

PLAYING NICE IN THE SANDBOX



One Soldier's Stories and Observations
From the Battle for Hearts and Minds

Steve Goldblatt



When the history of the Iraq war is written, it will come from the memoirs of people like SGT (ret.) Steve Goldblatt. At the introspective age of thirty-eight, he left the business world behind and found himself crossing the border from Kuwait into Iraq at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom as a Civil Affairs Specialist with the 308th Civil Affairs Brigade. Their mission: To win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people.

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by Steve Goldblatt

Edited by: Michael Carr, Gay Jones & Lisa Grace

More than the Local Dairy Queen

It's amazing what people will do to cool off on a really hot day. Baghdad in June is smack in the middle of several months of long, hot days. Even though the locals were acclimatized to the regional heat, they didn't love it. It was obvious to them that we didn't enjoy it either. Amazingly enough, it was plain to see empathy in their faces. Here were these occupying soldiers, foreign men in a foreign land, dressed in their long-sleeved shirts, boots, helmets, and body armor, certainly not accustomed to the harsh environment they found themselves in, sweating and looking generally uncomfortable. The punishing heat did, however, have a positive effect. It acted almost as an icebreaker between the troops and the Iraqis. Many times a local would laugh and point at me as I poured a bottle of water on my head. It would predictably lead to a slap on the back and a handshake, as if to say, "This sucks, but you're okay with me."

A drive down the main street through al'Amiriyah, in the Monsour district, was an awe-inspiring lesson on capitalism in action. We had been watching news reports over the previous few weeks regarding the overall state of affairs in Iraq, and the information being broadcast was bleak, to say the least: "*The economy is in shambles...the flow of goods has been choked off...Iraqis must scrounge for necessary items...*" Blah, blah, blah.. Obviously the news reporters had not taken a ride through al'Amiriyah—or had decided not to report about it.

The main street is a long, straight stretch of roadway running perpendicular to the airport highway. You reach it from the highway via a cloverleaf that runs under and over a bridge. Three lanes of traffic run on both sides, with a small island running down the center. All kinds of shops and stores line both sides of the road, selling anything from clothing to food, to electronics. By far the greatest number of stores were selling

electronic goods and electrical appliances. Satellite dishes and systems, air conditioners, refrigerators, and televisions were jammed in the shop windows and on the sidewalks in front of the doors, and business was booming.

A few weeks earlier, a drive over the bridge to downtown would have revealed the empty rooftops of houses and commercial buildings. Clotheslines and prayer rugs were the only things to be seen on rooftop patios. Saddam had banned satellite dishes years earlier, and although it was rumored that some Iraqis had the systems in their homes, they certainly kept them hidden for fear of a large fine and prison sentence should they be discovered. But now Saddam was gone, or at least no longer in power. In the course of two weeks the rooftops had sprung to modern life. Satellite dishes adorned almost every rooftop, and new television sets were flying off the store shelves. It was an amazing transformation in a very short time.

The street reminded me of Fifth Avenue in New York City, only a lot hotter and dustier. Crowds of people window-shopped and haggled with retailers at every opportunity. Iraqis from all walks of life walked in groups and alone, sometimes bunching up and forming human waves. It was like a city unto itself, a virtual melting pot of Baghdadis. Women lugged handfuls of shopping bags, a feat sometimes made more difficult by the confining bulkiness of their burkas. (Although many women wore burkas, many others did not. In this city of contrasts one could even see the strange contradiction of women wearing full black burkas with high stiletto heels peeking out from underneath as they walked.) Fathers held on tightly to their children's hands; groups of teenage boys ogled the girls. It was like any outdoor shopping mall in the US, with the exception that here everyone kept their eyes on us—as we did with them.

At the far end of the street, just before it doglegged right, stood a little ice cream shop. Its A-frame facade and big serving

windows reminded me of *Arnold's Soft-Serve* and family summer vacations on Cape Cod. I had never imagined eating an Iraqi ice-cream cone, but apparently everyone else in town did. The crowd in front of the tiny stand was enormous: two lines stretching back, one from each serving window, for almost a city block. Small children, businessmen, and burkha-clad crones crowded around the front of the building to study the assortment of flavors painted in Arabic squiggles on the plywood facade. As we stopped our Humvee across the street, I watched in amazement as clusters of people kept coming from both directions, flocking toward the long lines and the menu boards. The economy may have been in “shambles”, but here was half of Baghdad, eager to drop a few precious dinars for an ice cream on a hot day.

The bizarre scene had almost a dreamlike quality. Here the war was only a few months old, and civilians felt free enough and rich enough to take their families out for ice cream. Yes, life in Baghdad was marching determinedly on. But there was still serious work to be done. The new de-Baathification policy had not yet hit full stride, and many of Saddam's old cronies still ruled the land. Since Saddam had not yet been found, many Iraqis still lived in dire fear of his return—and of the horrific punishments awaiting anyone who had not helped his cause. Those who remained loyal to the brutal dictator (and who, obviously, had been rewarded for their devotion in the past) were still feared and avoided. This dynamic became plainly evident when a shiny black, late-model Mercedes rounded the bend in the street.

