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Das Loot

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In April 2003, just after American troops secured Baghdad, Iraqis looted the Iraqi national museum. American soldiers nearby made no effort to stop them, much less provide a guard. We either did not have enough soldiers to protect the museum, or we did not care enough to try.

This failure was simply a “matter of priorities,” according to Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld thought it was a “stretch” to attribute the theft and destruction of priceless Mesopotamian artifacts to “any defect in the war plan.”

Our government knew how to destroy but not how to build. We had toppled a regime, and in coming months we would dismantle Saddam Hussein’s bureaucracy and disband his army. But we did so with absolutely no understanding of how to build a liberal democracy, or even a stable, rights-regarding government with broad popular support.

Such a government requires a prosperous economy, a secure society and sufficient cultural unity to allow everyday interaction among different ethnic groups in workplaces, schools, hospitals, the army and the police. Protecting the symbols of a common and proud heritage is Democracy Building 101 — at least for anyone who understood anything about Iraqi history and culture.

Americans are still living with the aftermath of this ignorance, and we will be for decades to come. In 2003 and 2004, experts debated whether it would take one year or three to rebuild Iraq. Now we debate whether it will take 10 to 15 years or whether it can be done at all.

Those broken and stolen statues from the museum are the enduring symbols of what has gone so wrong. They were easy to smash, so hard to repair.

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