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Author(s): Kathe Jervis

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A SCHOOL UNDER FIRE: THE FOG OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE IN WAR

KATHE JERVIS

This article explores a little-known footnote in the history of the U.S. military occupation in Iraq. In mid-2007, when the war in Iraq was at its height, the author accepted a job to document the beginnings of a school designed and operated by the U.S. military in Iraq. Although this school was in many ways like any other, every aspect ultimately was conditioned by its singular context: it was a school for Iraqi juveniles captured in war. The author documented the situation of the teenage detainees attending this school run by the U.S. military, and described their educational program. Data collection included both semi-structured and informal conversations with the detainees, their teachers, their guards, and those in the military hierarchy who made decisions about the school and its curriculum; the author also conducted extended classroom observations. Document analysis included school schedules, students' written work and artwork, and assessments. The author gathered information to inform decision-makers about elements missing from the school program, to raise questions about texts and materials, and to offer ideas as the school developed. This article, which is adapted from the field notes the author maintained as part of her assignment, raises questions about the role of the U.S. military in providing education to detained Iraqi juveniles and describes daily life in school.

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INTRODUCTION

Although the optimistically named Dar al-Hikmah (House of Wisdom) was in many ways a school like any other, every aspect ultimately was conditioned by its singular context: it was a school for Iraqi juveniles captured in war. In mid-2007, when the war in Iraq was at its bloody height, I accepted a job to document the beginnings of this school designed and operated by the U.S. military. Before leaving, I set down on paper what role I could play. My initial thoughts became my contract:

I will be going to Camp Victory from August 19 to September 24 to document the situation of the approximately 900 teenage Iraqi detainees in their new school, started by the U.S. Military.¹ I will describe their educational program and leisure time activities. Data collection will include talking to the detainees, their teachers, their guards, other soldiers with whom they come into contact, and those in the military hierarchy who make decisions about curriculum. Some of this talk will be based on protocols and some on opportunities that present themselves. As part of this documentation process, I will be available as a sounding board and also to reflect back what I see, should this be helpful for decision-makers as the school develops. In addition, I will notice what provisions are missing and raise questions about texts, materials, and ideas. My notes will derive from first-hand observations of daily life in school. I will collect documents that include school schedules, written work, artwork, and assessments. I will have the luxury of an undistracted eye to do this work and not have responsibility for program implementation or teaching. Given the improvised nature of the task, anything more I might do when I actually see the situation is a bonus. The goal in relationships is to do no harm.

That I was experienced in studying school startups, had written about crossing cultural boundaries, and could leave immediately compelled me to answer a call for unspecified help on this unprecedented project to educate young detainees held by the U.S. military in Iraq. It was not lost on me that I fit the profile of other Americans called on to interfere in Iraq: I did not speak Arabic or study juvenile detention, military culture, war zones, Middle East geography, or Iraqi education.

¹ Camp Victory, the largest U.S. military base in Iraq, is located outside Baghdad.

And yet, the following narrative—a mere footnote to a disastrous war—tells a story that to my knowledge has not been told elsewhere. Besides recounting a U.S. military effort that should not be forgotten, the story I am about to tell calls attention to the blinders, both mine and others', that the collective “we” wear when we do not understand enough about another culture. Despite the best intentions, our vision blurs.

School startups under even the best conditions are notoriously complicated and improvisational. Planning leaves too little time to reflect on the contradictions of daily practice, whether in a war zone or urban charter school. This school in Iraq exemplifies how the ideas behind any new school can lose their power as they cycle through the bureaucratic layers and into the classroom.

Besides the usual caveats about my own White Western monolingual urban identity and the philosophical tenets that make any description only partial and idiosyncratic, I was admittedly outside my comfort level. I arrived in Iraq in mid-August 2007, straight from a comfortable life in New York City, to sleep with seven other women in a “dry” shipping container. Dry meant there was no running water and the bathrooms were 200 yards away—though if I wanted to, I could walk to Saddam’s former palace and use his old, shoddily constructed shower with the gold-handled fixtures.

