

**'A rollercoaster narrative of heroism, mismanagement  
and disaster...as gripping as any novel'**

**ROBERT IRWIN**

# **A WAR OF CHOICE**

**Honour, Hubris and Sacrifice:  
The British in Iraq**

**JACK FAIRWEATHER**

VINTAGE

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## About the Book

When Tony Blair plunged Britain into war he thought that, shortly thereafter, Iraq would emerge as a peaceful democracy. Instead the invasion sparked the worst foreign policy disaster since the Suez crisis in 1956.

*A War of Choice* is a compelling and authoritative portrayal of Britain's war in Iraq. At the outset, Blair insisted that Britain went to war to influence American decision-making. Based on over three hundred interviews, *A War of Choice* gives the inside story of Blair's war cabinet, Whitehall power struggles and intrigue at the White House, and traces the evolution of the special relationship, from the secret deals struck by Blair, to Brown's desperate bid to save his premiership, which brought already-strained relations with America to the verge of collapse.

The occupation of Iraq also marked an extraordinary attempt to introduce democracy into the heart of the Muslim world. Fairweather takes us inside the doomed effort in Basra, where civil servants and trigger-happy contractors lived in a holiday camp atmosphere in Saddam's former palace, while British troops struggled against a raging insurgency and Iranian agents and Iraqi tribesmen plotted the occupation's downfall. Tony Blair compounded the blunders in Iraq when he launched a peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan in 2006. Fairweather follows a small group of officers and diplomats as they try to learn the lessons of liberal intervention in time to avert a disaster in Helmand and a humiliating surrender in Basra.

A story of hubris and honour, betrayal and the ultimate sacrifice, *A War of Choice* is a gripping account of the moral and political challenges posed by the last ten years of war.

Posing the question 'can nation-building defeat terrorism?' the new government would do well to take heed.

Tony Blair always claimed that history would judge his decision to invade Iraq. This is it.

## About the Author

Jack Fairweather was the *Daily Telegraph's* Baghdad correspondent, and was embedded with British forces during the invasion. He covered the war in Afghanistan for the *Washington Post*. This is his first book.



