

Sex, Oil, Chaos and Corruption at the American University of Iraq

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Students at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimaniya - photo by Chris De Bruyn

Anyone who still wonders why the Bush administration invaded Iraq would do well to become familiar with an institution whose existence few Americans are aware of: the American University of Iraq-Sulaimaniya.

Located in Kurdistan, at the nexus of northern Iraq's border with Iran and Turkey, AUI-S opened its doors in 2007. At the time, Thomas Friedman of the New York Times wrote about it with the sort of wide-eyed enthusiasm that had generally accompanied the invasion itself four years before. "Imagine for a moment if one outcome of the U.S. invasion of Iraq had been the creation of an American University of Iraq...Imagine if we had created an island of decency in Iraq...Well, stop imagining."

You don't have to imagine, though, when history provides enough clues. For more than one hundred years, American business leaders (usually with the cooperation of local potentates) have funded Christian missionaries to set up universities in foreign countries

with valuable resources to exploit. This collaboration has served to create a more friendly environment for establishing a business foothold while simultaneously fulfilling the missionaries' desire to spread the Word around the globe.

In the Middle East—where the business has primarily been oil—the Rockefellers and others generously funded such institutions as the American University of Beirut, which was established on the bedrock of conservative Christian values more than one hundred years ago. It began modestly, with one class of sixteen students in 1863. Over time, it became a venerable academic oasis, characterized by values that could be accurately described as cosmopolitan and liberal.

With AUI-S in contemporary Kurdistan, however, it was back to square one, ideologically speaking. Oil—or “The Prize” as it is often called—was once again the business at hand. This time, access to The Prize was given to George W. Bush’s good friend and contributor, the Texan Ray Hunt, whose Kurdish oil concession is potentially worth billions of dollars. And from the beginning, the academic component of this particular foreign foothold has been plagued by problems far worse than the usual disarray that attends any new university venture. That’s because the people setting it up were missionaries of a uniquely postmodern variety.

MUGGED BY REALITY—AGAIN



John Agresto - photo by Lindsay France, Cornell University

As with the Occupation itself, the task of building and running the American University of Iraq-Sulaimaniya was given to Bush/Cheney administration loyalists. Generally, they were neoconservative ideologues with a fundamentalist Christian outlook, who brashly dismissed prior experience and scholarship so far as it concerned the culture and conditions on the ground.

The failure to do even the most basic homework was quickly apparent. Right after its opening, the university was caught up in a sex scandal. Officials discovered that they had improperly vetted Owen Cargol, the man chosen to be AUI-S’s first chancellor. Somehow, they had missed news reports that Cargol had resigned his previous post as

president of Northern Arizona University only four months into his tenure after being accused of sexual harassment.

A male employee at NAU had filed a suit alleging that Cargol—the married father of two—had grabbed his genitals. Cargol’s accuser made public the contents of an email in which Cargol had written: “For sure, I am a rub-your-belly, grab-your-balls, give-you-a-hug, slap-your-back, pull-your-dick, squeeze-your-hand, cheek-your-face, and pat-your-thigh kind of guy.” Cargol was let go without any severance pay or benefits. The accuser received a settlement of more than \$100,000.

Cargol’s replacement in Iraq was a man named John Agresto, an old friend of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Agresto had been a senior official at the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Reagan Administration, alongside Lynne Cheney and Agresto’s personal mentor, William Bennett. His nomination to be Archivist of the United States had been blocked by concerns voiced by more than a dozen academic and professional associations that he was inappropriately partisan and lacked qualifications for the position.

Through his connections, Agresto, former president of St. John’s College in New Mexico (on whose board Rumsfeld’s wife served), had originally been appointed as the education advisor for the Coalition Provisional Authority that initially ran the American occupation under Paul Bremer’s command. (He noted proudly that he hadn’t done research about Iraq’s educational system besides a Google search before landing in Baghdad in September, 2003 with two suitcases and a feather pillow. “I wanted to come here with as open a mind as I could have,” he told the Washington Post in a profile that appeared prior to his taking the university position. “I’d much rather learn firsthand than have it filtered to me by an author.”)