The military rules and ranks were more foreign to me than the Arabic-language classrooms where I spent my days. I was the oldest person at Camp Victory, an outlier in this high-testosterone community of 30,000 young people, mostly men between the ages of 19 and 32, led by senior officers in their fifties. As a 65-year-old grandmother, I sometimes hitchhiked the mile or so from the team office to the mess hall in afternoon heat that reached 130 degrees (like a sauna and not entirely unpleasant if you think of it that way). Those who gave me a lift often greeted me by saying, “I usually don’t stop for hitchhikers, but you remind me of my mother.” During an incoming mortar attack (harmless it turned out), a young officer from the South solicitously suggested, “Ma’am, why don’t you go into the next room where you’ll find a chair to sit in.” Senior citizen goes to war was perhaps a subtext, but the context was the work—24/7. Documenting the school kept me centered, but even so, I got just a glimpse of what detainment must have been like for these Iraqi teenagers.

Before I set foot in the school I needed to gain minimal trust—for a start, unrestricted access to classrooms and permission to take notes with a laptop in full view. I also needed guidance about informed consent and parental permissions,

the standards of academic research ethics with juveniles, but the Marine colonel I reported to rebuffed me: “There are no ethics in detention centers. Get on with it.” Since I could not contact parents for permissions—detainees hardly knew if their parents were alive—parental permission was not possible. I accepted that some people, for instance journalists, report without conforming to institutional review board (IRB) processes and that military regulations do support some key IRB guidelines: I was forbidden to record the ID numbers detainees wore on their wrists, so I never identified any individual detainee, even in my notes, and no detainee was required to talk to me against his will. Although I had been against the war from its inception, I had chosen to work on this project, and so I got on with it.²

THE SCHOOL AND HOW IT CAME TO BE

“I am impressed,” I wrote on my first school day. “Opening any kind of school on this schedule requires Herculean effort. Are there medals for this?” The facility would be familiar in any impoverished, warm-weather U.S. school district with repurposed structures: four new soccer fields; a library with abundant natural light, whitewashed walls, and empty shelves; a small teachers’ room and similarly sized medic’s office; and classrooms with stacking plastic chairs, long plastic tables, TVs, small whiteboards, equipment for mopping the floors, and not much else. Anyone who taught in mobile units on a school playground or during the heyday of open education, where there were no full walls between adjacent rooms, would recognize these classrooms. The quality of the construction implied “temporary,” but the entire facility impressively signaled “school.”

But this was not any school. I heard from a member of the Army Corps of Engineers who worked for 13 straight days to “harden” (fortify) this abandoned military training site that, like many “instant” schools, this one was set in a compromised space. The school was “inside the wire” but closer to local civilian territory than other structures on the base, which made it vulnerable to incoming mortars fired by insurgents. That Iraqis frequently fired on the base but never at the school suggests that they chose not to attack their young fellow countrymen. Engineers built multi-ton blast walls and waist-high cement bunkers everywhere on the base, but the school had extra barriers. No one could enter or leave the

² An exploration of the crucially important subject of research ethics in war is beyond the scope of this narrative, but excellent guidance can be found in Goodhand (2000).

school without the guards moving a large Humvee to allow a vehicle to pass.³ The military had positioned gates at intervals to prevent potential escapees from having direct routes to exits. Guard towers overlooked the soccer fields. A nine-man, highly trained SWAT team equipped with non-lethal rubber bullets—reputed to be close to lethal if fired at close range—stood ready to react to trouble. I never did get used to the “Deadly Weapons Authorized” sign, although soldiers on duty at the school checked their weapons into a designated arms room to prevent detainees from grabbing a gun. With all this military protection, it was easy to forget that these young detainees could be dangerous, but the general in charge of detainee ops urged me to take care, reminding me that two juveniles had recently killed a third.

Security routines ruled, a hybrid of military and prison logistics. I could see immediately that academic rigor would be hard to instill in these students, what with no homework or insistence on mastering academics. Their incentive for learning was to get a good report to the release board, based more on behavior than education. But security routines guaranteed less than optimal schooling. Guards woke the detainees at 5 AM, breakfast was from 6 to 7 AM, then the youth were loaded into 11 (new and expensive) buses for the 20-minute ride to Dar al-Hikmah. Twenty-five guards unloaded the buses one at a time, and each detainee was searched for contraband that he might use to make weapons. At 9 AM, four hours after wakeup call, classes finally began. At 4 PM, the procedure was reversed. Guards inspected every pocket for scraps of paper, bottle caps, or pencil fragments, then returned the detainees to their tents at 5 PM. It seemed to me a slow-motion grind for both guards and detainees.