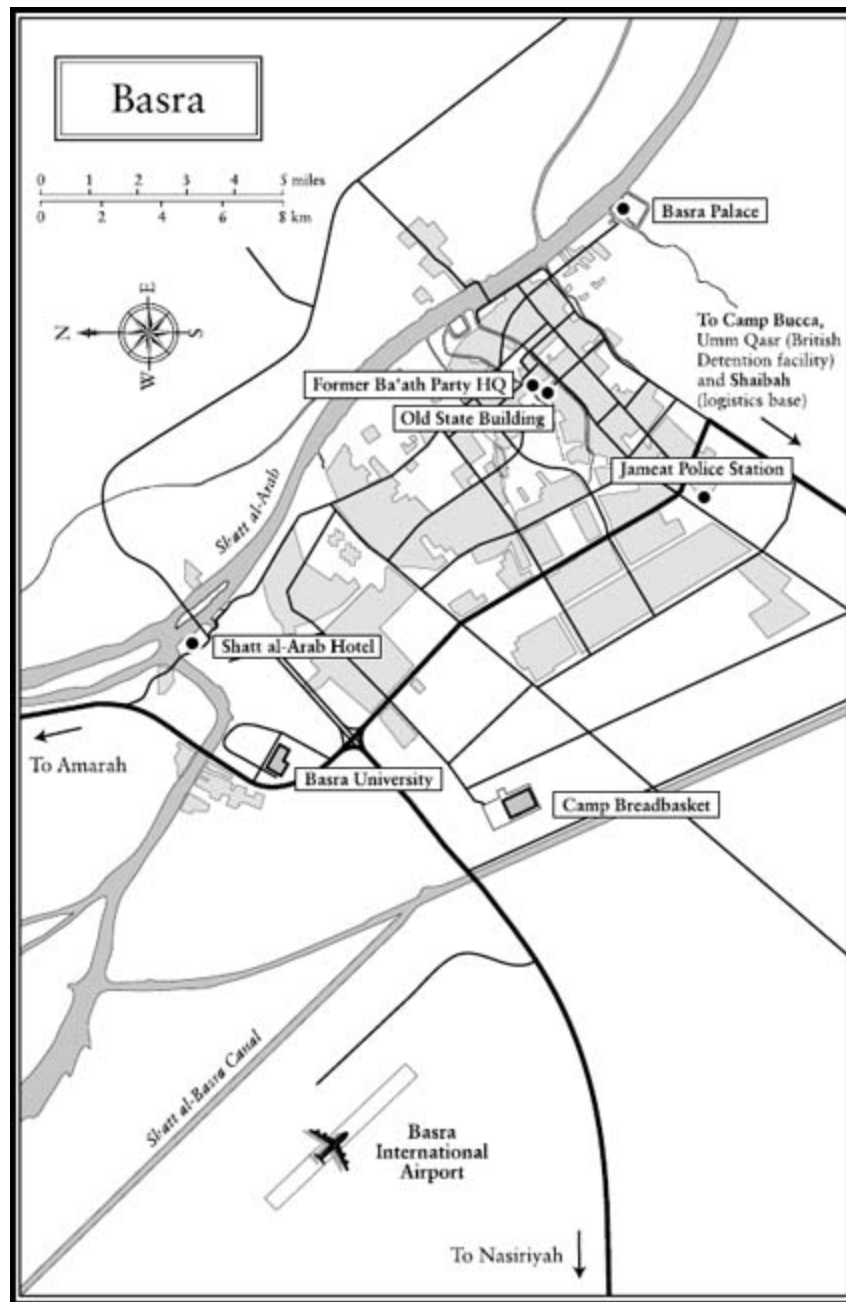
## Southern Afghanistan

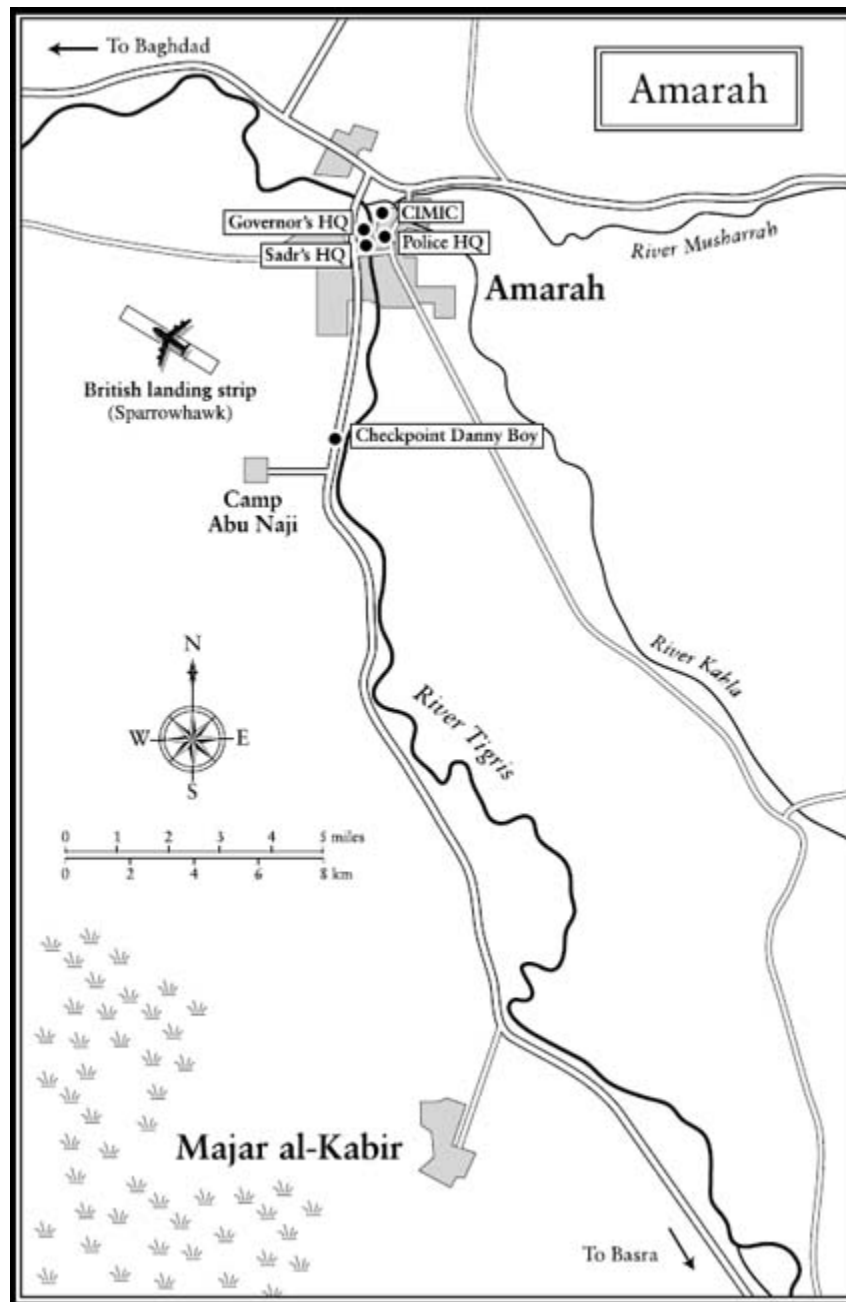


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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Abu Azzam, the leader of the Sunni insurgent group Jaish al-Islami who renounced violence at British urging during a pivotal moment in the battle for Baghdad in 2007.

Abu Hatem, a tribal leader from Maysan province who shifted allegiances between the British and Shia militia groups in 2004.

Abu Khadr, Wissam, the leader of Jaish al-Mahdi militia 2006-7.

Alderson, Alex, a British army doctrine writer.

Alderson, Andrew, an army reservist and southern Iraq's finance minister 2003-4.

Aldred, Margaret, deputy director of the security and defence committee, one of the overseers of the 2006 deployment to Helmand province.

Allawi, Ayad, Iraq's interim prime minister 2004-5.

Asquith, Dominic, the head of the Iraq desk at the FCO 2004-5 and ambassador to Baghdad 2006-7 who approved the partial evacuation of Basra palace following the Queen's Birthday party.

Baldwin, Gil, a commander of an early British detainment facility in southern Iraq. Later served as duty head of the post-conflict reconstruction unit, the British government's effort to plan and coordinate future overseas operations.

Bashall, James, a brigade commander in southern Iraq in 2007 during the withdrawal from Basra palace.

Bell, Gertrude, a colonial-era British diplomat who played an important role in establishing the state of Iraq.

Binns, Graham, a brigade commander during the 2003 Iraq invasion, and commander of British forces in southern Iraq

2007-8 during the contentious deal with a Shia militia leader.

Blair, Tony, prime minister 1997-2007.

Bourne, John, the governor of Dhi Qar province in 2003.

Bowron, Johnny, a company commander in Maysan in 2004, who later led a battle group in Basra during the British operation that sought to regain control of the city in 2006.

Brackenbury, Alan, a lance corporal who became the first British soldier to be killed in Iraq with a new type of precision-made roadside bomb in 2005.

Bradley, Tobin, American political adviser, Dhi Qar province 2003-4 who oversaw some of the first local elections in Iraq.

