

On leaving Iraq
Almost everyone is lying to you
By Declan Hill
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As I leave Iraq this warning phrase runs in my head. Many news outlets in the world are lying about what is going on in this country. They are lying not because of the complexity of the situation here: not out of concern for Iraqis or fear of terrorists or any other reason linked to the Middle East.

They are lying in the same way that Swift, Rousseau and the other 18th-century essayists used to pen long fictions describing the societies of China or the tribes of North America without leaving their desks in Paris or London

The news organizations of today, like Swift and Rousseau over two centuries ago, are lying because of domestic political agendas. For the first time in a quarter of a century political power in the United States will be decided, in large part, on foreign affairs. Not since the 1980 election between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter – which was fought with the shadows of the U.S. hostages in Tehran and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan hanging over the candidates – has an election been fought over foreign affairs.

Since 1980 the issues in U.S. elections can be summed up in James Carvilles' famous phrase. "It's the economy, stupid." This year is different. This year the conditions on the streets of Baghdad will play a large role in the domestic political agendas of the United States and the U.K.

So what, then, are the lies? We all know now the right-wing lies. Iraq was a country run by a psychopathic madman who had nuclear weapons capable of blowing up much of the world within 45 minutes.

We know now that there were no weapons of mass destruction. We know now that Saddam Hussein was a befuddled old man whose principal contribution to the defence of his country was writing a novel. We know now that the claim of world destruction within 45 minutes was an exaggerated claim designed to terrify us into war.

But what are the lies of the left wing? Largely, it is in their ignoring one of the oddest and most surreal conditions of post-war Iraq: there is a consumer boom going on.

The border post on the Iraq-Jordan border is a desolate collection of buildings surrounded by hundreds of kilometres of featureless desert. Along the tarmac of the highway is a long line of transports. They are piled high with Mercedes-Benzes and Audis. At the Habur Gate – in the mountain valley between Turkey and northern Iraq – the scene is repeated.

There are other lines of trucks stretching kilometres on either side of the border. Half a million new cars have poured into Iraq since last spring. Traffic jams are common in downtown Baghdad. Car sales can be seen even in small towns in the countryside.

It is partly that there are no taxes, and gas prices are extraordinarily cheap – to fill up a gas tank costs only a few dollars. But it is mostly that the Iraqi middle class, after years of sanctions, has a huge, pent up economic demand to fulfil.

Electronic goods are flooding into the country as well. The middle-classes are buying air conditioners, fridges and DVDs. Outside stores, porters stagger back and forth like ants carrying gigantic loads on their backs, pushing the goods into the back of taxis.

The poorer sections of Iraqi society are caught up in their own

consumer boom. Go to a village in the midst of the Sunni triangle. The scene looks unchanged from Biblical times. The men and women dressed in headscarves and veils, the houses shacks of mud brick or adobe, the village surrounded by fields of wheat, flocks of sheep and palm trees.

But over many of the houses are new satellite TV dishes. Go to the poorer sections of Iraqi towns and the same phenomenon is seen: huts with little or no running water have satellite TV dishes. Most of them are pointed at Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya television stations. This, too, is a revolutionary change in post-Saddam Iraq: both of these channels were banned in his regime. Now they show images of the Battle of Fallujah or the siege of Najaf. The global village has come to Iraq and it is not showing pleasant images.

The consumer boom makes the current situation almost an exact reversal of conditions in Iraq last April and May. Then the streets were filled with garbage, the shops were closed, there were lines for gas lasting two days – you entered the lineup for gas on Monday morning and with luck you got to the pump by Wednesday afternoon.

Yet for all the economic privations, the security was reasonably good. The criminals were far too busy looting to pay much attention to anything else. And as the American army drove past in their convoys they were generally welcomed.

Now in front of a backdrop of people rushing to buy new goods, the security situation is a nightmare. For a foreigner, every day brings fresh news of kidnappings and drive-by shootings. For an Iraqi, every day brings news of someone's daughter raped, a neighbour killed in a political assassination, a bomb in a school.

The American army still drives past in convoys, but they seem useless, intent on their own business, and they are largely ignored.

Another underreported surprise: last spring the roads and towns were full of military ordnance. Entering Baghdad from the west was to pass the remnants of battle with a dozen flamed-out tanks on the edge of the highway. In the city streets were abandoned armoured personnel carriers. In fields anti-aircraft guns pointed futilely at the sky.

Now, they are mostly gone.

There are more signs of destruction from war in Kosovo four years on than in Iraq one year after the war. On the road north of Mosul up to the Turkish border, there is a checkpoint run by a faction of Massoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party. In front of the checkpoint are dozens of trucks loaded to the gunnels with guns and missiles turned into scrap metal. It is ironic. As guerrilla war wages and terrorists roam free – the metal merchants are making a fortune by turning arms into scrap.

Leaving Iraq makes me feel conflicted. It feels like running away. Working as a journalist seems like giving important lessons in freedom of the press, speaking out and allowing victims a voice in a country that has never seen journalists operating freely.

But now, spooked by the news of more kidnappings, I leave. I tell myself it's the sensible thing to do. I don't have enough money for security. My hotel is unguarded. My documentaries are finished. There is no point in staying.

Yet it still feels like a betrayal of this country. If, when danger threatens, I leave, what use is any lesson I may have given about freedom of the press? In our domestic lives, we remember who was around in the moments of great crisis. So, too, in the politics of a country, we remember who stayed and who ran. At this moment, I must count myself as someone who ran.

http://www.cbc.ca/news/viewpoint/vp_hill/20040608.html