This was, to say the least, an unusual approach for someone who had been and would again become the head of an academic institution. But though he seemingly did not realize it, Agresto was in fact being influenced by others’ perceptions—albeit perceptions carefully orchestrated by the invading power. “Like everyone else in America, I saw images of people cheering as Saddam Hussein’s statue was pulled down,” he said. “I saw people hitting pictures of him with their shoes. Once you see that you can’t help but say, ‘Okay. This is going to work.’” At the time, Agresto assumed that Iraq “would feel like a newly liberated East European nation, keen to embrace the West and democratic change.”

Once in country, Agresto was immediately confronted with the fact that Iraq wasn’t Eastern Europe but rather a frenetic Middle Eastern shooting gallery. “Visits to the universities he was trying to rebuild and the faculty he wanted to invigorate were more and more dangerous, and infrequent,” wrote Washington Post correspondent Rajiv Chandrasekaran. “His Iraq staff was threatened by insurgents...his plans to repair hundreds of campus buildings were scuttled by the Bush administration’s decision to shift reconstruction efforts and by the failure to raise money from other sources...”

Puffing on a pipe by a swimming pool in the Green Zone, safely away from the bullets and bombs outside, a defeated Agresto told his interviewer, “I’m a neoconservative who’s been mugged by reality.” It was a reference, of course, to the old Neocon saw about conservatives being former liberals who finally had faced the cold hard facts. But in his case, it seems to have meant forsaking notions about democracy in favor of a more colonial approach. (Agresto did not respond to an e-mail from WhoWhatWhy seeking an interview.)

Agresto left Iraq after his Occupation stint, but was reinvented to the scene of his “mugging” in order to replace Cargol as AUI-S chancellor. This time, it was no more Mr. Nice Guy. Ditto with the man who followed him into the chancellorship when he became provost. This was Joshua Mitchell, a Georgetown University Professor of Political Theory. From the time Mitchell began pursuing his PhD in the late 1980s at that neoconservative temple, the University of Chicago, he’d drawn considerable funding from the right-wing Bradley and Olin foundations, half of the conservative movement quartet dubbed the “Four Sisters.” Mitchell had also gotten money from Lewis E. Lehrman, a well-known financier of rightwing political and academic projects, who endowed a chair for him at the Fund for American Studies, an ideologically conservative educational institute.



Main Building, American University of Iraq-Sulaimaniya. The school received a five-year unconditional accreditation in June 2010, less than three years after opening its doors

If Agresto had become a neo-colonialist by the time he returned to Iraq, Mitchell in some ways was the classic colonial university official with the bible in his pocket. In addition to teaching political theory at Georgetown, he was a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School. Shortly before he signed on with AUI-S, he delivered a speech at a religious conference in Colorado Springs in which he observed that Americans were fundamentally Calvinists “with purity and stain, with salvation and damnation, and with the inner perspicuity that was needed to tell the difference.”

<http://www.counterpunch.org/greuter11062009.html>

Education as "Soft Power"?

Inside the American University of Iraq

By MARK GRUETER

The cover of the brochure for the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani (AUI-S) features a picture of an enormous, very modern-looking building that *does not exist*. The actual AUI-S building, though nice enough, is much more modest. And that's mostly just where they keep the administrators. The teachers and students conduct classes outside in rows of box-shaped huts (which some students call "chicken shacks"), set up in front of the building.

The nonexistent, awe-inspiring campus building featured in the university's promotional pamphlet and on the AUI-S website is cheerily described this way:

Today, just a short drive across Sulaimani, on a sprawling one-hundred-eighty hectare parcel of land, construction crews are finishing the interior of a ten-thousand square meter, state-of-the-art Presidency Building, which will be the flagship edifice of the new AUI-S campus. By September 2010, this impressive, high-tech and ecologically sound five-level structure will house the University administration, as well as a series of comfortable classrooms and larger lecture halls. [*italics mine*]

These are outrageous claims. Blueprints in hand, I visited the site twice in June 2009: they haven't finished the exterior, the foundation, never mind the interior. It's just a big slab of cement with some loose wires and a lot of dirt and dust kicking around. Thinking they'd be impressed, the university chancellor wanted the students to see this construction site mess, so some of us took the students out there on a cripplingly hot afternoon and then left almost as soon as we'd arrived when it became clear how pointless of a trip it was.

"What are we supposed to be looking at?" asked one confused student. Another student revealingly explained to me, "Some students are only acting like they're interested because they think that's what AUI-S wants." And they're right. That's one thing that's so disturbing about the organization: many students behave like subjects eager to please their masters.