Bratcher, Simon, a military bomb disposal expert in Maysan province in 2005 who identified a new type of precision-made roadside bomb.

Bremer, Paul, civilian head of the US administration in Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority 2003-4.

Bristow, Andy, the mentor to the Iraqi general commanding southern Iraq in 2007 who helped conceive of the Iraqi-led operation that took on the Shia militia in Basra.

Broome, Christopher, a section commander during the ambush at the Danny Boy checkpoint outside Majar al-Kabir in 2004 who later suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Brown, Gordon, chancellor and prime minister 2007-10.

Browne, Des, defence minister 2006-7.

Bryan, Terry, a sergeant who led his men to safety after being caught in an ambush by Shia militia in Basra in 2004.

Bush, George, US president 2000-8.

Butler, Ed, the commander of British forces in Afghanistan during the 2006 Helmand deployment.

Campbell, Alastair, Tony Blair's communications director 1994-2003.

Carter, Nick, a brigade commander in southern Iraq during the April 2004 uprising against the occupation. In 2002, he had conceived of provincial reconstruction teams to deliver aid and reconstruction in Afghanistan, an idea that was later used in Iraq.

Casey, George, the American commander of Coalition forces in Iraq 2004-6.

Chakrabarti, Suma, the senior civil servant at the Department for International Development, 2002-8.

Clissit, Nick, the British officer who conceived of the post-conflict reconstruction unit, the British government's effort to plan and coordinate future overseas operations.

Cowan, James, the commander of a battle group deployed to Sunni tribal areas during the second battle of Fallujah in 2004, who later served as the chief of staff to the commander of British forces in southern Iraq in 2006.

Cross, Tim, a logistics specialist and member of the British military's planning team sent to US military headquarters. Cross subsequently became deputy head of the Office for Humanitarian Reconstruction and Assistance, Iraq's first post-war administration.

Curry, Charlie, the commander of the British headquarters in Amarah during the later part of a siege by the Jaish al-Mahdi in 2004.

