development became self-evident” (24).

With the emergence of “the human” as an object of knowledge (Mazlish 2009), “humanity” became a site of intervention, amelioration and control—the subject/object of care, practices of security, and strategies and techniques of government. Foucault’s term for the specific forms of knowledge and regulatory controls organized around the production and optimization of life is “biopower”—a powerful concept that has nonetheless been diluted through misappropriation and overuse in the contemporary academy. Biopower refers to the “practices of government” that monitor and modulate the conduct of individuals and the administration of social life by the state and other institutions. It also entails forms of work on the self.

Reading through a variety of obscure texts from the 17th to 19th centuries, Foucault declares that the concept of “government” has little to do with territorial rule or with juridical sovereignty: “what government has to do with is not territory but, rather, a sort of complex composed of men and things” (Foucault 2000, 208). It is a form of management in which people, their things, and their relations with each other and with things, are administered and cared for:

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65 For another account, see Murphy and Augelli (1993).

66 Ramah McKay, unpublished “labinar” report, 2006. “Understanding the figure of the human as limit point, imperative to action and site of incommensurability emphasizes the human as an object of practice. These practices may be ethical, medical, spiritual, humanitarian, or securitized (among others). Many of the projects [in the ‘labinar’] most concerned with the human examine the problems posed by the practical coincidence of the human as a figure of security and of charity.”
Governing a household, a family, does not essentially mean safeguarding the family property; what it concerns is the individuals who compose the family, their wealth and prosperity. It means reckoning with all the possible events that may intervene, such as births and deaths, and with all the things that can be done, such as possible alliances with other families; it is this general form of management that is characteristic of government. By comparison, the question of landed property for the family, and the question of the acquisition of sovereignty over a territory for a prince, are only relatively secondary matters. (Foucault, 2000, 209)

Whereas the instruments of juridical sovereignty are found in laws, the instruments of government encompass “a range of multiform tactics” (Foucault 2000, 211), including the calculations, procedures and analyses “statistics”—literally, the science of the state. In the eighteenth century, with the emergence of the modern state—that “composite reality and mythicized abstraction” (Foucault 2000, 220) that has received perhaps a bit too much attention—the tactics of government would be put to work on a new object, a new field of intervention: the population.

The object of knowledge and intervention for modern public health is the population, described by Foucault as “a global mass affected by overall pressures of birth, death, production, illness” (2003, 243). As he notes, “these are phenomena that are aleatory and unpredictable when taken in themselves or individually, but which, at the collective level, display constants that are easy, or at least possible, to establish.” Statistical knowledge makes such collective regularities visible. Public health interventions seek to know and manage these regularities, to decrease mortality and increase longevity, to “optimize a state of life.” These tactics are applied by a variety of actors, especially non-governmental organizations. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong writes:

As practitioners of humanity, NGOs make both technical and ethical interventions, since their work is fundamentally about managing the risk and security of marginalized populations by giving them value. In order to make claims on their behalf, NGOs define and sort out different categories of excluded humanity, in order to give them resources that may be convertible into entitlements and rights. Such ethical work of giving moral value to the politically excepted has an increasingly spatial dimension. NGO interventions entail mapping spaces of sheer survival that challenge the political spaces of inclusion and exclusion demarcated by individual nation-states. Such techno-ethical strategies are necessary for redrawing the map of moral inclusion. Ong (2006, 198)

* * *

The global humanitarian apparatus has expanded massively since the end of the Cold War (see de Waal 1997, 68-72; Fisher 1997; Lindenberg and Bryant 2001; Macrae 2002; Minear 2002). The European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) was established in 1990, reflecting the intensification of organizational capacities in the nascent European Union. Many states have developed humanitarian units within their foreign and defense ministries, and government overseas assistance budgets have increased from $2 billion in 1990 to $6 billion in 2000 (Barnett 2005, 723). This has coincided with the expansion of small-scale, internal conflict. Since 1989, at least 122 armed conflicts have taken place worldwide, according to the comprehensive database of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. As of late 2009, the International Crisis Group was tracking 58 areas of current and recent conflict.

The post-1989 era has also witnessed an explosion of nongovernmental organizations or “NGOs”—a category was created by ECOSOC in 1950—dedicated to some aspect of humanitarian action. “The term ‘international community’ may be a fiction,” journalist and critic David Rieff writes, “but there is, unquestionably, an international humanitarian system, whether independence-minded NGOs are comfortable with the fact or not” (Rieff 2002, 281). NGOs have become increasingly sophisticated in their use of material technologies as well as “humanitarian equipment.”

NGOs once operated with a relatively slow-moving machinery and were staffed by individuals who were expected to learn on the job. Now, however, most prominent agencies have a system of global positioning and delivery that allows trained professionals to get assistance quickly where it is needed. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), for example, grew from a two-room office in the 1970s into an international network of 19 semi-independent branches, with a combined annual budget of $500 million, running programs in over 70 countries, with 2,000 international and 15,000 national staff. (Barnett 2005, 723)

The specific elements of the global “humanitarian apparatus”—including actors (individuals and organizations), technologies, concepts, and discursive and non-discursive practices—have diverse beginnings and distinct histories. There is an interconnectedness, however, that brings these seemingly dissimilar parts together. Some of these connections are formalized and codified, while others cohere through mutually constitutive practices. One domain of practice is linguistic. Alex de Waal, drawing on the work of aid worker and researcher Michael Medley, writes critically of “humanitarian code language.” By this he means a kind of “systemic duplicity”:

The language that relief agencies use to their peers, donors and constituents is a systematic distortion of the realities of their work on the ground. The actual language of humanitarian action remains either unspoken or relegated to a somewhat distasteful substructure of “fieldcraft.” This is the language of pragmatic deals, compromises and turning a blind eye. This is a code—in the
sense of a cipher. [...] One of the difficulties faced by local NGOs and the local staff of international agencies is that in order to rise in the system they must become fluent at speaking this humanitarian code. (de Waal 1997:143)

Another level of interconnectedness is personal relationships: aid workers often know each other from previous emergency responses in other countries. Many of the humanitarian personnel that gathered in Amman in early 2003 had worked together recently in Afghanistan; the more experienced staff also swapped stories about the major crises of the 1990s, including Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Goma, Bosnia, Rwanda, East Timor, Haiti, Somalia, Iraqi Kurdistan and Cambodia. A few old codgers still reminisce about famine relief in Ethiopia and Sudan in 1984–85, the 1973 conflict in Ethiopia, or the civil war between secessionist Biafran rebels and the Nigerian government in 1969—one of the formative moments in the origin myth of the international humanitarian system.

Another level is institutional: each organization has developed particular “ways of working” (to use a phrase common among NGO staff) and established their areas of expertise and “competitive advantage.” Different organizations have their own special expertise and priorities. The NGO community is like the United Nations itself. A rhetoric of unity, common purpose and shared ideals gives way to reality of individual member states with their own interests and agendas, acting unilaterally.

Nowhere has this multiplicity of divergent agendas under a common rhetorical umbrella been clearer than the case of Iraq. The history of the humanitarian apparatus in Iraq is taken up in detail in the next chapter.
Since Saddam invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990, writing books about Iraq, its ruler, his penchant for terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, and US policy options has become a growth industry. Rarely have so many who knew so little about a subject written so much about it. (Yaphe 2004, 295)

Background and Context

The Republic of Iraq began to thrive economically after the oil industry was fully nationalized in 1972. By 1974 world oil prices had quadrupled as the result of an embargo by Arab members of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), designed to punish the United States and western Europe for resupplying Israel with money and materiel during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War (Yergin 1991, 598-617). With the sharp rise in oil prices, billions of petrodollars now flowed freely into the Iraqi state treasury.

In keeping with the ideological commitments of Arab Socialism, Iraq’s Ba’thist regime invested heavily in education, infrastructure, and social services. The mid-1970s was a heady time of rapid growth and expansion. “During that period, development was our main obsession,” Tariq Aziz would later recollect in an interview with PBS Frontline. Aziz left his post as information minister in 1974 to work closely with then-Vice President Saddam Husayn, who also served as chairman of the planning council in charge of development. Aziz explained: “our ambition was to turn Iraq into a very, very developed country, with industry, services,

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68 The nationalization of Iraqi oil occurred in multiple phases. In 1961 Abd al-Karim Qasim, the nationalist army officer who overthrew the monarchy in 1958, seized all of the undeveloped concessions of the Iraq Petroleum Company, a venture jointly owned by some of the largest oil companies in the world. This amounted to 99.5% of its holdings, leaving IPC only its active production operations at the Kirkuk oil field. These, too, were taken over by the Iraqi state in 1972. See Brown (1979) and Yergin (1991) for a detailed historical analysis of this period.

69 Throughout this dissertation, my spelling of “Husayn” follows standard academic rules for Arabic-to-English transcription. This is a relatively minor act with major political implications. Most articles and books written about the Middle East in English use “Hussein” because it reflects the conventional spelling used in the Western media. My intention is exactly the opposite. “Saddam Hussein”—or just simply “Saddam”—is an overdetermined signifier, linked to the demonization of the late Iraqi president as the “Butcher of Baghdad,” a “tyrant,” a “megalomaniac,” and a “madman.” As Hamdi Hassan (1999, 2) asserts ironically, “The media coverage is so obsessed with the homo Arabicus, Saddam Hussein, that one gets the impression that Saddam is the only inhabitant of Iraq.” Transliterating the late Iraqi leader’s name the same way we would any other Arabic word is a recurring reminder that I refer throughout this dissertation to the actual man, not the media myth.
technology, and education. This has not changed. During the Iraq-Iran war, it did not change, although our circumstances became more difficult.\textsuperscript{70}

One year after seizing the presidency in 1979, Saddam Husayn’s armies invaded Iran. The resulting Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) was the bloodiest conflict since Vietnam, with 644,500 reported battle-deaths (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005, 154). The eight-year war disrupted oil exports and had a massive impact on the Iraqi economy. The destruction of infrastructure was estimated to be $125 billion (Mofid 1990). Iraq received loans from many sources including the oil-rich Persian Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia ($30.9 billion), Kuwait ($8.2 billion) and the United Arab Emirates ($8 billion). This funding enabled Husayn to purchase military hardware from Britain, China, France, and the United States, to supplement the Soviet materiel that comprised the bulk of Iraq’s military equipment.

Even as he doubled the size of the Iraq military during the war, Husayn built his public persona on the ideal of a fatherly patriarch and tough but magnanimous Arab leader. He undertook to reinforce his domestic reputation by creating a vast “social welfare state” apparatus. The government subsidized all staple foods and provided monthly food rations through a nationwide “public distribution system” of food providers. Free medical services were available in the government-controlled network of hospitals and health clinics, where most doctors were employed by the Iraqi Ministry of Health. Disabled people and retirees received pensions, and workers were compensated by the government for maternity and sick leaves. Cash bonuses and generous benefits were paid to young men who volunteered for military service, and the family of a soldier killed in the fighting could expect to be subsidized for life. Many families that lost sons in the war received gifts of real estate and bank loans with very favorable terms (Viorst 1986).

Once a predominately rural society, nearly three-quarters of Iraq’s population—estimated by the United Nations to be 19.6 million people in 1991—were now urban dwellers living in the central plains and the cities of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. Despite the ravages of a long and costly war, Iraq achieved some of the highest human development indicators in the Middle East. Adult male literacy increased from 50% in 1970 to 70% in 1990, with that for females increasing from 18% to 49% during the same period. Between 1960 and 1990, life expectancy in Iraq increased from 49 to 65 years. By the late 1980s, 92% of the population had access to clean drinking water and 93% were served by modern health facilities. UNICEF estimated that the daily caloric supply per capita as a percentage of requirements averaged 123% in 1988 (Grant 1991; 1992). Prior to the trade embargo, Iraq imported 70% of its food needs, in addition to raw materials, industrial and agricultural inputs, spare parts and skilled labor.

Iraq’s role in funding, training and sheltering the Palestine Liberation Organization resulted in its being added to the US “state sponsors of terrorism” list in 1979 by the Carter Administration. Iraq was removed from the terrorism list in 1982, and Donald Rumsfeld, then the special envoy of President Ronald Reagan, visited Baghdad in December 1983. The declassified minutes of this meeting contain a ironic quote from Rumsfeld’s conversation with Tariq Aziz the previous evening, restated verbatim by Saddam Husayn: “Having a whole generation of Iraqis and Americans grow up without understanding each other had negative implications and could lead to mix-ups.”  

The rapprochement of the mid-1980s resulted in the United States selling military equipment to Iraq—mostly through third-party intermediaries—as well as sharing intelligence information on Iranian military positions with the Iraqis. Even the brutal Anfal campaigns against the Kurds in 1988 and 1989, including the chemical bombing of Halabja in which some 5,000 people were killed, did not greatly reduce the expanding US trade with Iraq. After Iran and Iraq signed a ceasefire agreement in 1988, the United States reevaluated its policy toward Iraq (Baker 1995, 270-74). President George H.W. Bush signed National Security Directive 26, titled “US Policy toward the Persian Gulf,” on October 2, 1989, affirming that “access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states in the area are vital to US national security.” The United States Congress passed some legislation restricting trade, however. During the summer of 1990, Saddam Hussayn laughingly noted that “there is nothing left for Iraq to buy in the US. Everything is prohibited except for wheat, and no doubt that will soon be declared a dual-use item.”

MCMLXXXIX

The phrase “New World Order” was first used by Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly on December 7, 1988. Gorbachev’s ambitious reform programs, including economic restructuring (perestroika), domestic liberalization and increased transparency (glastnost), and “new thinking” in foreign policy, inaugurated a series of radical transformations in the Soviet Union and the wider world. The withdrawal of 115,000 Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 1989 signaled the end of a decade-long military occupation, although Moscow continued to support the Marxist government in Kabul while the

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73. The text of the speech is reprinted in Gorbachev (1988).
United States and Pakistan continued to fund a motley assortment of rebel groups and *mujaheddin* fighters.

Later that year, the USSR abandoned the Brezhnev Doctrine—under which the Soviet Army had enforced Moscow’s domination of its client and satellite states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia—in favor of the whimsically named “Frank Sinatra Doctrine.” For the first time in 35 years, the Warsaw Pact countries were allowed to go their own way. Solidarność (Solidarity), a non-communist trade union founded by Lech Wałęsa, won the parliamentary elections in Poland. Wałęsa was elected president the following year. This was the first in a wave of democratic and mostly bloodless “revolutions” that ended the ruling communist parties’ monopoly on power in Eastern Europe. By the time the 44th session of the United Nations General Assembly convened in New York City in September 1989, the structures of the world system were being radically reconfigured. Theodore C. Sorensen, former special adviser and primary speechwriter for John F. Kennedy, described the fundamental shift that would come to define the era:

The touchstone for our nation’s security concept—the containment of Soviet military and ideological power—is gone. The primary threat cited over forty years in justification for most of our military budget, bases and overseas assistance is gone. The principal prism through which we viewed most of our worldwide diplomatic activities and alliances is gone. (Sorensen 1990, 1).\(^75\)

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany paved the way for further economic and political integration in Europe. Other major world intellectual figures weighed in with their analyses and predictions of the shifting global terrain. One particularly compelling article was written jointly by Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, former President of France, Yasuhiro Nakasone, former Prime Minister of Japan, and Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State. While acknowledging improved US-Soviet relations and progress in nuclear arms control, the illustrious authors sound a cautionary note: “History shows that tensions arise more frequently as a result of political conflict than due to weapons deployments. Moreover, prolonged conflict or tensions in such areas—Korea, Indochina, the Middle East and Central America—represent a human tragedy of immense proportions” (Giscard et al 1989).

\(^74\) The 18-acre site, located on international territory between First Avenue and the East River and extending from 42nd Street to 48th Street, has special status granted by the United States Congress in 1951.

\(^75\) Sorensen also provided an prescient statement of what would emerge as key themes in the analysis of “globalization”—“The constant, largely unregulated flow of acid rain, illicit refugees and electronically transmitted financial instruments across international borders, including our own, should have put all world leaders on notice that the old rules of national sovereignty have lost much of their meaning and effectiveness. Far more important than ever before are the collective security efforts that we undertake with our allies and the common security obligations that we share with mankind.” (Sorensen 1990, 3)
They cite the recent political settlements in Afghanistan and Angola, and the
progress made in negotiating peace in Cambodia, as positive developments.

With the need to contain the Soviet Union gone, a revitalized UN Security
Council took steps to end the 11-year civil war in Cambodia. South African President
Frederik Willem de Klerk began negotiations to end the apartheid system of racial
segregation, lifting the ban on the African National Congress and other anti- 
apartheid organizations and freeing Nelson Mandela in February 1990 after 27 years
of imprisonment. The withdrawal of Cuban ground and air forces from Angola,
together with South Africa’s agreement in 1988 to end its longstanding
administrative rule over Namibia, which it had first occupied during World War I,
created the possibility for Namibian independence. In late 1989, 8,000 men and
women from over 100 countries participated in the United Nations Transitional
Assistance Group (UNTAG) to oversee democratic elections in Namibia that led to
its emergence as an independent state in March 1990.

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With world attention over the preceding year focused on the end of the Cold
War, the reunification of Germany and the wave of democratic revolutions in eastern
Europe, western analysts had failed to notice that the political calculus of Arab states
had shifted. The United States was now the world’s sole superpower, and given its
unquestioned support for Israel, the Jewish state was seen as a greater threat than
ever before. The massive influx of Soviet Jews to Israel—and the concomitant
expansion of illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where many
of the new immigrants were housed—shifted the “facts on the ground” further in
Israel’s favor. Saddam Husayn, like many Arab leaders, was concerned for his
ability to maneuver strategically in this new regional context.

On July 17, 1990, as his country celebrated the anniversary of the revolution
that brought the Arab Socialist Ba’th Party to power in Iraq in 1968, President
Saddam Husayn appeared on Iraqi television to pick a fight with the neighbors.
Despite the Ba’th Party’s longstanding ideological commitment to “a single Arab

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76 As an aside, I am curious about the origins of the phrase “a human tragedy of immense
proportions.” A quick Google search reveals that writers have used the phrase to describe the 1918
flu pandemic, the Holocaust, and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. New York Mayor
Rudy Giuliani used it in 1996 to describe the crash of TWA Flight 800. Secretary of State Madeline
Albright used the phrase in 1999 to describe Kosovo, the same year that the Director-General of the
International Labor Organization applied it to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa. The Secretary General
of INTERPOL used the phrase on September 11 to describe the terrorist attacks in New York and
Washington DC. Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin used it in reference to Darfur in 2004. The
American Society of Civil Engineers applied it to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

77 At the close of the Arab League summit in Baghdad in May 1990, the 16 attending
member states proclaimed that Soviet Jewish immigration was a “grave threat to their security” and
condemned the US for supporting Israel’s policies of “aggression, terrorism and expansionism”
(quoted in Peretz 1990, 399).
nation with an eternal message,” Husayn spoke at length about his grievances with neighboring countries, especially the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. Husayn claimed that these small but exceedingly wealthy Gulf states were waging “economic war” on Iraq. Kuwait in particular was increasing its oil production in excess of OPEC quotas, artificially driving down the price of oil and crippling the Iraqi economy. The war with Iran had taken a heavy toll, and Iraq desperately needed raise capital to fund its reconstruction and development plans. The state was in serious financial trouble, teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. Soon even the pensions for widows and orphans would have to be cut. Husayn accused Kuwait of drilling diagonally underneath its disputed border with Iraq to tap into the Rumayla oil field, further undermining Iraq’s production capabilities. He threatened to use military force to stop Kuwait’s overproduction if a satisfactory agreement couldn’t be reached.

At noon on July 25, 1990, President Husayn summoned April Glaspie, US Ambassador to Iraq, to an unprecedented meeting at the Republican Palace in Baghdad. Although she had been in post since 1987, this was Glaspie’s first one-on-one meeting with the Iraqi leader, and she didn’t quite know what to expect. The United States knew that several divisions of Iraq’s elite Republican Guard were conducting maneuvers in the southern desert, not far from the Kuwaiti border. They had taken note of Husayn’s vitriolic statements against the tiny Gulf state in recent months. But they were also concerned about his increasingly belligerent posture towards Israel. She was pleased to report that Husayn’s manner was “cordial, reasonable and even warm throughout the ensuing two hours.”

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78 The official Ba’th slogan was “unity, freedom, socialism” (wahda, hurriyya, ishtirakiyya). Saddam Husayn ultimately developed his own interpretation of wahda, however, claiming that the annexation of Kuwait in 1990 achieved the unification of Iraq (wahadat al-Iraq). Ofra Bengio (2002, 48) argues that this move, followed by Iraq’s resounding defeat and ostracized in 1991, was the last time that “Arab unity” found any widespread usage.

79 Joseph Wilson, Glaspie’s deputy chief of mission in Baghdad, would later write: “While we were concerned about the tensions in Iraq’s relations with Kuwait, we did not suspect that the southern military exercises were, in fact, a first signal of Iraq’s intention to invade that country. We were more worried that Saddam’s hard line toward Israel would further inflame Arab passions and contribute to making any lasting settlement between Israel and the Palestinians that much more difficult to achieve” (Wilson 2004, 96). Wilson became famous in 2002 for his role in debunking claims that Iraq had attempted to purchase “yellowcake” uranium from Niger. Wilson’s refusal to support the second Bush administration’s line on Iraq resulted in the vindictive outing of his wife, Valerie Plame, as an undercover CIA officer.

80 One of the small, tightly-knit cadre of Arabists in the US State Department (see Kaplan 1993), April Glaspie was the first woman to be appointed as US ambassador to an Arab country. Sources used to reconstruct her meeting with Saddam Husayn include a declassified cable from Ambassador Glaspie to the National Security Council giving her account of the meeting, “US Embassy Baghdad to Washington (Saddam’s message of friendship to George Bush) [declassified 1998].” Bush Library, NSC (Richard Haass Files), Working Files Iraq Pre-2/8/90-12/90, available online at http://www.margarethather.org/document/0DFO0DDB2BA34EF59F2570CE7E03C8.pdf; the “Glaspie-Hussein Transcript” released by the Iraqis and reprinted in Bennis & Moushabeck (1991, 391-96); and an editorial by Andrew Killgore, former US ambassador to Qatar and publisher of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs (Killgore 2002).
President Husayn began by reading aloud a long letter to President George H.W. Bush. He complained, among other things, about the heavy debt burden (US$40bn) Iraq was carrying after eight years of war with Iran. He reiterated his extreme irritation with the governments of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, which he believed were conducting “economic war” against Iraq—artificially driving down the price of oil by exporting more than their OPEC quota allowed. In his letter to President Bush, Saddam drew a vivid picture of the distinction between military and economic warfare: “military war kills people by bleeding them, and economic war kills their humanity by depriving them of their chance to have a good standard of living” (Bennis & Moushabeck 1991, 392). He reminded the US president of Iraq’s sacrifices during its protracted war with Iran: “As you know, we gave rivers of blood in a war that lasted eight years, but we did not lose our humanity. Iraqis have a right to live proudly. We do not accept that anyone could injure Iraqi pride or the Iraqi right to have high standards of living” (392). In Husayn’s view, Iraqi intervention had saved the smaller, weaker Arab states from the Iranian threat, and he was angry at their seeming ingratitude: “Is this Iraq’s reward for its role in securing the stability of the region and for protecting it from an unknown flood?” (393)

Glaspie made a statement that critics would later interpret as giving tacit permission for Iraq to invade Kuwait: “we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait” (393). Glaspie was repeating almost verbatim the guidance sent by Secretary of State James Baker to embassies in the region only hours before: “While we take no position on the border delineation issue raised by Iraq with respect to Kuwait, or on other bi-lateral disputes, Iraqi statements suggest an intention to resolve outstanding agreements by the use of force, an approach which is contrary to UN-Charter principles.” Baker’s note continued: “The implications of having oil production and pricing policy in the Gulf determined and enforced by Iraqi guns are disturbing.”

Edward Said wrote angrily that Saddam Husayn “was almost invited into Kuwait” (Said 1991, 1). That is a difficult claim to sustain, however, as the transcript shows that Glaspie immediately pressed the Iraqi leader further, saying that she has been instructed to ask him about his intentions: “Frankly, we can only see that you have deployed massive troops in the south. Normally that would not be any of our business. But when this happens in the context of what you said on your national day, then we read the details in the two letters of the foreign minister, then when we see the Iraqi point of view that the measures taken by the UAE and Kuwait is, in the

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final analysis, parallel to military aggression against Iraq, then it would be reasonable for me to be concerned” (393).82

Saddam Husayn left the meeting at one point to take an urgent phone call from Mubarak, who was calling to tell him that the Kuwaitis had agreed to negotiate. The Kuwaiti Prime Minister, Crown Prince Sa’ad Abdallah, would meet with Izzat Ibrahim, the deputy chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council and Saddam’s second-in-command. The Saudis would host the meeting and provide an opportunity for the two sides to discuss protocol and prepare to settle their differences the following week in Baghdad.

Saddam Husayn ended his meeting with Ambassador Glaspie with a cryptic pronouncement, dismissing Egyptian President Mubarak’s concern that Iraqi troops were now just twenty kilometers north of the Kuwaiti border: “I said to him [Mubarak] that regardless of what is there, whether they are police, border guards or army, and regardless of how many are there, and what they are doing, assure the Kuwaitis and give them our word that we are not going to do anything until we meet with them. When we meet and when we see that there is hope, then nothing will happen. But if we are unable to find a solution, then it will be natural that Iraq will not accept death, even though wisdom is above everything else. There you have good news” (396).

The meeting between Iraq and Kuwait took place under Saudi auspices in Jeddah on July 31. The Kuwaitis refused to make any concessions, and Saddam’s deputy stormed out. Nearly two decades later, after Saddam Husayn’s death by hanging at the hands of a new Iraqi government, FBI Special Agent George Piro revealed what had happened. Piro, a Lebanese-American who spent seven months debriefing the deposed Iraqi president following his capture and imprisonment by American forces in November 2003, told 60 Minutes that Husayn wanted to punish Kuwait for a personal insult. At the meeting in Jeddah, the Kuwaiti prime minister told Saddam’s deputy that “he would not stop doing what he was doing until he turned every Iraqi woman into a $10 prostitute.”83 His honor and masculine pride deeply offended, Saddam Husayn took his country—and much of the world—to war. On Thursday, August 2, 1990, in the darkness before dawn, multiple armored

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82 Glaspie’s comment on March 20, 1991 (NYT?): “Nobody thought they’d take all of Kuwait.” Edward Said’s claim about the Husayn-Glaspie meeting may have been overstated, but his next prediction has proven correct: “Since 1973 the United States has wanted a physical presence in the Persian Gulf: to control oil supply, to project power and above all, recently, to refurbish and refinance its military …. the United States will not soon leave the Middle East” (Said 1991:1). See also Ambassador Glaspie’s 2008 interview with Randa Takieddine, US Ambassador to Baghdad Tells Al-Hayat The Story of Her Famous Meeting With Late Iraqi President,” Dar Al-Hayat (Lebanon), March 15, 2008; http://www.daralhayat.com/archive/article/248877.

columns breached the southern border between Iraq and Kuwait; within seven hours, up to 350 Iraqi tanks and Iraq’s Republican Guards had occupied Kuwait City (Niva 1991, 56).

The Humanitarian Apparatus Responds

Within hours of the initial attack, the United Nations Security Council held an emergency session in New York and quickly adopted Resolution 660 condemning Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, demanding an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of troops and calling for immediate and intensive negotiations between Iraq and Kuwait to resolve the conflict. Speaking to reporters after the early morning meeting, Secretary-General Pérez de Cuéllar declared that this was the first time in the 45-year history of the United Nations that the Security Council had “reacted with such unanimity to an invasion, occupation and purported annexation.”

For the first time in decades, discussions at the UN were not focused on preventing the conflict from escalating into a conflict between superpowers. The unprecedented cohesion among the world’s governments was further clarified the following day, when the United States and the USSR issued a joint statement calling for an “international cut-off of all arms supplies to Iraq.”

One of the primary US concerns was to prevent Saudi Arabia from falling into Iraqi hands. President Bush telephoned King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, stating that “the security of Saudi Arabia is vital—basically fundamental—to U.S. interests and really to the interests of the Western world” (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 330). On August 5, US Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney flew to Saudi Arabia and met with King Fahd, Crown Prince Abdullah, the Foreign Minister, and several other members of the royal family. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, ambassador to the US since 1983, served as a translator for the meeting. Cheney was accompanied by US CENTCOM commander-in-chief General Norman Schwarzkopf. “They knew exactly why we were there,” Cheney said in an interview. “There was very little small talk, we went right straight to the issue.” The Secretary of Defense briefed the Saudis on Iraqi troop positions, using classified satellite imagery to convince them that Saddam Husayn posed a direct military threat to the Kingdom. Cheney and Schwarzkopf sought permission from King Fahd for US forces to use Saudi territory to launch a massive military assault on Iraq. According to an account by prizewinning journalist and ultimate Washington insider Bob Woodward, the Vice President promised the Saudis: “After the danger is over, our forces will go home. Under his breath in Arabic, [Crown Prince] Abdullah interjected, ‘I would hope so.’ Bandar did not translate this” (Woodward 1991, 270).


