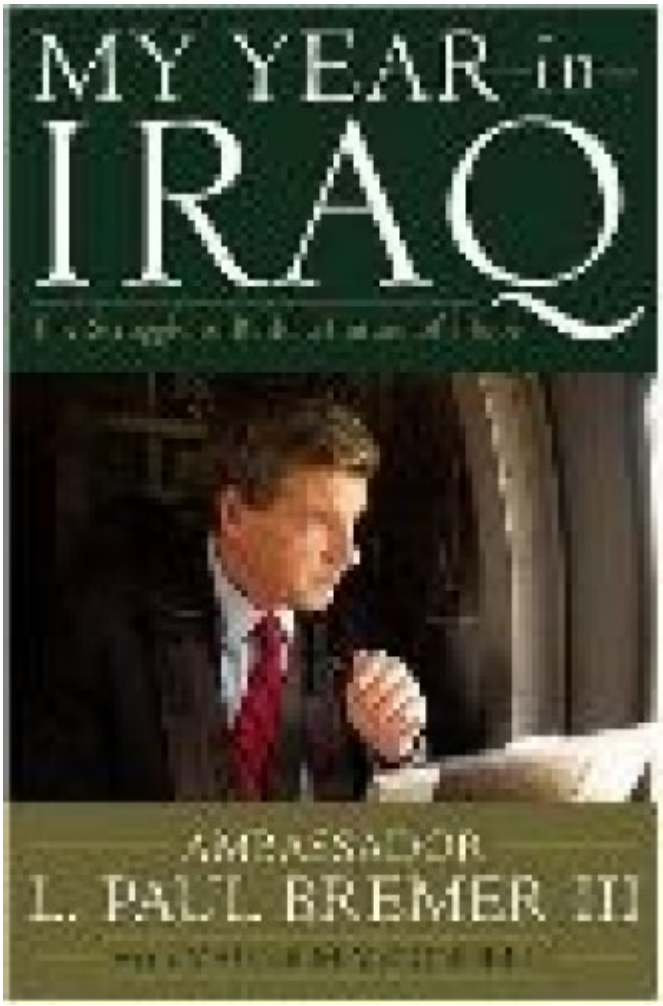
Chaos management

By Margaret O'Brien Steinfels in the June 13, 2006 issue

In Review



My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope

L. Paul Bremer III
Simon & Schuster

Paul Bremer landed in Baghdad on May 12, 2003, and departed little more than a year later, on June 28, 2004. His job in Iraq began just days after President Bush

victoriously declared the “mission accomplished,” and it ended with a surreptitious departure from the Baghdad airport lest Bremer’s plane be targeted by insurgents.

As head of the Coalition Provisional Authority and with ambassadorial rank, Bremer was to initiate a process that would return sovereignty to Iraq. Daily events quickly revealed that the underpinnings of a sovereign state—security, political institutions and fiscal regulations—were almost wholly lacking. Bunkered down in the Green Zone, Bremer found himself faced with some tasks he may not have anticipated.

Above all, he had to contend with Washington. Bureaucrats at every level worked at cross-purposes. The strain between the departments of defense and state in the run-up to the war is well documented. The postwar struggle between the civilian leadership and the military brass at the Pentagon is only now being reported. Bremer’s account underlines the continuing dispute over the size of U.S. forces. Top administration officials insisted that there were enough troops in Iraq; if more were needed, the military would ask. But General Eric Shinseki was “retired” for telling Congress, before the war, that “several hundred thousand soldiers” would be required. After that, perhaps no military officer had the nerve to ask.

Or maybe they did ask, indirectly through Bremer. For example, in July 2003, two months after arriving in Iraq, Bremer told National Security head Condoleezza Rice that the coalition had half the number of soldiers needed if the looting and incipient insurgency were to be brought under control. Where did he get that assessment? And then in May 2004, a month before Bremer left, coalition commander General Ricardo Sanchez told him that it would take two additional divisions—35,000-40,000 soldiers—to control Baghdad.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld did not want to hear those numbers. Instead, he urged that newly trained Iraqis replace U.S. forces. Bremer insisted that an effective Iraqi force would take at least two to three years to emerge. Other coalition forces, which the Bush administration had secured to signal international support, were not prepared for combat. Small attacks in their “secure” areas grew into major confrontations that drew U.S. troops back into battle. Bremer and the U.S. military lost the argument on troop strength, and from the day looting began the Iraqi people lost the chance for an orderly transition.

