

Cato's Letter

A QUARTERLY MESSAGE ON LIBERTY

Building a Free Society in Iraq

Tom Palmer

I sometimes wish that I could have been in Philadelphia or Williamsburg during America's founding period, helping George Washington and John Adams and Thomas Jefferson to lay the groundwork for a free society. I had a taste of that in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I assisted people who were tearing down communism and laying the foundations for societies based on limited government, respect for rights and property, and free markets. There I smuggled in photocopiers and fax machines; arranged translations of modern economics textbooks and the works of Milton Friedman, F. A. Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and other champions of liberty; and helped to change high school and university curricula so that they abandoned Marxist-Leninist dogma in favor of property, constitutionalism, markets, law, and economics.

Now, after the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi people are building a new system of government. Whatever one thinks of the war, we all want Iraqis to achieve a government that can live at peace with the world and that secures the rights of Iraqis to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Tom Palmer is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. This is a report on his recent two-week trip to Baghdad, where he promoted free markets, individual liberty, and constitutional government in Iraq.



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Thanks to the generosity of some Cato Institute Sponsors and the cooperation of the Atlas Economic Research Foundation (which named me one of their International Freedom Corps Scouts), I had an opportunity in April to work toward that goal. The situation differed from my first trip to Baghdad, in February of 2004, when I worked with a number of educators and the Ministry of Education to reform the

an armed escort. This time, my visits were carefully choreographed to avoid tipping off the terrorists, who have put a huge price on the heads of foreigners.

I spent about two weeks working with Iraqis, giving lectures, making a presentation to the parliament, and meeting with scholars, clerics, students, bloggers, political activists, women's rights groups, and politicians. Although the security situation got markedly worse while I was



The Word "Freedom" Was First Written in Iraq: Liberty and Law Originated in Iraq



The word "ama-gi," freedom, from a tablet in the ancient city of Lagash, Telloh in contemporary Iraq

2 teaching of "civics," replacing memorization of the life and sayings of Saddam Hussein with teaching how to resolve differences through discussion rather than violence, respect the rule of law, and give allegiance to a constitution rather than a ruler. The terrorism problem then was not as severe. One could fairly safely meet people at the airport and drive into town. I was invited to dinners in private homes on my first visit, and my hosts could pick me up in their cars at the curb outside my hotel. All of that has changed. I flew from Amman to Baghdad International Airport on a flight that made a tight spiral to avoid surface-to-air missiles and was met by some friends who had arranged

there, I made it through unscathed. I was delayed in leaving the country by the difficulty of getting to the airport, the road to which is probably the most dangerous in the country, but after a nervous ride (during which we were shot at once), I found that my Royal Jordanian flight was cancelled. (I managed to get one of the last seats on an Iraqi Airways flight to Jordan.)

BUILDING A NETWORK FOR LIBERTY

I had five major goals for my trip. First, to meet pro-freedom Iraqis to whom I could offer assistance in establishing pro-freedom and free-market think tanks, publishing houses, maga-

zines, or similar ventures. I met a number of remarkably brave and dedicated people. I provided six of them with the resources to travel to Turkey, where they took part in a series of libertarian conferences and spent time with libertarian academics and political activists to learn more about running such organizations. One is a doctor with her own private clinic, three are professors at universities in Baghdad and Hilla, one runs a think tank dedicated to promoting a political consensus around religious toleration, and one is an adviser to the Ministry of Finance. The last one could not make it to Turkey, but we are still in touch. As a result of their travels, they will become integrated into the international community of libertarian think tanks and similar organizations. The Association for Liberal Thinking (the major free-market group in Turkey) provided valuable assistance in arranging the trip.

SPEAKING THEIR LANGUAGE

My second goal was to meet people who could establish an Arabic-language website that would provide both a library of libertarian classics and ongoing commentary from a libertarian perspective. I met with some very impressive bloggers to whom I had been introduced by one of our donors. They have already created and distributed free Arabic software for independent blogging; the growth of the Internet in Iraq and throughout the Arab world has loosened the control of information by both authoritarian states and radically intolerant Islamists. I have since recruited a small staff of well-educated bilingual Arab scholars and editors to get a serious website going. It will soon

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make available public-domain material in Arabic, offer an online library of libertarian material, and publish regular commentary on free markets, individual rights, toleration, and limited government. Some of that commentary, I hope, will be published as op-eds in the Arab press, which will encourage more visits to the site.

My third goal was to commission translations of important texts in the libertarian tradition. I had already produced a bilingual version of Cato's pocket Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, with English and Arabic on facing pages. I distributed them to political activists and to members of the Iraqi parliament, and they were extremely popular. *The Law*, by Frederic Bastiat, is already available and has been very well received in Iraq. I commissioned translations of many other important texts. Textbooks are also important. For example, during the

years of the Soviet Bloc, I published translations of an outstanding economics textbook, Paul Heyne's *The Economic Way of Thinking*, into Russian, Hungarian, Czech, Romanian, and Albanian. The book had a serious influence on public understanding of how free markets work. An Arabic edition of that book is sorely needed and is under way.