Since the ice-cream shop crowd had now spilled out into the street, passing cars were obliged to jam together into a single lane to get by. The drivers didn't seem to mind the patrons mingling in the street, and the crowd certainly wasn't paying any attention to the traffic. The black Mercedes moved quietly

past our vehicles and drove directly toward the crowd. Even though it was traveling slowly, my first reaction was to expect casualties; however, none materialized. Instead, as the car approached the shop, the tide of human bodies calmly moved back, creating a passage directly to the serving window. It was as if Moses had just parted the waters. The once boisterous crowd fell eerily silent as the car door opened and its sole occupant got out: a tall man with a bushy black mustache, slicked-back hair, and dark sunglasses. He looked as though he had just walked off the set of *Saturday Night Fever*: tight polyester pants, alligator shoes, peach silk shirt unbuttoned to reveal several gold chains—*this guy was an Iraqi rendition of John Travolta's Tony Minero!* It was such a caricature, I had to chuckle...but no one else was laughing. The crowd turned away from the man, most of them actually bowing their heads as he walked past them to the serving window.

The blare of distant car horns and the usual bustle of city life drifted up the street, but here even the small children whispered in hushed tones. The sense of fear was palpable. I eyed the man closely, my thumb snug on the safety of my weapon. He was making a clear show of power—and one that he obviously wanted us to see, since our vehicles were in plain sight. But we had no authority to do anything about it.

The clerk behind the serving window handed him an ice-cream cone, and the man just turned and walked nonchalantly back to his car. I don't believe he paid, but I couldn't tell for sure—certainly no one was making any fuss about it. The Mercedes slowly backed out of the crowd, made a bootleg turn, and speeded back the way it had come, forcing a few bystanders to leap frantically out of its path. The crowd slowly closed in on the hole it had opened, and soon the chatter returned to its former volume.

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The whole interlude had taken scarcely a minute, and in that time I learned volumes. After forty years of living in fear under a brutal regime, it was going to take time for the citizens of Iraq to get their arms around the whole concept of freedom. I wanted to confront the man right there—slap that insolent face, arrest him, do *something* to put the *narcissistic wannabee hardass* in his place and show the people that they need not fear him and his kind anymore—but I couldn't. Instead I took his license plate number to turn over later to the intel people, because anyone with that kind of power was worth watching. In the coming weeks, the man would more than likely be taken down as part of the policy to remove the Saddam loyalists and hardcore Baathists from power. Meanwhile, the stifling heat would continue, the ice cream shop would keep up a brisk business, and life in Baghdad would go on.

6/6/03, 11:21 p.m.

This email is great...it's a hell of a lot easier than writing letters (which probably would never get to you, knowing the army mail system)...I made a deal with some South African pilots who fly through Jordan to get me about 30 lbs. of chicken...We had a barbeque with it tonight...first decent food I've had in months...The MREs aren't bad, but after you eat them every day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, it tends to make you regret opening the bag...There are only about 15 different menus...

Moving on

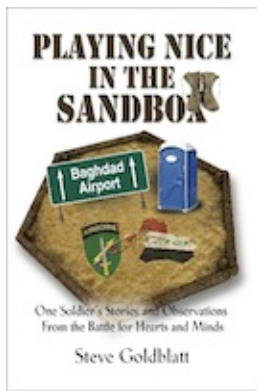
In May 2003 my unit picked up our equipment and moved out of the airport terminal area. The Spirit, wanting to be closer to the flagpole, moved us about three miles away to a half-destroyed building on the grounds of what was once the Baghdad polo club. While I was busy cleaning and generally making the new place livable, a lieutenant colonel at ORHA (Soon to be CPA, or Coalition Provisional Authority) was writing an order effectively attaching me to the airport mission.

6/8/03, 11:13 p.m.

We have a customs/immigrations problem going on at the airport...the problem is that there is no customs or immigration...I know there is some fishy business going on with some of the people and cargo leaving and coming into the airport right now...There are times when I keep my M16 loaded on the ramp....some of these people I just don't trust ...A few weeks ago the German government had an evac flight for three "critically injured" Iraqi children...The kids were smiling and laughing the whole time and certainly did not look critical at all...their parents were very well dressed and had a lot of jewelry...It was obvious they were pretty wealthy for these parts...Their orders said that the children were to be repatriated as soon as they were better...but now no one

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seems to know who they were or where they went...it is as if they just disappeared...My guess is that this was a family doing business with the Germans during the old regime and they were now being ferried out of the country...probably they know something important...who knows if their passports were even correct.... They could have been "most wanted" for all we know...The Saudis do the same type of thing...but at this point there is nothing I can do about it...



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