Dannatt, Richard, the commander of the allied rapid reaction corp 2003-4, the UK-led deployable NATO headquarters, then commander-in-chief at Land Command 2005-6. He warned of the dangers of the military being overstretched, before seeking to relieve some of those pressures as the head of the British army, 2006-9.

Daoud, Mohammed, the governor of Helmand province 2006-7.

Ellis, Lee, a soldier killed in Maysan province in 2006 whose sister Karla later became an anti-war campaigner.

Etherington, Mark, the governor of Kut 2003-4, where he survived a siege during the April 2004 uprising. He was

the operations officer for the post-conflict reconstruction unit in 2005, and warned Whitehall of the lack of knowledge about Helmand before the British deployment, before becoming head of southern Iraq's first provincial reconstruction team in 2006.

Everard, James, a brigade commander in southern Iraq in 2006 during the British operation that sought to regain control of the city.

Faraji, Mohan, see Mohan

Fartosi, Ahmed, the commander in Basra of the Shia militia called the Jaish al-Mahdi.

Featherstone, Justin, the commander of the British headquarters in Amarah during the early part of a siege by the Jaish al-Mahdi in 2004.

Flynn, George, the US Marine commandant who oversaw Coalition support for the Iraqi-led operation to defeat the Shia militia in Basra in 2008.

Free, Julian, the brigade commander in Basra during the Iraqi-led operation to defeat Shia militias in the city in 2008.

Fry, Rob, the deputy chief of the general staff for operations 2003-6, the key strategy role at the Ministry of Defence, where he planned for the deployment to Helmand and withdrawal from Iraq.

Gharawi, Ahmed Abu Sajad, commander of the Shia militia called the Jaish al-Mahdi in Maysan province.

Goldsmith, Peter, attorney general 1997-2007, the senior legal adviser to the government, whose decision that the war was legal paved the way for the UK's involvement in the Iraq invasion.

Greenstock, Jeremy, the British ambassador to the United Nations during the build-up to the Iraq invasion and the senior UK representative in Baghdad 2003-4.

Haider, Samad, Iraqi translator.

Hamilton-Jewell, Simon, a sergeant in the Royal Military Police who was one of six soldiers to be murdered in Majar

al-Kabir in 2003.

Harding, Paul, a company commander in Basra who was killed manning a British outpost in the city shortly before it was handed over to Iraqi control in 2007.

Heatley, Charles, a British spokesman for the US occupation in Baghdad in 2003 and an adviser to Iraq's interim prime minister, Ayad Allawi, in 2004.

Henderson, Nick, a battle group commander in Basra during the 2005 hostage crisis involving two SAS soldiers who were held at the Jamiat police station.

Hickey, Christopher, a sergeant killed checking for roadside bombs in 2005, whose mother Pauline later campaigned against Snatch Land Rovers.

Holmes, Richard, a captain who was killed in Amarah in 2006, sparking a period of violence in southern Iraq that only ended with the British deal with a Shia militia leader.

Hoon, Geoff, defence secretary 1999-2005.

Houghton, Nick, the head of the British military headquarters in Northwood 2005-7, who steered UK forces through the withdrawal of Iraq.

Hughes, Chris, brigade commander in southern Iraq in 2005, and later, senior planner at the MOD before the 2006 Helmand deployment.

Hussein, Saddam, Iraqi dictator 1978-2003.

Iron, Richard, the senior mentor to General Mohan, the commander of Iraqi forces in Basra 2007-8. Iron helped conceive and execute the Iraqi-led operation to take on the Shia militias in Basra in 2008.

Jackson, Mike, the head of the professional army, 2003-6, a period when the military came close to breaking point.

Jadiri, Basima, senior adviser to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki whose friendship with Emma Sky helped relieve tensions between the Iraqi government and the US military.

Jaffar, commander of the serious crimes unit located at the Jamiat police station 2004-6 who played an instrumental

role in the detention of two British SAS soldiers.

Jarvenpaa, Minna, member of the post-conflict reconstruction unit 2004-7.

Jones, Rupert, the chief of staff of the brigade headquarters that took charge of the hostage crisis involving two British SAS soldiers at the Jamiat police station in 2005.

Karzai, Hamid, Afghan president, 2004-

Kearney, William, ArmorGroup manager 2004-6, the private security firm training and mentoring Iraqi police in southern Iraq who tried to raise concerns about the abuse of detainees by local security forces.