Cheney was delighted: “When King Fahd said that he was prepared to accept our proposition, I was pleased, obviously. That was something that was very important to achieve but, secondly, I also had a sense that this particular decision then triggered a whole sequence of pretty momentous events. Hundreds of thousands of troops going to the desert—US deploying major force half way round the world was obviously a significant event.” But even Cheney failed to comprehend just how significant this event was, and what historic forces and counter-forces were being set in motion. Five years later, the continued presence of US troops on Saudi soil would be the number one complaint of Usama Bin Laden in his 1995 “fatwa against Jews and Crusaders” (Scheuer 2002; 2004).

The Security Council met again on August 6, 1992 and adopted Resolution 661 imposing comprehensive and mandatory economic sanctions against Iraq in order to compel Iraq to end its occupation of Kuwait to restore Kuwait’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. United Nations sanctions are authorized under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Article 41 of Chapter VII states:

The Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed to give effect to its decisions, and it may call upon the Members of the United Nations to apply such measures. These may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations.

In order to impose sanctions, the Security Council must act by a majority vote with no veto from any of the five permanent members (France, China, Russia, United Kingdom, United States). In the case of Iraq, the vote was unanimous.

Only twice in its prior history had the United Nations imposed economic sanctions against a member state: a series of embargoes against Southern Rhodesia (which became Zimbabwe) between 1966 and 1977 and an arms embargo against South Africa in 1977. Resolution 661 was shaped according to the Rhodesian model. It banned the export, import or trans-shipment of all commodities and products originating in Iraq or Kuwait and prohibited the sale or supply to Iraq of


87 Chris Dammers, a former Oxfam country representative in Iraq and an astute observer of political affairs, writes about the issue of sovereignty: “There are few half-way houses on questions of national sovereignty, especially under authoritarian governments. Too many states have too many vested interests to allow this principle to be undermined other than on an ad hoc basis. The international consensus over Kuwait was in itself organized around the defense of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, ironically for a country whose origin is widely seen, in the Arab world at least, as particularly artificial and whose sustenance is a reflection of international economic interests as much as the upholding of political principles” (Dammers 1991, 360).

all commodities, products or financial resources—“not including supplies intended strictly for medical purposes, and, in humanitarian circumstances, foodstuffs.”

With Saudi Arabia now “requesting” military assistance, the United States reported to the Security Council on August 9 that it was deploying troops to the Persian Gulf region “in exercise of the inherent right of individual and collective self-defense,” recognized in Article 51 of the UN Charter. Other countries subsequently deployed forces to the region. That same day, the Council adopted Resolution 662 declaring Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait as “null and void.” Following reports from the United States and the United Kingdom that their navies were intercepting vessels seeking to trade with Iraq and Kuwait in violation of UN-imposed sanctions, the Security Council adopted Resolution 665 on August 25 endorsing a naval blockade. States were asked to use the Council’s long-inactive Military Staff Committee to coordinate their actions.

The First Wave of “Refugees”

The 1950s and 60s had brought about enormous social, economic, and technological change in Kuwait, as oil revenues skyrocketed and the country underwent a period of rapid modernization. In the absence of a local Kuwaiti class of skilled professional, technical or managerial workers, the ruling family found it necessary to contract out for foreign workers from Asia, Europe, and other Arab countries to assist in development projects. Between 1965 and 1985, expatriate workers increased to 77% of the total labor force employed in Kuwait (Salih 1991, 48). The occupation of Kuwait City by Iraqi tanks and troops in August 1990 triggered a mass exodus of these foreign workers, with the greatest numbers occurring within days of the invasion.

More than half a million evacuees or “third-country nationals”—mostly from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand—fled from Kuwait through the barren Iraqi desert, traveling first to Baghdad before continuing on to Jordan. Upon arriving at the Iraqi-Jordanian border, the evacuees were blocked by both governments. Iraq had closed its borders, only allowing the foreign workers through in clusters by nationality. Petra, the official Jordanian news agency, reported that 605,300 third-country nationals crossed into Jordan in the first month.89 But the Jordanian government was not willing to let evacuees into the country until arrangements could be made for their onward travel or repatriation. More than 100,000 people were confined to in overcrowded “transit camps” in the barren no-man’s land between Iraq and Jordan.90

89 Associated Press, “More Relief Aid Needed for Refugees,” September 7, 1990. The evacuees were not technically refugees and did not qualify for protected status under international law, since they were fleeing a country other than their country of citizenship.

90 This was not the first time that large numbers of third-country nationals had sought refuge in Jordan. Situated at the “crossroads of the Middle East,” as the adage goes, Jordan had long been
On August 18, 1990, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 664, demanding that Iraq permit and facilitate the immediate departure from Iraq and Kuwait of third-country nationals and that no action be taken to jeopardize their safety, security or health. A few weeks later, as word of the crisis spread, reporter for the *Sunday Times* in London couldn’t resist describing the situation with a heavy dose of humanitarian hyperbole: “a silent army of hundreds of thousands of Arabs and Asians is on the move, possibly the largest forced migration of civilians since the Second World War” (James 1990).

The Jordanian government had initially tried to manage the relief operation on its own—driven by security concerns and domestic pressures. International humanitarian operations didn’t commence until the third week of August, when Jordan reached the limits of its capacity to respond and appealed to the United Nations for help. The Secretary General appointed the UN Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO) as the agency responsible for overall coordination among the various agencies responding to the “Gulf Crisis,” as it was called, in cooperation with the Jordanian government’s High Committee for Evacuee Welfare, an inter-ministerial group created to oversee the crisis response. UNDRO held a donors’ conference in Geneva on August 24, 1990, two days after Jordan’s request for assistance.

The first international organization to respond to the needs of evacuees in Jordan was the International Committee of the Red Cross. The ICRC’s mandate, derived from the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and its own statues, is unique among humanitarian agencies. In addition to assisting civilians, non-combatants, and refugees in situations of international and internal armed conflict, ICRC is responsible for providing medical care to wounded soldiers on the battlefield, supervising the treatment of prisoners of war, searching for missing persons (“tracing”), and monitoring the compliance of warring parties to the Geneva Conventions. The Committee also works to promote and strengthen humanitarian law and respect for “universal humanitarian principles” (Forsythe 2005, 161).

In 1990, ICRC had been established in Jordan for 23 years, working closely with the Jordanian authorities to provide aid and support to Palestinian refugees.

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91 Resolution 664 also demanded that Iraq rescind its orders to close diplomatic and consular missions in Kuwait and withdraw immunity for their personnel.

92 The reporter is clearly not familiar with the 1971 civil war in South Asia, during which the genocidal massacre of over one million Hindu and Muslim Bengalis in East Pakistan (now independent Bangladesh) at the hands of the West Pakistani army caused over 10 million refugees to flee across the border to neighboring Indian states.
The day after the official appeal from the Jordanian government, ICRC delegates set up a field base to provide medical services and water at the Shalaan I camp (pop. 45,000), an overcrowded transit camp in no-man’s land, and Ruweished Bridge, a camp not far from the border area. ICRC convinced as well as in a new “tent city” set up on the outskirts of Azraq, an oasis town in Jordan’s eastern desert, 60 miles from the capital Amman. Extreme temperatures posed a major problem: it could be scorching hot during the day and then drop to near-freezing overnight. There was a constant, heavy wind that knocked over tents and scoured everything with gusts of fine-grained sand, making life uncomfortable for evacuees and aid workers alike.

On August 24, 1990, the ICRC requested that BINGO UK—the pseudonym for a “Big International NGO” based in the United Kingdom—support their relief efforts by selling some of its specialized emergency water equipment for use in the transit camps. BINGO’s regional analysis humanitarian and development needs in the Middle East prior to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait had focused primarily on Palestinian issues—especially following the intensification of the intifada that began in December 1987. Nevertheless, the agency’s Middle East Desk quickly realized that the Gulf crisis could have “potentially catastrophic” consequences for the region. The staff affiliated with the Middle East Desk felt strongly that the agency should get involved: “the crisis following Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait was seen to have immediate regional (within the Middle East) as well as ultimately global humanitarian consequences” (BINGO n.d.: 1).

At first, there was a great deal of hesitation, skepticism and organizational inertia that worked to prevent or delay a crisis response. BINGO’s institutional policy at the time was to discourage “out-of-area” disaster relief activities—that is, activities conducted in countries where the agency had no pre-existing office or developmental program (BINGO n.d.: 1). This was the classic “Third World development” paradigm that BINGO had perfected in the 1970s and 1980s, in which the agency worked primarily through local partner organizations in the so-called “Third World,” especially Africa. An alternative paradigm—focused on operational responses to political crises and “complex emergencies” in the “new world order”—

93 The Middle East Desk had an anomalous status within the organization, which continues to the present day in the organizational structure and geographical location the agency’s department for the MEEECIS region (Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Commonwealth of Independent States).

94 This chapter draws heavily on four confidential, internal documents that were “salvaged” from BINGO’s office in Amman, Jordan (BINGO n.d., 1991; 1992; 1994). These unpublished documents, written from multiple and competing points of view, reflect the range of interests and positions of differently situated actors within the agency in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis. The documents reveal the internal workings an organization in transition, adjusting to a changing global landscape by reconfiguring its departments and technical capacities. They cite other internal documents and make oblique references to ongoing debates within the organization, giving us a limited glimpse of a world that remains largely inaccessible. There is unfortunately no way to give credit to the individual authors without compromising the confidentiality of specific individuals and organizations. I thus cite these documents throughout as having been authored by “BINGO.”
was beginning to emerge but had yet to take hold (see Duffield 1994). Competing priorities within other BINGO departments also posed a challenge. The Emergencies Unit in particular, which had been formed during the African famines of the mid-1980s, remained focused on the “increasingly precarious situation in a number of African countries, most of which already had BINGO emergency programs running” (BINGO 1991, 2). There were concerns that the agency’s resources were in danger of being overstretched.

Despite some initial resistance, the Middle East Desk arranged for a field assessment mission to travel to Jordan to gather first-hand information that could inform future decision making. (August 27 to September 2, 1990). The assessment was conducted by the Deputy Regional Representative and the country director of Lebanon, both of whom had extensive knowledge of the region but little emergency experience. The Middle East Desk staff drew on the established “Third World development” paradigm, looking for local organizations to partner with. They identified two suitable local partners: the Jordanian Water Authority would work on water and sanitation projects in the camps, while the Jordanian Red Crescent Society would receive BINGO blankets and shelter units for distribution to the camp populations.

The specific views of the agency’s Middle East-focused staff who participated in this phase of the crisis response are not conveyed in the internal BINGO documents. What is clear, however, is that there was a rift between the regional experts on the one hand and the technical experts on the other. The traditional division of labor between the Technical Unit, the Overseas Division, and the regional “desks” was being challenged. The irritation of the BINGO technical staff is palpable, especially in a second program evaluation report (BINGO 1992). The assessment teams fielded by the Middle East Desk didn’t understand the technical specifications of BINGO’s proprietary water equipment, not to mention the agency’s competencies in the area of public health. The regional experts, on the other hand, felt that the engineers didn’t grasp the complexity and nuance of the political situation in the Middle East. The first evaluation notes that “no formal decision was taken as to whether the EU [Emergencies Unit] or the MED [Middle East Desk] should take the lead in relief measures” (BINGO 1991, 2-3), creating confusion, frustration and an ad hoc approach throughout the response.

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95 A second split would emerge over the course of the Gulf crisis between those who emphasized programming and those who emphasized advocacy. The Strategic Plan for Iraq written several years later notes that: “In Iraq BINGO has developed an integrated communication, advocacy, and lobbying element to the programme. 50% of the Communication Officer’s time is committed to Iraq. In both regions [government-controlled and Kurdish-controlled areas], the program is led and leads advocacy issues…” (BINGO 1994, 33). Not everyone in the organization agreed that this was an appropriate distribution of resources and priorities.
The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) is another international organization that already had a presence in the region and responded immediately to the crisis at the Iraq-Jordan border. UNICEF’s Supply Division shipped tents, blankets and medicine from its main warehouse in Copenhagen, while engineers and logisticians purchased water equipment and mattresses at local markets in Jordan. UNICEF water and sanitation, health care, and shelter experts worked with the ICRC camp managers and the Jordanian Red Crescent to storm-proof the transit camps to withstand wind and inclement weather. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also had an established presence, with representatives based in all the transit countries for evacuees (Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Saudia Arabia).

UN officials warned that Jordan might have to absorb nearly one million refugees from Kuwait—an unwelcome prospect for the Jordanian regime, which was already struggling with a major financial crisis of its and the burden of successive waves of Palestinian refugees from Israel in 1948 and 1967. The Jordanians urged the evacuees’ countries of origin to step in and assist with the repatriation of their citizens (Owen and Gumucio 1990). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) arrived in Jordan on September 3, 1990, to provide ground and air transportation for returning the evacuees to their countries of origin. The “Scarlet Lady,” a Boeing 747 carrying Richard Branson and 40 tons of aid supplies, including rice, flour, and 20,000 blankets, landed in Amman on September 5. The flamboyant owner of Virgin Atlantic Airlines was responding to a personal request from Jordan’s Queen Noor. He broke into tears as he warned television viewers that there would be “horrendous loss of life” unless governments and private companies organized an colossal airlift to transport the evacuees home (Owen and Gumucio 1990).

IOM appealed publicly to the governments of 24 countries to donate aircraft and ships “before human suffering becomes a human tragedy” (Black and Pallister 1990). BINGO’s Middle East Desk officer, who had recently assessed conditions in the transit camps, agreed: “There is a grave humanitarian crisis at the Iraq-Jordanian border where the refugees are furthest from supplies. More aid is desperately needed but so are the ships and planes to enable the returnees to go back to their home countries” (Black and Pallister 1990). By September 9, BINGO had sent three charter flights to Jordan, carrying water equipment, emergency supplies, and three engineers to provide technical assistance to the JWA. Concerned about increasing anti-Western sentiments in Jordan, BINGO’s Overseas Division imposed a strict time limit of three weeks for the project. The engineers returned to England at the end of September having “installed or improved temporary water supply to five transit camps then sheltering 36,000 returnees” (BINGO 1991, 5).

The way the Jordan-run transit camps are portrayed in an internal evaluation report (BINGO 1991) is at odds with the way they were portrayed in the international media. Drawing on well-established tropes refined during earlier African famines, many journalists portrayed the camps as sites of desolation and despair. The
BINGO engineers, on the other hand, many of whom had experience in camps and feeding centers in Africa, were pleasantly surprised at the level of care. The evaluation notes that the displaced population “reflected the employment profile of modern, middle ranking industrial countries. […] The conditioned physical and social needs of such populations are high. The praiseworthy Jordanian reaction therefore can also be seen as a necessary response to these needs.” (BINGO 1991, 3) The Jordanian government spent $57 million to assist the evacuees, mobilizing the country’s entire fleet of tourist buses and 90% of its police force to manage the repatriation effort and to assist in “keeping the transit population moving” (1991, 3). The Jordanians installed electric street lighting and transported doctors from Amman to deal with the medical needs of the camp populations. The camps were supplied with high quality water from the country’s main supply, despite the fact that water in the capital was rationed due to ongoing drought (1991, 3). Fresh vegetables, fruit and meat were delivered to the camps in refrigerated trucks.

Other international organizations joined the relief effort in September and October, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Program, the League of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (working through the Jordanian Red Crescent). Many nongovernmental organizations provided assistance to the evacuees and support to ICRC and UNICEF technical operations in the camps: CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Christian Aid, Médecins du Monde, Médecins sans Frontières, Middle East Council of Churches, Oxfam, the Queen Alia Social Welfare Fund, Save the Children Fund, and other national and international agencies.96 In addition to the funds spent by the host country governments of Iran, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, international donors contributed an estimated $487 million to the humanitarian response.97 In Britain, the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) issued a joint appeal.

In hindsight, it is interesting to note that BINGO’s public positions throughout the first year of Gulf crisis had very little to do with its impact on people living in either Kuwait or Iraq. BINGO’s first fundraising appeal, launched on September 9 shortly after the decision was made to get operationally involved in Jordan, focused on the negative effects that the influx of foreign workers was having on Jordan’s economy and society. The strategy proved to be effective. In the first day, the appeal—launched jointly with the Disasters Emergency Committee—raised approximately £250,000 in credit card donations alone.

On September 13, the Security Council convened again, this time to adopt Resolution 666 (1990), dealing with humanitarian needs arising from the imposition

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97 Ibid., 4.
of sanctions. It asked the Secretary-General to obtain information in that regard, particularly as to children under 15 years of age, expectant mothers, maternity cases, the sick and the elderly. Iraq was asked, at the same time, to ensure the safety of “third State nationals.” On September 16, the Security Council adopted Resolution 667, strongly condemning “aggressive acts” by Iraq against diplomatic premises and personnel in Kuwait and demanding the release of foreign nationals.

Eight days later, on September 24, the Council dealt with an increasing number of requests for assistance to countries affected by the sanctions process and adopted Resolution 669, entrusting the Sanctions Committee established under resolution 661 to act on those requests. Resolution 670, the ninth resolution since the start of the conflict, was adopted by the Security Council on September 25 at a session presided by USSR Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and attended by many other Foreign Ministers. The 13-operative paragraph text confirmed that sanctions applied to all means of transport, including aircraft, and spelled out specific exceptions. The Council again called for strict and complete compliance with the embargoes.

By mid-October the majority of the foreign workers had been transported out of Jordan with the help of various Asian governments. Tens of thousands remained stuck in Iraq, however, denied freedom of movement. On October 29, a tenth Security Council resolution (674) on hostage protection was adopted, demanding that Iraq stop taking third-country nationals hostage in Iraq and Kuwait. For those that remained in the transit camps in Jordan, conditions were difficult. The Jordanian authorities hoped to reduce overcrowding by moving more people from Shaalan I to Shaalan II, a camp located seven miles inside the no man’s zone from Jordan and managed by the Paris-based Médecins sans Frontières. Shaalan III, located twelve miles inside the no man’s land from the Jordanian border, was set up by six charities under the auspices of the Middle East Council of Churches. BINGO announced that it was sending three water engineers and water equipment to supply up to 100,000 people. The agency also shipped 1,000 tents and 11,000 blankets to the Royal Jordanian Red Crescent Society.

A total of 12 UN Resolutions on Iraq were adopted between August 2 and November 29, 1990, when the Security Council gave Iraq “one final opportunity” to comply. Resolution 677, adopted just the day (November 28), had condemned Iraq’s attempts to alter the demographic composition and destroy the civil records of Kuwait. Now in Resolution 678, adopted on November 29, the Security Council authorized the multinational troops assembled in the Gulf region to use force if necessary to evict Iraq from Kuwait. Paragraph 2 of the resolution imposed a deadline of January 15, 1991—to be preceded by a 48-day waiting period that the resolution termed “a pause of goodwill”—after which member states were authorized to use “all necessary means” to implement the previous eleven resolutions “and to restore international peace and security in the area.” The stage was set for war.
Don’t Forget Africa!

The “humanitarian apparatus” is premised on strong linkages between relief agencies and the media agenda. The production and circulation of powerful images is a central component of humanitarian advocacy—for policy change, and also for fundraising. There are a number of things at stake in this work. One is the brand and reputation of the organization. Simply “doing good” isn’t enough. In order to protect their market share, aid agencies must be seen to be doing good. Institutional donors and the general public must see that the organization is actively engaged in helping people. This necessitates a proactive stance towards the media, pitching stories that show the organization at work.

In most large development and humanitarian relief agencies such as CARE, MSF, Oxfam, and Save the Children, there are entire departments devoted to specialized media and advocacy operations. BINGO is no different. In fact, in the early 1990s, there were at least nine different BINGO departments that dealt with “public information policy”—a generic term covering media work, private lobbying, and public campaigns, in addition to the research and analysis functions necessary to support these activities. Most of these departments were housed in the Communications Division, including the Press and Information Offices that served as the main external and internal communicators during the early stages of the Gulf crisis. The Development Policy Unit, a separate entity within the Overseas Division tasked with researching the structural causes of poverty, also played a leading role in framing BINGO’s public position. As the crisis unfolded over the next few months, the Central Fund Raising department as well as many others would become involved.

Early on in the Gulf crisis, BINGO’s top administrators decided against taking a public position on the conflict. This decision was a source of internal friction. The Middle East Desk staff felt strongly that BINGO should declare its opposition to the war, while the senior management were concerned that this would get the organization in further trouble with the Charity Commissioners, who were already investigating some of BINGO’s public campaigns—as well as those of several other major British NGOs, including Oxfam and Christian Aid—to determine if these organizations had violated UK charity laws by espousing political views. Furthermore, it was not at all clear that the British public would sympathize with the agency’s views. As an internal evaluation document notes, “there also existed widespread public support for the commitment of British troops to the Gulf. In these circumstances, the Directorate and Divisional Heads made a pragmatic decision that BINGO’s wider interests would not be served by adopting a public position on the crisis which challenged government policy.” (BINGO 1991:7)

In the wake of the Iraqi invasion, BINGO’s analysts and communicators sought to develop an understanding of the Gulf crisis that would allow for public advocacy and private lobbying without compromising its status as a registered
charity organization. Given the politically sensitive nature of the crisis, the challenge was to find a “hook” that would connect the situation in the Gulf to BINGO’s broader humanitarian agenda and operational priorities. BINGO extended its interpretation of the Jordan experience to other countries as well, arguing that the Gulf crisis would have negative economic impacts on all Third World countries. This position reveals BINGO’s primary orientation toward the so-called “Third World,” and Africa in particular, as the *raison d’être* of development and relief work. The “Don’t Forget Africa” campaign in January 1991 can be seen as an attempt to re-inscribe the established order of aid priorities.

Many aid agencies were worried that the threat of war in the Gulf, together with the deteriorating food situation in the Soviet Union, would overshadow the food crisis brewing in Africa—especially Angola, Liberia and Mozambique, as well as Ethiopia and Sudan. An article in *The Guardian* on January 2, 1991, highlighted this concern: “If prime television viewing time is taken up by events in the Gulf, or by further adverse developments for the Kremlin leadership, they fear there will be less time as a consequence for the hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, who are starving in Africa” (Simmons 1991).

Three weeks later, with Operation Desert Storm well underway in Kuwait and Iraq, the rhetoric was cranked up a notch: “We are not going to let 20 million people die in Africa while we are fighting in the Gulf,” the director of BINGO, who had just returned from a visit to Ethiopia, stated in a press release. The director was frustrated that virtually unlimited funds could be found for fighting Iraq while “in Africa, we are fighting a war to save people from starvation and yet we are not finding the resources.” Invoking the classic “governments must do more” language that still pervades humanitarian advocacy, the BINGO director warned that “there will be catastrophic effects should the attention and resources of governments, the media and the public continue to be dominated by the Gulf at the expense of the crisis in Africa.” (Simpson 1991).

In subsequent press releases, BINGO published a series of “killer facts” as they’re called in media lingo, such as this one, designed to contrast the high military expenditures in the Gulf with the money needed for Africa: “Just 46 pounds sterling can buy wheat, lentils and oil for one person at risk from starvation for a year. That is the estimated cost of British operations in the gulf for one second” (Inter-Press Service 1991). BINGO also advocated for increased aid, especially food, as well as

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98 The specific details of this military conflict are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Speaking more generally of this historical moment, Ramesh Thakur notes: “The most important long-term significance of UN actions in the Gulf lies in the crossing of the conceptual Rubicon, first by authorizing enforcement of sanctions and then military eviction of the aggressor by troops not even nominally under UN command (as they had been in Korea in the 1950s).” (Thakur 1993, 8). The Desert Storm conflict—as well as Operation Safe Haven / Operation Provide Comfort in response to the Kurdish refugee crisis in northern Iraq in April-June 1991—initiated many heated debates about “cross-border operations” and territorial sovereignty.
debt relief for the “crisis-stricken” African countries. The agency started a “popular mobilization” campaign in the United Kingdom, distributing “I Haven’t Forgotten Africa” badges for people to wear and urging them to contact their local and national government representatives in support of the campaign.

Sanctions and Humanitarian Politics

Beginning four days after Saddam Husayn’s army rolled across the southeastern border of Iraq and invaded neighboring Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council imposed a series of comprehensive economic sanctions on Iraq. The initial round of sanctions (Resolution 661: August 6, 1990) was imposed as a coercive measure, whereas the even more robust sanctions regime included in the ceasefire resolution (Resolution 687: April 3, 1991) could be seen as a punitive measure (Graham-Brown 1999, 57-58). Over the next decade, the country with the second largest proven oil reserves in the world became second from the bottom in terms of development indicators. By 1999, UNICEF reported that mortality rates for Iraqi children under five had increased at an alarming rate under the sanctions regime, and were now more than double that of the previous decade. The UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2002 placed Iraq at 110 among 111 countries reviewed. Iraq’s GDP per capita was estimated to have dropped from over $3,300 in 1980 to $1,200 in 2002. Over 80 per cent of the population were estimated to be living in poverty.

At the start of the sanctions regime in 1990, there was very little baseline data about the food situation in Iraq or the medical and nutritional needs of the population. The impact of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and the degradation of infrastructure and social services remained unclear. The Iraqi government was unwilling to allow UN agencies and ICRC to conduct nation-wide assessments.

Several assessment missions were allowed in 1991—both during Operation Desert Storm as well as after the military operations ended on March 28—starting with a joint UNICEF/WHO team in February. Two UN delegations also traveled to Iraq in the aftermath of the war, the first led by Under Secretary General Martti Ahtisaari followed by another led by the UN Secretary General’s Executive Delegate, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan. Both delegations reported that the humanitarian situation was “dire, if not catastrophic” (Graham-Brown 1999, 70). The Ahtissari report notes that “Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial

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99 This resolution reaffirmed and extended the trade embargo first imposed by Resolution 661. Ramesh Thakur observes that the resolution “was testimony to the [Security] Council’s ambitions as the guarantor of international peace and security. The resolution affirmed the Council’s juridical and operational resurgence. It also marked a shift in the balance of relations between the Security Council and the General Assembly: contrary to the Council’s usual practice, no Assembly resolution was cited and nothing was asked of the plenary organ.” (Thakur 1993, 13)

100 United Nations, Secretary-General’s Report, 15 July 2003, 16.
age, but with all the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology."

The widespread destruction of civil infrastructure and industry in Iraq had left public services such as the electricity supply and telecommunications barely functioning. Over half of Iraq’s roads, railways and bridges were destroyed, and the oil industry was at a virtual standstill (Barakat, 1993, 33). The CIA estimated that the cost of repairing Iraq’s damaged infrastructure would be at least $30 billion. It would take some time, however, for the world to realize “the tremendous suffering that the war and its aftermath have inflicted on large numbers of Iraqi people” (Hunter 1993, 23).

The July 1991 report issued by the inter-agency taskforce led by Sadruddin Aga Khan, composed of experts from UNICEF, WHO, FAO, WFP, UNHCR, UNDP and others, acknowledge the damage of the war itself. But even more so, it concluded, “the impact of the sanctions had been, and remains, very substantial on the economy and living conditions of its civilian population.” More than half of the inhabitants of Iraq were now unemployed. “During the war, the embargo had cut off most food supplies, while infrastructural damage caused by the bombing campaign severely disrupted basic civilian services, especially electricity supplies. Industry and agriculture ground to a halt.” (Graham-Brown 1999, 70).

As the economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council approached their one-year anniversary in August 1991, Chris Dammers painted a vivid picture of the situation he witnessed during a trip to Iraq in June of that year:

Iraq is a shattered and unstable country facing a continuing political and humanitarian crisis. A comparatively wealthy state is threatened with widespread famine. Typhoid and gastroenteritis have reached epidemic proportions and cholera is widespread. On average food costs around ten times as much as before the war, with staples such as wheat and rice retailing, respectively, at 45 and 22 times their prewar price. Water supplies and consumption are running at a quarter of their pre-war levels, with greatly increased pollution. Only a quarter of the power generating capacity has been restored. Telecommunications remain completely disrupted. (Dammers 1991, 355)

Dammers attributed the food crisis and lack of public services to three things: the war, the uprisings and the sanctions, with the latter beginning to overshadow the former causes: “As the immediate impact of the war and the uprisings recedes, the impact of the international trade embargo increases” (Dammers 1991, 355).

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NGO positions on the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq were complex. The American Friends Service Committee, a pacifist Quaker organization, had supported the trade embargo after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, but opposed its continuation after Operation Desert Storm in 1991. Oxfam, the largest aid and best-known aid agency in the United Kingdom, refused to take a position on the embargo of Iraq—which is ironic given that the organization was founded in 1942 in opposition to the Allied naval blockade of Greece (Black 1992). Remarkably, Oxfam’s willingness to speak out publicly against the sanctions imposed on Iraq in August 1990 was constrained by its campaigning in favor of sanctions against South Africa earlier that same year.