Iraq needed a government; sovereignty required one. Bremer began by organizing a governing council representative of varied and conflicting Iraqi interests. Having

cobbled the council together, he had to cajole the group into rebuilding a jumble of ministries while pressing them forward on writing a temporary administrative law. Once the law was in place, he then had to convince many of the council members to make way for a successor government, to which he would turn over sovereignty on June 30, 2004. Students of comparative political cultures will have a field day studying the encounters between the can-do Bremer and the council members. Their leisurely, roundabout style was intolerable, even frightening, to Bremer and his bosses in Washington.

The council was made up of both Iraqis who had lived under Saddam and those who had gone into exile. One of the latter, Ahmad Chalabi, expected to rule the country. Bremer had no such plan—and probably had orders to keep Chalabi from taking power, though the Iraqi still had friends in Washington pressing his case. The tensions between the exiles and those who had remained in the country under Saddam, as well as religious and tribal distinctions, were a major factor in the council's dynamic. Another critical element was fear—fear of limited U.S. resolve to restore order, fear of recriminations and revenge, fear of Saddam's return; in all its fears, the council was truly representative of the Iraqi people.

Bremer and the Bush administration were deeply committed to establishing free-market mechanisms in a country that had previously combined the inefficient decision making of a command economy with the duplicitous dealings of an underground one. Corruption was rife; bribery was the coin of everyday life. Where sanctions had not corroded the economy and the middle class, Saddam's skimming of oil-for-food funds had. Iraq's enormous oil reserves, with which the Bush administration planned to finance reconstruction, were stoppered by a ramshackle infrastructure, smuggling and sabotage. Bremer's most important economic achievement, the issuance of a new currency, may seem pitifully small, but it allowed the Iraqi dinar to float, controlled inflation and gave the Iraqi people a basic tool for carrying on daily life—cash.

Bremer was a busy man, working, as he frequently says, 18- and 20-hour days. Yet many initiatives on the CPA's agenda receded into the future under the weight of daily chaos and the growing insurgency. Bremer rails against the media's fixation on bad news, but other recent accounts suggest that there was not all that much good news. George Packer, in *The Assassins' Gate*, captures the chaos, uncertainty and arbitrary decisions that followed the invasion and plagued the CPA. In *Squandered Victory* another Green Zone occupant, Larry Diamond, gives evidence that Bremer

and the Bush administration operated in a crippling knowledge vacuum.

Though he credits the work of his colleagues, Bremer's day-to-day account makes him very much the center of his own attention. He corrects gossip and media accounts of his motives and defends his decisions, especially the order to demobilize the Iraqi army. He settles scores above all with the Rumsfeld-Wolfowitz-Feith triumvirate in charge of Iraq policy. Bremer—a former ambassador, businessperson and managing director of Kissinger Associates—was their hire. But Rumsfeld's eagerness to get out of Iraq quickly worked against Bremer's aim: to stay the course and create a democracy, which Bremer claims was also President Bush's real goal.

Bush and the White House became Bremer's supporters—as Bremer is eager to show by presenting details of every meal, workout and conversation he shared with the president. (His year in Iraq included frequent trips back to Washington to shore up his position.) He was, he claims, "the president's man," and he counts Rice and Secretary of State Colin Powell his allies. But, he says, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card warned him that "people in Washington are 'gaming' you." Perhaps the most telling, and galling, quote Bremer offers is Rumsfeld's remonstrance to the senior CPA staff during a September visit to Baghdad: "I wonder if all of you have a sufficient sense of urgency." Of urgency, yes; of security, no.

Bremer's finger-pointing should not overshadow the reality that he—and all conscientious Americans—have had to confront. The United States is caught up in the moral dilemma of meeting postbellum obligations in a country that never actually surrendered. Though billions of dollars have been spent, the military forces and bureaucratic focus required for dependable security and civil order were never invested. The failure to deploy enough troops in the beginning and then increase their numbers to prevent looting and contain an incipient insurgency was a strategic error that has magnified the moral error of going to war in the first place.

Under the circumstances, simply pulling out has not been considered an acceptable moral response, even by many of those who opposed the U.S. invasion. We have set loose forces that will take decades to contain—if they can ever be. For now the chaos, revenge killings, murders, suicide bombings, torture and kidnappings have created a level of fear and recrimination among Iraqis at least as great as during Saddam's tyranny. Not even the can-do Bremers of the Bush administration have been able to alter that reality—and they may have made it worse.

Why do good people countenance bad things? Because they think they can draw good consequences from bad beginnings. And when they represent the most powerful nation in the world, good people may be especially susceptible to the temptation to believe that there is no nation they cannot better with efficiency and effective organization. Bremer succumbed to that temptation.