Keys, Reg, father of murdered Red Cap Tom Keys, and independent candidate for Tony Blair's Sedgefield seat in the 2005 general election.

Khazali, Qais, commander of the Shia militia called the Jaish al-Mahdi 2003-4, then leader of a splinter group 2004-7 that refused to recognise a ceasefire with Coalition forces.

Labouchere, David, commander of British forces in Maysan province in 2006 during the withdrawal from Camp Abu Naji.

Lamb, Graeme, the commander of British forces in southern Iraq in 2003, then a director at the Land Warfare centre, in charge of re-writing British doctrine 2004-6, before becoming deputy commander of Coalition forces in Baghdad 2007-8, where he played an instrumental role in turning the tide against Sunni insurgents.

Lamb, Robin, senior British diplomat in Basra in 2006 who sought to define the UK's legacy in southern Iraq.

Lorimer, John, brigade commander in southern Iraq during the 2005 hostage crisis involving two SAS soldiers held at the Jamiat police station.

MacCartney, Charlie, a British police mentor to the Jamiat police station 2004-6.

Maciejewski, Justin, a battle group commander in Basra during the British operation to regain control of the city in 2006.



Maer, Matt, commander of Maysan province in 2004 during the first heavy battles with the Shia militia called the Jaish al-Mahdi. Later served as a planner for Iraq and Afghan operations at the British military headquarters in Northwood.

Maliki, Nouri, Iraqi prime minister 2006–

Manning, David, Tony Blair's foreign policy adviser during the build-up to the invasion and ambassador to Washington 2003–7.

Marriott, Patrick, the chief of staff to the commander of British ground forces during the invasion of Iraq, then a brigade commander in southern Iraq in 2006, and subsequently a senior Iraq planner in British military headquarters in Northwood, where he raised concerns about a too-hasty withdrawal.

Marsden, Rosalind, an ambassador to Afghanistan 2004–6, then senior British diplomat in Basra in 2006.

Marston, Daniel, an American academic and instructor at Sandhurst 2004–7 who sought to transform Britain's approach to counter-insurgency.

McChrystal, Stanley, US Special Forces commander 2003–8.

Mercer, Nicholas, the British military's senior lawyer in southern Iraq during the summer of 2003 who first raised concerns about the UK's treatment of detainees.

Messenger, Gordon, the chief planner for the 2006 deployment to Helmand whose findings were later ignored.

Mills, Dan, a sergeant who led a sniper company during the siege of the British headquarters in Amarah by the Jaish al-Mahdi in 2004.

Mohan, the Iraqi general in command of Iraqi forces in Basra 2007–8 during the operation to take on Shia militias in Basra.

Morrison, William, managing director of Adam Smith International, an NGO that trained Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's staff how to govern.

Muhammadawi, Abdul Kerim Mahud, see Abu Hatem.

Odierno, Ray, the divisional commander in Iraq in 2003-4, and then put in charge of day-to-day running of Coalition forces in Iraq 2006-8.

Parker, Chris, the chief of staff of the brigade headquarters that took charge of the city after the invasion of Iraq.

Pennett, Miles, army reservist and briefly southern Iraq's minister of culture in 2003.

Petraeus, David, the commander of Combined Arms Centre in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2005-6, where he transformed the US military's thinking about counter-insurgency before becoming commander of American forces in Iraq 2007-9.

Phee, Molly, the American governor of Maysan province 2003-4.

Philby, Harry St John, colonial-era diplomat who resigned from the British administration after disagreeing with the policy of rigging an Iraqi referendum that established a pro-British candidate as the first king of Iraq.

Pike, Will, a company commander during the 2006 Helmand deployment who led the first British troops into the Afghan town of Sangin.

Reid, John, defence minister 2005-6.

Rice, Condoleezza, US National Security Adviser 2000-4, then Secretary of State 2005-8.

Richmond, David, British special representative to Iraq in 2004 who persuaded the UN representative Lakhdar Brahimi not to resign at a critical moment of the April 2004 uprising.

Riley, Jonathon, a brigadier who contributed to early efforts to rebuild the Iraqi army, and was later a commander of British forces in southern Iraq in 2004.

Rogan, Janet, senior British diplomat in Basra during the summer of 2003, who formed the first British administration in southern Iraq since the colonial era.

Rubaie, Mowaffak, Iraqi national security adviser, 2003-

Rumseld, Donald, US Secretary of State for Defense 2000–6.  
Sadoon, Ali, the Iraqi translator Haider Samad's uncle-in-law.  
al-Sadr, Moqtada, the son of a popular ayatollah murdered by Saddam Hussein, who went on to found a nationalist Iraqi political movement and the Shia militia called the Jaish al-Mahdi.