Throughout the 1980s, Oxfam had been accused on numerous occasions of engaging in improper political activities. Referring to that time period, Richard Lock (1998) notes that “the nature of the charity’s activities was beginning to arouse the interest of the media and certain political groups who complained to the Charity Commission.” In April 1990, upon learning that Oxfam planned to launch a major public campaign focusing on southern Africa, the Charity Commission announced a preemptive investigation to ascertain if the agency was engaging in “undue political activity.” In instituting this inquiry, the Charity Commissioners were acting under Section 6 of the 1960 Charities Act. They sought to determine “whether in advocating and campaigning for political change, in this country or abroad, the trustees of Oxfam were acting in accordance with their trusts and the restrictions of charity law in England and Wales” (Charity Commissioners 1991). Peter Burnell adds some important contextual detail, pointing out that the investigation of Oxfam was instigated by a right-wing lobbying group:

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102 The Charity Commission is a non-ministerial government department that acts on behalf of Parliament to regulate the 165,000 registered charities in England and Wales. Separate regulatory bodies exist for charities in Scotland and Northern Ireland; see Adirondack & Taylor (1997). On May 16, 1989, the British government had issued a white paper, “Charities: A Framework for the Future.” This white paper spelled out the government’s proposals for revising the way charities are managed. It recommended that the Commission be given greater powers to investigate malpractice and inefficiency within charities and suggested that all registered charities should be required to file annual financial statements. Chapter 2 of the white paper explored whether the political activities of charities should be further legislated, but refrained from recommending further action on this issue. Given that the Charity Commissioners already had the power to revoke an organization’s charity status, the white paper suggested there was no need to strengthen the law (United Kingdom 1989). Considering the legal ramifications of this issue, Alison Dunn (2008) notes that “most common-law-based societies accept that charities advantaged by legal and taxation status should not support or be political parties. Nevertheless, most charitable objects rely upon some political means for their execution and it is at this juncture that the policy and legal rules become indeterminate.” For further discussion, see Cornwell (1997) and Burt (1998).

103 A revised Charities Act came into force in 1992, followed by another in 1993, replacing the 1960 Charities Act and giving the Charity Commissioners greater powers to investigate and act on charges of mismanagement or misconduct in the non-profit sector (Hind 1995, 390).
The Charity Commissioners' inquiry was preceded by a persistent campaign directed against Oxfam by the free-market pressure group, the International Freedom Foundation, which submitted 42 pages of evidence detailing alleged abuse of charitable status. ... [The IFF] is currently mounting a campaign to have Christian Aid (the country’s third largest overseas aid charity, after Oxfam and the Save the Children Fund) made the subject of an official inquiry, and charges it with having become an important conduit of support to radical groups in southern Africa and the Middle East, as well as a platform for political campaigns in the United Kingdom. (Burnell 1992, 312)

The Oxfam campaign, called “Front Line Africa,” sought to raise £1 million for the organization’s development and relief work in southern Africa. The campaign also advocated for maintaining sanctions against the apartheid regime until a democratic system was put in place. Oxfam’s recent campaign for Cambodia would also be investigated. Frank Judd, director of Oxfam, defended the agency’s education, outreach and campaigning activities, arguing that public campaigns were a necessary supplement to direct assistance. Oxfam “has a charitable duty to educate the public about the causes of suffering,” he maintained (Souster 1990). Nevertheless, Oxfam agreed to withhold a number of publications that called for sanctions to be maintained. An agency spokesperson said:

> It is still Oxfam's policy to say that sanctions should be maintained, because we think that is the best way of helping to achieve peace and development in South Africa and the region as a whole. We base that claim on many years’ experience of working in South Africa. We will be vigorously defending our position at the inquiry. In the meantime we have accepted that the commissioners have made a ruling and we will go along with it.

The outcome of the Charity Commissioners’ inquiry, published in May 1991, publicly reprimanded Oxfam for using its charitable status as a cover for political activities and threatened the agency’s trustees with penalties if such abuse should recur. Undaunted, and Oxfam spokesperson declared that “the report has not curtailed our campaigning activity.” He added: “We have to be clear now as to how a campaign arise directly from our work and how it will benefit the people we work with” (Tanner 1993).

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Throughout the 1990s, only a handful of international NGOs had operational programs in government-controlled Iraq. US citizens were forbidden to travel to the country, and the strict Office of Foreign Asset Control regulations outlawed the

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104 By way of comparison, Oxfam’s income in 1988-89 was £66.7 million, of which £52.4 million was spent on overseas relief and development work and £2.5 million on education and campaigning in the UK and Ireland. See “Oxfam Faces Inquiry into ‘Political’ Campaigns,” The Independent (London), April 28, 1990.
transfer of money and material goods to Iraq. “Sanctions busting” activists (e.g., former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, Voices in the Wilderness, Christian Peacemaker Teams, Mennonite Central Committee, Code Pink, Global Exchange) organized trips, assisted by Iraqi expatriate organizations. These visiting delegations were often welcomed by the Iraqi regime, which viewed them as a useful tool to turn international public opinion against the UN sanctions and ultimately have them lifted. Their freedom of movement was extremely curtailed, and they were accompanied at all times by Iraqi government minders, as were international journalists.

The Ba’thist regime despised the UN sanctions, seeing them as an insult to its legitimacy and authority. Saddam’s number one aim was to get the sanctions lifted, and he sought at every opportunity to manipulate international public opinion to achieve this end. The regime was quite happy for visiting delegations to visit specific sites, under the watchful eye of minders. The Iraqi people knew the “script”—when the cameras and tape recorders were rolling, they were to denounce the sanctions and praise Saddam Husayn. The complexity of the situation in Iraq never entered the public debate.

The Ba’thist regime urged these international delegations to highlight the impact of sanctions, while simultaneously denying its own brutal history of human rights violations. By contrast, the US government spoke only of weapons of mass destruction and human rights, while downplaying the effect of sanctions. The battle lines of the propaganda war were firmly established. As the report issued by the International Study Group (commonly known as the “Duelfer report” would later explain:

As part of his efforts to escape sanctions, Saddam launched a vigorous campaign to shape international opinion. The Regime drew attention to everything from poor sanitation to the absence of electric power; the main effort, however, focused on the impact of sanctions upon children, especially those under five years of age. Sanctions did indeed have an enormous impact upon Iraq, and Saddam’s campaign utilized and amplified that impact. The campaign eventually involved everyone from ministers of the Iraqi Government to journalists around the world, humanitarian groups, and UN officials.105

The Iraqi government frequently claimed that the embargo was “the sole cause of hardship or disruption of civilian life” (Graham-Brown 1999, 91). Those who opposed the Iraqi regime relied on a single narrative frame: Saddam Husayn is a brutal dictator who has used weapons of mass destruction against his own people. Those who opposed the economic blockade of Iraq had an equally simplistic

message: The sanctions are killing Iraqi children. The reality on the ground was vastly more complex, and it is clear that “both Security Council members and Iraq frequently allowed humanitarian issues to become bargaining chips in struggles over the fulfillment of UNSC 687” (Graham-Brown & Toensing 2003, 168). Caught in the middle, many professional humanitarian agencies simply chose not to engage. A few agencies were able to make their position clear, but primarily in confidential documents intended for internal distribution only: “the main causes of poverty are sanctions and [Iraqi] government policies” (BINGO 1994, i). Chris Dammers commented on the complex political landscape:

Various shibboleths of the United Nations, and of the post-1945 world order, notably “respect for national sovereignty” and “non-interference in the internal policies of member states” are going by the board in Iraq, though in an ambiguous and perhaps temporary way that causes considerable confusion amongst UN officials trying to adjust to their new freedom and authority. This authority is itself very much a part of the post-war political dispensation in Iraq and the continuing international pressure on the Iraqi government. It will change as and when the Iraqi government feels strong enough to reassert its authority. The UN presence is not something the Iraqi government has requested or welcomed, although cooperation with the humanitarian agencies is remarkably good. (Dammers 1991, 360)

In 1992, the Iraqi government reasserted its control over international agencies operating on its territory. With the de facto separation of the three northern provinces into “Iraqi Kurdistan” in the wake of Operation Provide Comfort, the remaining 15 provinces were designated “Government-controlled Areas” (or GCA, in aid worker shorthand). International agencies that were conducting operations in both areas were now forced to choose. Many international NGOs did not sign the Memorandum of Understanding with the government, refusing to accept the stringent restrictions imposed on their operations by the Iraqi regime.

Furthermore, many aid officials were skeptical of their own ability to make the difference that was needed. Iraq had once been a wealthy country, and it would take billions of dollars to restore the infrastructure and public services to pre-war levels. 19-20 million Iraqis had depended on the government for daily support. Faced with the effects of war and economic sanctions, their needs exceeded what the aid agencies could provide. By October 1992, all non-governmental organizations except CARE and Oxfam GB had withdrawn from government-controlled areas of Iraq.106

106 CARE International was represented in Baghdad by CARE Australia, personified by Margaret Hassan. As of late 1994, some 30 NGOs were still working in the Kurdish-controlled areas. (Graham-Brown & Toensing 2003)
“One aspect of Saddam’s strategy of unhinging the UN’s sanctions against Iraq, centered on Saddam’s efforts to influence certain UN SC permanent members, such as Russia, France, and China and some nonpermanent (Syria, Ukraine) members to end UN sanctions. Under Saddam’s orders, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) formulated and implemented a strategy aimed at these UNSC members and international public opinion with the purpose of ending UN sanctions and undermining its subsequent OFF program by diplomatic and economic means. At a minimum, Saddam wanted to divide the five permanent members and foment international public support of Iraq at the UN and throughout the world by a savvy public relations campaign and an extensive diplomatic effort.”

Beginning in late 1993, the Iraqi government “began a concerted campaign to woo leading members of the Security Council which were most amenable to seeing the oil embargo lifted—France, Russia and China—and to highlight the growing differences of opinion among the permanent members” (Graham-Brown 1999, 78). France and Russia wanted the oil embargo lifted since 1991. Elf and Total signed “agreements in principle” with the State Oil Marketing Organization in Baghdad.

“A great deal of Iraq’s public health infrastructure was in desperate need maintenance, rehabilitation and renovation, including water treatment and distribution systems, sanitation facilities, and health facilities such as clinics and hospitals. It was commonly reported by anti-sanctions activists that shortages of spare parts and replacement equipment—banned as “dual-use” items by the 661 Committee—kept the infrastructure in a permanent state of disrepair. This was part of the story, but failed to account for the full scope of the problem. Orders for water, sanitation and medical equipment had to originate from the Iraqi government. If no parts were ordered, there was little the international community could do. Furthermore, only hardware could be imported—there was no cash component to pay salaries for installation and maintenance.

When Iraq’s economy ground to a halt in the early 1990s, much of the skilled workforce that was able to do so left the country. I spent a fair amount of time in Jordan between 1994–1998, and it was common to find Iraqis with PhDs in


chemistry or agricultural science driving taxis in Amman. In an attempt to stop the “brain drain,” the Iraqi government imposed a hefty “exit tax” to prevent people from leaving the country (see al-Radi 2003). After brutally suppressing the Shi’a uprising that followed Operation Desert Storm—supported rhetorically but not militarily by the United States government—Saddam Husayn continued to punish the southern provinces through deprivation and forced underdevelopment. The main water treatment facility in Najaf, the spiritual and political center of Shi’a Islam, was a frequent stop for visiting delegations. It was broken, but could’ve been repaired.

Who was to blame? The reports issued by United Nations agencies throughout the 1990s are unsurprisingly vague about who was responsible for the condition of the Iraqi people. The UN agencies’ presence in Iraq required the approval of the Iraqi government, and many of the reports were issued jointly with Iraqi line ministries. As a sovereign (and founding) member of the United Nations, Iraq had the ultimate authority over its internal affairs. The mere presence of the UN humanitarian agencies in Iraq was viewed by the regime as a sign of weakness and a threat to its legitimate authority. United Nations agencies report to the Secretary-General, whose office serves the UN member states. The Secretariat and the specialized agencies could make recommendations, but they had no power to enforce them.

Under UN Security Council Resolution 661 (August 6, 1990), Iraqi government ministries would submit applications to the “661 Committee” in New York via the Office of the Iraq Program, headquartered at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad. The sanctions committee would approve and process the contracts, while the Iraqi government would issue tenders directly to the suppliers and shippers who would manage the delivery. All three aspects were flawed. The Government of Iraq didn’t submit in a timely manner, the UN’s contract processing and approval procedures were notoriously inefficient, and many shipments did not arrive on time. Furthermore, contracts were paid up front, rather than on delivery, and there were poor quality controls in place. With no incentive to perform at a high level, many food shipments were delivered late and did not meet international food quality standards.

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By 1994, there were indications that the humanitarian situation in government-controlled areas of Iraq had deteriorated rapidly. “By this time, even the US administration accepted that the suffering among the ordinary people of Iraq was not just a figment of Iraqi government propaganda” (Graham-Brown 1999, 81), although the Americans consistently blamed Saddam Husayn, not the sanctions.

Saddam Husayn had long refused a number of international programs to allow limited exports of Iraqi oil under UN auspices. The Iraqi regime’s resistance to these offers makes sense on two levels. On the one hand, Husayn viewed them as yet another affront to the regime’s sovereignty, which was already constrained by
sanctions, the weapons inspectors, and the no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq. On the other hand, the regime’s highest priority was to have the economic sanctions lifted completely. Saddam Husayn saw increased international sympathy with the plight of Iraqi civilians as a key element of his strategy end the UN-imposed embargo and maintain his legitimacy as the leader of a sovereign Arab nation. If the Iraqi people’s quality of life improved under the Oil-for-Food Program, there would be less compelling evidence to turn international public opinion against the sanctions.

The Iraqi economy, which had declined precipitously under the comprehensive trade embargo imposed in 1991, finally hit rock bottom in 1995, compelling the Iraqi regime to accept the Oil-for-Food Program established by Security Council Resolution 986 (1995) the following year. Iraq grudgingly approved the program in May 1996, oil exports began in December 1996, and the first shipments of food and medicine arrived in Iraq between March and May 1997. The striking thing about this “humanitarian” program is that it was largely driven by political and economic concerns, as Sarah Graham-Brown explains:

> Whatever the public rhetoric, the record suggests that the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi population have never been more than a secondary concern for any of the major protagonists. The way in which the first oil-for-food resolutions were formulated demonstrated this problem. Resolution 986 sprang from a concern that the Security Council could be embarrassed by the scale of civilian suffering, but was also designed to keep sanctions in place. Equally, Iraq’s decision to accept it was probably based on calculations which had little to do with the well-being of the population. (Graham-Brown 1999, 90).

The Oil-for-Food Program was intended as a temporary measure to provide for the immediate needs of the Iraqi people. Under this program, the proceeds from the sale of Iraqi oil were used to purchase basic foodstuffs and medicines. Public Distribution System—ration cards, monthly “food basket” of staples (flour, pulses, oil). Nevertheless, the Oil-for-Food Program quickly became the largest humanitarian bureaucracy in the world, in terms of the financial means, logistics, and number of staff involved. It also became the largest and most complex humanitarian assistance operation in the history of the United Nations. The program involved nine specialized UN agencies, in addition to the Secretariat and the Security Council, and maintained thousands of employees in Iraq itself. The program oversaw the sale of Iraqi oil totaling approximately $110 billion dollars (Meyer and Califano 2006).

Unfortunately, however, there were unintended consequences. The Oil-for-Food Program provided a level of bureaucratic and procedural complexity that was sufficient to allow the Iraqi regime to engage in all sorts of obfuscation and illicit activity. There were ample opportunities for fraud, corruption, manipulation and abuse. The onset of the program also provided a source of income for the Iraqi
regime, and “the revenues Iraq garnered grew incredibly from an estimated $250 million in 1996 to $2.76 billion in 2001. This allowed Saddam Husayn to escape the shackles imposed by UN sanctions.

The Iraq Survey Group, tasked in 2003 by the CIA and the Pentagon with documenting evidence of Iraq’s WMD programs, produced the most detailed post-mortem analysis of the Ba’thist regime’s operations and intentions in the critical years between 1991 and 2003. Headed first by David Kay and then by Charles Duelfer, both with prior experience on UN weapons inspection teams, the ISG had 1,400 personnel deployed throughout Iraq, supported by a 900-person team working on document processing and translation in Qatar. The ISG painstakingly reconstructed the elaborate network of front companies, trade intermediaries, bank accounts, cash transfers—often under diplomatic cover—and “protocols” (bilateral trade agreements with neighboring countries).

The Duelfer report revealed how oil “vouchers” had been given to individuals, companies and countries in exchange for support. It documents how illicit materials and equipment were purchased abroad and transported overland, primarily through Syria and Jordan. The list of countries whose government officials and private companies were implicated in these activities is truly astounding: Russia, France and China—the three members of the UN Security Council that had been most accommodating of Iraq—in addition to Belarus, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, India, Taiwan, North Korea. In particular, Saddam gave preferential treatment to Russian and French companies hoping for Russian and French support on the UN Security Council. “The Regime’s strategy was successful to the point where sitting members of the Security Council were actively violating the resolutions passed by the Security Council.”

Saddam Husayn’s government continued to restrict humanitarian aid operations. In June 1998, the regime announced that just seven NGOs, in addition to the UN humanitarian agencies operating under the Oil-for-Food Program, would be allowed to run programs in the government-controlled areas of central and southern Iraq. The NGOs were required to operate under the auspices of the Iraqi Red Crescent Society, believed by many to gather intelligence for the government, and they were only allowed to do certain kinds of work. No aspect of life in Iraq escaped the Ba’thist regime’s scrutiny and control, and the IRCS was no exception. The government refused to allow independent NGO assessments and limited their access to needy populations.

Many people within the international humanitarian apparatus were concerned that the United Nations was both the enforcer of sanctions and the provider of relief.

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111 Ibid.
“We break their legs and give them crutches,” one United Nations staff member complained bitterly. (Graham-Brown 1999, 325). Denis Halliday, the assistant secretary general sent to Iraq to run the Oil-For-Food program resigned in 1998. His successor, Hans von Sponeck, also resigned as did Jutta Burghardt, the director of the World Food Programme in Iraq.

*          *          *

The Gulf crisis that began in 1990 and continued in various forms for over a decade was a complex and troubled situation for many state and non-state actors alike. Humanitarian NGOs, in particular, found themselves caught up in unforeseen processes and problematic situations. As the author of the first major evaluation of BINGO’s responses to the Gulf Crisis notes, “In many respects, the present period is a turning point equal in importance to the mid-1980s. During this period, BINGO’s income grew considerably as a result of a concern about the famine in the Horn of Africa” (BINGO 1991, ii). BINGO was beginning to confront the fact that it was becoming an emergency relief as well as a development agency, recognizing the need to develop further its ability to respond to crises around the world. BINGO had traditionally worked with local partner organizations, but now it was starting to develop and expand its own operational capacity.

A new level of operational involvement would require a new paradigm of material resources, technical competencies and managerial capabilities. The Gulf crisis was “an occasion of unusual scale and world-historical significance” (BINGO 1991, 1). Within one year of the invasion, BINGO had become operationally involved in five countries—Jordan, Yemen, Turkey, Iran and Iraq—and spent £2.4 million on relief activities, with nearly £600,000 of specialized water equipment sold to other agencies, primarily the International Committee of the Red Cross. For better or for worse, the organization was now a major player in the Middle East. There was no turning back.
Interlude:
The Propaganda War

The second Bush administration—which had begun planning to topple the Iraqi regime in January 2001, 10 days after President George W. Bush’s inauguration (Suskind 2004, 84-86)—updated its plan to oust Saddam Husayn immediately after the September 11 attacks. Within hours after the first plane slammed into the World Trade Center that fateful Tuesday morning, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld directed a team of military planners to mobilize a counter-strike. The evidence coming in from intelligence agencies throughout the day all pointed to Bin Laden’s Al Qa’ida organization, but Rumsfeld’s instructions were far more sweeping. Notes from aides who were with Rumsfeld in the National Military Command Center at 2:40 pm quote the Defense Secretary as wanting “best info fast. Judge whether good enough hit S.H. [Saddam Husayn] at same time. Not only UBL [Usama Bin Laden].” The scope of Rumsfeld’s directive was unambiguous: “Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not” (Roberts 2002).

Four months later, with the war in Afghanistan in full swing, President Bush revealed the full magnitude of Rumsfeld’s “things related and not” in his State of the Union address to Congress on January 29, 2002. Bush identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” He asserted that “these regimes pose a grave and growing danger” and that “the price of indifference would be catastrophic.” In a preliminary statement of what would come to be known as the Bush Doctrine, the President asserted that urgent threats called for decisive action: “We’ll be deliberate, yet time is not on our side. I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer. The United States of America will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”112

The Bush Doctrine was specified further in the President’s commencement address to the US Military Academy at West Point on June 1, 2002. In a rousing speech to the bicentennial graduating class, Bush exhorted the young officers that the military they would lead “must be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world.” He declared that the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment were insufficient to deal with the threats posed by “shadowy terrorist networks” and “unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction.” International law prohibits the use of force to settle disputes between states, although Article 51 of the United Nations Charter upholds the right of states to act in self-defense against armed attacks. Extending this principle radically, Bush laid out a new national security policy based on the notion of preemption: “If we wait for threats

to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. [...] the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge.” The President did not mention Iraq in his speech, but the implications were clear: Bush was taking the battle to Saddam Husayn.

For the rest of the summer, there was a great deal of speculation and public debate around the world about an impending showdown between Iraq and the United States. Tensions mounted daily as the drama unfolded. Iraq became the top story for every major news organization on the planet, as the saber-rattling pronouncements of Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld were matched by the increasingly bellicose rhetoric of Iraqi President Saddam Husayn. Cabinet members and administration officials joined high-ranking members of Congress and a motley assortment of military and terrorism experts, academics, and political commentators in supplying the US media with a regular stream of sound bites and off-the-cuff analysis. The “fog of war” settled in.

United Nations officials, heads of state, diplomatic missions, humanitarian and development NGOs, activist groups, faith-based organizations and concerned members of the public voiced a range of concerns about the Bush administration’s thinly-veiled threats of armed intervention. Christian Aid, the official development agency for over 40 churches in Britain and Ireland, was one of the first NGOs to highlight the potential consequences of military action on Iraq’s civilian population, which “would undoubtedly suffer the most from any renewal of hostilities.” While “deeply concerned by the threat of military action in Iraq,” the agency did not specifically oppose the war but rather called on the British government to consider the “just war” criteria in its “deliberations on such potentially devastating action.”

113 “Our security will require the best intelligence, to reveal threats hidden in caves and growing in laboratories. Our security will require modernizing domestic agencies such as the FBI, so they’re prepared to act, and act quickly, against danger. Our security will require transforming the military you will lead -- a military that must be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world. And our security will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives.” George W. Bush, “Graduation Speech at West Point,” June 1, 2002. http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/06/print/20020601-3.html These policies were codified in the National Security Strategy of the United States of America, signed by the President on September 17 and released to the public on September 20, 2002.

114 Prussian army officer and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz’s first used this phrase in the 19th-century to describe the ambiguity and uncertainty that clouds battlefield decision-making: “The great uncertainty of all data in war is a peculiar difficulty, because all action must, to a certain extent, be planned in a mere twilight, which in addition not infrequently—like the effect of a fog or moonshine—gives to things exaggerated dimensions and unnatural appearance.” See von Clausewitz, On War, Book 2, Chapter 2, Paragraph 24.

115 “Christian Aid Statement on Iraq,” August 13, 2002. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/OCHA-64D9H7_Drawing on a long tradition of Catholic moral theology in the vein of Augustine and Aquinas, Christian Aid summed up the just war criteria as follows: “there must be lawful authority for such an attack; there must be a just cause for such an action; the just cause must
With global opinion mounting against military intervention, key players in the Bush administration worked behind the scenes to design a public relations campaign to market the war to the American people. President Bush was scheduled to address the United Nations General Assembly in September, and his political advisers wanted to ensure the maximum impact. White House chief of staff Andrew Card assembled a strategic communications task force called the White House Iraq Group (WHIG) whose stated purpose was to “educate the public” about the threat posed by the Iraqi dictator. The group included Karl Rove, the president’s senior political adviser; communications strategists Karen Hughes, Mary Matalin and James R. Wilkinson; legislative liaison Nicholas E. Calio; national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and her deputy, Stephen J. Hadley, and I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, Cheney’s chief of staff.\footnote{Barton Gellman and Walter Pincus, “Depiction of Threat Outgrew Supporting Evidence,” \textit{The Washington Post}, August 10, 2003; Walter Pincus, “Records Could Shed Light on Iraq Group,” \textit{The Washington Post}, June 9, 2008.}

With support from the Rendon Group, a secretive PR firm contracted by the CIA and the Pentagon to handle “perception management” for the war on terror, WHIG members refined messages, drafted talking points and commissioned white papers.\footnote{On the Rendon Group, see Stephen Hedges, “U.S. pays PR guru to make its points,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, May 12, 2002, \texttt{http://cndyorks.gn.apc.org/news/articles/usprguru.htm}; and James Bamford, “The Man Who Sold the War,” \textit{Rolling Stone}, November 17, 2005, \texttt{http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/8798997/the_man_who_sold_the_war/}} In preparing these materials, the group “wanted gripping images and stories not available in the hedged and austere language of intelligence,” three anonymous administration officials confirmed to a \textit{Washington Post} reporter.\footnote{Gellman and Pincus, “Depiction of Threat.”} “The script had been finalized with great care over the summer,” former White House press secretary Scott McClellan later wrote in his controversial memoir, for a “campaign to convince Americans that war with Iraq was inevitable and necessary” (McClellan 2008).

The White House Iraq Group waited until after the Labor Day holiday to unveil its new campaign to garner public support of the administration’s Iraq policy because, as Andrew Card quipped, “from a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.”\footnote{“Quotation of the Day,” \textit{New York Times}, Section A; Column 6; (September 7, 2002), 2} Then, just a few days before the one-year anniversary of the September 11 attacks, WHIG orchestrated a media blitz. A front-page story by Michael Gordon and Judith Miller in the Sunday \textit{New York Times} reported fresh evidence, revealed by unnamed administration officials, that Saddam Husayn was actively seeking nuclear weapons. A large shipment of aluminum tubes,
ordered from a Chinese manufacturer through a Jordanian intermediary, had been intercepted en route to Iraq in violation of UN sanctions.

The article stated that “administration hard-liners” were “alarmed that American intelligence underestimated the pace and scale of Iraq’s nuclear program” in the past, and they insisted that “Washington dare not wait” for further hard evidence. “The first sign of a ‘smoking gun,’ they argue, could be a mushroom cloud.” Gordon and Miller did not report that the seizure of aluminum tubes was old news, having happened in July 2001. They did not mention that many top nuclear experts from the US Department of Energy and the International Atomic Energy Agency had rejected the pet theory held by few CIA analysts that the tubes were for building centrifuges to enrich uranium. They also did not report that the primary source of this information was the White House Iraq Group, and in particular the Vice President’s office.

As the *New York Times* story about Iraq’s alleged nuclear ambitions was landing on front porches and kitchen tables across America—not to mention news desks around the world—four top administration officials appeared simultaneously on the Sunday talk shows of major TV networks. Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell and Rice stayed tightly on message, saturating the airwaves with claims about the threat posed by Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction. The aluminum tubes story featured prominently in all four interviews. Rice told CNN’s Late Edition that the tubes “are only really suited for nuclear weapons programs, centrifuge programs.” Cheney and Powell both referred to Gordon and Miller’s article in the *New York Times* as if it substantiated their claims. “I want to attribute the *Times,*” Cheney said on NBC’s Meet the Press, in a tour-de-force of circular logic. The Vice President repeated phrases that had been included in the article, saying that Saddam Husayn “has indeed stepped up his capacity to produce and deliver biological weapons … he has reconstituted his nuclear program to develop a nuclear weapon.”

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122 Investigative journalist Craig Unger (2007, 253) explains the importance of the New York Times in setting the global news agenda: “Network television producers, wire service editors, and editors at major newspapers across the globe read the *Times* daily to pick up stories deemed important by the paper’s editors, and pass them on to their readers and viewers. On that day alone, nearly five hundred newspaper articles and broadcasts all over the country, indeed the world, discussed Iraq as a nuclear threat, largely as a result of the Miller-Gordon story in the *Times.*” Judith Miller eventually came under intense criticism for uncritical reporting that relied heavily on Bush Administration officials and discredited Iraqi exiles. She left the New York Times in November 2005.
Cheney hammered away on the nuclear threat currently posed by Saddam Husayn: “he now is trying, through his illicit procurement network, to acquire the equipment he needs to be able to enrich uranium to make the bombs—specifically aluminum tubes.” “He is, in fact, actively and aggressively seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.” “We do know, with absolute certainty, that he is using his procurement system to acquire the equipment he needs in order to enrich uranium to build a nuclear weapon.” All four officials urged that it was time to act. As Powell said to Fox News Sunday, “I don’t think we should just sit around and wait to see whether or not he does it or not. […] as the President has said, and as Prime Minister Blair said yesterday, doing nothing is no longer an option.” This was echoed by Rumsfeld (“the one choice we don’t have is to do nothing”) and Rice (“we don’t have option of doing nothing”). Lest there be any doubt about the Iraqi leader’s intentions, Cheney brought the menace closer to home: “Increasingly, we believe that the United States may well become the target of those activities.” Rumsfeld, too, invoked the horrifying possibility of a WMD attack against American targets on CBS’s Face the Nation: “imagine a September 11 with weapons of mass destruction. It’s not 3,000 [victims]—it’s tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children.” Rice repeated the vivid message that had been leaked earlier to the New York Times: “we don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”

Four days later, on September 12, 2002, President Bush addressed the UN General Assembly and presented the US government’s case against Iraq, highlighting Saddam Husayn’s failure to abide by numerous UN Security Council Resolutions; his attempts to obtain chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons; his refusal to comply with weapons inspections; his history of brutality against the Iraqi people. Without explicitly threatening to take his nation to war with Iraq, Bush made his position clear: “We will work with the UN Security Council for the necessary resolutions. But the purposes of the United States should not be doubted. The Security Council resolutions will be enforced—the just demands of peace and security will be met—or action will be unavoidable. And a regime that has lost its legitimacy will also lose its power.” This statement was a major shot across the

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bow of the Iraqi regime— an unmistakable sign that the “military option” for dealing with Iraq was firmly on the President’s agenda.
Chapter Four: Framing Iraq, 2002–2003

NGO / UN Responses

As the Bush administration’s rhetoric intensified, operational aid agencies—those that deploy staff and equipment into crisis zones to provide assistance to populations in need—were faced with a quandary. As the prospects of another invasion of Iraq loomed, many other crises were competing for their limited time, money, and skilled staff. The massive influx of capital and personnel during the previous decade of “humanitarian intervention” (Northern Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, East Timor, Rwanda, Bosnia, Goma, Sudan, Kosovo, Uganda, Sierra Leone) created a crisis of its own. NGOs that once scraped by with a handful of dedicated staff and extremely limited resources now had annual operating budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars. In response to calls for greater transparency and accountability, many organizations had developed elaborate procedures, systems and financial controls—some of which now seemed overly bureaucratic and unwieldy.