I don't know what to say about such throwaway lines like the "ecologically sound" boast toward the end of the chirpy PR pitch quoted above. In a country like Iraq, what could that possibly mean?

Last year, I was hired by the American University of Iraq, based in Sulaimani (Iraqi Kurdistan) as an English lecturer. AUI-S has been in business since October 2007, promising an “American-style liberal arts education” for Iraqi students. I wondered about the name from the beginning. For one thing, it more or less declares itself a neoimperialist venture in the “soft power” sense. And, by rubbing the “American” name in, doesn’t AUI-S further set itself up as a target for any would-be terrorist? But I took the job because I thought I could do some good; I’ve taught overseas before (in Russia), and I thought it would be fascinating to work in Iraq; the money was good, and it became clear to me that I’d be free to teach how and what I pleased.

Some background on AUI-S: it was founded by a prominent group of Kurdish politicians (including Iraqi President Jalal Talabani) and American neoconservatives. Iraqi deputy Prime Minister Dr. Barham Salih was a prime mover, along with John Agresto. Agresto had been working in Baghdad with the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) before undertaking the American University project. Agresto has ties to both Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. He used to work with Lynne Cheney at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH).

Given these facts, it is not surprising that AUI-S functions more like a political tool, rather than as an educational enterprise. That, of course, does not stop its leaders from promoting AUI-S as a real university bent on spreading democracy. Create the appearance of a thriving western-style university in Iraq and then cite it as evidence of Iraq’s progress toward a liberal democracy. That is pretty much the idea. It looks good on paper for both pro-war cheerleaders and Iraqi politicians in power to brag about. However, almost everything about AUI-S – aside from the inept, villainous crowd who run it – is artificial.

Nobody actually believes that the new campus or even the one shadow building will be finished by September 2010, assuming it’s ever completed, which I tend to doubt. In a fantasyland, I guess it doesn’t matter: it sounds much nicer to say that it will be done soon, and that’s all that counts, right? The point of the campus description is not to be honest but to attract potential investors. (Just like the amusing but quickly tiresome “AUI-S 3D Flyover” video – <http://www.ais.org/index.php/AUI-S-3D-Flyover.html> - depicting the future campus, complete with a glorious soundtrack.)

AUI-S is a private university. We don’t know where the money comes from exactly, because AUI-S does not release such information. All we know, according to published reports, is that it received \$10 million grants from both the U.S. and the Kurdistan regional governments – pocket change for a university with a reported \$500 million budget and even loftier ambitions for the future. But it’s impossible for me to say exactly where that money is spent, aside from bloated admin salaries and digitally animated videos.

The important work of actually teaching students, as I learned in a most unpleasant way, takes a back seat to everything, especially to the egos of the administrators, including the acting chancellor Joshua Mitchell. Mitchell is a straight-laced preppy conservative who both looks and sounds a lot like the New York Times columnist David Brooks. Mitchell makes little attempt to reach out to teachers or students. His driver pulls him up to the front door in a Mercedes every morning; he slithers into his office and is almost never heard from throughout the day. He’s completely out of touch with what’s actually happening on the ground level at AUI-S. When Mitchell

does appear, he makes it a point to showcase his Christian beliefs, often quoting from the Bible during speeches, talks, and in email sermons to yours truly. For instance, he recently wrote to me, "You have shown yourself only too quick to point out the splinter in someone else's eye but not the beam in your own." (Matt 7:1-5) He ended a separate email lecture with a line that I could not find in the Bible, but which sounds Biblically: "Be not a perfectionist, for the world you live in is a deeply flawed one, which seldom moves forward by force of arms or by the force of words."

So, it moves forward by force of fate or god? What was he talking about? Aside from his half a million dollar a year paycheck (estimate), one can only speculate about what the guy's motives are for being there. Personally, I think Mitchell believes he's doing missionary work for Jesus. The only indication that he is a neoconservative is that he was hired by Agresto ... but that's not a bad indication. Whatever he is, I can assure you, he is a believer in the American presence in Iraq.

Now, to the point about politics as the priority over education: AUI-S quite simply and on many different levels misrepresents itself or more directly lies to people about what is actually going on there. According to the AUI-S website and the university's promotional materials, Iraqi students are required to score a 550 or above on the TOEFL exam in order to enter the undergraduate program. Last semester, this claim was exposed as fraudulent after it was learned that out of the 40 or so undergraduate students at AUI-S only a handful had scored 550. Students were being pushed through and into undergraduate study because, well, they had to be: there had to at least be a show of legitimacy.