Sajjad, Seyyed, right hand man of Ahmed al-Fartosi, the Shia militia commander who was released as part of the contentious deal with the British army.

Sanders, Patrick, a battle group commander in Basra who led the last British forces out of the city in 2007.

Sandiford, Tim, a battle group commander in Basra 2006–7, who led the operation that destroyed the Jamiat police station.

Sewan, Ali, the commander of the Jamiat police station 2003–6.

Shaw, Jonathan, the commander of British forces in southern Iraq in 2007 and the officer who brokered a contentious deal with a militia leader that enabled UK forces to safely withdraw from Basra palace.

Shearer, Richard, a second lieutenant who was killed in Iraq in 2005.

Sheinwald, Nigel, Tony Blair's foreign policy adviser 2003–7 who sought to marshal Whitehall to confront the crisis in Iraq, before serving as ambassador to Washington 2007–

Shirreff, Richard, the commander of British forces in southern Iraq in 2006 who led the British operation that sought to regain control of the city.

Short, Clare, minister for the Department for International Development 1997–2003.

Siddique, Rabia, a member of the British military legal team who was sent to the Jamiat police station in 2005 to try and resolve the hostage crisis involving two SAS soldiers.

Sistani, Ali, a Grand Ayatollah and Iraq's most senior Shia cleric.

Sky, Emma, the governor of Kirkuk, 2003-4, and then a political adviser to American General Ray Odierno 2007-10.

Smith, Colin, the senior British police adviser in 2005 who sought to reform the Iraqi police in Basra.

Soleimani, Qasem, the commander of Iranian Al-Qods force who directed operations in Iraq against Coalition forces.

Stewart, Andrew, the commander of the British force in southern Iraq during the April 2004 uprising against the occupation.

Stewart, Rory, deputy governor of Amarah and Nasiriyah 2003-4.

Stirrup, Jock, the chief of the defence staff 2006-10 who succeeded in withdrawing British forces from Iraq and sought to stabilise the growing insurgency in Helmand.

Straw, Jack, foreign secretary 2001-6.

Synnott, Hilary, the senior British diplomat in southern Iraq 2003-4, who moved the British headquarters to Basra palace.

Tansely, James, a career diplomat and senior British diplomat in southern Iraq 2005-6 who hosted the Queen's Birthday Party in 2006 that led to the partial withdrawal from Basra palace.

Tootal, Stuart, 3 Para battle group commander during the 2006 Helmand deployment.

Waeli, Mohammed Musbeh, the governor of Basra 2005-8.

Wakefield, Anthony, a soldier killed on the eve of the 2005 general election.

Walker, Michael, the head of the professional army, in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq and then chief of the defence staff when the decision was taken to send British forces to Helmand.

Wall, Peter, deputy head of the British military headquarters in Northwood 2004-6.

Warrick, Tom, the US State Department official who wrote 'The Future of Iraq Project,' a thirteen-volume plan for

post-war Iraq that was discarded by the Pentagon.

Webster, Martin, a corporal who filmed the abuse of Iraqi detainees by British soldiers during violence in Amarah in 2004, which was later published by the *News of the World*.

White-Spunner, Barney, the head of the Joint Forces Headquarters 2003-5, Northwood, which performed the initial planning work for British deployment to Helmand, and then the commander of British forces in Iraq in 2008.

Whitford, Victoria, a press officer for the US administration in Baghdad in 2004, and then for the British Embassy 2004-5.

Williams, Andrew, the military commander of Maysan province in 2005 who first encountered the devastating effect of precision-made roadside bombs.

Williams, Richard, lieutenant colonel and SAS commander.

For my parents, Rufus and Cherry

# A War of Choice

Honour, Hubris and Sacrifice: The British  
in Iraq

Jack Fairweather



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

‘The king must first wage only obligatory wars. What is an obligatory war? It is a war against the seven nations, the war against Amalek, and a war to deliver Israel from an enemy who has attacked them. Then he may wage authorised wars, which is a war against others in order to enlarge the borders of Israel and to increase his greatness and prestige.’

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, c.1170-1180

Tim Russert: ‘Do you believe the war in Iraq is a war of choice or a war of necessity?’

President George Bush: ‘I think that’s an interesting question. Please elaborate on that a little bit. A war of choice or a war of necessity? It’s a war of necessity.’