Operationally, many aid agencies were still struggling to find their feet in Afghanistan, where the October 2001 invasion to defeat the Taliban created a huge spike in aid programming. An ugly civil war was brewing in Liberia, the peace process in Sudan was shaky at best, and Israeli military incursions in Gaza, Jenin and Nablus had created yet another crisis in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Nevertheless, Iraq was by far the single biggest media story of the year, and a quick response would mean not only saving lives, but making headlines. In an era of stiff competition between NGOs for projects, donor funding, and access to vulnerable populations, enhancing the organizational profile and heightening the agency’s relevance was of the utmost importance. Positioning an NGO as an authority on humanitarian matters wasn’t just good for “business.” It was necessary to maximize the agency’s fundraising from institutional donors and the public—and, by extension, its ability to help the people who would need it most.

In the case of Iraq, however, more was at stake for humanitarian agencies than their ability to respond rapidly to mitigate the consequences of a US-led invasion. Many of their staff and constituents opposed the idea of military action in Iraq on political, moral, religious, or legal grounds. Those with direct knowledge of the damaging effects of sanctions were especially troubled that the United States might wage a “war of choice” that would further heighten the suffering of the Iraqi population. Nevertheless, if the consequences of the impending war were as dire as they predicted, the aid agencies would undoubtedly be called to respond. The fundamental “humanitarian imperative” that lay at the source of their work would demand that they rush in to help the wounded, sick, hungry, uprooted masses that would likely be caught up in the conflict.
Given the enormous humanitarian needs a war in Iraq could potentially create, the aid agencies should start preparing now for a large-scale response. Yet if they began sending staff and resources to the region before the war started, it could be seen as an admission that the conflict was inevitable. Worse still, it could be interpreted as tacit support for the Bush administration’s emerging regional strategy, fueled by the longstanding desire among neoconservative ideologues to forcibly remodel the Middle East (see Cockburn 2007; Mann 2004; Stelzer 2004; Weisman 2007). At the organizational level, many NGOs were deeply concerned not to be co-opted by the political agendas of any government, whether belligerent or not. A fierce commitment to the principles of independence and impartiality, enshrined in the Red Cross Code of Conduct for NGOs in Disaster Relief, made them wary that their involvement could be used to legitimize the war. If they didn’t undertake the necessary planning and “pre-positioning,” however, the aid agencies could easily be caught unprepared.

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The day after Bush’s UN speech, representatives from twelve NGOs gathered in South London at the offices of CARE International UK on Rushworth Street, a narrow urban lane about a mile from Waterloo Station. The organizations were all members of the UK NGO Platform on Iraq, a loose grouping of 20 humanitarian and human rights agencies that had been coming together for several years to exchange information and to coordinate joint advocacy initiatives. Their overarching goal was to promote awareness among the British public of the suffering occurring in Iraq under a decade of sanctions.

On this particular Friday, the meeting began with each agency giving a brief summary of their past and present aid programming and advocacy work in Iraq. BINGO, Oxfam and Save the Children were represented by three staff members each; CARE, Help Age, Tearfund and 4Rs by two; while Amnesty International, Christian Aid, the Committee Against Sanctions on Iraq, Islamic Relief, Merlin and Mines Advisory Group each had a single staff member present. Of the organizations present in the room, only CARE currently had programs in Baghdad-controlled areas of the country. A few agencies were no longer active in Iraq, although they had worked in the central and southern provinces at various times between 1991-1998. The rest were operating exclusively in the three provinces of Northern Iraq (sometimes called Iraqi Kurdistan).

The NGO representatives discussed operational issues as well as media and advocacy tactics. Some thought that it was important to shift attention away from politics and to focus on the longstanding needs in Iraq. Anecdotal reports from various sources in Iraq suggested that the people’s access to food was deteriorating,

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125 This account is based on unpublished meeting notes that were circulated by e-mail and archived by the present author.
but it was difficult to get accurate information. “If we had better evidence on food security, we could get it out in a wider domain,” one aid worker said. CARE explained that their staff in Baghdad had attempted to track the cost of food and essential household items in local markets, but the shopkeepers were uncooperative and many had refused to provide pricing information. “We'll have to get up-to-date information from WFP,” another person said, and CARE agreed pass the request to the World Food Programme office in Baghdad. The aid workers speculated about the future of the Oil-for-Food Program and whether the UN agencies were drawing up contingency plans.

Some staff around the table expressed concern about population displacement in the event of war, with Turkey, Iran and Jordan all planning to close their borders to fleeing refugees. “Iraqis don’t want to move,” one person countered, while another suggested that Kurdish refugees would still be able to get out through Syria. Several agencies said that they had recently attempted to send needs assessment teams to Iraq, but they were hindered by procedural obstacles and bureaucratic delays. Visas applications for Arab staff were being handled by the Iraqi Embassy in London; all others had to apply directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Baghdad, where the process could take months. Different warfare scenarios were considered, including cluster bombs, fierce urban fighting, and the possibility of biological or chemical attacks.

“Under the circumstances, should we take a confrontational or a milder approach to advocacy?” one aid worker asked. The general consensus was that messages targeting the public should focus on the current humanitarian situation, including food insecurity, the shortage of medicines and other immediate needs. Messages targeting the British government and Members of Parliament should focus on international law and the questionable legality of war. “We can make modest predictions on the impact of war, but we should focus on the current suffering,” one person said. BINGO suggested the names of a few experts who could be contacted for updates on the humanitarian situation and possible joint media work, including Toby Dodge, a political scientist specializing on Iraq, and Hans von Sponeck, a former UN Assistant Secretary General and ex-Humanitarian Coordinator in Iraq who resigned from the United Nations in March 2000—as his predecessor Denis Halliday had done in October 1998—to protest the impact of sanctions on the Iraqi people. Save the Children had issued its own press release that very day, and they announced that they also were working on a joint NGO statement. As the meeting adjourned, their representatives promised to circulate a draft of their joint statement to the rest of the group for comments and signatures.

The following weeks saw a flurry of statements and reports to the international media, as humanitarian NGOs began stepping up their own public advocacy efforts in response to the Bush administration’s hardened stanch on Iraq. At first their predictions about the potentially dire consequences of war were expressed in fairly general language. The Save the Children press release on
September 13 had warned that “military intervention would greatly exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Iraq: pushing a population already suffering from poverty and sanctions over the edge.” With children under the age of 14 comprising almost half of the Iraqi population, the aid agency feared that “children’s rights and their survival would be violated by military action that undermines food security through the interruption of supplies, border closures or disablement of local transportation and distribution.” Save the Children urged the British government to use diplomacy, not violence, to resolve the current impasse.126

The Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) issued a press release warning that military action would “inflict a very heavy toll on the civilian population” and “cause untold suffering to the ordinary people of Iraq.” George Gelber, CAFOD’s Head of Public Policy, declared that “the health system and hospitals, already creaking under the strain of sanctions, could not begin to cope with the thousands of civilian casualties that bombing and war would cause.”127 In a similar vein, the joint NGO statement drafted by Save the Children and signed by eight NGOs asserted that “aerial bombardment, followed by the ground war … would place large numbers of civilians—particularly in densely populated urban areas—in grave danger.” In their concluding remarks, the NGOs reiterated the overarching message they had agreed in their meeting the day after Bush’s UN speech, urging the British government not to overlook the existing crisis in Iraq: “the current focus on the government’s ‘dossier of evidence,’ weapons inspectors and Iraqi disarmament should not detract from the urgent need to address the humanitarian crisis that has been unfolding in Iraq for the past 12 years.”128

126 Save the Children, “War will exacerbate humanitarian crisis in Iraq,” press release, September 13, 2002. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/OCHA-64CTTN The statement hinges on a fairly complex argument—difficult to boil down into a media-sized sound bite. So Save the Children attached a supplemental document to the press release, elaborating on the likely consequences of military action: “First, supplies of humanitarian goods imported under the UN Oil-for-Food program (OFF) will be interrupted. Neighboring states may close their borders, UN agency, international and local aid staff will evacuate their posts, and local authorities may obstruct or be unable to deliver supplies to the needy. Second, armed conflict is likely to encompass centers of high population density and affect key aspects of their infrastructure. Power cuts and closure of transport routes leading to public health hazards can endanger the lives of large numbers of Iraqis in the medium term. Third, a breakdown in communications and logistics in the Iraqi civil administration will leave civilians without access to centrally warehoused supplies and hamper distribution.” This domino-effect scenario would be repeated countless times by other international aid agencies in the months leading up to the war.


128 “United NGO Statement on Iraq,” September 23, 2002. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/ACOS-64D6S8 The eight signatories were Save the Children UK, CARE International UK, Christian Aid, CAFOD, Tearfund, Help Age International, Islamic Relief and 4Rs. As mentioned above, the crisis referred to in this statement was largely occurring in the 15 provinces of central and southern Iraq where none of these agencies except CARE had current programs, although CAFOD was funding the work of a “local partner” agency, Caritas Iraq, a Chaldean Christian group based in Baghdad.
Another joint NGO letter published in the Guardian on September 26 argued that “military action could cause a humanitarian catastrophe.” The agencies noted that “hundreds of thousands of people, especially children, are already in a weakened and highly vulnerable state” and maintained that “war is highly likely to further destroy the water, power, health and sanitation infrastructure and interrupt vital supplies of food, fuel and medicines.” Death and displacement would be the predictable outcomes of a military attack: “the danger of large-scale civilian casualties is very great, as is the likelihood of significant movements of displaced people and refugees.” CARE Australia, which managed all of CARE International’s programs in Iraq through its office in Baghdad, warned that military action “could cause large-scale civilian loss of life, displacement of people and destruction of essential infrastructure. […] Significant conflict could lead to massive population displacement with catastrophic human consequences.”

By mid-October, these dire but general warnings were becoming increasingly specific. There were two reasons for this, one rhetorical and the other practical. On one hand, the NGOs needed strong media messages to compete with the dramatic “smoking gun–mushroom cloud” scenario being repeated over and over by the Bush administration. On the other hand, any agency preparing to mount an operational relief program in the event of war would need detailed contingency plans, with specific estimates of the humanitarian needs, staff and material resources, and budgetary requirements. If a massive humanitarian disaster did break out in Iraq, it could take millions of dollars, thousands of tons of relief supplies, and hundreds of highly-skilled staff to meet the immediate needs.

But there was a problem. Only a handful of NGOs had operational programs in government-controlled Iraq, and even their access to reliable information was limited. These agencies included French organizations focused health care and hospital rehabilitation, notably Première Urgence, Médecins du Monde and Enfants du Monde–Droits de l'Homme (EMDH). CARE International was represented by the formidable presence of Margaret Hassan, known to locals as Madam Margaret,

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130 “CARE Australia stresses Iraq humanitarian concerns,” September 30, 2002. http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/ACOS-64C674. CARE asserted that military intervention “could also destabilize the region and sow the seeds of humanitarian crises elsewhere,” and that such action “would give rise to a need for the commitment of significant resources to enable the grave humanitarian issues to be addressed.”

131 The EU was Iraq’s main source of humanitarian aid outside the Oil-for-Food Program, with €13m of funding for NGOs in Iraq being provided by ECHO, the European Commission’s humanitarian aid department. The French NGOs began to establish a semi-permanent presence in Baghdad in the late 1990s, as diplomatic and business relations between Iraq and France improved. Although fiercely anti-sovereigntist in the manner of MSF, the presence of these agencies and their (no doubt unintentional) complicity in the humanitarian politics of Iraq deserves further critical examination.
an Irish-born woman who married an Iraqi student in the United Kingdom and moved to Iraq with him in 1972. Hassan remained in Baghdad during the first Gulf war, and she began working for CARE when the aid organization first set up operations in Iraq in 1991. A German couple running their own small NGO, Architects for People in Need, joined the small expat community in Baghdad, along with a handful of representatives from faith-based groups and pacifist organizations, such as the Mennonite Central Committee, the American Friends Service Committee and the anti-sanctions group Voices in the Wilderness.

Most relief agencies had to rely on published statistics of rather dubious quality to make their case against the impending war and to oppose it on “humanitarian grounds.” The primary sources of data on the humanitarian situation in Iraq were the UN agencies in Baghdad, especially UNDP, WFP, UNICEF, FAO, and the Office of the Iraq Program. The statistics themselves fell into two domains: indicators of the current humanitarian situation in Iraq and projections of the potential impact of a military invasion. Both were mired in obscurity. A report by UK advocacy group MedAct in late 2002 expressed frustration at the lack of reliable information on the current situation in Iraq: “Our team reviewed many sources but was hampered by the quality of the data and the many discrepancies. Much data is not available, not collected and/or not published, or its quality is questionable. [...] More than a decade into one of the major humanitarian disasters of our time, we are left to debate causes and responsibilities without an adequate information base.”

On October 16, 2002 the U.S. Congress passed Public Law 107–243 authorizing President Bush to use “any means necessary” against Iraq. This joint resolution, formally titled the Authorization For Use Of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution Of 2002, upheld the need for continued diplomatic efforts at the UN Security Council, while simultaneously authorizing the President “to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he deems necessary and appropriate” against Iraq.

Three days after Congress passed the Iraq War Resolution, a joint NGO assessment team traveled to Baghdad via Jordan. The delegation was headed by Julian Filochowski, director of CAFOD, under the auspices of Caritas Internationalis, a worldwide confederation of 162 Roman Catholic relief, development, and service organizations based at the Palazzo San Calisto in Vatican City.

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133 http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.uscongress/legislation.107hrres114

134 While not an official arm of the Roman Catholic church, Caritas Internationalis had been recognized by the Holy See since 1950. In 2004 Pope John Paul II granted canonical legal status to the confederation, making it further subject to ecclesiastical oversight.
Filochowski had traveled frequently to Iraq in the past, and he was an outspoken critic of UN-imposed sanctions. After returning from a previous fact-finding mission with Caritas Europa in February 2001, Filochowski did not mince words: “The sanctions are humanly catastrophic, morally indefensible and politically ineffective. They are a failed policy and must be changed.” The published report of that trip, *A People Sacrificed: Sanctions Against Iraq,* was widely cited by anti-sanctions activists around the world, including Noam Chomsky. Caritas Europa members used the report to lobby European ministers and British Members of Parliament for a change of policy on Iraq.

The stated purpose of the trip in October 2002 was a “mission of solidarity with the people of Iraq.” The composition of the team suggests how the abstract notion of “solidarity” would be expressed in concrete practices. Two technical specialists were tasked with advising Iraqi staff at Caritas health centers throughout Iraq: Sister Maura O’Donohue, a medical doctor, would focus on health and nutrition; Paul Sherlock, an engineer and the senior humanitarian representative from Oxfam GB, would deal with water and sanitation. Jean Kors, Head of Programs at the Caritas Middle East-North Africa regional office in Lebanon, would handle logistics and security management for the delegation. Two advocacy experts—Livia Leykauf, a communications officer from Caritas Switzerland, and Jacques Bertrand, Head of Global Issues from the Caritas Internationalis headquarters in Rome—would collect human interest stories and statistics on the humanitarian situation, refine the delegation’s public messages, and oversee the production of a hard-hitting report for use by Caritas members in lobbying their national governments to end sanctions and prevent another war. The team was accompanied by photojournalist and poet Carlos Reyes-Manzo, a former Chilean political prisoner now based in London, who had previously documented the human suffering in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Bosnia, Albania, and Afghanistan and would seek to do the same for Iraq.

The visiting Caritas delegation was hosted by Raphael I Bitawid, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, the largest Christian community in Iraq.

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136 The report published a few days after the delegation left Iraq identified the specific objectives of the fact-finding trip, listing advocacy as the top priority: “first, to provide the basis for advocacy actions . . .; second, to offer advice and assistance to the Confrérie de la Charité (Caritas Iraq) as it sets in place a disaster-preparedness plan; and third, to discuss how, together as Caritas, we will be able to respond to this humanitarian crisis.” Caritas Internationalis, “On the Brink of War: A Recipe for a Humanitarian Disaster,” October 31, 2002, 1.

137 Reyes-Manzo’s photos from the trip were displayed from February 25 to March 4, 2003, in the gallery at Foyle’s, an independent bookstore on Charing Cross Road in London. Clare Short, Britain’s then-Secretary of State for International Development, attended the opening event. Less than two weeks later, she resigned from her cabinet-level post, accusing Prime Minister Tony Blair of breaking his promise to give the United Nations a leading role in the post-war reconstruction of Iraq.

138 Chaldean Catholics form approximately 70% of Iraq’s Christian minority, which in 2002 represented some 3-5 percent of the total population, or nearly one million people. Baghdad had the
had founded the Confrérie de la Charité in 1992, with the support of the other three Catholic Churches in Iraq (Latin, Armenian, and Syrian). Confrérie de la Charité became a full member of Caritas Internationalis in 1995 and was now the “implementing partner” for the confederation’s work in Iraq. Confrérie de la Charité was said to be the only private aid agency in Iraq permitted to deliver assistance in all areas of the country, including predominately Kurdish northern provinces.

Like many members of the Caritas Internationalis network, Caritas Iraq emphasized public advocacy in addition to programs providing direct, material assistance to people in need. This was particularly relevant with regards to sanctions. Anthony O’Mahoney (2004, 135) explains: “Over and above concrete aid measures, the Iraqi Churches did not tire of pointing out that the UN embargo only harmed the population in general and not the ruling elite.” The medical centers operated by the Confrérie de la Charité in Baghdad, Najaf, Kirkuk, Mosul, Qaraqosh and other cities around the country supplied food aid and medical care to babies, pregnant women, and nursing mothers. This gave the organization a front-line view of the effect of sanctions on the most vulnerable members of the Iraqi population, and they repeatedly sought to show the world the devastating impact of the embargo. The message of the Caritas delegation was clear and direct: “The Iraqi people are already suffering, and the international community is largely responsible for it.”

This criticism aligned the group somewhat uncomfortably with the rhetoric of the Ba’thist regime. Anti-sanctions groups were often criticized in Europe and America for allegedly being the mouthpiece for regime propaganda. Julian Filochowski had addressed this criticism directly after a previous trip to Iraq: “Some will accuse us of being apologists for the Iraqi regime—we are not. But we are proud to be apologists for the Iraqi people.”¹⁴⁰ The simple fact was that Caritas could not openly criticize the regime without endangering the all-Iraqi staff of the Confrérie de la Charité, who lived and worked under the watchful eye of the state security and intelligence services. Sanctions were only the proximate cause of Iraqi suffering. The church groups knew, but could not publicly say, where the ultimate responsibility lay:

They could not always openly speak the second half of the truth, namely that the responsibility for the embargo had been with the government, whose members did not themselves suffer any material consequences from sanctions. Such a statement, which one could hear from church representative behind closed doors, would instantly be subject to a death

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sentence in public and would cause considerable disadvantages for all Christians in the country. (O’Mahoney 2004, 132)

While continuing its tradition of blaming the international community for the ongoing effects of sanctions, the Caritas delegation turned its attention to the threat of military action against Iraq, arguing that the path to war would create a “huge humanitarian catastrophe.” The evidence to support this claim was pieced together from interviews with UN officials in Baghdad (UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, UNOCHI, and WHO), senior officials from the Iraqi Red Crescent Society, and high-level meetings with Iraqi government officials, including Health minister Dr. Umaid Mubarak and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz—himself a Christian. In a 45-minute meeting with the Caritas delegation, Tariq Aziz offered some guidance on the NGO’s ongoing advocacy campaign. “Last time you visited you concentrated on sanctions,” he said. “This time you should concentrate on the threat of war.”

Aziz spoke at length about the importance of public opinion in the US, the UK and France. If enough regular people and churches came out against the war, he explained, maybe it could be stopped. He suggested that perhaps even George W. Bush’s own church could play an important role. He then declared that Iraq did not have any weapons of mass destruction—a claim the Iraq Survey Group would ultimately validate, albeit two years, tens of thousands of lives, and billions of dollars later. "We have nothing to hide," Aziz proclaimed, and then he made an extraordinary suggestion: “The Church could come in with its own expertise and provide its own weapons inspection team. Caritas should consider it. You would be given the same access as the UN team. This would give a truer picture, because the UN team is biased.” Needless to say, this improbable option never materialized. It is unlikely that Tariq Aziz repeated the offer in his private audience with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican on February 14, 2003, by which time UN weapons inspections had already resumed, and the drums of war were pounding louder by the minute.

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The public reports issued by members and affiliates of the Caritas delegation, including an Oxfam Briefing Note that drew heavily on Sherlock’s account of the trip, outline the fundamental paradox that was Iraq in late 2002. On the one hand, the country had vast petroleum reserves and other natural resources, and it once led the region in education, literacy, health care, and other key developmental indicators.

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On the other hand, the UN-imposed comprehensive trade embargo prevented Iraq from doing business with the rest of the world, and over the past 12 years the country had “experienced a shift from relative affluence to massive poverty.”¹⁴⁴ Paul Sherlock was Oxfam’s most experienced water expert and had worked regularly in Iraq between 1991–1996. A squat, ruddy-faced man with a neatly trimmed white beard, he described the Iraq paradox vividly and with an engineer’s eye for structural detail:

When entering Iraq from Jordan, you get a measure of what Iraq is like. You move from a tarmac desert road in Jordan ... to a European styled 2-3 lane motorway with picnic stops and a full range of sign posting. Coming into Baghdad, a city of 5.2 million, you encounter miles of overhead bridges, underpasses and overpasses and major road junctions. The city is full of large monuments, large buildings, new mosques and parks. All junctions have traffic lights that are working, and most are overseen by traffic police in cars or motorcycles. At night, all major roadways and roundabouts are lit with good lighting, and the shopping areas are very bright with lots of advertising. Most shops are still open at 10 o’clock at night. The impression you get is that the shops are well stocked with goods, you see quite a lot of new cars, and the impression is that you are in a very lively, modern city. [...] All this is in the context that everybody in the country gets a food ration (22 million plus) and that 14-16 million people are completely dependent on food aid.¹⁴⁵

Continuing the anecdotal evidence, the Caritas report noted that while the shops are “glittering and bustling,” the impact of sanctions is “visible everywhere, especially in the poorer areas of Baghdad, in the hospitals and in the nutrition centers.”¹⁴⁶ It refers to a UNICEF paper that identifies “a visible rise in the number of children selling goods on the streets, and in the number of child beggars, a recent phenomenon.”

An assortment of descriptive statistics are deployed to back up these observations. 49% of families don’t earn enough money to meet their basic needs. More than 50% of all pregnant women are anemic. 15% of children under 5 are underweight, 22% are stunted or chronically malnourished, and 5.9% are acutely malnourished—nearly 1 million children. Adult literacy has fallen from 89% in 1985


to 57% in 1997. One-third of the power supply network is still down, having been badly damaged in the 1991 air strikes. Most urban homes have piped water, but only 35% of it is treated. More than 50% of sewage treatment plants are inoperable, and 25% of those working don’t meet Iraq’s national environmental standards. 500,000 tons of raw sewage are discharged into the Tigris River every day. Iraq has suffered the greatest increase in the rate of child mortality in the world—160% in the decade to 2000. More than one in ten Iraqi children die before their fifth birthday (131 out of every 1000 live births). 7 out of 10 infant deaths result from diarrhea or acute respiratory infection linked to polluted water or malnutrition.\textsuperscript{147}

Based on these figures, the Caritas delegation argued that a military invasion would turn the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Iraq into a full-blown catastrophe. “Every United Nations official with whom we spoke predicted a major humanitarian disaster should war materialize,” the team reported. “There are hundreds of scenarios of how a war might be waged. Some estimates by reputable think tanks talk about 10,000 deaths, others speculate even ten times that figure.”\textsuperscript{148}

**“Likely Humanitarian Scenarios”**

Apocalyptic forebodings are the aid worker’s stock-in-trade. The entire history of modern humanitarianism is a demonstration of this. […] It now appears that, for all the horrors of that conflict, there was no genocide in Biafra. Or think of Sarajevo, in 1992, when the UN confidently predicted that tens of thousands would die of cold. […] Similar mistakes were made in Rwanda and Kosovo. In short, aid workers are as often wrong in their fears as they are right. They were, in the event, wrong in Afghanistan too. But what if they had not been? Despite what critics of aid say, surely it is better to predict the worst and be pleasantly surprised if it does not come to pass than to be too sanguine and then discover, as people begin to die, that one was wrong. (Rieff 2002, 256)

Sometime in late 2002, United Nations agencies were requested by the Secretary-General to draw up contingency plans to respond to a potential war in Iraq. The process was highly secretive, for nobody wanted to signal that war was inevitable. Each agency developed its own plan, then the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) worked to combine the plans into a unified document. The contingency planning was an inherently speculative process. Without specific details of where, when and how the war would be prosecuted, it was impossible to predict the “humanitarian consequences.”


The documents reflect an enormous range of outcomes; in the case of refugees, for example, different UN agencies provided estimates that varied from 50,000 to 900,000 people. While it seems that some international NGOs were aware of the secret planning process, they were not included. The International Rescue Committee, one of the largest US NGOs, wrote:

Concerned about the appearance of planning a response to war, UN agencies have been guarded and discrete in answering questions about humanitarian contingency planning for Iraq. They have not spoken publicly on the matter, they have not sought additional funds for such a response, and they have not coordinated with their implementing partners on issues of substance.149

The story broke just before Christmas, with a headline in the Times of London on December 22, 2003 declaring: “UN Chief Issues Secret Orders for War in Iraq.” A set of confidential UN documents had been published online, creating a minor furor in Iraq policy circles.150 It is not entirely clear how these “secret” UN planning documents found their way into the media. Perhaps an NGO representative acquired hard copies from someone at the United Nations headquarters in New York. In any event, the documents were scanned and sent to the Campaign Against the Sanctions in Iraq, based in London, who posted them on their website along with transcriptions and a bit of commentary. Numerous pages were withheld, for reasons that are not stated.

Although the main document is titled “likely humanitarian scenarios,” many of its planning assumptions are of the worst-case variety. What would the operating conditions be in Iraq after a “large-scale and protracted ground offensive”? The first few pages list some of these assumptions:

- “access to those in need denied … or severely hampered”
- “the electricity network will be seriously degraded”
- “the port of Umm Qasr will be largely unavailable”
- “the railway system will be significantly degraded”
- “road transportation vehicles and depots will suffer considerable damage”
- “most, if not all, major bridges will be destroyed or damaged”
- “significant damage to existing Government stocks of all commodities”
- “production and export of crude oil as well as the production of petroleum products mostly for domestic consumption [e.g., gasoline, diesel, kerosene, cooking gas] will have ceased”


150 This section is based on two documents, “likely humanitarian scenarios” and “iasc021220,” which can be downloaded from http://www.casi.org.uk/.
• “outbreak of diseases in epidemic, if not pandemic, proportions is very likely” (6)
• “It is estimated that the nutritional status of some 3.03m persons countrywide will be dire and that they will require therapeutic feeding.” (6)

The “total caseload of beneficiaries” was predicted to be 7.4 million—5.4 million people in southern Iraq who would have immediate humanitarian needs and be accessible to aid agencies, plus 2 million IDPs and refugees (pg. 5)

In hindsight, it seems rather unlikely that UN agencies in Iraq would be called on to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to the entire population of central and southern Iraq—some 23 million people. (The same document says “it would not seem prudent to replace the ‘state provider’ with a ‘humanitarian provider’, pg. 9). With this improbable outcome listed in the conclusion of the document as a “likely scenario,” we must question the true purpose of these documents. Were they really intended as the basis for an operational plan? Or where they part of a sophisticated attempt to oppose the war on “humanitarian grounds”? United Nations staffers could not take a public position for or against the impending war, but they could portray the consequences in an extremely negative light and thus attempt to avert an impending disaster.

“Though we oppose it, we must plan for it”

The publication of the UN documents provided just the “hook” that was needed, and the policy, advocacy, and media departments of major international NGOs stepped up their activities. Many had already begun their own internal planning processes for both operational programs and advocacy campaigns. In the case of BINGO, two pivotal documents had been drafted and “signed off” following a meeting of BINGO Worldwide’s executive directors on November 15, 2002. The first was a two-page statement of BINGO’s policy on potential military action in Iraq. The second was a five-page advocacy strategy laying out how that policy would be communicated. The policy statement made BINGO’s anti-war position unequivocally clear. The top-line message was that “military action against Iraq now would be unjustifiable because it would disproportionately increase civilian suffering and fuel regional instability.”