SUPPORTING CONSTITUTIONALISM

My fourth goal was to explain that a democracy of the sort worth striving for is not merely the unbridled rule of the majority, nor a path toward "one man, one vote, one time," but a system of limited government dedicated to the definition and protection of rights. It has a democratic component in the form of elections, but the scope of such collective choice is limited, and the state itself is subject to the law.

To get that idea across, I gave lectures and presentations before a variety of groups, including 61 members of the Iraqi parliament in the parliamentary assembly hall. I spoke also before groups of lawyers, journalists, activist women, and academics. My presentation was also shown to religious and tribal leaders. I gave presentations on basic principles of constitutional democracy, the challenges of democratization, rational choice and political and economic institutions, a free market in Iraq, and effective public speaking.

For each presentation, I used images that Iraqis would recognize: the Great Mosque of Samarra, Gilgamesh and Enkidu from Babylonian legend, Iraqi voters holding

up purple-stained fingers, and the first meeting of the Iraqi National Assembly. I worked to create messages that would be understood by Iraqis and that would explain how liberty has roots in their civilization. The Powerpoint presentation on "Basic Principles of Constitutional Democracy" was requested by a number of people (it's amazing how many people carried USB "thumb drives") for use in their own presentations. The presentation has been printed in full color and distributed along with my outline on "Challenges of Democratization" and the bilingual edition of the Declaration and the Constitution to the full membership of the parliament. (The English version is available at http://www.cato.org/pubs/democracy_iraq_english.ppt.)

Finally, to introduce Iraqis to some comparative constitutional experience and to help them establish a workable constitutional order, I prepared some "talking papers" on religious toleration and the law, and the challenges of democracy. For example, expectations that are too high will lead to disappoint-

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ment. At the same time, if expectations are too low, people won't expect honest officials who obey the law, and so won't demand it.

IMPRESSIONS OF IRAQ

The huge upsurge in terrorist violence that coincided with my trip caused me to cancel my plans outside of Baghdad. It was difficult to meet with people, and the public advertisement of a talk by a foreigner on constitutional democracy was a magnet for terrorists, which would have endangered the people who attended. Some university lectures I had planned were therefore cancelled. Accordingly, I didn't mix or mingle with lots of people, and I have little insight into what "most Iraqis" think, beyond the publicly available polling data. It's clear that the terrorists are not popular in Iraq; indeed, there is widespread and intense hatred for them, and whatever base of support they may have is extremely narrow. However, the terrorists are extremely brutal and willing to kill as many people—whether children or adults, Iraqis or foreigners—as necessary to achieve their end: complete chaos, the collapse of the government, and then their own takeover of total power.

I was impressed by the political sophistication among Iraqis, who are quite eager to follow up on the national elections and establish a constitution. The discussions I had at a number of venues demonstrated a seriousness of purpose and a grasp of the essentials of constitutionalism that I found very promising. Perhaps most encouraging was the courage and sophistication among Iraqi women. Associations of Iraqi businesswomen are working to

deliver freedom and prosperity for women—and men, as well—through free enterprise. I have connected some Iraqi women with international "micro-credit" system and hope to get more Iraqi women involved in that process of small business formation.

A "RICH COUNTRY"

The level of sophistication among academic economists was not as promising. A serious problem among both intellectuals and the public at large is the mistaken perception that because "Iraq is a rich country," all they need is "the right leadership" to be able to divide up the oil resources properly. The curse of oil has had a pernicious effect on the economy, on politics, and on intellectual life. (Fareed Zakaria has eloquently described the problems of oil-states in *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*; his article in *Cato's Letter* was translated and published in one of the biggest newspapers when I was there.) I made a presentation on the importance of institutions and showed that great satellite photo of the Korean peninsula at night, with the north plunged into darkness and the south ablaze with light. "What could explain the difference?" I asked. It's neither language nor culture, since both are shared across the border, so maybe it's the radically different incentives to create light that are faced by North Koreans and by South Koreans. Incentives are shaped by institutions—socialism in the north compared to private property and free enterprise in the south. That led some of the professors to wave their hands and insist, "Yes, yes, yes, we all agree that we need the institutional system, but you have to realize that Iraq is a rich country." They listed Iraq's

resources: oil, land, water, people, sulfur, and tourist attractions. One asserted that Iraq is “rich in civilization and religious traditions.” Statist and nationalist ideologies have made it very difficult for the academic economists to understand what has to be done. We have to educate the thinkers there so that they can better explain cause and effect to the public.

terrorists have a great deal of money that they looted from the central bank. You can buy a lot of arms and support with so much cash. I was shown the expensive bullets that the terrorists had recently started using: armor-piercing incendiary rounds that can go through the engine block of a car and kill the passengers. Defeating them requires both bullets and a vision, such as the



“A democracy of the sort worth striving for is not merely the unbridled rule of the majority.”