When I write "pushed through," I mean, pushed through AUI-S's English preparatory program, which is where the great majority of AUI-S students are currently enrolled. Last semester, there were approximately 150 students in this program, compared to the 40 or so undergrads. So, basically, we have a "university" with at least three times as many pre-frosh as frosh. With at least 250 new students entering AUIS this semester, that ratio promises to multiply considerably.

Another administrator worth mentioning is Rosalind Warfield-Brown, who is the chair of the aforementioned English prep program. As chair of this particular program, she is responsible for the majority of students at AUI-S.

Mitchell and Warfield-Brown preside over another specious claim regarding the education: "At all levels of instruction at AUI-S, learning is enhanced by way of small, interactive classes..." This typical fallacy seriously frustrated teachers and hindered the quality of education.

With all of the millions supposedly coming in (toward the end of last semester, Mitchell kept bragging about a new \$50 million grant he had pulled in), AUI-S *could* have the small class sizes it claims to have, but they simply refuse to hire enough teachers, citing cost concerns, of all things. Our classes – which primarily involve ESL-type instruction – were as large as 20 students per teacher. Ask any experienced ESL teacher if that's an effective way to conduct a class, especially when, in the case of AUI-S, students of widely different levels inhabit the same class. Again, education is simply not the priority. The result is a lot of overworked, burned-out teachers surrounded by an extremely needy group of students – students who deserve both more teachers and other personnel (like, say, guidance counselors) to meet their needs. Some students have scholarships, but most pay the annual tuition

of \$10,000, which is an extraordinary sum in that part of the world, as you might imagine.

Regarding tuition, in a sick twist, rich rather than poor students are more likely to receive admission and tuition breaks, because of their family connections to the local political regime now headed by none other than Dr. Barham Salih, the main man at AUI-S. Discrimination on multiple levels against poorer, non-connected students at AUI-S is routine and it amounts to the level of abuse and oppression. The underprivileged are cut off from university funded programs to travel abroad, excluded from staged media photo-ops (AUI-S only wants the best dressed students shown), had a student association/newspaper called Students for Change closed down by the administration and, on many occasions, are even served smaller portions of food in the cafeteria!

A disturbing allegation has recently surfaced that Dr. Barham Salih (who was just named Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government) promised AUI-S scholarships to families in exchange for political support in a close, recent election he had against the popular 'Change' party candidate Nashirwan Mustafa. All of this free money delivered as promised to new, unqualified students created a cash shortfall at AUI-S, resulting in arbitrary tuition hikes for existing students, which forced the poorer of those students to actually drop out. Just to give you one clue how students feel, one wrote to me: "They do everything, even kill people, to get whatever they want." And these are America's wonderful allies in the region.

It should be noted that many of the students passed on other promising educational opportunities based on the claims made by AUI-S. Arrogant westerners often take it granted that they're doing the natives a favor just by being there, even though this presumption is both insulting and untrue. I fear many of the Iraqi students will be terribly disappointed when their American education doesn't land them the jobs they expected.

Additionally, if AUI-S were really interested in developing Iraq toward a civil society, it would, at least, make an attempt to integrate its staff into the community. I felt safe walking around the city. Instead, they seem hellbent on isolating "us" from "them," further promoting the imperialist-subject relationship, both in appearance and in practice. This segregationist mentality among most expats is something I always find so shockingly stupid. For AUI-S staff, they built an absurd mini-compound outside the city, near the airport. The streets are designed to look like something out of a Floridian residential neighborhood, complete with small palm trees and orange-pink villas. It was built in the middle of a wasteland, and far too remote for anyone to walk into the city. It is a laughable setup until it becomes a maddening one.

Like America's military invasion of Iraq, one could argue that the problem with AUI-S was not so much in the ideal as it was in the execution. But, perhaps, the two are not so far apart? Americans prove, time and again, how incapable we are of nation-building. Part of it is a lack of genuine willingness, and part is a lack of understanding of what it takes. When we consider reality versus stated claims of fantasy, the American University of Iraq, despite its "soft" intentions, is no exception to the overall failed policy of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.

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