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151 Therapeutic feeding programs are for the treatment of severe acute malnutrition. The notion that over three million people could be in such an extreme condition at one time simply boggles the mind. The largest therapeutic feeding program in the history of MSF—during the Niger food crisis in 2005—treated 62,000 severely malnourished children between January and November (Tectonidis 2006). In Ethiopia, where 4.2 million people were reportedly in need of emergency assistance, 137,500 children received therapeutic feeding from international agencies between January and June 2008.

152 Two additional documents specified the operational strategy as well as the roles and responsibilities of BINGO Worldwide affiliates in the Iraq response.
In the event of a military attack, the document continued, the warring parties must adhere to “a strict interpretation of international humanitarian law, to ensure the maximum protection of civilians.” Iraq’s neighbors—Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria—“must keep their borders open to refugees fleeing any conflict.” International donors should step in to provide “swift, adequate assistance.” A clear distinction must be maintained between military and civilian actors, and “military forces should not engage in humanitarian assistance unless there is no other way for life-threatening needs to be met.”

The document repeatedly emphasized the primacy of the United Nations and other multilateral actors in coordinating relief: “The UN, not any military force, must lead any new humanitarian effort.” The document concluded with an appeal not to forget the urgent needs in other countries: “despite its scale and global significance, Iraq is not the only humanitarian crisis in the world.” BINGO urged the international community, including governments as well as aid agencies, not to focus “its political energy, or possible future aid budgets, so disproportionately on Iraq that the enormous human suffering in other crises remains unmet.”

Extending BINGO’s Iraq policy into the domain of practical action, the advocacy strategy specified how the international agency would attempt to influence key targets by communicating these messages both publicly and privately. The document was a working draft, and it acknowledged that the contents “will be rapidly updated as needed in the light of events.” It identified four phases up to the end of major military actions against Iraq—Phase 1: present until military action is imminent; Phase 2: War imminent or beginning; Phase 3: Military action underway; and Phase 4: War ending. Not surprisingly for a forward-looking document, the earliest phases had the greatest level of detail. Phase 1 had two full pages of detailed strategies and actions, while Phase 2 had half a page, and Phases 3 and 4 contained just a few general guidelines.

Until military action was imminent (Phase 1), BINGO would only communicate some of its messages publicly in press releases and media interviews, reserving others for private lobbying of governments and donor agencies behind closed doors. The overarching aim was to position BINGO as “an expert voice on the humanitarian impact of a major military strike,” but to do so “without compromising BINGO’s agreed view against military action.” The key message was that a military strike was unjustified, as it would “be far more likely to do more harm than good.” BINGO would advocate privately for military forces to uphold international humanitarian law in the event of an invasion of Iraq, to minimize civilian casualties and refrain from targeting essential food, water, sanitation and health resources.

153 BINGO Worldwide, “Policy on Potential Military Action in Iraq,” internal document, December 20, 2002. The preamble to these specific policy positions also addressed the need to find “a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” and to overcome “the inability of many of the peoples of the Middle East to have an effective say in their future.”
BINGO did not want to be seen advising military forces on how to conduct themselves during war, for fear that this would imply that the war was inevitable. Somewhat paradoxically, BINGO would advocate both publicly and privately against military forces providing humanitarian aid, except in extreme circumstances where no civilian relief agency was capable of doing so. This was a broad organizational position, not limited to Iraq, based on recent experience in Afghanistan and Kosovo.\footnote{Tony Vaux (2002) provides a critical appraisal of humanitarian NGOs’ complicity with military forces in these and other recent conflicts.} A detailed briefing note on this issue would be commissioned, and the attempt to limit the military’s involvement in humanitarian assistance would become a primary focus of BINGO’s public media work and private lobbying in the coming months. The aims during Phase 2 of the advocacy strategy (“war imminent or beginning”) were to limit civilian suffering during the conflict, monitor and report any violations of international humanitarian law, and influence neighboring countries to keep their borders open to refugees.

To do this advocacy work effectively would require access to detailed and up-to-the-minute information and the capacity to “rapidly develop topical policy and comment, as appropriate, on a series of potential concerns.” BINGO decided to recruit and deploy a full-time policy adviser to Amman, Jordan. This person would be tasked with implementing the advocacy strategy at a regional level, as well as with providing critical input into BINGO’s policy and advocacy machinery. A job description was circulated, listing the key responsibilities of the post. The first would be to “produce timely, succinct analysis of the Iraq crisis” based on information gathered from BINGO program staff, partner organizations, and external contacts in the Middle East.

There was a palpable sense of urgency to this task, discernible even in the austere, bureaucratic language of the job announcement: “the main focus of the analysis will be on rapid events, responding swiftly to exploit urgent opportunities identified by the post-holder.” On the basis of this analysis, the policy adviser would “suggest public policy recommendations, distinctively grounded in BINGO’s experience, and suitable for media, lobbying and, if agreed, popular campaigning.” Another task would be to research and write public briefing notes on key issues, such as civil-military relations and international humanitarian law. Finally, the policy adviser would “advocate BINGO’s message on the Iraq crisis to lobbying, and possibly media, targets within the region.”

What kind of person would be suitable for such a position? The job description was somewhat generic, but it indicated that the equipment (knowledges, capacities, techniques of self-formation, modes of conduct) of a policy adviser differs from that of a conventional aid worker. The section on “Skills and Competence”
listed the following prerequisites: a university degree “in a relevant subject”; a minimum of three years “professional experience in policy or programme work on conflict and humanitarian issues”; knowledge of Iraq and the Middle East—or lacking that, “a track record of rapidly learning a new area of work”; a “proven ability to seize initiatives in identifying new opportunities and exploiting them”; and a “proven ability to present complex policy issues in clear, succinct terms, both in writing and speaking, suitable for a quality media audience.”

The applicant would also need to have the “ability and willingness to travel”; a “proven ability to work under great pressure, in rapidly changing situations, and to meet deadlines with effective planning, organization and strict prioritization”; a “mature understanding of humanitarian and development issues, including a strong gender perspective and understanding of gender analysis”; and the ability to “work effectively in a team and with colleagues at a distance,” with limited supervision.

One of the people who applied for the new position in January 2003 was 29-year old Rosie Richards, an attractive and high-spirited analyst in BINGO UK’s policy department, known to many for her recent work on advocacy campaigns that targeted private sector companies. With a first class honors degree in Economics from University College London and a Masters in Economics from Cambridge, Rosie had received rigorous academic training in development economics and financial accountancy. Five years of work as a economic consultant with PricewaterhouseCoopers had given her extensive international experience and well-honed professional skills. Her involvement with market reform projects in developing countries—including restructuring the electricity sector in Brazil, power networks in Ukraine, and air transport in Chile—had required her to advise and collaborate with government ministries, private companies and the World Bank.

Rosie’s career had taken a very different turn in October 2000, when she left the jet-setting world of management consulting and went to work for BINGO in the Democratic Republic of Congo. After 14 months in the field, she returned to London to work with BINGO’s private sector policy team. She put her economics background and consulting experience to good use, conducting research and coordinating advocacy campaigns on the impact of private sector on development. She lobbied the pharmaceutical industry to adopt a tiered pricing strategy to cut the cost of essential medicines in developing countries, persuaded major investment banks to incorporate humanitarian benchmarks into investment decisions, and co-founded the Soros-funded “Publish What You Pay” campaign to improve the transparency of natural resource companies working in the developing world.

Rosie’s professional background was already quite diverse, and the Iraq job would be another major change. In late 2003, after we had been evacuated from Baghdad to Amman with the rest of the BINGO team, I asked her about the personal trajectory that led to this point. Her account gives some insights into the private world of aid worker careers, motivations, and experiences.
AM: Where is “home” for you?

RR: When I was five years old, we moved to a house my dad had designed in Weedon, a village in Buckinghamshire. It was still being finished when we moved in. That was definitely home, because I grew up there and everything was linked to it. Now my parents live in Aylesbury, England, and I live in Amman, Jordan. I've lived in rented accommodation or in other people’s houses for about 13 years. I haven’t had any place that was really mine since I moved to London to go to university. I have had places where I’ve been staying, or places I’ve been renting, but I have never just gotten a van and taken everything I own and put it all in one place.

AM: Do you feel like you belong here?

RR: No, but I’m living here at the moment. I’ve been here on and off since February 2003, so for about ten months. From May through the end of August, I was either in Iraq or traveling abroad, outside of the Middle East. When I was in Iraq, I lived in Baghdad. I didn’t really live in Amman then, because I didn’t leave any of my stuff here.

AM: Since you went away to university, what is the longest you’ve lived in one place?

RR: The longest time everything I own has been in one building was in Kinshasha, Congo, and that was for about 12 months. Actually, my stuff didn’t arrive for a long time because it got stuck at the port. BINGO wouldn’t pay a bribe to get it through, so it was sitting at the Kinshasha docks going moldy for three months. But effectively it was that place—a house in a compound that I shared with my manager and her boyfriend.

AM: Was that the first time that you had lived an extended period out of England?

RR: I was in New Zealand for six months in ’98. My boyfriend was there, and he was working, so I did things like windsurfing and learning Chinese and traveling around with my sister. The Chinese part was just because I found it interesting. I looked for a job but realized I didn’t want to do the jobs I was offered. I decided to just stay there for a bit and then get back to what I was doing in London, which was management consultancy.

AM: What kind of work were you doing?

RR: Working in teams on different projects in different places around the world, especially in developing countries. We would have a specific task, like designing a database so that any changes to a document were monitored carefully. You knew
who had proposed them and why they had or hadn’t been changed. Another task might have been writing a legal code for how electricity is traded. It was always teamwork, working on projects for various clients.

AM: How did you get interested in international work?

RR: I grew up in a village in Buckinghamshire, which is really boring. The most exciting thing about living in a village is being able to go somewhere else, whether it is on holiday or just taking the train to London for the day. The moment I finished school—when I was 17 years old, between school and university—the first thing I did was go Inter-railing in Europe for a couple of months with a friend of mine. We’d both saved up money from work to do it. Lots of people in England take a year off between school and university, but neither my friend or I had enough money to do that. We just went away for the summer.

AM: Had you traveled a lot with your family growing up?

RR: No, hardly at all. I’d been to Bendon and Spain on the Costa de Sol quite a few times. I’d been to Disneyworld in Florida and a couple of European trips … Brussels, or something, but that was it.

AM: So where did your sense of the larger world come from, do you think?

RR: Well, partly my mum. She traveled when she was younger, and she was very keen on it. My grandparents used to go away four or five times a year to different places to see the Northern Lights, or go to Iceland or Egypt. We grew up with maps and globes and stories about different places in the world. When I was doing A-levels at school, one of the things I studied was geography. We did a course on the United States, and I memorized all the state capitals. I don’t remember them all now. Another thing we studied was Brazil, and I always wanted to go to Brazil from then on. We learned about the Yanomamo Indians in the northeast. We learned about the gold rush. We learned about different agricultural and climate conditions, and shanty towns, and how people grew up, and how they were or weren’t supplied with electricity and water. It was a completely different world. It somehow seemed more real than Buckinghamshire, which is a twee little place with hedgerows and neat fields—not very wild or rugged at all.

AM: How did you get your first BINGO job in Congo?

RR: I was working late one Friday night at PricewaterhouseCoopers in London, and I got an email from someone whose name I recognized saying, “I don’t know if you remember me…” It was a guy who’d left Coopers & Lybrand in 1995, just after I joined, to work with a small NGO in South Africa—something he and a friend had set up at Cambridge. Since then he had been working with various NGOs in different places. He was writing to tell me that he had started an organization called Mango—
Management Accounting for Non-Governmental Organizations—to improve the professionalism of financial management in non-profits because a lot of money was being wasted. He was trying to get businesses interested in contributing their skills to NGOs, and he wanted to know if I could get him access to the partners and senior HR people at PwC to sell his idea. He was looking for two things, really. One was money and the other was people’s time, which required buy-in from senior partners to second staff to Mango, which would place them in an NGO for three months or something. I helped him get access to partners at PwC and wrote some proposals and sent them to people. After awhile I thought, you know, this really interesting. Instead of selling this internally, I’d quite like to go and actually do the secondment. He called one day and said, “do you want to work in Congo for 12 months?” I said, “where is Congo?”—when I was studying geography it was still called Zaire—and then, “twelve months? I thought you said three!” Finally I agreed to come for an interview to get a place on Mango’s register. Then I had to have a second interview with a person at BINGO, who ended up being my manager for 14 months in Congo.

AM: What made you decide to leave management consulting? You’d been working around the world, in lots of different countries. You were part of a team, or different teams. You were doing interesting, challenging work and probably getting paid quite well for it.

RR: Yeah, I was relatively well-paid, and the travel was fun. But I wanted to live and work in a developing country—I had wanted that ever since I did A-levels at school when I was 16. I wanted to do something that had more to do with poor people and less to do with profits for rich people. Some of the things that we did as consultants seemed not to be what people actually needed. They seemed to be what a government had to do to demonstrate to the World Bank that it was behaving appropriately, or something.

AM: You obviously knew about BINGO, having grown up in England. Did you have it in mind as a particular organization you wanted to work for?

RR: No, but I had ones that I didn’t want to work for. I didn’t want to work for any religious organizations, and I didn’t want to work in any countries that were particularly anti-female equality. I didn’t want to wear a veil or anything like that. So I was excited by the opportunity to work for BINGO in Congo, which is a very needy place. When they offered me the job, I wanted to know how much they were going to pay me. After an extensive period of negotiation, I managed to get an extra £500 a year. I was negotiating more out of principle than because it was actually going to make any difference. I just thought it was ridiculous that they listed a salary and said “negotiable,” when it actually wasn’t. But I knew all along that I would take the job anyway. It was more for the sake of friends and family that I said, “thank you very much for the offer. I’ll think about it.” But I decided straight away, “Yep, I’ll do that.”
AM: How much of a pay cut were you taking to leave PwC and work for a humanitarian NGO?

RR: Half.

AM: What specifically attracted you? Not that people necessarily do this, but if you were to have done a cost-benefit analysis, what outweighed the cut in salary?

RR: Well, I actually did do a cost-benefit analysis to calculate what I’d gain and what I’d lose. Perhaps it comes from being an economist, but I would always do that. As for the salary, I knew I wouldn’t spend very much money in Congo—nothing like what I was spending in London on restaurants and bars, that kind of thing. The biggest expenses would be flights to other places for holidays and stuff. The job was offered as a secondment as well. PwC said, “come back in 12 months time.” They basically left the position completely open for me to come back. I had already taken a year off previously to live in New Zealand and travel around Central Asia and Russia, so they were being very flexible. At that stage I wasn’t ruling out anything, keeping my options open.

AM: You said that you were quite adamantly not interested in working for a religious organization. Did you have a religious upbringing?

RR: I had a very non-religious upbringing. I was christened after my sister was born, because my parents basically saved up and did us both together. I was three years old or something. We went to church maybe once or twice a year, for funerals or weddings. I don’t like the idea of imposing stuff on other people, so I wouldn’t want to work for anyone that “sold” religion. I don’t think just because you believe something, it means you’re right.

AM: But you wanted to help people. Poor people.

RR: Well, I don’t know. “Helping” is quite patronizing, in a way. I mean, yes, if you use the definition of the word “to help” which means to assist. It’s more that I wanted to share things, to work in a different place where I felt it would be more useful and more beneficial. I am really not the sort of person who is any good at helping people on a one-to-one basis. Most of the time I just want to say, “Oh for goodness sakes, pull yourself together!” So on an individual level, I didn’t want to be a nurse or look after mentally sick kids or anything like that. I couldn’t … it just gives me the shivers, individually. But as a sort of global thing, I think it’s great that people do it. I would like to support them to do it, just not have to do it myself.

AM: The individual, one-on-one aspect makes you shiver. Why is that?

RR: I don’t like ill people. I don’t know, I guess I am not very sympathetic. It’s a waste of time—my time and their time—if they’re not really ill. And if they are really
ill, then it’s pretty pointless, unless they’re in hospital after breaking a leg or something like that. I am not very good at being sympathetic, but I can do it for a short amount of time. It’s just that nothing is obviously going to change or improve as a result of it. People might feel better, but it doesn’t actually make things better.

AM: It is important to you to actually make a difference.

RR: Yes, not just to be nice.

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In mid-January 2003, Rosie Richards began to prepare for her upcoming interview for the Iraq policy job with William Stone, head of BINGO UK’s Conflict and Natural Disasters policy team in London, and Albert Lummox, BINGO’s Regional Director of the MEEECIS department (covering the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Commonwealth of Independent States). She grappled with the complexity of Iraq and the wider Middle East, contacting local academics and other experts for suggested reading material and following up with questions about subjects that needed further clarification. On January 15, she wrote to the head of BINGO Worldwide’s advocacy office in New York: “I am reading manically about humanitarian law and the Middle East but it seems that the more I read, the more ignorant I become. I am trying to think about what issues BINGO might encounter in Iraq. If you have a few minutes, I would really love to chat this through with you as you must be encountering these issues already.”

Her intensive and focused preparation paid off, and the interview went favorably. On January 28, Rosie was offered the job as policy adviser for Iraq, and she eagerly accepted. Later that day she wrote to Dr. Charles Reed, an Iraq expert at the Church of England who had been active in the anti-sanctions movement, “I am really grateful that you were able to spare so much time and thought to discuss Iraq with me. I will be going out to Amman in about three weeks time. Let’s all hope that a diplomatic solution is found quickly and that I have a quiet six months to learn Arabic.”

One of Rosie’s first challenges after assuming her new role was to establish relationships with the key players in BINGO’s Iraq response. She filled the first three pages of a black, leather-bound notebook with more than 50 names of BINGO staff working on various aspects of the Iraq program. The Iraq policy adviser position was embedded in a complex matrix of roles and responsibilities. Although based in Amman, Rosie would be managed by William Stone, the senior Iraq policy adviser in London. Strategic guidance for her work would come from top executives at BINGO UK with additional input from the principal advocacy and media staff of BINGO Worldwide, a confederation of 12 independently incorporated BINGO “affiliates.”
Working out of BINGO’s newly established office in Jordan, Rosie would have to collaborate closely with BINGO staff throughout the Middle East. Her day-to-day tasks and movements would be coordinated with the program staff and managers in Amman, who would oversee security management issues, handle logistics and other practical arrangements, and provide input on the policy analysis. The Information & Communications Officer in Amman would compile detailed reports about BINGO’s humanitarian program activities, while the Media Officer would provide timely information about media trends and opportunities to influence the press coverage and editorial agenda. There would also be considerable contact with staff members from BINGO Worldwide affiliates that were supporting local partner organizations in the region.

Amman: The Humanitarian Apparatus Prepares for War

I sat in the lounge bar of the Hyatt hotel in Jabal Amman one evening in late February 2003, nursing a $7 pint of beer and trying not to eat too many roasted nuts from an oddly-shaped porcelain bowl on the table. The dim, candle-lit area just off the main lobby was an oasis of relative tranquility amidst the storm clouds brewing over pre-war Amman. Nothing of the preceding narrative was known to me at the time. Like most Americans, I understood very little about the actual workings of the United Nations or humanitarian relief agencies. I had only the vaguest idea about international law, and no direct experience of war.

What I did know was that in the course of a single month, the “normal” expatriate residents of Amman (consultants, businesspeople, development professionals, archaeologists, researchers, teachers, students, non-essential embassy staff) had packed up and gone somewhere else—voluntarily, in some cases, and at the behest of their respective governments in others—only to be replaced by an entirely different population. Journalists from nearly every country in the world descended on the Jordanian capital in droves, and Amman became a major international hub for media organizations seeking to provide up-to-the-minute coverage of the unfolding situation in neighboring Iraq.

Down the street from the Hyatt, halfway between the Third and Second Circles, the lobby of the venerable Intercontinental hotel was teeming with print journalists and television crews. Carts piled high with suitcases and equipment lined the walls and clogged the corridors. Representatives from the Ministry of Information had set up an office in the hotel annex to inspect visiting journalists’ credentials and issue temporary press passes. Media personnel are always monitored closely in Jordan, despite the government’s official rhetoric of press freedom, but the recent deluge of inquisitive foreign journalists seems to have made the authorities extra nervous.

Undercover agents of the Jordanian secret police (mukhabaraat) were everywhere, trying to blend into the scenery as they stood around awkwardly in their
cheap leather jackets, smoking endless packs of cigarettes and fiddling absent-mindedly with prayer beads. In tiny broadcast studios on the roof of the Intercon, the massive blue dome of the King Abdullah mosque on nearby Jabal Hussein provided an exotic backdrop as reporters faced the cameras and responded earnestly to questions beamed in by satellite from evening news anchors in television studios around the globe.

At the Grand Hyatt Amman, a smaller, newer hotel, the scene was only slightly less chaotic. Eager, young freelancers milled about the room, hobnobbing with seasoned reporters and looking for tips on the latest story. Others are debating practical strategies for dealing with Iraqi embassy officials, border guards and government minders in Baghdad. “They see this war as a career opportunity,” one of my companions remarked coolly, surveying the action from our table in the lounge. “And of course they’re right—war reporting can make you famous.” It was the voice of personal experience. Christopher Dickey, Paris bureau chief and Middle East regional editor for Newsweek magazine, is one of the most respected journalists in the business.

The eldest son of novelist and poet James Dickey, author of Deliverance, Chris cut his journalistic teeth reporting for the Washington Post on the bitter Latin American conflicts of the 1970s and 80s. He traveled with Contra rebels through the jungles of Nicaragua and won an Overseas Press Club award for his reporting on El Salvadoran death squads. He is also an expert on the greater Middle East; he assumed a post as Cairo bureau chief for Newsweek in 1986 and has been reporting on the region ever since. He author of several books, including two novels about terrorism, he is knowledgeable, articulate, and devastatingly well-connected. Earlier that day he had coffee with a former head of the Jordanian intelligence service; tomorrow he would have lunch with the Queen.

Dickey set his glass of South African chardonnay on the table and motioned to one of the smartly dressed waiters hovering—never quite discreetly enough—in the shadowy lounge. “What about you, Adrian?” he asked, as he selected a thick Cuban cigar from the wooden box brought over by the waiter. “What’s next for you?” Dickey expertly cut the tip off the Cohiba and struck a long match, filling the air with sweet-smelling smoke. I no longer had a job in Amman, now that the study abroad program I had been hired to administer was suspended due to the impending conflict in Iraq. I said I would probably head back to Cairo to hang out with friends and wait out the war. Chris arched his eyebrows disapprovingly. “Why would you leave now,” he interjected. “Things are just getting interesting!” Dickey ordered another round of drinks, and we continued to talk. By the time I had finished my third beer, I had been hired as a “stringer” for Newsweek.

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By February 18, the US had assembled 100,000 troops in the region, primarily in Kuwait. The official line of the Jordanian government was that there were no US troops in Jordan, but strange new sights had begun to appear around the country in the previous months. Almost every afternoon, a plain white 737 banked low over downtown Amman before landing at the military airport on the eastern edge of the capital. The unmarked plane’s flight path was almost directly above the outdoor patio at the popular Books@Cafe just off Rainbow Street, where I spent many an afternoon. “CIA,” a twentysomething waiter whispered knowingly, as the plane passed overhead.

Other, less ambiguous, indications of an American military presence could be seen in Jordan’s eastern deserts. On a recent trip out to the small, grubby town of Safawi with a fellow Fulbright scholar—giving a ride “home” to a friendly Peace Corps volunteer after a weekend in Amman—I spotted a pair of A-10 Warthogs flying low and slow, less than a mile east of the highway. While rock climbing in the red sandstone cliffs of Wadi Rum with friends from the British Embassy, I observed F-16s and Apache helicopters flying through the desert canyons from their base at the King Faisal air field near al-Jafr. Years later I would learn that al-Jafr was also the site of a prison operated by the General Intelligence Directorate, a key node on the secret international torture network created by the CIA’s extraordinary rendition program (see Paglen and Thompson 2006).

Wave after wave of “TDY” (temporary duty) personnel passed through the US Embassy in Amman. The upscale restaurants, bars and clubs of Abdoun and Shmeisani now teemed with stereotypical young Americans looking like they had stepped straight out of the Gap, or a J. Crew catalog—golf shirts, chinos, braided leather belts, and loafers. The small contingent of Marines that secured the Embassy could still be found out on the town once a week in dive bars like the “Old Irish” at the Dove Hotel, the Shamrock across from the Intercontinental, or fancier places like Naï in the basement of the Howard Johnson. But now they were accompanied by older, quieter men—no less muscular than the young Marines—but more tanned and weather-beaten, and with longer than regulation haircuts.

The presence of US Special Forces in Jordan was a public secret—that is, something “which is generally known, but cannot be articulated” (Taussig 1999, 5). I ran into a group of these “special operators” at the 7th Circle Safeway one Thursday afternoon, as they were loading up shopping carts with dozens of cases of Amstel Light beer and boxes of Red Bull. They wore their own kind of uniform: jeans or khaki cargo pants, casual shirts with the sleeves rolled up to reveal rugged wristwatches, shirttails untucked to cover the bulge of sidearms tucked against the small of their backs, Oakley sunglasses perched jauntily on top of their heads. Most

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of the Safeway clientele were upper-middle class Jordanians or large families visiting from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States, so these guys were about as inconspicuous as a group of strippers in Sunday School.

Ever the wiseacre, I couldn’t resist: “You boys goin’ camping or something?” I quipped. Nobody said a word, but one of them glanced over at me with an unmistakable “I-could-tell-you-but-then-I’d-have-to-kill-you” look. From the hardened appearance of these men, it seemed like more than just an idle threat, and I backed off in a hurry. “Don’t feed the animals,” I muttered, scooting away. Outside in the parking lot, a uniformed US soldier wearing a red beret stood guard next to an armored SUV with blackened windows. I remembered a line from My Cousin Vinny, where Joe Pesci berates Marissa Tomei for wearing a skin-tight catsuit in a small Southern town: “Oh yeah, baby, you blend.”

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In addition to the soldiers and the journalists now visible on the streets of Amman, another strange, scruffy crowd had appeared on the scene: NGO workers. By early March 2003, there were over 40 international NGOs registered in Jordan, representing a wide range of characters. All the major international agencies were there, including Oxfam GB, CARE International, World Vision, Save the Children US and UK, Action Contre la Faim, Médecins sans Frontières-Belgium, MSF-Holland, Médecins du Monde, Mercy Corps, International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee, Première Urgence, Solidarités, Aide Médicale Internationale and InterSOS. Also present were members of the European “solidarity” and anti-sanctions crowd (e.g., the Spanish group MPDL—Movimiento por la Paz, el Desarme y la Libertad—and the Italian group Un Ponte Per Baghdad), as well as the pacifists (e.g., Mennonite Central Committee, American Friends Service Committee), and several “boutique” agencies, including Architects for People in Need. Rounding out the humanitarian circus were six members of the Spanish group Clowns Without Borders, a Korean organization called Oasis of Love, and the Japanese group Good People.

I sat down with Marvin Gadfry, the team leader for BINGO, to find out more about their pre-war preparations. Marvin explained that BINGO had put together a 30-member emergency response team, based in the UK. “We’ve been doing contingency planning since October, and we started ‘prepositioning’ staff throughout the sub-region in December.” He added that BINGO currently had thirteen staff members in Jordan, four in Iran, two in Syria and one in Turkey. They were doing pre-response planning and preparedness work in all these, but Jordan would be the main staging area for operations focused on Iraq. “We will go to Iraq as soon as we possibly can,” Gadfry declared.

Meanwhile, in a repeat of its operations in the Jordanian transit camps in 1990, BINGO was working closely with the Jordanian government, especially the
Ministry of Water and Irrigation, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Planning, and the Jordanian Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO), which was coordinating the overall aid effort. BINGO engineers were designing a water storage and distribution system for 10,000 refugees at “Camp A,” 8 kilometers down the road from Ruweished. Other services at the camp would be provided by CARE and a medical agency—either Médecins sans Frontières or Médecins du Monde.

Whichever of these two competing agencies wasn’t operating at “Camp A” would staff the medical facilities at “Camp B” a few more kilometers away, which was being managed by the Jordanian Red Crescent with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM). “If you take away all the political and policy implications, the most difficult thing about this camp technically is that there are quite high winds,” Gadfry added. He described BINGO’s efforts to engage constructively with the other humanitarian agencies: “We all are working to support the efforts of the Jordanian government,” Gadfry asserted. “We don’t always agree, but when we disagree we advocate for change. We don’t just go running around like a bunch of cowboys.”

I asked Marvin about BINGO’s relationship with the Jordanian military, and his response was circumspect. “We don’t work directly with them, but they are a player and we have to respect that.” He paused for a moment and then continued, explaining BINGO’s general position about cooperating with the military: “We have a very firm line. We will not be coordinated by a military—any military—be it a peacekeeping force or a belligerent force. Obviously, a lot of our security depends on the military securing the area, so we do end up in a very, very difficult situation.”

The need for operational security information meant that sometimes humanitarian distance would have to be compromised.