‘Meet the Press with Tim Russert’, NBC, 7 February 2004

‘The freest human being is not one who acts on reasons he has chosen for himself, but one who never has to choose.’

John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 2002



## NOTE ON THE TEXT

This book is intended as a strategic and operational overview of the war in Iraq. Quotations attributed to individuals are from their own recollections, except where footnotes indicate another source. Subsequent quotations from the same individual without footnotes indicate that the same source is being used.

I have sought to protect the identities of British Special Forces personnel and Secret Intelligence Service agents using pseudonyms, except if they are no longer serving and have given their permission to be identified.

Several individuals cited in the book received honorary titles during the period covered. To avoid confusion and unnecessary explanation, I have refrained from using titles.

For Arabic words and place names I have sought to use the most common transliterations. I have used the suffix al- in surnames when giving an individual's full name. When only referring to the surname I have dropped the suffix for convenience.

## *Prologue*

### THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

BASRA'S POSTAL SERVICE was still not running, which meant the invitations would have to be hand-delivered. Ahmed, the consulate's office manager, was dispatched into the city with two hundred of the stiff white cards. The florid lettering on each read, 'You are kindly invited to attend the Queen's Birthday Party at Basra Palace. Date April 21st 2006.'<sup>[1](#)</sup>

Consular staff had compiled an impressive guest list to celebrate the royal birthday: southern Iraq's most notable sheikhs, imams, security officials and politicians. Many owed their position and wealth to British patronage, although few would publicly defend Her Majesty's Government's presence. Iraqis working inside the consulate whispered among themselves that some of the guests were known to have organised attacks against the British army.<sup>[2](#)</sup> But a well-attended event was important to British diplomats like James Tansley, the consul general, who anxiously texted the tribal chiefs he knew, encouraging them to attend. Pulling off the Queen's Birthday Party was one of the annual rigours of life in the field for diplomats, but this year's required special dedication. Three years after the invasion, Britain's empire in southern Iraq was teetering.

This country's greatest nation-building exercise since the colonial era stretched from the dense marshes and war-ravaged palm groves of the Iranian border to the vast expanse of the Arabian desert, covering an area larger than

Ireland. Over four million Iraqis looked to British guidance on electricity, water, healthcare, education and security. Despite the insistence by UK diplomats that authority lay in the hands of Iraqis, the 8,000 British troops stationed in southern Iraq suggested otherwise. With power had come the expectation among Iraqis that the UK would transform the region. Britain's failure to deliver since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 had stoked popular resentment and a growing insurgency.

The military was feeling the strain. Two months earlier, the *News of the World* had released a video of British soldiers beating Iraqi rioters in the Marsh Arab town of Amarah.<sup>3</sup> In response, protesters took to the streets, UK bases were hit with nightly mortar and rocket attacks and in Amarah a roadside bomb killed two British soldiers. In addition, the local council in Basra, an elected body of suspected militia sympathisers, dodgy businessmen and clerics, was testing the promise of a smooth transition to democratic rule. The UK was relying on the council to take control of the city so that British troops could begin withdrawing. However, after the video emerged, the council had stopped speaking to the British altogether.

In his daily reports to London Tansley played down the attacks, knowing that the media was likely to blow the violence out of proportion. His job was to reassure Number 10 that progress was still being made. When a rocket slammed into the ground thirty metres from his office but failed to detonate, he made light of the situation: 'If that had gone off I certainly would have felt it.'

Tansley looked the part of a cautious bureaucrat – plump and softly spoken – but he shared that peculiar streak of romance that marks out many Arabists at the FCO. As a young diplomat posted to Baghdad in the 1980s, he had taken a taxi to the front line of the murderous Iran-Iraq war, and had been the first Western diplomat into liberated Kuwait in 1991. He had left government for business school

and a brief stint working for the Australian Cricket Board before the lure of adventure and the FCO's pension scheme brought him back. An ambassadorship was not out of the question, especially as he had supported the invasion, unlike many in the FCO. He had seen Saddam Hussein's tyranny first hand and felt Britain should not stand idly by while an entire nation suffered in fear and poverty.

