

## A Catastrophe for Our Civilization

By William R. Polk

The Iraq Museum of Antiquities -- the world's greatest collection of artifacts reaching back more than 5,000 years and documenting the rise of our civilization, the origins of writing, the basis of the Judeo-Christian religious inspiration and the rise of cities -- is no more. On April 10, thousands of hungry, angry and greedy people poured out of the slums of Baghdad and tore through the museum, pillaging, smashing and chopping up the priceless collection.

As the chairman of President Bush's Advisory Committee on Cultural property, Martin Sullivan, declared on April 17, "The tragedy was foreseeable and preventable." Furious at the action -- and inaction -- of the American government, he resigned his post. He was right: it was preventable.

As I wrote in *La Vanguardia* on March 9, I was one of the last people to see the collection before the wave of destruction. While I was attempting to negotiate some way to save it, I could not reveal the efforts I and others were making. Now I can now tell the full story.

When I went through the museum on the eve of the invasion, it was clear that little had been done to protect the collected works. The director had almost no resources to cope with the impending danger. True, some of the more spectacular treasures were stored in underground vaults, but thousands of other pieces, some even more valuable in a cultural sense than those made of gold and ornamented with precious stones, were still in fragile glass cases. Some of these were among the earliest examples of writing and

others were tiny artistic wonders. Incised in reverse on stone dowels, each just the size of a child's finger, these cylinder seals produced a griffon or sphinx or a cuneiform message when rolled across wet clay. Among other displays were statues, jewelry, inscriptions and magnificent, gigantic winged bulls from the palaces of ancient Assyria.

All in all, the museum collection was an irreplaceable record, painstakingly assembled over more than a century by hundreds of scholars, of how our civilization began.

When I asked the director why the smaller pieces had not been removed and why sandbags had not been placed around the giant statues and wall friezes, he shrugged and said that there was really nothing he could do: one bomb would destroy the building, its underground vaults and all they contained. And like everyone with whom I spoke in Baghdad, he expected not one bomb but thousands. If the museum was to be saved from bombs, it had had to be done in Washington where the war was being planned.

As a result of my article in *La Vanguardia*, I was contacted by the former associate curator of antiquities in the Getty Museum, Arthur Houghton. Mr. Houghton, a numismatist and former U.S. Foreign Service officer, comes from a family distinguished for its generous support of the arts. Through his personal connections and joined by colleagues from the Archaeological Institute of America, Mr. Houghton lobbied the American government to ensure that the museum was not targeted in the onslaught.

I applauded Mr. Houghton's efforts, but I feared that they would not succeed. Among the hundreds of cruise missiles aimed at Iraq, I thought it likely that at least one would go astray and strike the museum. I was wrong about that fear: no missile hit the museum.

Sadly, I was right in my other fear: that when Baghdad was besieged, as it certainly would be, public order would break down. As casualties mounted, the administration would collapse and people would become hungry, frightened and desperate. Inevitably at least some would become looters. To them, the museum would be a treasure trove. It would have required a miracle, I wrote in *La Vanguardia*, to make the collapse of the Iraqi government perfectly coordinate with the arrival of American soldiers. In the interval, I predicted, the museum would likely perish.

There was no way to stop the invasion and obviously in the course of the fighting the Iraqi administration would collapse. So what to do?

One idea was to organize some sort of civil guard at the museum. But that was impractical in the midst of a war. One side or the other would surely have attacked any armed group set up there.

A second idea proved equally impractical. It was to remove the collection. There was very little time; in less than two weeks the invasion began. But I thought it was the only hope. So I approached the Government of Jordan to ask if King Abdullah would agree to act as custodian of the Iraq museum treasures under the supervision and at the request of an international committee composed of directors of world's major museums and if the W.P. Carey Foundation of New York would arrange to have them packed and shipped to Jordan.

The former prime minister of Jordan, who had been a student of mine, was sympathetic, but, reasonably, he pointed out that the Iraqi authorities would almost certainly not allow the collection to be sent abroad. Furious that they were being attacked, they would say, 'if our buildings are to be blown up and we are to be killed, we

will not make your attack easier by removing something you do not wish to destroy.’ The Jordanians felt that they could not offer unless asked to do so by the Iraqis. Literally “under the gun,” the Iraqi government had no time for such considerations.

So I fell back on the third possibility: I offered to go back to Baghdad the first week of March to see if I could help organize and finance a move of everything into the museum cellars and the construction of sandbag walls around the huge pieces; but it was too late. The attack began a few days later. And it would not have stopped the raging mob of looters. They were too desperate and the rewards were too great.

So, in the greatest onslaught since the fearsome Mongol conqueror Hulagu Khan sacked the city in 1258, Baghdad fell. The Americans did not destroy its centers of culture as Hulagu had done, but they did little to protect them. American troops conspicuously guarded the ministries of petroleum and interior, but paid no attention to mobs looting hospitals, schools, and, above all, the museum. It was the failure to act that caused Mr. Sullivan to resign from the Bush administration.

For several days, gangs of men armed with axes, chainsaws, sledgehammers and guns rampaged through the museum, shattered the glass cases holding the objects I had seen, broke down or cut up those objects too heavy to carry and smashed their ways through the heavy doors of the vaults. They were mainly after the “high value” art objects, but they also took the entire collection, some 80,000 pieces, of the cuneiform “library” of ancient Mesopotamia. Almost worse, they ripped apart the card catalogs and records of the vast collection. While of no value to them, the records might have enabled UNESCO, as the UN Security Council has just instructed it, to effect a worldwide ban on

the sale of objects stolen by the looters. But without the records, such a ban will be difficult to enforce.

Attempts are now being made to repair what could have been saved: Italy has led with a grant of \$400,000; such duplicates as other museums have of the records are being assembled and under the leadership of the British Museum, experts are being gathered from the Louvre, the Metropolitan and Berlin Museum. Universities and such organizations as the World Monuments Fund have mobilized to help. These efforts are commendable, but they are both too little and too late. As one of the Iraq Museum curators lamented, “our heritage is finished.”

Iraq is not alone: what was in the Iraq Museum was the heritage of the whole world. We too are the losers.

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