“You do want to get some practical information,” Marvin explained. “Where are the mine fields? What sort of munitions did they use in this area? Are we exposing our staff to depleted uranium? Were chemical munitions used here? We don’t want to have the ‘BINGO Gulf Syndrome’ like the US military has. But at the

An BINGO engineer would later write the following comments in his post-deployment debrief report: “Following several assessment missions inside Iraq by BINGO senior teams late 2002, and in view of the then looming war, an office was set up in Jordan to a) jointly with other players, prepare a response in case of influx of refugees into the country while b) monitoring the events going on inside Iraq. BINGO played a key role in responding to humanitarian needs in 1991 inside Jordan. After years of absence from Jordan and Iraq there was a need to re-establish links with the technical governmental departments in Jordan, support UNHCR in their response planning, engage with other key actors (local and INGOs), and help establish a yard stick against which minimum standards can be monitored. Due to the bureaucracy in Jordan BINGO’s registration took quite sometime. I thus initially worked as UNHCR, which in a way helped me access areas close to the border otherwise inaccessible to NGOs. I was a player in the planning of Ruweished camp A, including site planning (general camp layout), water and sanitation layout, and implementation of minimum standards in the camp (based on SPHERE guidelines). I drew plans for camps having capacities of 1200, 5000, 10000 and 20000 people, including budgets and human resource requirements. This was in line with the manager’s requests – the population figures kept changing all the time at the time owing to changing scenarios.”
same time, any visible cooperation, or even just private discussions with the military can put our staff at serious risk.”

As Marvin described BINGO’s position on civil-military relations, he reached into his bag and gave me a copy of a recent briefing paper on the subject issued by BINGO Worldwide’s policy department in London. “Our position is that all of the humanitarian aid that is channeled into Iraq, or destined to help Iraq, should be done by a civil administration managed by the United Nations system,” Marvin explained. This even extended to the registration and certification of humanitarian agencies, especially the issuing of identification cards. “We would prefer not to have to register and get IDs from the military. The last thing I want to do is be stopped on the road by some irate Iraqi and have to show him an ID that says ‘US Army’,” Gadfray quipped.

Marvin elaborated on BINGO’s efforts to gain acceptance from the communities where they worked: “Our strategy is to work at a very low, community-based level to build trust, so that hopefully through our connections people will let us know the general feeling in the community.” The agency’s security depended on receiving input from the local community and managing their views of the organization. “We can’t control people’s perceptions, and we will make no attempt to manipulate people’s perceptions. But at the same time we hope that by keeping our distance from the military we can prove to people that we are acting in an impartial, neutral way.”

Even the route the agency chose to transport staff and equipment into Iraq would have political implications. “The UN has asked us to go in from Kuwait,” Marvin explained. The problem is that would mean following in the wake of belligerent military forces. BINGO would prefer to enter Iraq from Jordan, which is why the bulk of their staff was based here. Syria was another possibility. Marvin spoke emphatically against the Kuwait option: “There’s no doubt that coming in from Kuwait would be the fastest and most effective way to assist the population, and the Basra-Baghdad corridor is very important in terms of population numbers. But we are not in the business of sanitizing for the US military, or any other military for that matter. They have international legal obligations. We’re not going in and cleaning up their mess. We don’t follow front lines—we occasionally cross front lines, but we don’t follow them, cleaning up after an aggressive military campaign.”

In order to maintain independence and impartiality, BINGO staff would conduct their own assessments of the humanitarian needs in Iraq. “Even if, say, a highly-respected agency like MSF did an assessment, we would cross-check it ourselves before we committed money and did an intervention,” Marvin explained. BINGO’s goals in Iraq would include the immediate provision of clean water, along with repairs to emergency generators to get sewage treatment plants and pumping stations back online. “We’re looking at it all in an emergency perspective. This means that we’ll invest between five to twenty thousand dollars to get something online—even with the knowledge that a contractor will come along six months later
and trash all the work we did and then make a new million dollar investment on a complete rehab. As a humanitarian agency, we deal with immediate effects, not long term rehabilitation.”

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I met Rosie Richards in Amman in mid-March 2003, about a month after she arrived in her new role as BINGO’s policy adviser. We chatted for awhile in the lobby of a five-star hotel. Her pointy-toed shoes, tailored trousers and lavender shirt with silver cufflinks hardly fit the stereotypical image of a humanitarian aid worker. She made detailed notes in a leather-bound Paperchase notebook, her constant companion. I couldn’t decide if the pink ink she wrote in gave the notebook a flair of stylishness or just plain silliness. Rosie was a master networker, constantly making new connections and maintaining established ones. Her telephone contact list was a who’s who of the most important diplomats, journalists and aid workers in Amman. Most of her waking hours were spent meeting with people, talking on the phone, or working on her laptop computer.

Dozens of people waved to Rosie as they walk through the hotel lobby, and some of them come over to our table to chat for a few minutes. Many of the men were flirting outrageously with her, and we struck up a conversation about the worst pick-up lines we’d heard in Amman so far. “Come upstairs to my room and I’ll tell you how to get an Iraqi visa” was a recurring one. I told Rosie about the Fox News cameraman I had overheard at a US Embassy press conference, prior to being bussed out to tour some warehouses full of blankets and aid supplies. “You’re embedded in my heart, baby!” he had proclaimed to a female companion. We agreed that war reporting seems to bring out the worst in people.

After a few weeks of interviewing NGO workers and attending daily UN press conferences at the Intercontinental Hotel, I began to get a sense of how the post-war humanitarian aid response would work. I wrote an internal memo to Christopher Dickey, my new boss at Newsweek, explaining what I had learned:

*In the days following a military invasion, the scouts and advance troops of another massive army will cross into Iraq from their bases in Kuwait, Jordan, Iran, and Syria. But the legions of this unconventional army will carry clipboards and checkbooks, not weapons. The first wave will comprise emergency humanitarian relief workers from UN agencies and international aid organizations. Over the next few months they will be joined by contractors and investors working toward the rebuilding of Iraq’s infrastructure and institutions.

No one can predict with any certainty what the humanitarian costs of the military invasion of Iraq will be. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is planning for 600,000 refugees throughout the region,*
although a senior logistics officer at UNHCR’s office in Amman admitted to me that this number is conjectural at best. When asked about the potential impact of war on the population and infrastructure of Iraq, the unanimous response of aid workers and UN staff in Jordan is, “it depends on what happens.” As one UN employee pointed out, “If there are chemical attacks, the whole thing changes completely.”

The initial responsibility for humanitarian relief lies with the military. As an occupying force, coalition troops will be responsible under the Geneva Conventions to provide food and basic medical care to Iraqi civilians and prisoners of war. In his statement to the Security Council on March 19, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated: “Under international law, the responsibility for protecting civilians in conflict falls on the belligerents; in any area under military occupation, responsibility for the welfare of the population falls on the occupying power.” He added, “Without in any way assuming or diminishing that ultimate responsibility, we in the United Nations will do whatever we can to help.”

The first civilians allowed into the areas occupied by coalition military forces will be technical experts from the 60-member Disaster Assessment and Response Team (DART), recruited, trained, and funded by the United States Agency for International Development. DART will be based in Kuwait and have three mobile field offices. According to USAID, this is the largest DART team in US history. Their task will be to conduct a rapid assessment of the situation and begin collecting the baseline data that will inform and guide future humanitarian aid projects.

The DART team will use the Rapid Assessment questionnaire developed by the UN’s Humanitarian Information Center (HIC) in Amman. The initial assessment will be “rapid, shallow, and broad,” a HIC spokesperson stated. “The Rapid Assessment process gives you some baseline data. When others share their data we can link it, we can display it on maps, we can show what the situation was before, along with change over time.” The HIC plans to make its maps and data available to UN agencies, NGOs, and even private contracting companies wanting to submit bids for the reconstruction of post-war Iraq. “We don’t always know what people use our data for,” Miner stated, “but the data we have, we share.” The database produced by the Rapid Assessment teams will be accessible on the Internet free of charge.

In a press briefing in Washington, DC on February 23, Bernd McConnell, Director of USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, explained the DART’s operational priorities: “we are interested in water and sanitation, we are interested in basic health care, we are interested in shelter and we are interested in the distribution of food. … But, again, it’s very basic. We’re the
band-aid guys. When we talk about shelter, we’re talking about plastic sheeting; we’re not talking about rebuilding buildings, that sort of thing.”

McConnell explained that the relationship between DART and the military would be closer than in any previous disaster or conflict: “In the event there is a military action, we are going to be considered—here’s a neat term for you—embedded in the military force, embedded in the sense of we will rely on the military for protection and for access. They will rely on us, conversely, for the actual humanitarian work that we can do, which I think they will admit they cannot.”

Many humanitarian NGOs are concerned that collaborating with the military would compromise their position as impartial agencies. Addressing these concerns, McConnell said: “We understand the sensitivities of the NGOs and we respect that sensitivity. But in actual fact, a secure environment is necessary for the NGOs and for the DART to do what it needs to do.”

The DART will also have a fair amount of money and the power to spend it. According to USAID: “DART has statutory grant making authority and includes administrative officers in logistics, transportation, and procurement, enabling the team to function as a turnkey response mechanism for assessment and funding in the field.” The DART team leader here in Amman said at a press briefing: “DART is uniquely positioned because it is part of the US government.” He later elaborated on their nearly unlimited source of funding: “DARTs have never had a problem getting money for humanitarian assistance. We don’t operate within a budget. We operate within needs.”

The United Nations agencies and NGOs, on the other hand, are short on cash. In his statement to the Security Council, Kofi Annan stated: “We have done our best to assess the possible effects of war, in terms of population displacement and human need, and to position our personnel and equipment accordingly. For these preparations we requested 123.5 million dollars from donors a month ago, but only 45 million have been pledged, and 34 million dollars received, to date. I’m afraid we shall very soon be coming back with an appeal for much larger sums, to finance actual relief operations – and I earnestly hope that Member States will respond with generosity and speed.”

A spokesperson for UNHCR in Amman told me that they have only received 30 percent of the funding required simply for preparedness activities, not for any actual relief operations. CARE International, the only international humanitarian agency to have been operating continuously in central Iraq since 1991, says that it, too, is suffering from severe financial constraints: “We’re in the same situation as the UN and other agencies. Donors are not
funding pre-positioning or preparedness because it would seem to support the war.”

BINGO’s Media War

As the war drums beat louder, another major component of BINGO’s Iraq advocacy work was taking shape: a sophisticated media strategy to raise public awareness of the consequences of invading Iraq and to oppose the war on humanitarian grounds. The strategy acknowledged “that the media space available to us around the Iraq crisis is limited. This fact makes it even more important for us to find opportunities to get our messages heard by decision-makers and the public. But we need to get the tone and facts right, both to withstand scrutiny today and in the future, when people look back at them with the benefit of hindsight.”

The strategy sought to distinguish BINGO from the anti-war lobby in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States by positioning the agency as an authority on humanitarian issues, especially water and sanitation. The goal was not “to get coverage along with the rest of the anti-war protesters but rather to have a voice in the debate outlining why military action now is unjustifiable—on humanitarian grounds.” This would require a close partnership with the policy researchers, analysts and advisers assigned to the Iraq program, who would “produce topical and timely policy papers to push our advocacy and position BINGO as authoritative. These will continue to drive our public messages to use in interviews, press releases, op-eds, web stories etc.”

The Media Unit would prepare a “‘crib sheet’ of catchy, sound-bite messages” for use in interviews, while BINGO aid workers in the field “will be generating information (photos; interviews with BINGO staff, local people, refugees; personal diaries; UN briefings; sit-reps; security reports; regional contextual reports etc.) from the region.” This sense of “being there” would provide the authenticity and authority for BINGO’s public messaging, and would be “vital to position BINGO as ‘experts’ on-the-ground—a source of news rather than comment.”

The BINGO media strategy relied on a “slow-drip” approach to build relationships with journalists and deliver the agency’s top-line advocacy messages. BINGO press officers would contact journalists that were covering Iraq, send them background reports and offer “background briefings” with lead BINGO spokespeople. This approach had been quite successful in Great Britain, where the BINGO UK Media Unit had been cultivating relationships with the press for years. “A large proportion of UK journalists covering the Iraq story have now been identified and briefed and as a result, many are turning to us for comments to feed into stories they are writing.” BINGO US staff in Washington DC would quietly approach the Pentagon and the White House and “strive for key intelligence from within this

important hub of influence and information," while BINGO Worldwide representatives in New York would do the same at the United Nations.

The media strategy included a detailed breakdown of the priority media markets BINGO would seek to influence, such as “the US, the UK and other belligerent countries, possibly including Spain,” “France and Germany … other skeptical or neutral countries/regions,” and “key papers of influence in the [Middle East] region.” There was a fine line to hold, however, in speaking publicly about the possibility of war, especially when discussing the pre-positioning of staff and supplies in the countries surrounding Iraq: “We must be careful in our media work … not to lead people to think that these contingency plans prove that BINGO believes the war is inevitable.” The strategy mentioned specific topics to avoid when speaking with reporters, including potential sources of funding, the cooperative agreements BINGO had signed with other agencies, and whether BINGO would support military action if a second UN resolution was passed.

On March 14, 2003, an internal document with key messages and talking points on Iraq was sent to BINGO policy, advocacy and media staff around the world.158 The document identified three central message, written in plain and simple language:

- **Life is already very tough in Iraq and a war could cause a humanitarian crisis. For this reason we do not believe war is justifiable.**

- **Although we do not believe war to be inevitable, we acknowledge our obligation as an international aid agency to be prepared for any contingency, and to this end we are making preparations in the region for the possible humanitarian consequences of a conflict.**

- **In the case of military action we want any humanitarian relief effort to be headed by the UN and carried out by civilians. We would not be happy working under the military.**

The document went on to describe the current “humanitarian situation” in Iraq, noting that “Twelve years of sanctions means that life in Iraq is very tough for the majority of people. Women and children are particularly hard hit.” The document continued by recounting the two key statistics that had been repeated over and over by many agencies: “One in 10 Iraqi children die before their 5th birthday and in the past decade the country has experienced the fastest increase in the rate of child mortality in the world.”

The water and sanitation system is on the verge of collapse. Military action could destroy the infrastructure and cause a public health with diseases such as typhoid, and maybe even cholera, spreading quickly. Of the approximately twenty three million people in Iraq, 16m are entirely dependent on food aid.

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Malnutrition is widespread and is particularly bad among women and children. Military action could damage roads and bridges, disrupting the distribution network, and leaving many people without the food they need to survive.

On the eve of the invasion, BINGO had spent £246,000 on preparedness activities and pre-positioning. This money came entirely from within the BINGO Worldwide “family.” In the section of the “Key Messages” paper dealing with program information—subtitled “what have we done already, and what are we able to do?”—the document provided the following guidance, reiterating a point that had been made many times before: “The tone of delivery on this is important, as we must not give the impression that we believe war to be inevitable.” The document explained that BINGO had water and sanitation equipment in its central warehouse in the UK, “ready to be flown out as soon as it is needed.” It indicated that BINGO was working with UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies to build refugee camps in Iran, Jordan and Syria, and that it had sent water and sanitation equipment to mother and baby clinics in Iraq run by Caritas Iraq.

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The countdown to war began in earnest on March 17, when President Bush gave a final ultimatum to Saddam Husayn, declaring that the Iraqi president and his two sons must Iraq in 48 hours. “Their refusal to do so,” the US president declared from a podium in the Cross Hall, “will result in military conflict, commenced at a time of our choosing.” He added an ominous warning: “For their own safety, all foreign nationals—including journalists and inspectors—should leave Iraq immediately.”

The following day, all UN international staff in Iraq were evacuated. Romero da Silva, the UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, relocated from Baghdad to Larnaca, Cyprus where he and 100 UN staff established a new base of operations from which to coordinate the UN’s humanitarian operations in Iraq.

Bush’s ultimatum also caused a flurry of activity at BINGO offices around the world. Confidential documents were circulated by e-mail, specifying the communication protocols to be followed during the first 48 hours following an invasion. A password-protected “extranet” was established so that key documents, reports, and stories from staff in the field could be shared with BINGO International affiliates worldwide. BINGO wasn’t alone in its preparations. Five major aid agencies drafted a joint statement in advance, preparing to shift from a “war is unjustifiable” message to a “protection of civilians” message immediately after the start of hostilities. The press release stated, “now that military strikes have begun, our main concern is for the protection and well-being of Iraq’s vulnerable, civilian population.

This over-rides any concerns we may have about the legitimacy of military action in international law.”

The BINGO Media Unit fired off its own press release, warning that the UN must take the lead in coordinating any humanitarian relief operations in Iraq. BINGO’s director, Paula Starkley, spoke on BBC Radio 4’s noted “Today” program, saying: “We want to work under the auspices of the UN and not under the auspices of the military. We want the UN to take charge as quickly as possible.” “It is very important that we are seen to be impartial—we do not want to be seen as part of the war effort,” Starkley explained. The agency was walking a thin line in rejecting an attack on Iraq while simultaneously calling for increased funding for UN humanitarian operations:

BINGO still believes military action against Iraq would be unjustifiable at this moment because of concerns about civilian suffering and regional instability. However, if military action does go ahead, it is vital that the UN is given the international backing and funds to enable their response, says BINGO. “Money must flow through to the UN so that they have the funds to get really geared up,” said Ms Starkley.

The press release was widely picked up by the media. At 11:30 am on the same morning that she had appeared on the Today program, Paula Starkley spoke at the Foreign Press Association in London. She reiterated BINGO’s core messages, adding more detail about International Humanitarian Law and the necessity of protecting civilians in conflict areas. She emphasized the primacy of civilian humanitarian agencies in the delivery of humanitarian assistance:

Under most circumstances, UN agencies working with civilian humanitarian agencies deliver the most effective and appropriate response to crises. Any occupying power must fulfil its legal obligations under International Humanitarian Law and ensure the provision of food and medical supplies. However, as soon as the security conditions allow, civilian agencies—under UN leadership—should assume responsibility for delivering assistance. The UN is the only body with the international legitimacy to act as the coordinator of a humanitarian response and as a guarantor of a neutral transition to a new government.

Starkley concluded her remarks with a powerful and prophetic statement: “The one thing most likely to inflame the Middle East is a one-sided US occupation of Iraq.”

British Prime Minister Tony Blair echoed BINGO’s top-line advocacy message in a

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161 “A response from the British Overseas Agencies Group (BOAG) on the start of war in Iraq,” 14 March 2003. The statement was signed by the heads of Action Aid, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children UK.

speech at the House of Commons later that day (March 18), stating that the United Nations should have a key role in humanitarian aid and post-war reconstruction.

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On Wednesday, March 19, 2003, the United Nations Security Council held an open meeting on Iraq. Chief weapons inspector Dr. Hans Blix, Executive Chairman of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), made his final statement:

I naturally feel sadness that three and a half months of work carried out in Iraq have not brought the assurances needed about the absence of weapons of mass destruction or other proscribed items in Iraq, that no more time is available for our inspections and that armed action now seems imminent. At the same time I feel a sense of relief that it was possible to withdraw yesterday all UN international staff, including that of UNMOVIC and the IAEA. I note that the Iraqi authorities gave full cooperation to achieve this and that our withdrawal to Larnaca took place in a safe and orderly manner. Some sensitive equipment was also taken to Larnaca, while other equipment was left and our offices in Baghdad have been sealed.163

Secretary-General Kofi Annan delivered a statement after all the Council members and Iraq had spoken. “It is the plight of the Iraqi people which is now my most immediate concern, and I have been glad to hear that sentiment shared by all the speakers in this debate,” he said. “In the past twenty years, Iraqis have been through two major wars, internal uprisings and conflict, and more than a decade of debilitating sanctions.” He cautioned that “the conflict that is now clearly about to start can only make things worse—perhaps much worse.”164 On March 20, 2003, Coalition forces began military operations in Iraq.


The al-Karama border crossing between Jordan and Iraq was a dismal, desolate place. Strong gusts of bitterly cold wind raised salvos of sand and grit from the desert floor that blasted a troupe of journalists as we streamed off the bus provided for the occasion by the Jordanian Ministry of Information. Camera crews braced themselves against the gale as they dutifully set up their tripods and prepared to film. But to film what? The bus had stopped a hundred meters away from the fenced-in border zone, which we were forbidden to enter, and there was no traffic along the highway. A BBC cameraman told me that last week he had witnessed a lone Iraqi truck driver arrive at the al-Karama crossing on his way back to Iraq. The man had difficulty even climbing down from the cab of his truck, as he was immediately set upon by a swarm of journalists brandishing cameras and microphones and shouting a barrage of questions. Today, however, no one appeared. The only sign of life was a black dog chasing a plastic bag near a cluster of dilapidated shacks nearby.

The frustration on the bus was palpable during the hour-long drive back to Ruweished, a dismal and impoverished little Jordanian town that until its recent invasion by members of the foreign media was little more than a wide spot of oil-encrusted tarmac, the last outpost on the road to Iraq. The mayor of the Ruweished municipality, Khalid Shara’, had told me the day before that 1,500 newcomers—mostly international journalists and aid workers—had recently moved into the town of 12,000 people. “I’m sad that the only reason for this increase is the war,” he had said. “I’m certainly glad that the people of Ruweished have new opportunities for employment, but material gain is not our primary goal. We simply want to welcome our new guests and make them comfortable. I wish that they had come under happier circumstances, perhaps to see the interesting tourist sites and antiquities in the area.”

The journalists on the bus, having absolutely no interest in tourism or archaeology, were growing desperate. They had failed to find newsworthy stories, and unlike the stars of Seinfeld they would not get paid for a show about nothing. Perhaps to pass the time, a South Korean television crew interviewed other reporters on the bus. “What story are you working on today?” they asked my seatmate, a freelance video journalist. “Nothing, absolutely nothing,” he replied peevishly, chewing on an apple. “I was tired of sitting around Ruweished, so I came up here for a picnic.” As the camera crew moved down the aisle, I joked to my new

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I have borrowed (i.e., “remediated”) this evocative phrase from Thomas Friedman’s account of the US Marine Corps’ misadventures in Lebanon between 1982 to 1984. See Friedman (1991, 187-211).
friend, “you know the situation is desperate when we are the only story.” “No,” he muttered darkly, “you know the situation is desperate when we are the only story four days in a row.”

I had gone to the tightly-controlled border area in an attempt to verify reports that a reverse migration was taking place. Despite estimates by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that as many as 60,000 Iraqis might flee to Jordan in the coming weeks, not a single Iraqi refugee had yet arrived in the country. Rather, it seemed that hundreds of Iraqis are returning home to be with their families and, just maybe, to join the fight against the coalition forces that have invaded their country. The International Organization for Migration, which was monitoring the al-Karama border crossing, reported that 12 Iraqis traveling in four cars had left Jordan the day before, heading for Baghdad. During a press conference in Amman on Tuesday, March 25, Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher announced that Jordanian border guards have registered more than 4300 Iraqis returning to Iraq since the beginning of the war. Peter Kessler, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Amman, could not confirm the Foreign Minister’s statement. “We have no details on this move, and obviously any Iraqis who wish to go home are returning to their homeland. They are not refugees—they are citizens returning home. I don’t think the UN has anything to do with that. It’s a bilateral issue between Jordan and Iraq.”

The next morning, as I was having my breakfast of bread, hummus and tea at a sticky table in a small restaurant along Ruweished’s only major street, a dilapidated sedan braked to a halt outside. The car’s distinctive paint job—white, with bright orange fenders—was common to Iraq’s fleet of shared, long-distance taxis. A restaurant employee later told me that prior to the war, as many as 1,000 passengers a day used to pass through this grimy desert town in similar vehicles, traveling both to and from Iraq. Now that number was less than 50 a day—and they were all heading east.

Two men and a very young boy got out of the car, which was sagging under the weight of its heavy load. The rear seat was piled high with luggage, and what appeared to be a complete set of wicker patio furniture was lashed to the roof. They stayed only long enough to use the restaurant’s toilet, then climbed back into the car and roared off down the road toward the Iraqi border. They had no time to talk to the press. It was a long drive to Baghdad.

Second Wave: The Humanitarian Invasion of Iraq

Two months later, at 2:30 am in my apartment in Amman, I prepared to make the long drive myself. It was going to be my first trip to Baghdad, and I had no idea what to pack. I threw a few changes of clothing, some blank notebooks, and a carton of cigarettes into a green duffel bag. Then, remembering Douglas Adams’ sage advice in The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy—which should be required reading
for aid workers and anthropologists—I added a bag of peanuts and a towel.\textsuperscript{166} Then I took a taxi through the dark streets of the Jordanian capital to the Gondola Hotel, where Duke Hurdley, the BINGO security adviser, has been living for the past several months. Two white GMC Suburbans were idling at the curb, the drivers from Kamal Amro company eager to get on the road and make the border crossing by first light. Duke and I climbed into one of big vehicles—there are seats for seven passengers, plus room in the back for luggage. We made one stop to load some additional Jordanian passengers into the other Suburban, then drove to the BINGO office in Umm Uthainah, a few miles away. There was just enough time for a cup of Nestle instant coffee with the rest of the BINGO team (Jamie, Ralph and Laurent) before our convoy heads out of town.

Several hours later, after passing through five Jordanian checkpoints in the secure military zone, we arrived at Ruweished, where we stopped for breakfast at the famous restaurant with a huge bulletin board covered with journalists’ business cards. There were little notes as well, offering last minute advice for the journey: “Speed, determination and caffeine.” “Fill up with petrol in Ruweished, then again in Rutba. Top off from your jerry cans at Kilometer 160, then haul ass.”

We arrived at the Karama border crossing just as the sun was coming up over the desert horizon. Long lines of vehicles were already there, waiting for the border to open. There were several lanes of commercial vehicles, including dozens of oil tankers. A long line of cars, trucks, and tankers stretched through the no-man’s land separating the Jordanian and Iraqi customs and immigration areas. There were no Iraqi border guards in sight. None of the oppressive measures that once defined this crossing remain in place—no scrutiny or questioning, no searches, no mandatory AIDS test. Just a couple of US soldiers to wave us through.

We filled up with bootleg gas at a black market fuel station less than a mile inside Iraq. Then we formed a large convoy with other GMCS and headed down the road to Baghdad at over 100 miles an hour. Our convoy of rented GMC Suburbans raced along in tight formation, navigating the desert highway at speeds in excess of 120 miles per hour. The drivers pilot their massive vehicles with a nonchalance born of years behind the wheel. They maneuvered with Blue Angels-style precision, merging into a single-file line to roar past slower moving vehicles, then fanning out to cover the width of the highway so no one can overtake us from behind. Duke was

\textsuperscript{166} “A towel, [The Hitchhiker’s Guide] says, is about the most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have. Partly it has great practical value. You can wrap it around you for warmth as you bound across the cold moons of Jaglan Beta; you can lie on it on the brilliant marble-sanded beaches of Santraginus V, inhaling the heady sea vapors; you can sleep under it beneath the stars which shine so redly on the desert world of Kakrafoon; use it to sail a minirat down the slow heavy River Moth; wet it for use in hand-to-hand-combat; wrap it round your head to ward off noxious fumes or avoid the gaze of the Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal (such a mind-bogglingly stupid animal, it assumes that if you can’t see it, it can’t see you); you can wave your towel in emergencies as a distress signal, and of course dry yourself off with it if it still seems to be clean enough.” See The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, ch. 3.
fast asleep in the back seat by the time we passed the first bombed-out section of highway near Al-Rutbah. Our driver was serious and grim as the pancake flat desert gave way to greener foliage. We could see palm trees in the distance as we approached the oasis towns of Fallujah and Ramadi. We passed through this area without incident, despite a slew of bandit attacks on convoys such as ours in the past month.

**Baghdad: Positions and Position-takings**

On May 22, 2003, the day I arrived in the Iraqi capital, the United Nations Security Council passed a new resolution lifting the economic sanctions against Iraq that had been in place since August 1990. Fourteen of the 15 Security Council members voted to adopt the resolution, while Syria—the only Arab state on the council that month—boycotted the meeting. Security Council Resolution 1483 confirmed that the United States and the United Kingdom were “occupying Powers” in Iraq. It called upon them to comply fully with the obligations imposed by the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Hague regulations of 1907 on occupying forces and urged them to work towards the restoration of conditions of security and stability. It further called for the creation of conditions in which the Iraqi people could freely determine their own political future.\(^{167}\)

The very next day, Coalition Provisional Authority administrator L. Paul (“Jerry”) Bremer issued CPA Order Number 2, dissolving the entire Iraqi army and putting nearly 400,000 soldiers out of work. The Order also abolished the ministries and institutions that had formed the backbone of Saddam Husayn’s power structure and internal security apparatus, including the Ministry of the Interior, the intelligence agencies, Saddam Husayn’s presidential security units, and the Republican Guard. This move came just one week after Bremer’s radical “de-Baathification” policy (CPA Order Number 1) was announced, leaving some 30-50,000 members of the Iraqi Ba’th Party now banned for life from holding government jobs.\(^{168}\) Those two executive decisions together left over half a million Iraqi people—including most members of the technical and managerial classes, in addition to the skilled and

\(^{167}\) Resolution 1483 also granted a mandate to the UN presence in the country and provided for the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq. The SRSG’s responsibilities would include, among others, coordinating humanitarian and reconstruction activities, promoting the return of refugees, economic reconstruction and the protection of human rights, encouraging other restorative efforts and working intensively with the occupying Powers to establish the necessary institutions for representative governance in Iraq.

