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## Quotable

War is fear cloaked in courage.  
– General William Westmoreland

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# Iraq Invasion the 'Biggest Cultural Disaster Since 1258'

by Humberto Márquez

CARACAS - One million books, 10 million documents, and 14,000 archaeological artifacts have been lost in the U.S.-led invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq – the biggest cultural disaster since the descendants of Genghis Khan destroyed Baghdad in 1258, Venezuelan writer Fernando Báez told IPS.

"U.S. and Polish soldiers are still stealing treasures today and selling them across the borders with Jordan and Kuwait, where art merchants pay up to \$57,000 for a Sumerian tablet," said Báez, who was interviewed during a brief visit to Caracas.

The expert on the destruction of libraries has helped document the devastation of cultural and religious objects in Iraq, where the ancient Mesopotamian kingdoms of Sumer, Akkad, and Babylon emerged, giving it a reputation as the birthplace of civilisation.

His inventory of the destruction and his denunciations that the coalition forces are violating the Hague Convention of 1954 on the protection of cultural heritage in times of war have earned him the enmity of Washington.

Báez said he was refused a visa to enter the United States to take part in conferences.

In addition, he has been barred from returning to Iraq "to carry out further investigations," he added. "But it's too late, because we already have documents, footage and photos that in time will serve as evidence of the atrocities committed," said Báez, the author of *The Cultural Destruction of Iraq* and *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, which were published in Spanish.

**IPS:** What do you accuse the United States of doing?

**FB:** In first place, of violating the Hague Convention, which states that cultural property must be protected in the event of armed conflict.

That is a criminally punishable offense, which is why Washington has not signed the convention, or the 1999 protocol attached to it. And perhaps it is one reason the administration of George W. Bush is seeking immunity for its soldiers.

But it is not only the United States; the rest of the coalition forces are also guilty.

**IPS:** But according to the reports, it was Iraqi civilians and not U.S. soldiers who looted libraries and museums.

**FB:** But the U.S. Army was criminally negligent, failing to protect libraries, museums, and archaeological sites despite clear warnings from UNESCO [the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization], the UN, the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, and the former head of the U.S. president's Advisory Committee on Cultural Property, Martin Sullivan.

The Iraqis who went out to loot interpreted the negligence as a green light to

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act without restraint.

**IPS:** So the sin committed by the U.S. was one of omission?

**FB:** Not only that. There was also direct destruction and looting. In Nasiriya in May 2004, a year after the formal end of hostilities, during fighting with (Shi'ite cleric) Moqtada el-Sadr's militants, 40,000 religious manuscripts were destroyed in a fire [set by the coalition forces].

And when soldiers found out that the Sumerian city of Ur [in southern Iraq] was the birthplace of the prophet Abraham, they took ancient bricks as souvenirs.

**IPS:** You also accuse soldiers from other countries, besides U.S. troops.

**FB:** That's right. In late May 2004, Italian Carabinieri were caught trying to smuggle looted cultural artifacts over the border into Kuwait. And the British Museum reported that Polish forces destroyed part of Babylon's ancient ruins, to the south of Baghdad.

**IPS:** Can we suppose that these events are part of phases of the conflict that have already been left behind?

**FB:** No. More recently it was found that Polish troops drove heavy vehicles near the Nebuchadnezzar Palace, which dates back to the sixth century BC, and then covered large areas of the site with asphalt, doing irreparable damage. There were also attempts to gouge out bricks at the Gate of Ishtar.

To that is added the collapse of ancient walls due to the continuous passage of U.S. trucks and helicopters, and walls spraypainted with graffiti, like "I was here" or "I love Mary."

**IPS:** Can we expect the situation to improve with time?

**FB:** Another accusation that can be made against the United States is that it has created a less safe country overall, by generating the conditions for cultural destruction, which will be even worse in future years, due to the situation of legal insecurity.

In the days of the looting of Baghdad, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld went so far as to say that looting "isn't something that someone allows or doesn't allow. It's something that happens."

Today Iraq is like a golf course for the world's terrorists, and its cultural treasures will not be safe in the future.

**IPS:** What impact has there been on the United States?

**FB:** One of its reactions was to rejoin UNESCO, which the U.S. had withdrawn from during the era of [Ronald] Reagan [1981-1989] on the pretext that the UN agency served as "a communist front."

Experts at the U.S. State and Defense Departments are trying to mitigate the damages. U.S. military police helped Iraqi police track down the Lady of Warka, dubbed the "Mona Lisa of Mesopotamia," a 5,200-year-old marble sculpture that is one of the earliest known representations of the human face in the history of art.

**IPS:** How significant are the losses?

**FB:** The Lady of Warka may be worth \$100-\$150 million. A Sumerian cuneiform tablet or an Assyrian stela can fetch \$57,000 at the border.

Some Iraqis have been purchasing books at used-book markets in Baghdad to return them to the libraries.

But the damage is incalculable. In the Baghdad National Library, around one million books were burnt, including early editions of *Arabian Nights*, mathematical treatises by Omar Khayyam, and tracts by philosophers Avicenna and Averroes.

**IPS:** Thousands of relics were also lost from the National Archaeological

Museum.

**FB:** The initial reports spoke of 170,000 objects, but 25 major artifacts as well as 14,000 less important ones actually disappeared. An amnesty for the looters led to the recovery of around 3,500, according to the U.S. colonel who led the investigations, Matthew Bogdanos.

But besides the national museum and library, the al-Awqaf library, which held over 5,000 Islamic manuscripts, university libraries, and the library of Bayt al-Hikma also suffered. At least 10 million documents have been lost in Iraq altogether.

[Báez has said his research into the destruction of libraries and archives was first motivated by his painful childhood memories of a flash flood that wiped away the library in his hometown, San Félix in southeastern Venezuela. He cherished the municipal library because since his parents worked, he had often been left with relatives who worked there, and spent his days reading.

His research culminated in *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books*, which documents the catastrophic loss of books during wars, like the Library of Alexandria, which burnt down in 48 BC, or the burning of millions of books by the Nazis.]

**IPS:** Do you believe military forces have been the worst enemy of books?

**FB:** No, actually I don't. I believe intellectuals are the worst enemies. Intellectuals have burnt books in the name of the Bible or the Koran. Vladimir Nabokov [1899-1977] burnt *El Quixote* in front of his students. Destroyers like Adolph Hitler or Slobodan Milosevic were bibliophiles. Saddam Hussein himself, an archaeologist and philologist, published three novels. Joseph Goebbels, the genius of Nazi propaganda, was a philologist.

And many of those who have led the U.S. to war in Iraq are academics. It is a paradox: the inventors of the electronic book returned to Mesopotamia, where books, history, and civilisation were born, to destroy it.

(Inter Press Service)



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