The same could be said of latrine breaks. The military had scrounged Iraqi-style latrines (for squatting), but not enough. (Outside contractors installed them without a cleaning contract, an odd detail that was either shoddy or consciously left to military ingenuity.) Bathroom routines often challenge schools, but the military required detainees, who were never trusted to be alone, to be escorted by trained escort teams. Three times a day, alongside their classmates, the young men waited in a squat for 25 minutes, hands behind their heads (called “stalled movement,” necessary for security), while taking turns on the WC and washing at the sinks, and then squatting again until the escorts returned them to class.

3 I use “guard” to describe all the U.S. military personnel whose job was to regulate the daily life of the Iraqi juvenile detainees. These enlisted men deployed from various Army national guard units to conduct force protection, which included care and custody of detainees at Dar Al-Hikmah. When I was there, guards came from infantry units in New Mexico and California, military police from Rhode Island and Michigan, and field artillery from Utah.

School had begun inauspiciously the week before I arrived. On the first day, the military had divided the approximately 700 detainees into classes of 60 students each, but 60 adolescent bodies did not fit into these small classrooms. Soldiers immediately sent all the detainees back to their tents, and the next day only 250 detainees arrived, split into eight classes of 23-30. Now each detainee would attend school only one day out of three, instead of six days a week. That change weakened the entire point of the school—to provide a consistent, intensive educational experience for all detainees—and the gap between intention and execution was widened in one fell swoop. Visitors, military inspectors, and the press, however, would hardly notice.

Running a school for juveniles detained in war was unprecedented in the history of U.S. military combat operations. Marine reservist Major General Stone, a charismatic and wealthy Silicon Valley software developer and the new head of Detainee Operations TF-134, lobbied General David Petraeus for a site, cajoled visiting Senator Lindsey Graham for funds, and fought resistance to his idea up and down the chain of command. Even without final approval, he ordered his U.S. military and Iraqi civilian staff to create a school on paper. This being the military, the school would need an “official” emblem. The clever overworked soldier tasked to design it found a private school logo on the Internet, overlaid the image on the red, white, and black Iraqi flag, added the name of the school in Arabic, and voila—the exquisite symbol of Dar al-Hikmah was born.

The school was indeed an inspired vision, but “vision” was not exactly the right word for this nascent effort. No military doctrine existed for how to operate a school for juveniles, and neither Stone nor his staff had professional education experience. As Stone said at a press conference during the first week of school, “I’m not sure where we’re going to go with the youth, other than I’m very hopeful.” Moreover, the noble goal of educating young Iraqi detainees was not Stone’s most pressing priority. He also was responsible for the increasing number of Iraqi adults being swept off the streets during the U.S. surge, who were confined in an overcrowded detention facility at Bucca, a tinderbox always on the verge of a riot. My first day on the job, in a raucous bout of after-hours storytelling to initiate me into the team—non-alcoholic, due to base rules, but with the feel of everyone wishing for a drink—Stone told me emphatically, “This school is not Exeter, and this is war.”

Because the Geneva Conventions require that juveniles captured during a conflict be held no more than a year, Stone charged his staff with creating a time-limited experience powerful enough to convince adolescent detainees not to join—or

rejoin—the insurgency. In the absence of a crafted school mission statement, I collected a list of intentions gathered directly from Stone and his staff:

- **Practical:** Keep these teenage detainees occupied, give them skills, and keep them away from identified extremists.
- **Possible:** Open their minds to respect another way of thinking. That is the best we can do . . . we are not running a prep school, only a detention center.
- **Values laden:** Turn their world upside down and change the detainees' perspective so they see themselves as part of the future of the new Iraq, rather than of the insurgency.
- **Optics** (how the undertaking looks to others): Convince the wider world that Americans care about the education of Arab adolescents as much as (or more than) Arabs themselves do.
- **Aspirational:** Hope that the future prime minister and other ministers in Iraq come from this detainee population.

To their credit, the military leadership thought hard about whether the school was to represent an American or an Iraqi enterprise, and whether to infuse the school environment with civilian or military culture. The military could have hired Americans or depended on uniformed teachers from their ranks, but they did not. Two decisions, reached early on, specified (1) only Iraqis or Iraqi-Americans could teach; (2) no one in uniform was permitted in a teaching role. These two key values shaped the school as the only consistent practices unrelated to keeping order, and thus attempted to de-emphasize the military circumstances of detention during war and demonstrate faith in the future of a new Iraq led by Iraqis.

