



THE  TIMES

Freedom at a terrible price

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To understand the current insurgency in Iraq, one must return to April 28, 2003 — the day when relations between locals and US troops started to head south. Three weeks after a bronze edifice of Saddam Hussein was pulled to the ground in Firdus Square, Baghdad, 13 Iraqis were killed when US forces opened fire on demonstrators in Fallujah, an almost exclusively Sunni town of about 250,000 inhabitants situated on a bend in the Euphrates. As locals started to bury their dead, back in Firdus Square Iraqi resistance was expressed in graffiti painted on the vacant base where Saddam once stood monumental. “All done,” read the sign, imperfect in its spelling but unmistakable in intent. “Go home.”

The portrait of Fallujah, a town which until recently was run by Sunni warlords as a jihadist dominion — its clerics brutalised its inhabitants and harnessed the desert landscape for a campaign of murders, kidnappings, suicide bombings, ambushes and, according to some reports, beheadings — illustrates the semi-dreamlike tone of *The Freedom: Shadows and Hallucinations in Iraq*, by Christian Parenti, a furious jeremiad against the country’s post-Baathist rulers.

After the April 28 killings in Fallujah, Iraq erupted in a series of uprisings. On July 31, about 10,000 men in Najaf enlisted in the Islamic army set up by Moqtada al-Sadr, the self-appointed leader of Shia opposition. This culminated in the audacious bombing of the United Nations’ mission headquarters in Baghdad on August 19, killing Sergio Vieira de Mello, the UN’s Special Representative to the country, and 21 fellow workers.

Parenti — a regular contributor to *The Nation* whose previous works include *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* — finds Fallujah a microcosm of a wider Iraqi quandary. American Marines, “big-boned, well armed, often meaning well but almost always totally ignorant of who and what they are dealing with”, clash with dissenting clerics, local shooters and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

No less perilous are his encounters with the disciples of war, extreme tourists and joyriders like Michael Tucker who have a scent for the battlefield. Tucker, armed with a Gurkha knife, wears pale desert camouflage under a Peshmerga vest and carries a satchel that reads, “Mike Tucker, Author”, written with a black magic marker. He toasts the “gods of war” and eulogises the redemptive power of “the force”. As an author, Tucker claims to have written a book on the Kurds. In fact, he has never been published. Of the encounter, Parenti writes: “It is the Conradian end of the river where empire’s lawless opportunities mix with personal madness to form a potent political and psychedelic cocktail.”

Having witnessed the turning of the tide in Iraq, where guerrilla fighters regularly lure American troops into battle, Parenti has written an altogether sobering piece of field journalism. One young Iraqi, Akeel, 26, best sums up the new Iraq — and the desperate note of sadness struck by this book — by saying: “Ah, the freedom. Look, we have the gas line freedom, the looting freedom, the killing freedom, the rape freedom. I don’t know what to do with all this freedom.”

In stark contrast, Asne Seierstad’s *A Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal* has little of Parenti’s delirious violence, nor any of its fury. In truth, this is perhaps because Parenti spent more time travelling around the Sunni triangle, an area robustly targeted by the Iraqi resistance.

Over distinct timeframes — the book is split into three chapters, *Before*, *During* and *After* — Seierstad, whose previous book was *The Bookseller of Kabul*, provides a tender journal of her 101 days in Iraq’s capital. Her Baghdad is a city swarming with opportunity; where corrupt members of the Baath Party charge journalists over \$200 a day for the right to cover the regime’s dying gasps. As in any capital city, wealth, and the pursuit of wealth, drives the collective consciousness. At the end of the war, this was painfully demonstrated by the opportunistic and some would argue cathartic looting that took place. I remember interviewing a young man in Basra who, after breaking into a bank with a schoolfriend, was savagely beaten by his accomplice after a dispute over who would keep the lion’s share of the prize. Seierstad’s recollection of postwar anarchy, while gentler than Parenti’s energetic chronology, is similarly emotive. Outside the Ministry of Agriculture in Baghdad, she witnesses horse-drawn carts laden with computers, televisions, desks, chairs and electric fans. “They said they were opening the doors to freedom,” says one onlooker. “They have opened those to chaos instead.”

While Parenti and Seierstad have both sought to illustrate Iraq using Iraqi interpretations, David Zucchino’s *Thunder Run: Three Days in the Battle for Baghdad* is an all-out American swashbuckler, glorifying how the Second Brigade of the Third Infantry Division punched a hole through central Baghdad towards Saddam’s presidential palace. A foreign correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, Zucchino writes with an innocent’s glee for warfare — and the behaviour it inspires in US troops. His book rarely tries to climb the rapidly crumbling sand dunes of initial optimism felt in the immediate aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Freedom: Shadows and Hallucinations in Iraq by Christian Parenti (*The New Press*, £12.99; offer £10.39) Buy the book

A Hundred and One Days: A Baghdad Journal by Asne Seierstad (*Virago*, £6.99; offer £5.94) Buy the book

Thunder Run: Three Days in the Battle for Baghdad by David Zucchino (Atlantic, £12; offer £10.20) Buy the book

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 **Burhan Wazir**

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