\(^{168}\) These moves ran directly counter to the analysis and recommendations of the many national security experts and Middle East scholars in the United States. In the report of a conference at the National Defense University in late 2002 on “Iraq: Looking Beyond Saddam’s Role,” it was recommended that the Iraqi army should be kept intact to serve as a unifying force in post-war Iraq: “In a highly diverse and fragmented society like Iraq, the military … is one of the few national institutions that stresses national unity as an important principle. To tear apart the army in the war’s aftermath could lead to the destruction of one of the only forces for unity within [Iraqi] society” (quoted in Ricks 2007, 73).
semi-skilled military and intelligence personnel—alienated, unemployed, upset and disenfranchised.

For the first few months after the humanitarian apparatus established itself in Baghdad, there were eleven coordination meetings each week conducted by the Coalition authorities alone—many of them redundant. By July, they had reduced this number to a handful of meetings. ‘coordination’ meetings conducted by the Coalition in Baghdad alone. By July, this number was reduced to a handful of meetings.”

The military-staffed Humanitarian Assistance Co-ordination Center—Baghdad (HACC-B) met at the Civil-Military Coordination Center (CMCC) near the Republican Palace in the Green Zone on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturday at 9 am. The Iraqi Assistance Center, a CPA-run body that liaised with national and international NGOs, had meetings at the old Convention Center on Saturdays, Sundays, Wednesdays and Thursdays at 5 pm. The NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) met on Mondays at 5 pm at the Baghdad Tower Hotel. The UN had a NGO meeting on Tuesdays from 9-11 am at the Canal Hotel.

By mid-summer it was hot as hell, even at night. Jamie and I sat out by the pool at the Hamra Hotel and ordered our dinner from the “Chinese” restaurant. Then we ordered a half-bottle of Scotch, followed by another. Helicopters were flying low, buzzing the rooftops. Back in the room, several hours later, I went out on the balcony to use the MCI phone issued for free by the CPA to international NGOs and government contractors in Iraq. The phone had a 914 area code—Westchester County, NY. Jamie called it the “devil’s phone.” The power in the neighborhood was out, and it was pitch black on our third-floor, street-side balcony, located about 15 feet above the pavement. As I talked on the phone, the red dot of a laser sight moved across the wall to my left and settled on my chest. I assumed it was an infantry patrol, but didn’t wait around to find out. I beat a hasty retreat.

The streets of Baghdad were chaotic the next morning. The traffic signals weren’t working, and there were no policemen to control the flow of cars through snarled intersections. In the absence of governing structures, regular civilian cars had become informal taxi cabs. Passing drivers would pull over to the side of the road, pick you up, and deliver you to your destination for 2000-3000 Iraqi dinars. Everywhere one could see the effects of the looting that had racked the city for the last six weeks since the fall of the Saddam statue in Firdaws Square, the traffic circle near the Palestine Hotel, on April 8, 2003. On one trip across town, passed a small yellow pickup truck, the bed piled high with window frames that have been torn out of the walls of government buildings. Later we passed a queue at a petrol station that was at least half a mile long and three cars wide. Our Iraqi driver said that the price of LPG bottles on the black market was currently 13,000 dinars in Basra and 4,000 in Baghdad. The pre-war price was 250 or 300 dinars.

\[^{169}\] For more on NGO-military relationships in Iraq, see Eric James (2003).
Inflation was so high that the money changers near the Palestine Hotel sold rubber-banded bricks of Iraqi currency by weight, rather than counting out the individual bills. The shops in the middle-class neighborhood of Karrada were bursting with “white goods,” the sidewalks stacked high overhead with cardboard boxes of refrigerators, washing machines, and other appliances. Satellite dishes, formerly banned under Saddam Husayn, quickly became one of the most popular items offered for sale, and there were thousands of them piled along a single city block on ‘Arasaat al-Hindiyya Street in the upscale shopping district.

The Al-Abraj Hotel was a small, squat building with 12 rooms in the Al Masbah district, a quiet residential neighborhood behind the German Embassy. It was right across the street from the MSF-Belgium office and just down the road from Première Urgence. The Al-Abraj, too, had recently acquired a satellite dish. The young men who worked at the hotel were glued to the television in the lobby, watching Al Jazeera during the day and tacky German porn at night.

The grass in the hotel’s enclosed front garden was mostly dead. A white plastic table and a few chairs served as the outdoor patio. Nigel, the BINGO Program Coordinator, sat at the table fussing with the cable connecting his laptop to a Thuraya satellite phone. He was attempting to replicate his Lotus Notes email database with the servers in Amman and London—a constant technical challenge. The first order of business was to report to headquarters with a security update and daily “sitrep.” The second was to connect with other NGO personnel to exchange information about security, meeting schedules, and other activities. Informal networking between agencies is an essential component of aid work. Despite the prevalence of written information, transmitted internally in the form of “sit reps” and externally in the form of press releases, policy papers, and other published reports, the community relies on a word-of-mouth network for daily operations. Coordination meetings were one important venue, parties would turn out to be another.

Much of the daily communication was done by VHF radio. These handheld two-way radios are low power, with a two-mile range at best—unless tall buildings get in the way, in which case the range drops significantly. But the UN had finally installed repeaters around Baghdad, creating more or less city-wide coverage. Aid workers used the radios to report their movements, to monitor security information, and to request rides from their agency or anyone else in the area. The most important use of the radios, however, was for coordinating parties. No one would admit this, of course, but it would be obvious to any keen listener:

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\[170\] VHF radio communication is by no means secure. One aid worker told the story of two guys working for “a certain NGO” in Afghanistan who had announced over the radio that they were standing outside the bank, “We’ve picked up the money,” they announced. “What time will the driver be here?” “Idiots,” the person telling the story had exclaimed. “Serves them right that someone relieved them of their cash.”

“This is Victor Charlie Three, go ahead.”

“Are you going to … uh … pass by our location tonight, over?”

“That’s affirmative. Do you need us to bring anything, over?”

“Can you give a ride to Papa Lima Four and Papa Lima Five? They will wait you at their location. Oh, and bring a case of … uh … toner for the printer, s’il te plait, if you still have some of that good stuff. Over.”

“Roger. See you around 1900. Victor Charlie Three out.”

Translation: the French were going to have a party at their house tonight. There would be booze and girls.

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Rosie Richards returned to Baghdad in June after a whirlwind lobbying trip to New York, London, and Brussels. Her written account of the next several days, written as both a personal narrative and an advocacy document, communicates richly the situation “on the ground” in mid-summer 2003.

2 June 2003

We leave dusty Amman early, arriving in Baghdad at an airport much more organized than when I last flew here in early May. On the tarmac there is a DHL plane and then we walk through dark cargo warehouses full of desert-camouflaged soldiers drinking strawberry juice and eating salted Pringles. They are lazing amongst piles of Ericsson mobile phone boxes. A young female American soldier registers us efficiently at the “NGO Reception Center.” While we are having our photographs taken for identity purposes, we notice a children’s drawing on the wall. It’s an American flag with a picture of a US trooper and a poem: “Roses are red, Violets are blue, You risked your lives, for me and for You!” The poem’s final “You!” raises a question many Iraqi people are asking—who was the invasion of their country for?

The driver from another international aid agency gives us a us a lift into the center of Baghdad. We slalom through a roadblock and past six truckloads of portaloos, while being told of recent attacks with rocket propelled grenades and mortars on coalition forces guarding the other Baghdad airfield. Later in the day another NGO describes how the coalition had failed to spot a poster that said “Long Live Saddam,” hung high in a bombed out building opposite their HQ in the Republican Palace, presumably because it was in Arabic. Right outside the Palestine hotel, on the
podium of the new statue erected to replace Saddam, is a piece of graffiti which has been erased and rewritten several times. It reads “All Donne, Go Home.”

In the afternoon we drive to the center of today’s Baghdad, the Office of the Coalition Provisional Authority in the Conference Center, across from the Rashid Hotel. The checkpoint procedures are far smoother than they were a month ago. The young, well-armed American soldiers at the dusty, sand-bagged gate have heard of our meeting and a female soldier is summoned to body-search me. At the NGO meeting we are told “good news” stories about the 7,000 policemen working in Baghdad and the schools in Karbala that have been cleared of explosive devices by the Coalition Forces. Nevertheless, military and intelligence analysts confidently predict increased attacks on the civilian part of the Authority—and also on international NGOs.

At the press briefing upstairs, Ambassador Bremer is telling journalists that his top priority is to turn the Iraqi economy around. The Authority wants to jumpstart trade, begin oil exports, create employment and reduce debt. It seems a strange list, when the Iraqi people I’ve talked to are mostly worried about robbery, rape and kidnapping. But people haven’t been paid a salary for months, so perhaps the motives behind the wave of criminal activity are economic after all.

3 June 2003

We go to the UN compound to attend a briefing for dozens of NGOs about security and the humanitarian situation in Iraq. There’s a lot of talk about “anti-coalition sentiment.” In Baquba, people are refusing to be paid by the Americans who, they think, should go home. In Baghdad yesterday there was a peaceful demonstration by a few thousand angry men—former soldiers from the disbanded Iraqi army demanding compensation and jobs.

Later, on the way to the UNICEF office we wind our way through congested noisy streets and past the slow, snaking fuel queues. At one junction which is always blocked, our Iraqi translator explains that the official traffic police who now returned to work (even though they are still not being paid) will have gone home as it is after midday. But there is a new informal system where local people manage their own roads. The motivated and well-placed wave of a volunteer’s hand seems sufficient to quell traffic tensions and get cars moving smoothly.

Outside the Palestine Hotel, the girl who a month ago was asking us for money to go to school tomorrow is nowhere to be seen – hopefully she is back at school rather than swelling the growing ranks of street children in post war Iraq. At the BBC office, we speak to an Arabic service correspondent who still sounds rather shaken as she recounts how she was car-jacked by four armed men in the late afternoon in central Baghdad a couple of days ago. They roughly yanked her out of the car and convinced the driver to surrender his personal car—his primary means of earning a living—by holding a gun to his head.
4 June 2003

Today we got lost driving across the city. While we tried to find our way, we saw lots of graffiti telling Americans to leave Iraq now and go home. US tanks block entire streets and young American soldiers with dark glasses and khaki bandanas point guns from the turrets of jeeps. Convoys of armored personnel carriers gesture violently for all other vehicles to get out of their way. A strange-looking armored vehicle with a box and two large guns perched on top passes us by. It is only when the box and the big guns swivel right around and rotate down to stare at us that we realize it is an anti-aircraft gun.

We go to buy take-away lunch—falafel, salad and chili sauce sandwich from a “Spanish” restaurant. At today’s exchange rate of 1,300 dinar to the dollar, our lunch bill of 1,000 dinar or 50 pence is expensive compared with yesterday. But it is difficult to keep up: a fortnight ago, a dollar was only buying 850 dinar and a month ago about 2,500. Near our Spanish/Iraqi restaurant there are several gleaming red fire engines, complete with hoses and puddles of water. The firemen haven’t been paid for months. Instead, they are spraying down dusty Baghdad houses and mosques for cash.

That afternoon we hear an upbeat speech from the Coalition’s liaison officers who run the Iraqi Assistance Center about Baghdad getting safer. There are more patrols, electricity is improving, people are being paid and more medical drugs are arriving for the warehouses. Some of it is true but it’s all happening far too slowly. It is also true that the princely sum of $1 million is being distributed daily to unpaid government workers. It sounds great—a million dollars is a fortune—but when the people getting the cash are trying to make it last an entire month and support the rest of Iraq as well, it works out at just over one dollar a month for every Iraqi. Where’s the oil money? Why isn’t Iraq rich? As many Iraqi people tell us, they are patient, they have already been patient for 35 years, but people can only be patient for so long.

Back in the hotel later that day, Haider gestures excitedly at the television during the BBC World Service “Hard Talk” program. A representative from Médecins Sans Frontières is being interviewed. He and his team stayed in the Al-Abraj Hotel for two months. During the war, two of his staff were kidnapped. Someone thought they were spies so they were held for 10 days in three different prisons before being released. The interviewer gives him a hard time for working in Iraq—are there bigger crises in the world? Sure, there are other countries in vast need but Iraq’s immediate problems do seem to have been caused by a foreign invasion so perhaps it is reasonable to expect the international community to help find solutions now.

5 June, 2003
An extravagant Iraqi breakfast at the home of an Iraqi friend starts the day. Fragrant black tea, potent thick coffee, early morning bakery bread and croissants, apricot jam and deliciously fresh tasting candied orange. Beautiful pastry delicacies are filled with dates—there are over 80 kinds of dates in Iraq. Before oil became the major export, and before Saddam Husayn chopped the date palms down in case snipers were hiding in the leaves, dates were a major export for Basra in Southern Iraq. Today, people in Baghdad won’t even eat the abundant tomatoes from Basra because they are worried about contamination from the depleted uranium the coalition artillery uses in its shells.

14-year-old Ahmad asks if we like Shakira or Eminem? We listen to pop music on his walkman and look at daytime TV—unfortunately all channels are noisy grey fuzz until evening time. Ahmad’s older brother Yusuf drives us, in a squeaking car with dubious brakes, around the Karrada neighborhood. We stop to talk to a lady called Ekram living with her husband and three children in a metal shipping container. She sold her nearby house just before the war to pay for her son to get out of military service. Her two daughters, Dua and Isra smile as we read a small piece of paper taped to the wall, which declares “Yes, yes, Mr. Bush. No, no, Saddam.” But they complain there is no security, no certainty and they still want freedom.

Ahmad and Yusuf take us to see a woman who is having a hard time in the new Iraq. At Umm Maryam’s empty house she gives us cola and apologizes for the lack of anywhere to sit: she sold the furniture five years ago to pay the rent. Her oldest daughter, Maryam, is diabetic but there is no insulin at the hospital. Her middle daughter, Nora, has rheumatism and they can’t afford the tests and analysis to find out what is causing the pain in her tummy. Umm Maryam works as a cleaner whenever and wherever she can but life is tough.

Last night, and for lunch today they ate only fried tomatoes. Cooking gas is hard to get hold of—Umm Maryam would have to skip work and join a four or five hour queue to buy some. There’s been no running water since before the war. A simple job such as washing clothes means carting heavy water bottles back around the block and then lugging them up two flights of stairs. Her hopes for the future don’t include much prospect for her. “I’m too old”—she’s only 38—“but I hope my children have some hope for the future, insha’allah,” she says. God willing.

The day ends with a surreal meeting about human rights in Iraq. It is chaired by a representative from USAID— the US government’s foreign aid arm —in a tall, hot, windowless room. Human Rights Watch announces that it is investigating possible human rights abuses by the Coalition Forces during the war, as well as alarming reports of post-war rapes and kidnappings of girls. Several Iraqi NGOs speak eloquently about the need for justice for the killings and torture of the past decades so that people can come to terms with the past and move on with their lives. Then, because the meeting is overrunning and we’re in danger of missing curfew, we
decide to discuss the exhumation of hundreds of thousands of bodies in mass graves next week.

* * * *

As the summer wore on, what was euphemistically call “the security situation” in Iraq deteriorated drastically. The number of attacks perpetrated against the Coalition military forces in Iraq rose from 117 in May to 307 in June to 451 in July. The widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in roadside ambushes made travel around the city and countryside exceedingly dangerous. There were also several targeted attacks against international humanitarian personnel. On July 20, an IOM vehicle was attacked on the road between Baghdad and al-Hilla. Gunmen opened fire on the vehicle and the driver was killed. Two days later, a Sri Lankan IT technician working for the ICRC was shot dead and his Iraqi driver wounded as well. The vehicle in which the two men were traveling was marked with highly visible red cross emblems, the most widely recognized symbol of neutral medical assistance in the world. So much for the protection of humanitarian principles.

The humanitarian community in Iraq held a wide range of divergent opinions and relationships with Coalition forces. In southern Iraq, some NGOs would drive their vehicles onto American bases to get fuel from the military. The bombing of the Jordanian Embassy on August 7, 2003, was a clear indication that anyone—including Arab diplomats—seen to be cooperating with the foreign occupation was a potential target. The devastating blast at the UN Canal Hotel on August 19 convinced many humanitarian agencies that it was increasingly impossible to operate in Iraq. All BINGO staff were evacuated to Jordan on August 26, as described in the opening pages of this dissertation, and the deputy director of the Emergency Unit flew from London to Amman to debrief the team and discuss our next steps. For the first time I began to understand the deep split between “policy” and “programs” that underlies much humanitarian work.

The international NGO response to Iraq demonstrates the limits—and ultimate failure—of modern humanitarian equipment. In 2003 there were communicable diseases to hold in check, no refugee camps to manage, no populations to survey. Yet from the perspective of contemporary humanitarian equipment, it was a fruitful scene of engagement. But without the clear indicators of humanitarian crisis, BINGO didn’t know how to make a case for its continued presence. “We don’t do policy without programs,” I was told time and time again. “But what if policy, advocacy, and media work is a program?” I would reply. “What if it’s the only program we’ve got that could actually make a difference in this situation?”

On August 29, the Imam Ali Mosque in the holy town of Najaf was hit by a suicide car bomber, assassinating the head of Iraq’s largest Shi’a political parties
and killing between 85 to 125 bystanders. A month later, Akila al-Hashimi—a 50-year old career diplomat and one of three women on the Iraqi Governing Council—was shot in the stomach outside her home in Baghdad; she died five days later. At a press conference on the day of her death, Lt. General Ricardo Sanchez dismissed the idea that Iraq’s security situation was out of control. In a week of violence that included a second bomb attack on the Canal Hotel on Tuesday, a car bomb outside the headquarters of NBC News on Wednesday, and IED attacks on US military convoys on Thursday, General Sanchez stated flatly: “There isn’t a security crisis in the country at this point” (Berenson 2003).

Contemporary Humanitarian Equipment

Rosie Richards and I embarked on another policy and advocacy tour in September 2003. In New York, we presented BINGO’s analysis and an overview of our humanitarian work at meetings with ambassadors, Iraq experts and political advisers at the British, French, Jordanian, Mexican, Russian, Turkish permanent missions to the United Nations, as well as to the UN Office of the Iraq Program, OCHA, ICVA, and the Open Society Institute. We held briefings for BINGO-US staff at their headquarters in Boston, and for BINGO-Canada staff in Ottawa. Then we flew to Brussels, where we met with the Director of the Mediterranean, Middle East, Africa and Asia Unit at the Council of the European Union, the Iraq desk officers at the Directorate General for External Relations at the European Commission, the head of the Middle East Task Force in the Policy, Planning, and Early Warning Unit at the EU Council, the Iraq team at ECHO, and the Spanish and UK Permanent Representation to the EU.

Everywhere we went, international diplomats and humanitarian technocrats spoke of being constrained by US policy towards Iraq. “You can talk to me until you’re blue in the face, but our hands our tied,” the deputy Russian ambassador to the United Nations told us in New York. “The Americans are controlling everything, and there’s nothing we can do.” The rhetoric of the Global War on Terror was all-pervasive. “This is about winning the war on terrorism,” White House press secretary Scott McClellan told reporters on 8 October, 2003. “And Iraq is the central front. ... So we’re going to continue to keep the American people informed as we move forward in this front on the war on terrorism and as we prevail in this front in the war on terrorism.”

At a two-day conference on Iraqi reconstruction, held in Madrid on October 23-24 and attended by representatives from 80 countries, international donors pledged $13 billion in addition to the $20 billion already promised by the United States. A joint needs assessment conducted by the United Nations and the World

171 Al-Hashimi had previously worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, managing Iraq’s relationship with international organizations and the UN Oil-For-Food program. In July 2003, the Coalition Provisional Authority appointed her as Iraq’s representative to the United Nations.
The World Bank estimated that reconstructing Iraq would require at least $56 billion over the next four years.

Three days after the Madrid conference, on the morning of October 27, the first day of Ramadan, there was a massive explosion outside the Baghdad headquarters of the ICRC, perhaps the world’s preeminent humanitarian organization. It was the first in a series of four car bomb attacks, all occurring within the space of 45 minutes at locations across Baghdad. The explosions killed at least 35 people and wounded 230, with 12 of the casualties occurring at the Red Cross site. The ICRC, which had been operating in Iraq continuously since 1980, withdrew most of its staff from the country. Many humanitarian NGOs followed. It was the beginning of the end of an era.
Interlude:  
Reflections on “Humanitarian Space” in Iraq

Tuesday, June 6, 2005, 5:36 pm. The late afternoon sun stretches across the upstairs patio at Kanabayé, a restaurant located right on the 3rd Circle in Jabal Amman. I’m sitting outside, enjoying a glass of ice-cold beer, as merging traffic honks its way onto the roundabout below. I’m en route from Cairo to London, with a week-long stopover in Jordan to conduct some interviews. Lance Darkly and I discuss the NGO workshop we’ve just attended.

AM: I think that all this talk about “humanitarian space” is a kind of a red herring, I just can’t quite put my finger on it. Furthermore, once you’ve gone low profile, you’ve got no transparency. Should international humanitarian agencies, or anyone for that matter, work in situations where there’s no transparency? If you have to pretend to be someone else, or not to be anyone at all, actually … because it’s not like aid workers in Iraq are disguising themselves as something else. It’s different from Special Forces operators in Afghanistan dressing up as aid workers to get into villages.

LD: How do they dress up? They wear Birkenstocks?

AM: Well, I guess it’s more that they already look like us. The Special Forces dudes are unshaven and a bit older than your average grunt. They’ve got longer hair, and they often wear civilian clothes. It requires an additional effort on our part to make ourselves distinct from them. Now, if every NGO worker in the world wore a clown wig on their head, or did something equally ridiculous, it might be hard to be taken seriously, but it would also be hard to be confused with the military.

LD: The Christian Peacemaker Teams always wear these reddish-pink baseball caps. They don’t wear them in Iraq anymore, but they still wear them in Hebron. But, look, why do we want humanitarian space? We have to be clear. It’s not because we don’t want to be kidnapped, or we don’t want to die. Those things are certainly true, but we mainly want it so civilian lives can be saved. That’s the issue with humanitarian space—if it’s lost, civilian lives are being lost. That’s the first issue. Not the fact that we’re being kidnapped.

AM: And where does the refusal of humanitarian action come into the equation? Why not say, “You know what, Uncle Sam? We’re not getting involved! This is your mess, and you’d better clean it up. You have an obligation under international law and the laws of occupation to handle this stuff. And if you don’t do it, we’re going to let the whole world know that you didn’t do it.” Not all needs are humanitarian needs. When there are massive reconstruction needs—roads and power networks, etc.—it probably shouldn’t be NGOs doing it anyway. I think the fundamental questions
about the nature of the crisis in Iraq haven’t been honestly addressed by all the NGOs that basically stormed the gates.

*LD*: All the NGOs that were being pushed to the gates by donor money.

*AM*: Or chasing relevance. No one said you have to go work in Iraq. But if you didn’t, you were completely irrelevant in 2003.

*LD*: That’s another thing to investigate. Just how do … what are the details of how donors commit their aid? So Andrew Natsios wants USAID stickers all over the place so America looks better. Okay, that’s one thing, but that’s pretty small.¹⁷²

*AM*: Well, the only ones who can answer that question—if they’re willing to be honest about it—are the NGOs that dance with the devil, if you will.

*LD*: People have this idea that aid workers should be poor and noble. What’s-his-name was pretty crude at the conference this morning when he said that we could all be making more money somewhere else.

*AM*: I think that’s not true for a lot of us.

*LD*: Well, I could be. Actually, no, wait a second. I am making more money now then I was in graduate school. I can buy groceries! I can go buy chicken breasts, because I just bill it all for food and household. I don’t have to worry about only buying pasta, rice and beans because I spent all my money on beer and cigarettes, you know? So actually, I’m making out all right. Part of the problem with that is we get these kids who don’t know what the fuck they’re doing. On one hand, I like that, because I was one of those kids. In some ways, I think I still am. So it’s this opportunity for people who don’t have any experience with this shit to realize, hey I’m pretty good at this. But then, you would think this work deserves experts.

*AM*: For the most pressing issues facing humanitarianism in the world of our time—not of all time, but of our time—for these issues to be left to the likes of you and me is actually kind of frightening. If Iraq is indeed the most complex and serious threat to the very notion of humanitarianism, as Antonio Donini, Larry Minear, David Rieff, Hugo Slim and others keep saying, then how come on the front lines, where

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¹⁷² Andrew Natsios, then-Administrator of USAID, had aired his frustration that local people in Iraq weren’t aware that the United States was making their life better: “They believe it is improving through mechanisms that have nothing to do with the U.S. government and nothing to do with the central government. That is a very serious problem. You want to know why we’ve chosen [NGO] contractors? I’ve told them, the contractors, if you even mention your own organization once, when you’re in the villages, I will tear your contract up and fire you. I actually said that in Iraq. I said, ‘You are an arm of the U.S. government right now, because we need to show the people of Iraq an improvement in their standard of living in the next year or two.’ ” Speech to a plenary session at the InterAction forum, Washington DC, May 21, 2003.
compromises are made on a daily basis, where principles are abdicated out of either ignorance or something worse, it’s *us*!

*LD:* Some people are saying that NGOs sent their second stringers to Iraq. Not true in all cases, but in a lot of them. On the other hand, the people in Iraq that I respect the most are ones that sort of found their gifts here.

*AM:* I think those are the ones you still find working in Iraq, but in the early days there were a lot of relatively senior humanitarian field workers here. There were some heavyweights setting up offices, developing proposals, deploying teams, leading teams into the field. But then the emergency pool, as always happens in every humanitarian crisis, rotates out. They’re on to the next big thing. The same people who set up BINGO’s programs in Iraq in 2003 also set up programs in Darfur in 2004, and then went off to set up programs for the tsunami response in early 2005. There is a kind of natural cycle.

*LD:* Changing the subject a little bit, one of the things that bothered me about this humanitarian space discussion is that so much of it seemed to be external. There is very little NGO self-examination. I was struck by seeing the Code of Conduct up there on the PowerPoint. That second half of it, about how the accountability to beneficiaries comes first. What a crock of shit! Or participatory decision making, together with the beneficiaries. It seems to me right now if those two things would be seriously done, then humanitarian space would be completely transformed.

*AM:* That one on building local capacities as well. Not capacity building, which is this other kind of paternalistic discourse…

*LD:* Exactly. But building on local capacities seems to be extremely difficult when it’s humanitarian aid. I mean, you’ve got 100,000 refugees, and they’ve just come over into Goma from Rwanda. Who’s there that knows anything about local capacities?

[we order another round of drinks]

*LD:* I’ve been bothered by this capacity-building working group name. What should we call it? I think it used to be “local NGO support” or “national NGO support.” Now it’s “civil society capacity-building”—and I don’t like both terms.

*AM:* Right. Why don’t we just call it westernization? Or liberalism’s outreach project?

*LD:* Write that down. The Liberalism Outreach Group. But there’s another question. How can you say that? I mean, okay, so you can say it to me, I can say it to you. I can say it to friends, but I can’t say that at a working group meeting. There are limits to the discourse. One of my organization’s theoretical pillars—how much it’s just theory, I don’t know—is that we’re not an implementing agency, because we assume that there is local capacity. We assume that there’s going to be community groups,
local churches, local NGOs. That capacity is already there, we just have to find it. Now, that’s easier in Palestine where there’s been civil society and a local NGO community for 50 years. It’s very different in Iraq. And then that creates its own set of problems.

AM: It’s funny, isn’t it? This whole local NGO, capacity-building thing takes you right into the heart of the beast, in a way, because George Bush’s democratic vision of a new, free Iraq is one peopled with these little civil society organizations doing various democratic projects.

LD: Well, it’s the same as his vision of America. Remember his old man? A thousand points of light? Remember his faith-based organizations?

AM: Sure. At the same time, this issue gets tangled up in all the fears around the war on terror. “Hey we can’t have just anybody setting up an NGO. What if it turns out to be a terrorist organization?” So there’s this fundamental tension in terms of US foreign policy between the desire for these grass roots, democratic organizations—the flowering blossoms of freedom and civilization—and the desire to control that proliferation somehow so that they don’t unwittingly become havens for, you know, “nests of terror.”

LD: That’s a concern that many international NGOs share too. So many of the capacity-building workshops start out with, what is an NGO? Here’s the Code of Conduct. This is what you’re going to be. We want you to be like us.

AM: Why don’t we set up mosque organizations? Partly because, like we were saying earlier, they already know how to fish.

LD: Sadr City didn’t need NGOs. Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr [the late Shi’a Grand Ayatollah] was a genius community organizer. And his son [Moqtada al-Sadr] picked up on some of that. That would be really interesting to study. Or look at Hezbollah. They’re good at that stuff.

AM: Yeah. In addition to being an armed resistance movement, Hezbollah is the largest provider of social services and welfare projects in Lebanon. Education, water, security, protection, you name it.

LD: And the whole neutral, non-partisan thing. Does anyone say that at home? I wonder how many people in this business ever worked with community-based groups in their hometown. Does anyone tell the NAACP they should be non-partisan? You’ve got church groups and radical democratic organizing groups that work in downtown Durham doing literacy training, and it never occurs to them to be
non-partisan. I’m not saying that international NGOs should model themselves on that, but they should be aware that local NGOs have that option.¹⁷³

AM: It’s one thing not to be formally constituted as a political party. It’s another thing to say you can’t have any political aspirations or activities.