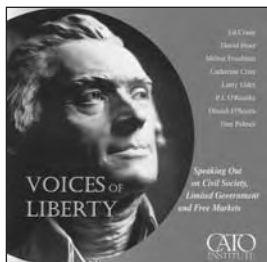
FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM

I am moderately optimistic about the possibilities for Iraqi freedom, provided that the new government is able to defeat the terrorists militarily. Victory will require that more people show the bravery (not merely the desire) to provide intelligence to the police and military. Television shows powerful ads about how to call in tips on suicide bombers, as well as confessions of captured terrorists, which demonstrate to the viewers that they’re not as impressive as they like to present themselves. I hope that the Iraqis find and kill the dedicated terrorists and dry up tacit support for the terrorist insurgency in the narrow pockets of Ba’athism and religious fanaticism. That will not be easy, since the

privately organized “Iraq 2010” project, which shows what the country can be like in five years, based on projects already underway, if the terrorists are thwarted in their goal of maximum destruction. All the terrorists offer is just more car bombs, more murder, and more destruction.

In any case, I will continue working with our Iraqi friends. Regardless of whether one opposed or supported the war, the decision was made and Saddam’s regime was overthrown. The Iraqis are now in a founding period; they have a chance to put something much, much better in place of the previous regime. The consequences for them, for their neighbors, and indeed for the whole world are too important for us not to help them.

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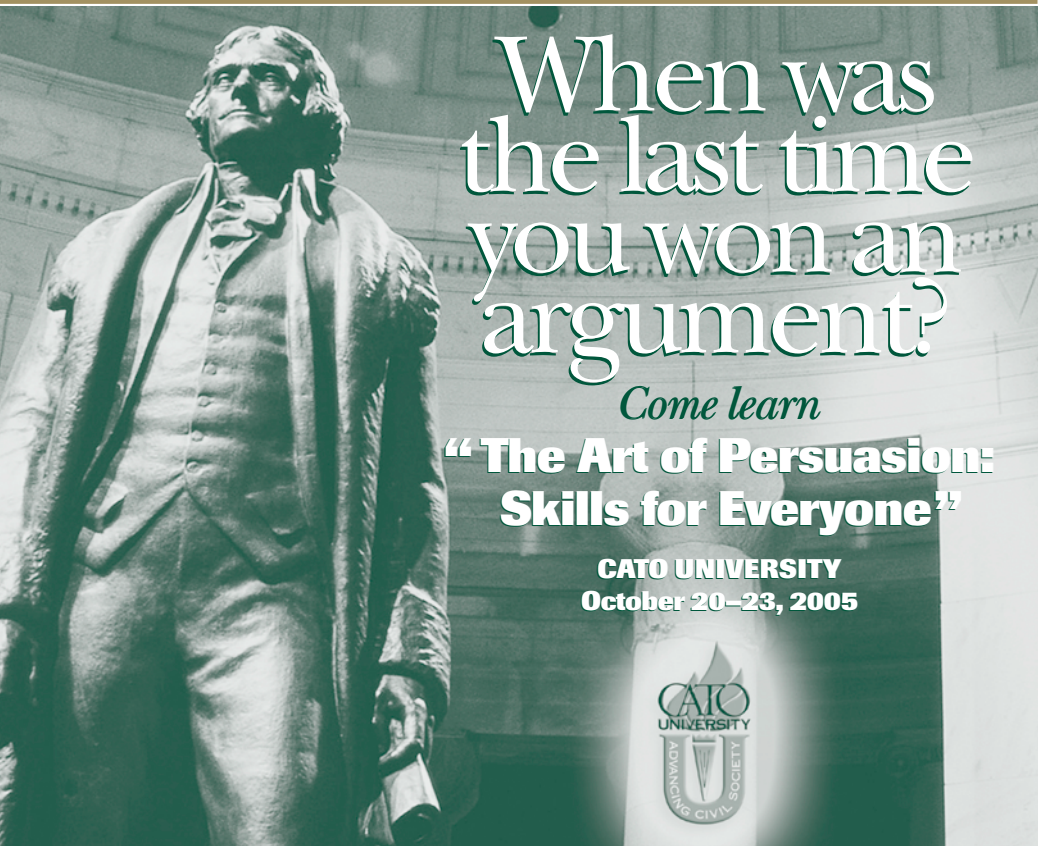
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