However, his rose-tinted reports to London were becoming more difficult to write as the violence increased. A fortnight before the Queen's Birthday Party was due to take place, rockets were slamming nightly into the British headquarters. Tansley had discussed withdrawing non-essential staff – almost half of the fifty-strong team – from the consulate with Dominic Asquith, the Iraq director at the FCO in London. Asquith was the doyen of the department. Great-grandson of the prime minister who had authorised the British invasion of Iraq during the First World War, he embodied the gentlemanly values that many in the FCO sought to preserve. He also had a first-class political brain and a self-deprecating manner that won him loyalty among his subordinates. Ultimate responsibility for non-military British personnel in Iraq rested with him.

'Shouldn't you be getting out?' Asquith asked over the phone.<sup>4</sup>

Tansley argued that the rockets were being fired by a handful of militants and that to retreat would only empower them. Both men knew the smell of British defeat was in the air. The war was growing in unpopularity in the UK, and the politicians were turning their attentions towards Afghanistan. Even as they planned the party in Iraq, the first troops were landing in Helmand, Afghanistan. Asquith mentioned that Peter Ricketts, one of the FCO's most influential mandarins and an Iraq sceptic, was due to be in Basra the week of the party.<sup>5</sup> Tansley felt a successful event, with a strong Iraqi showing, would send the message that the British were still in control of southern Iraq.

ON THE BALMY spring afternoon of the party, the Iraqi guests queued up outside the concrete guardhouse to be frisked. In the spirit of the event, Imam Ali al-Musawi had brought a two-metre-square cake, garishly decorated with a digitally inscribed image of Queen Elizabeth II. At the gate already-skittish Filipino guards had panicked at the possibility that the cake contained a bomb, but Musawi and the cake were eventually cleared to enter. The leader of the Ismaili Shia sect in Basra, Musawi was a long-standing favourite of the British, who had rewarded him with many lucrative rebuilding contracts, only some of which had been completed. Tansley smiled diplomatically as the tasteless rendering of the Queen was brought through the giant arched entranceway of the compound and placed proudly on the table of kebabs and hummus that marked the focal point of the party on the consulate lawn.

A contrast to Saddam's regal home in Baghdad, currently serving as the American headquarters, the British centre of operations consisted of a dozen villas which the Iraqi dictator had built in 1988 to host an Arab summit that never took place. The dictator had spent little time in the Shia south, where he had viciously crushed several uprisings over the years. Compared to the rest of Basra, a once elegant city that Saddam had reduced to a squalid, overcrowded cesspool, the villas were luxurious, boasting neo-Palladian columns and marble floors. Divided from each other by twisting canals and ornate bridges, they evoked the salubrious air of a Florida golf resort. Beyond a fringe of palm trees the swollen Shatt al-Arab river sent cool breezes through the palace windows as it ran the thirty-four miles towards the Persian Gulf. After the 2003 invasion, the villas had been converted into offices for the use of diplomats and Iraqi staff, while nearby portacabins, interspersed with concrete blast walls and bomb shelters, were used for housing. Next to the villas, the portacabins looked like a

Butlins holiday camp, although they were air-conditioned with en-suite bathrooms. A phalanx of golf buggies provided transport within the compound, which was where most of the British diplomats stayed.

Musawi stood beaming beside his cake as the rest of Basra's elite arrived. Sheikhs in gold-trimmed cloaks were greeted by Tansley and a crowd of besuited diplomats and contractors clutching wine glasses. Tansley was aware that Islam forbade alcohol, but such a vital British custom could be discreetly observed without offending anyone. Furthermore, Muzahim al-Tamimi, a garrulous Iraqi sheikh who had ingratiated himself with the British, welcomed a drink. As he declared to the crowd, surely the whole point was to offend the unsophisticated 'turbans', whose piety did not represent the moderate majority. To emphasise the point, Tamimi had brought his own supply of Johnnie Walker whisky.

Peter Ricketts, a clever man dulled by the endless machinations of Whitehall, commented to Tansley, 'I don't think I've ever seen an embassy where everyone is so relaxed on the Queen's Birthday.'<sup>6</sup> Tansley laughed a little nervously.

The party was in full swing when the sun dipped below the line of palm trees, and the mood suddenly changed. By some accounts, phones began to ring, and groups of Iraqis hastily departed. Ole Jepsen, a sixty-one-year-old Danish contractor advising on southern Iraq's tomato and date crops, remembered talking to the deputy head of Basra Council as he received a call and left without a word.<sup>7</sup> Tansley would later insist that the party was actually winding down, and that his guests had left for evening prayers. However, shortly after their departure, the first Katyusha rocket salvo slammed into scrubland just outside the compound walls, the explosion rippling through the ground. The Katyusha rocket system was designed by the Soviets during the Second World War to deliver a barrage of