LD: Right, or to say that you can’t be faith based. I mean, this guy today was pretty good at saying you can be faith based.

AM: The Code of Conduct says you can as well. I think the language goes, “not withstanding the right of humanitarian agencies to have religious or political beliefs, their work should strive to be non-partisan.”

LD: Right. Because World Vision has $700 million dollars.

AM: All the secularists have their humanist religion anyway.

LD: Exactly. But my point is that the local NGOs don’t pick up that there’s a French secularist teaching them.

AM: Yeah. There is something that needs exploring in this project around secularism.

LD: Especially in this part of the world.

AM: I’m just starting to realize something, after more than 10 years in the Middle East. The two things that people here want to talk about more than anything else are religion and politics. If you’re an organization that pretends to have nothing to say about either one of those things, how can you possibly be seen as relevant? In fact, as you say, it doesn’t matter if you have a difference of opinion about it, because people here thrive on differences of opinion. These apolitical, secularist NGOs might not be giving enough credence to the possibility that being apolitical and secular actually diminishes you in the eyes of the population. Now, clearly having certain religious views or certain and political views would be a problem. But open, frank discussion of religious and political differences is not a problem, within certain limits. Saying “I work for a humanitarian NGO, so I’m apolitical”—people are immediately suspicious. It’s unacceptable here to say that you have no religion. The simple fact is you have to have something to say about religion and politics.

¹⁷³ Fred Cuny, the legendary if controversial pioneer of alternative relief paradigms who was murdered in Chechnya in 1995, wrote something similar in an essay that was published after his death: “humanitarian neutrality in a civil war is a distinctly western concept, not necessarily welcome in the third world” (Cuny 1999, 146).
LD: And that gets sort of tough to say, too. Religion and politics is easy to talk about at home, where even the fundamentalists don’t want a theocracy.

* * *

LD: Back in the day, how missionaries operated was they’d go to a place like Meserete in Ethiopia, or Shirati in Tanzania, and they set up. They built a hospital, build a school, or a vocational training thing, and then there’s this sort of circle of missionary houses, four here, four here.

AM: Compounds. I’ve seen them.

LD: Yeah, compounds. Missionary compounds. But now, no missionary would ever do that. Now they’re all completely embarrassed about these places, because they seem so terribly colonial. Now the missionaries are always isolated individuals, couples, families living alone somewhere in Timbukthre. That is an example of missionaries learning their lesson, so to speak. But it gets completely reproduced in aid work. We’re all living in the same compounds. When the work day’s done, it’s just you and your aid worker friends drinking beer and getting lucky—mostly with each other.

AM: I made a note to myself to think more about this, the difference between an anthropologist and an aid worker. You know, anthropologists are the lone wolves, traditionally anyway. They’re supposed to go to places and immerse themselves in the local culture.

LD: Participant observers.

AM: Yeah, yeah. And they generally have lots antipathy towards the missionaries and the aid workers as well. The anthropologists posture themselves as the ones who know the language and the people and the culture. Of course, missionaries do that, too—sometimes even better than the anthropologists, because they’ve been there longer.

LD: Right, they’ve been there for 20 years. Look, Evans-Pritchard spent 11 months with the Nuer. He didn’t learn the language. Have you read V.Y. Mudimbe? The Invention of Africa is his big book. It’s kind of like Edward Said goes to Africa.¹⁷⁴ He

¹⁷⁴ Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), a definitive and widely-read contribution to postcolonial theory, has become the basic point of departure for any discussion of Western representations of the Middle East. Said defines orientalism as a discourse premised on the binary opposition between Orient and Occident and the belief in a fundamental inequality that places the latter in a perpetually superior position to the former. Said’s use of the term “discourse” suggests that orientalism occurs at multiple levels: it is a collection of texts, a mélange of “received ideas” and preconceptions, as well as the various institutions (academic, social, political, and military) that produce and proclaim these ideas. Said asserts that orientalist discourse is not merely a byproduct of political activity or of the history of contact between East and West, nor is it reducible to the misrepresentation of some “real” Orient. Rather, Said argues that these texts have produced reality by generating, promoting, and
hates the missionaries, but he says, look, we need to hate the missionaries, but at least they're better than the anthropologists. I mean, they do actually immerse themselves and learn three of the tribal languages, etc.

AM: Aid workers put a similar value as anthropologists on “being there,” but are they really there? That’s the question. Where are they? They’re generally living in shared housing with other aid workers …

LD: But there’s not many aid workers that don’t feel bad about that. Or at least there’s enough that realize it and think, what’s going on? And then they think of Père Robert or Father Vincent, you know, the old missionaries.

AM: The point of reference for aid workers is often the missionaries, or the nuns, like we were saying the other day. One of the things I asked people when I was doing formal interviews is, what is an example, a model of an aid worker that you most admire? And almost invariably it turns out to be some nun or a priest, someone who had been there for 30 years and didn’t make any money at all. They just lived with the people, and got sick when the people got sick, and got killed when the people got killed. There was no international advocacy, nothing. They were just there.

LD: There was no “missionary space.” So what now? I mean, do the aid workers give any explanation to why their lifestyle is so different, or how they feel about that?

AM: I don’t think I pushed people hard enough on that. “So why do you only go to aid worker parties, and why do you only sleep with aid worker girls?” The interesting tension for anthropologists, of course, was the idea of going native, which was actually seen as a bad thing, because in the old days you were supposed to maintain your objectivity. Sleeping with the locals was a very gray area, even though it’s widely done. And the few people who’ve actually written about it have been seriously savaged by the rest of the community.¹⁷⁵

reconstituting the relations of power. He maintains that the language and rhetoric of orientalism have fixed the limits of a common vocabulary for representing the “Oriental other” and supplied the principal classificatory structures through which the East can be encountered and understood.

The worldwide acclaim for Said’s book tends to overshadow the fact that he was by no means the first to make some of his central arguments. For examples of earlier treatments of orientalism in English, see Anouar Abdel-Malek (1963); Maryam Jameelah (1971); and Abdul Latif Tibawi (1965, 1979). A classic French study comparing the approach to Islam of five orientalists (Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, Becker, Macdonald, and Massignon) is Jean-Jacques Waardenburg (1970). Numerous books on orientalism were published in Arabic prior to Edward Said’s work, including Muhammad al-Bahi (1970); Muhammad Ghallab (1967); Anwar al-Jindi (1962); ‘Ali Husni al-Kharbutli (1976); ‘Abd al-Jalil ‘Abduh Shalabi (1978); and Zakariya Hashim Zakariya (1965).

¹⁷⁵ For example, many critics have weighed in on Paul Rabinow’s (1977) sparse, three-paragraph account of his one-night stand with a Berber prostitute who worked for one of his chief informants. Clifford (1997, 72) applauds his honesty, noting that sex and sexuality are no less of a concern while “on the road” than they are at home, while others uphold the traditional disciplinary taboo on such behavior and question the ethics of “sex with informants” (e.g., Goode 1999). Esther Newton (1996, 226) provides a more biting comment on the affair in an article that foregrounds her own erotic entanglements during the course of research: “Malinowski struggled to keep himself pure, and Rabinow saw no ethical difficulty in his sexual behavior in the field. Yet it is hard to see why, if
LD: I remember my first pre-field orientation back in 1995. You were warned against going native. You don’t want to be an outsider, but you don’t want to go native.

AM: And maintaining that insider/outsider balance is tough. It’s less tough for these NGO aid workers because the barriers are pretty solid. They’re ones riding around the Land Cruisers. They’re the ones going home from the camps at night. Often it’s under the sign of “security procedures,” or whatever, but the barriers between them and the community are pretty rigid. It’s quite disconcerting to be an anthropologist among the aid workers and to recognize the fact that it’s really easy to fall into these same patterns myself, to replicate the same problem. I went to NGO parties and I slept with NGO girls. I wasn’t different.

LD: It’s part of the appeal, you know. This is like college, except the people are more interesting—and they’re a lot prettier. Or rather, what you find here are the interesting people from college who have actually tried to be equal to their demand for a fairer world, to use Oxfam’s old tagline. They might have grown disillusioned with that demand by now, but they’re the ones who were chasing it. It’s an interesting group, and there’s no reason not enjoy it and like it. Although maybe some people like it a little too much.

AM: That’s something else that has to be explored in terms of motivation. There is a tendency to be disaster junkies. There’s an adrenaline thing. A lot of us like taking some risks, within reason—a reasonable risk, if there is such a thing.

LD: Love is a reasonable risk.

AM: Well, it’s been an unreasonable one, in my experience.

LD: Fair point.

AM: And there are lots of reasons why people do this stuff. I mean, it’s like you-know-who was saying today in his boring little story about going to join this charity organization. It took him a long time to make a very basic point.

LD: Yeah, but there was something there.

AM: He was saying, “I’m here for the girls and the danger.” But that’s about as taboo as saying that we’re the vanguard of liberalism. We’re the foot soldiers of this westernization project.

our power as anthropologists to name the subordinated ‘other’ poses an ethical problem, the power to screw them doesn’t.”
LD: Right. I remember one time back in March 2004, I wrote this letter to a good friend at home saying, “what the fuck am I doing here?” I had to remind myself—and I had only been here for 2½ months. The list was 8 things long, and that wasn’t even all of them. I couldn’t really prioritize them, or even decide which was a good or a bad reason. I just listed them all, saying, “do with this what you want.” And I bet you could get a lot more than eight.

AM: One of things that is attractive about this work is a certain kind of friendship that’s available. A certain kind of community.

LD: Yeah, and it’s a community in the midst of in a conflict situation, so it automatically becomes more intense. But it’s intensity without commitment, because everyone’s leaving. Which is a good thing sometimes.

AM: Especially in intimate relationships. There’s no question of, you know, “is this about forever?” No, this about till we meet again in Burundi, or Congo, or wherever. “Hey, weren’t you that girl that worked for that one agency in Afghanistan? Didn’t you get drunk and fall into my bed a few times?” Intensity without commitment, indeed.

LD: It also has the commonality of a religious community, where everyone shares the same texts, right? The SPHERE project, the Code of Conduct. There’s an instant commonality that doesn’t have to be worked at.

AM: That’s a really good point. But it does have to be worked at, as well, because you have to constantly induct new members into the community. There’s a certain pedagogy that takes place.

LD: Right, which has been part of my problem with this community. I came from Stanley Fish’s Duke, where my advisor was Stanley Hauerwas. It was kind of embarrassing, even disgusting, for a lot of us, but TIME magazine named him America’s Best Theologian. His whole shtick has been anti-liberal. The churches have sold out, they’re too liberal. The cover of one of his books is a Bible wrapped in an American flag. So I got here already immunized to this whole liberalism/secularism business. I had published a paper on Hardt and Negri’s book, so I already knew we’re the mendicant orders of global capital. I already hated the term “capacity building.” I’d read Foucault and Deleuze on civil society, so I was, like, what? I spent my whole first year in Jordan and Iraq saying, “keep your mouth shut, Lance. Keep your graduate school bullshit to yourself. You’re in the real world now. Stop being an egghead.” And now I actually think I should have been talking all along, because I was right.

AM: What were you right about?
**LD:** Well, that local NGO capacity building is westernization. That anytime an NGO spends 90% of its time reporting to ECHO and not talking with the beneficiaries, there’s a serious, serious power problem. Or that secularism, while not quite a religion, is an ideology of its own that absolutely doesn’t deserve the title of impartiality or neutrality. Or rather, that impartiality and neutrality are simply part of this kind of religion. I guess I’ve started to think of those critiques of the aid industry the way I think of the same critiques of power/knowledge in the university. They’re right, but I’m still glad I went to graduate school. I’m still going to be a professor.

**AM:** Maybe without any of the sophisticated, analytical apparatus of western self-critique, local people actually “get it” in a basic and visceral way. They say, “hang on now, you guys are actually agents of some foreign government policy.” They don’t have to know what Colin Powell or Andrew Natsios have said about NGOs.\(^{176}\)

**LD:** They don’t even have to say you’re an agent of a foreign government policy. All they have to say is, “you didn’t consult me about it.”

**AM:** NGOs respond to that by saying, “we need a community-based acceptance strategy.” Well maybe they need to be a little more transparent, which requires more honesty and self-awareness, as well. What are they doing here? There are probably not a lot of people that will respond well to it, but it would be interesting to sit a bunch of people down individually like one-on-one and say, okay look, let’s just cut out the crap and all the typical vocabulary that we normally use to describe what we’re doing, and let me ask you, Maurice, or whoever, what are you really doing here?

**LD:** I wonder how that conversation would go. The self is never transparent to itself. It needs to be in conversation that can be confrontational and argumentative, and a safe place for that is friendship. Friendship is the key category. And a friend, as Aristotle said, is another self, the mirror to myself, so I can only be exposed to what I am through conversations with the other.

**AM:** Paul Rabinow said something almost identical to that in *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*.\(^{177}\)

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\(^{176}\) In a 2001 speech during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Colin Powell said: “As I speak, just as surely as our diplomats and military, American NGOs are out there serving and sacrificing on the front lines of freedom. … I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team.” Colin L. Powell, “Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations,” US Department of State, Washington DC, October 26, 2001.

\(^{177}\) A number of commentators have misread *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Rabinow 1977) by ignoring the issue of friendship raised in the last part of the book. Clifford Geertz, for example, completely misses the connections between *philìa*, philosophy, and fieldwork—arguably the central concerns of Rabinow’s text—while disparagingly referring to Rabinow’s textual presence as a “pal, comrade, companion—copain, to stay in the idiom—knocking about here and there . . . a rather obliging figure, as much bemused as anything else, carried along in a flux of largely accidental, generally shallow, often enough transient sociability” (Geertz 1988, 93). Lila Abu-Lughod, who claims that the string of informants in the book are ordered “by their increasing ‘otherness’,” asserts that “this
LD: Really? I should probably read that. But aid workers don’t become vulnerable to beneficiaries in that way. They might think they’re doing so when they listen to their local staff. But they never, ever do that with beneficiaries, unless they’re aggressively working at or participating in a grassroots community organization. And I think that’s a myth, except for the people working in Latin American liberation theology.

AM: That’s a really good point, because friendship does entail vulnerability.

LD: And it takes time. You’re not going to treat someone you meet on your first day in Fallujah the way I’m going to treat Henry [a close friend], for example. You’re not going to have the same sort of ability to understand, to be critical, and so forth.

AM: In humanitarian emergencies, you find aid workers seeking solace and friendship with each other. Those are the sites of self-examination and critique, when people get drunk or stoned and start really opening up to each other. The real question is how friendship, with the vulnerability and analysis it offers, serves simultaneously to structure the field of humanitarian action as well as to organize and enable my own particular research project.

LD: This would also be an angle from which to read Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures and to criticize it, in so far as you don’t get enough conversation between the three authors to get a good answer to the question.178

AM: Absolutely. In fact, that’s the only book that I’m aware of that makes friendship the organizing principle of narrative and analysis. In that sense it’s kind of interesting, but it’s also deeply inadequate. Because what these friendships offer is

progression serves as the narrative drama of the book whose climax is his final confrontation with utter ‘otherness,’ a confrontation that makes him decide it is time to go home, hardly a year after he has begun fieldwork” (Abu-Lughod 1989, 276). Building on Abu-Lughod’s position, Anne Beal adds that Rabinow’s text “strongly suggests that there cannot be any understanding between the two [Moroccans and Americans]” (Beal 1995, 296). This is the basis of her claim that Reflections reinscribes an Orientalist conception of the world as irrevocably divided between East and West. These criticisms do not take into account the final paragraph of the book, where Rabinow clearly says about Driss ben Mohammed: “He did not live in a crystalline world of immutable Otherness any more than I did. . . . Our Otherness was not an ineffable essence, but rather the sum of different historical experiences” (162). Rabinow’s discussion of his relationship with ben Mohammed has clear Hegelian overtones: “There were now two subjects facing each other. . . . We were profoundly Other to each other.” But the emphasis is placed on warmth and the possibility of dialogue: “We had become friends, we had shown each other mutual respect and trust” (Rabinow 1977, 161). While maintaining some affinities with the need for mutual recognition posited by Hegel in the lord-bondsman relationship, Rabinow’s treatment of friendship sets aside Hegel’s “trial by death” in favor of an Aristotelian approach where two people “must be mutually recognized as bearing goodwill and wishing well to each other” (Rabinow 1977, 142). He is quoting from the Nicomachean Ethics, Book VIII, Chapter 2 (see McKeon 1941, 1060). The notion of friendship or philia as an ethical and epistemological practice is developed more fully in Rabinow (1996, 13-15).

private vulnerability. The second that friends come together in public to speak about what they’re doing, all that is gone. All the fixed, predictable justifications are back. The veil that protects you from …

[The tape recorder is turned off mid-sentence. Two women join our table, and the conversation shifts to predictable themes.]
Conclusion

What I’m trying to pick out with this term [dispositif] is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (Foucault 1980, 194)

This dissertation has identified changes in both the object and subject of humanitarianism in the contemporary world, using the case of Iraq as a lens to make these changes visible. Nearly two decades of conflict in Iraq formed the backdrop for the workings of a specific, territorialized humanitarian apparatus. From Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 through the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the various elements of this apparatus framed Iraq as a humanitarian problem—one to which humanitarian intervention was a self-evident solution. This process itself was certainly not unique to Iraq, although the particular forms the humanitarian apparatus took—its shifting ensemble of actors, organizations, and institutions; moral propositions and philanthropic commitments; technologies and procedures; and political, technical and scientific discourses—together with the biopolitical effects these discourses produced, are situated at a specific historical conjuncture.

Post-World War II claims about “humanity” and the “humanitarian imperative” found new traction in post-Cold War contests and negotiations that pose a fundamental challenge to the territorial sovereignty of states. A coterie of human rights groups, humanitarian and development NGOs, journalists, political activists and other knowledge workers have taken up the rallying cry for a program of universal rights and obligations also labeled “human.”

Over twenty years ago, Larry Minear wrote an article titled “The Forgotten Human Agenda.” Reading it again today, it is uncanny how similar Minear’s claim is to what was being said in 2003–2004 about Iraq—simply substitute “Bush” for “Reagan” and “terrorism” for “communism”:

U.S. foreign policy, always an arena of tension between political and humanitarian goals, has recently elevated the ideological over the humane. However successful the Reagan administration’s anticommunist foreign policy has been, its impact on human beings has been grave. Aid to meet human needs has become politicized. Foreign economic and military policies have
compounded human suffering and deprivation. Respect for international humanitarian institutions and laws has ebbed. (Minear 1988, 76)

Much of the way humanitarianism is discussed by the humanitarians themselves—the “first-order observers,” in the analytical vocabulary of Niklas Luhmann (1998)—doesn’t allow us to see where the real fault lines lie. Claims such as Minear’s are not external, second-order observations. Rather, they are constitutive components of the humanitarian apparatus itself. There is widespread nostalgia for an imagined past, a Golden Age of humanitarian action when aid workers were all apolitical (and thus weren’t targeted and killed in action) and humanitarian space was stable and guaranteed. Most aid workers continue to valorize the ICRC and MSF as the vanguard of principled humanitarian action; this view is adopted by critics outside the humanitarian apparatus as well (e.g., Rieff 2002). In fact, these organizations invented the very same moral geography in which they are now held up as exemplars. The ideological humanism of Henry Dunant was wedded to the cocky anti-authoritarianism of Bernard Kouchner to create a whole new moral universe of is/ought, plus an affect and an orientation for practical activity—in short, an ethos.179

In the face of an intensification of explicit linkages between humanitarianism and US foreign policy, many civilian aid workers complain about the “ politicization of aid” and the erosion of “humanitarian space.” Such actors often assert that humanitarianism itself is now in question, if not in crisis (Barnett and Weiss 2008; Donini et al 2008; Minear 2002, 2003, Rieff 2002). Government and military personnel, on the other hand, increasingly question the effectiveness and relevance of independent NGOs and private aid organizations. Questions of legitimacy, authority and sovereignty remain paramount, although their contours are shifting. A struggle has ensued over who has controls the legitimate use of the language of “helping people.”

Private, voluntary aid organizations, once the primary actors in the relief sector no longer hold the exclusive copyright on humanitarian action. Vote-seeking governments and profit-seeking companies alike have adopted the rhetoric of humanitarianism to achieve strategic objectives, build public support, or justify other agendas. Government technocrats, military forces, and private military/security companies are deploying the discourses and practices of humanitarianism with

179 Bernard Kouchner’s career trajectory—from student radical, to volunteer doctor with the French Red Cross, to co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières and Médecins du Monde, to UN Special Representative in Kosovo, to three-time Minister of Health and ultimately Minister of Foreign Affairs in France under Sarkozy—a 2007 appointment that led to his expulsion from the Socialist party—could be the subject of several PhD dissertations. For less than flattering accounts of Kouchner’s personal involvement in Rwanda, see Dallaire (2003) and Orbinski (2008). Suffice to say, his career indicates the entanglement of “non-governmental politics” with the structures and strictures of formal state politics. (Thanks to Mariane Ferme for noting this salient fact.) What, if anything, this prefigures for the fate of humanitarian NGOs remains to be seen.
increasing frequency. Divergent activities and agendas often are masked by a common vocabulary of charity, benevolence and moral virtue.

For many first-order actors in the humanitarian apparatus, the legitimacy and autonomy of “humanitarianism” is self-evident. Alex de Waal, on the other hand, has argued that despite the self-importance of humanitarian agencies, with their repeated claims that aid is indispensable in times of crisis, “relief is generally merely a footnote to the story of how people survive famine” (de Waal 1997, 1). De Waal’s response—in practice as well as in print—has been to reject operational humanitarian aid in favor of research, advocacy, and political lobbying. How to reconcile these two views?

**Condemned to Repeat, Again?**

It is clear from reviewing the historical and contemporary practices of “humanitarian equipment” in Iraq, that the global humanitarian apparatus—what de Waal disparagingly terms the “humanitarian international”—is caught up in its own mystifications and misrecognitions (Bourdieu 1990). The self-descriptions provided by elements of this apparatus do not match the reality of what happened on the ground in Iraq.

The humanitarian apparatus that responded to the Gulf crisis in August 1990 was ill-equipped for the operational challenges that lay ahead, not to mention the political and ethical entanglements that ensued. Organizations like BINGO—still largely attached to a “Third World development” model that they themselves had invented—had neither the concepts nor the technical and organizational capacities to respond to the full complexity of the crisis. In 2003, more than a decade later, many of the same mistakes were repeated.

The withdrawal of most humanitarian NGOs from Iraq, as described in the opening pages of this dissertation, is by no means the only example of the humanitarian apparatus in retreat. Fiona Terry, former head of the French section of MSF in the Rwandan refugee camps in Tanzania in late 1994, presents a detailed and insightful analysis of the problem in *Condemned to Repeat: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (2002). Writing of eastern Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), Terry states:

> “With the best intentions, aid organizations had come to their assistance, and, with the gravest concerns for their future, the aid organizations withdrew. At that point, the agencies had realized the limits of humanitarian action, but it was too late. The limits had been exceeded long before, but they had continued to play along as if meeting the material needs of the refugees translated into a humanitarian act.” (Terry 2002, 216)
Terry concludes that “humanitarian action will never attain perfection. Rather than aiming for a first-best world, we must aim for a second-best world and adjust to that accordingly” (2002, 245)

The global humanitarian apparatus itself may very well be in need of “reconstruction” in John Dewey’s sense—that is to say, a reflective and conceptually rigorous inquiry that engages with and improves present conditions. This reconstruction would entail the design and construction of new “equipmental platforms” (Rabinow & Bennett 2007) that would enable alternative and improved practices. Such a task, however, is beyond the scope of the present dissertation.

In a polemical essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Friedrich Nietzsche argues that “the oversaturation of an age with history” (1997, 83) is detrimental to a healthy, vital, vigorous life. Rather than presupposing a fundamental rupture between past and present, Nietzsche’s phrase implies that the past inhabits and even saturates the present. He highlights the presence of the past in the present—the remainder, the residue, the remnant. Nietzsche goes on to specify three types of history—antiquarian, monumental, and critical—and to argue for a necessary balance between memory and forgetting. This is a common theme in Nietzsche, most prominently in The Genealogy of Morals where he argues that forgetting is an essential part of what it means to be free—to free yourself from the bonds of history.

In Part Two of his essay On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche (1967) outlined an altogether different theory of the relationship between memory and the body. Expanding on Hegel’s discussion of the lord–bondsman dialectic, Nietzsche took up the linkage between pain and debt, arguing that the technologies of memory are the painful means by which one’s debts are inscribed on the body—the pang or “bite” of conscience that is one source of the “slave” or “herd” mentality. Nietzsche called for an active forgetfulness to counteract and resist the pains of tradition. This forgetting, however, may be a luxury that neither anthropologists nor humanitarian aid workers cannot yet afford.

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180 Dewey writes: “reconstruction can be nothing less than the work of developing, of forming, of producing (in the literal sense of that word) the intellectual instrumentalities which will progressively direct inquiry into the deeply and inclusively human—that is to say, moral—facts of the present scene and situation” (Dewey 1948, xxvii). The ultimate goal of such work is the attainment of “a more ordered and intelligent happiness” (Dewey 1948, 27).

181 Gilles Deleuze grasps the radical monism underlying Nietzsche’s temporality: “How are we to understand this closeness between the future and the past? The philosopher of the future is the explorer of ancient worlds, of peaks and caves, who creates only inasmuch as he recalls something that has been essentially forgotten. That something, according to Nietzsche, is the unity of life and thought. It is a complex unity: one step for life, one step for thought. Modes of life inspire ways of thinking; modes of thinking create ways of living. Life activates thought, and thought in turn affirms life. Of this pre-Socratic unity we no longer have even the slightest idea.” (Deleuze 2005, 67)
This dissertation argues that the discourses and practices of the humanitarian apparatus are neither stable nor self-evident, although an ever-present rhetoric of “helping people” and “doing good” gives the appearance that things are the same. To this end, it has constituted a different analytical object (the humanitarian apparatus) and created a new distinction (humanitarian equipment)—an approach to humanitarian action that doesn’t rely on simplistic first-order distinctions such as humanitarianism vs. politics, or aid workers vs. the military. “Politics” versus “humanitarian principles” is a false dichotomy. Rather, the pervasiveness of politics—that is to say, power relations—is total. There is no non-political space of humanity.

“Humanitarian space” is a discursive construct—a frame inside which action and affect are organized. It is not something pre-established and self-evident. It is created by declaration, and it is demarcated by the very conversations that seek to defend it. The domain of humanitarian action itself becomes an ongoing negotiation—not a contested terrain or “space,” per se, but the contest itself. This contest is characterized by the presence, not the absence, of politics.

Humanitarianism is not in crisis, although it may be at an impasse. It is also not experiencing a paradigm shift—at least not in the way that it’s often described. The case of Iraq demonstrates how little willing the humanitarian apparatus is to really take stock of itself and engage in a process of critical inquiry and reflection. What remains the same is the claim by first-order actors in the humanitarian apparatus that something “new” and “troubling” is emerging, a novel challenge or threat. This claim is ever present for the simple reason that is the mode of contemporary humanitarian equipment: vigilance and urgency. “Humanity must be defended,” the high priests of humanitarianism proclaim. New threats must continuously be identified and monitored—threats to the objects of humanitarianism (the vulnerable, suffering human) as well as threats to the subjects of humanitarianism (actors and agencies).

Pain and privation exist in the world, but suffering must be “produced.” Classical and modern humanitarian equipment treat suffering as self-evident, while the operations, mediations, and remediations of contemporary humanitarian equipment provide a rhetorical and visual toolkit to produce and circulate figures of suffering. Indeed, the production of suffering is one of the discursive effects of the humanitarian apparatus. Thus, the “problem of suffering” is not a problem in the world—just as earthquakes are not a problem for the earth. Paraphrasing Luhmann, the world knows no problems (he says “risks”), “for it knows neither distinctions, nor expectations, nor evaluations, nor probabilities—unless self-produced by observer systems in the environment of other systems” (Luhmann 1993, 6).

What ground is there, then for practices of freedom and for thinking “the human” differently? Not all needs are “humanitarian” needs, and even the most basic necessities of life—food, clean water, medicine, shelter—are managed and
distributed in a biopolitical model that locks both the aid workers and their “beneficiaries” into modes of pastoral power (see Foucault 2007, 125-190). The problem of humanitarianism today cannot be solved by technical innovation or increased accountability or improved bureaucratic efficiency. These tactics and practices merely reproduce the power relations and discursive effects that perpetuate the humanitarian apparatus itself.

This simple, uncontestable fact is that non-governmental organizations are themselves part of a governmental matrix. They are not state or territory based, but they nonetheless extend forms of management and control over individuals and populations. Invoking the rhetoric of “classical humanitarian equipment,” humanitarian NGOs justify their technologies of power and control with figures of anthropos—the malnourished child, the displaced person, the suffering human being. These figures are not themselves the object of their intervention, which remains largely the population. But they endorse an alternative form of sovereignty—one that is mobilized around “humanity” rather than the state territory. The fate of both forms is now in question.

Foucault characterizes this form of power relations as that of shepherd to flock, noting its specifically Christian overtones: “The shepherd (pasteur) serves the flock and must be an intermediary between the flock and pasture, food, and salvation, which implies that pastoral power is always a good in itself” (Foucault 2007: 128).
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