Other embryonic ideas were slow to cohere, and answers to the perennial questions of what to teach and how to teach it were murky at best. The Strategic Communications Plan signed by Major General Stone ordered that “our engagement must be culturally appropriate: Iraqi values, not Western, must have primacy.” But the primacy of Iraqi values necessarily conflicted with exposure to Western values that the military hoped the Iraq of the future would adopt. As part of my role was to find opportunities for “changing juvenile mindsets,” I was dismayed to find that the school planners—a mix of American military

personnel, Iraqi American civilian teachers, and one local Iraqi teacher—never proposed teaching anything other than the Iraqi curriculum. Could a rote Iraqi curriculum persuade these young men to believe in a unified Iraq and moderate Islam? Perhaps they already embraced such ideas, but no one had asked them, nor would most Americans on site have trusted their answers. The school, like the occupation, faced the tension between respecting Iraqi values and making Iraqis into democratic citizens.

Other than English instruction, the classroom structure was the same whether it was a lecture on methods of water purification or basic Iraqi geography: students raised their hands to answer the teachers' questions. I hoped to write down discussions, note students' questions, and record debate—all hallmarks of the best American curriculum—but these teachers followed the traditional Iraqi template of lecture and recitation, with the teacher as absolute authority. It may have been colossally naive to begin with so many contradictory goals, but every school startup faces similar inconsistencies; time is too limited to think through how all but the most central values will translate into practice. Even as I began to observe, it nagged at me how this American school could educate detainees to Iraqi norms and yet change those norms to reflect U.S. military goals.

My favorite sergeant, who ran the school day-to-day, had no school administrative experience but did have a calm demeanor and excellent judgment. He carried around a tattered e-mail printout confirming that the Iraqi education minister would provide a newly revised post-Saddam curriculum, but by the third week of school he was gnashing his teeth and lamenting that the final agreement still languished, unsigned, on the minister's desk—perhaps a not-so-subtle signal of ministerial disapproval. He showed me another document meant to be a “brainstorming device and vague curriculum outline” that got sent up the chain of command and came back as a binding agreement. The planners had written in this 10-page “Juvenile Education Report” that the school's goal was “to provide the detainees with basic educational skills to the Iraqi fifth-grade level while opening their minds to the democratic process and the concepts therein, while creating a more compliant population.” It would be hard to beat that mixed message.

The school plan offered the detainees a chance to learn, but it also aimed to expose them to idealized American values of tolerance and diversity. Created to educate Iraqis, Dar al-Hikmah was still “school” as American soldiers imagined it. Classes would take place six days a week, but not Friday, the Muslim day of rest; subject-matter teachers would move from classroom to classroom; the schedule would include lunch, prayer, soccer, Arabic, math, geography, civics,

and English. Contrary to usual Iraqi practice, the planners decided to track detainees into academic levels. They used familiar American methods to chart progress, including anecdotal behavior sheets, tests scores, report cards, and health information. Enlisted men set up folders to hold students' classwork—not for every detainee but enough to demonstrate their intention to keep records. Most problematic in this original school plan was class size. Sixty students to one teacher was not unheard of in Iraq's best schools, but these inexperienced administrators clearly had not visualized that number of adolescents in the new school's classrooms.

ADOLESCENTS IN DETENTION AT CAMP CROPPER

Flash to the 30 minutes' drive from the dusty center of Camp Victory to the even dustier school grounds on another part of the base. After traveling across the world to finally see the school for myself, I was turned back for not having the correct badge. (Was it a careless bureaucratic error, or had I not yet earned that elusive minimal trust?) I was taken instead to Camp Cropper on another edge of Camp Victory to see where the juveniles were quartered. Cropper is the rumored site of Saddam Hussein's execution and where the Americans were detaining several thousand adults, including "high-value detainees" from Saddam's inner circle. In this hot, unrelievedly brown environment ringed with coiled razor wire, and after many more checkpoints that required finessing my lack of a proper badge, I finally set eyes on the young detainees I had been fantasizing about.

My Iraqi American driver concealed her ID card so no one could punish her prominent Baghdad family for having a relative working for the American military. The ubiquitous multi-ton concrete barriers faded from my consciousness as the teenagers milling about outside their tents came into focus—most of them 16 and 17 but some as young as 11. Groomed and ready for prayers—the Qur'an dictates having a clean body and clean clothes when praying—some were wearing spotless white *dishdashas* (ankle-length shirts) rather than their usual yellow jumpsuits. They were a startlingly attractive group of teenagers. Some looked as familiar to me as the olive-skinned, brown-eyed Semitic teenagers I grew up with. A bilingual-bicultural advisor (BBA) attached to the military took me to meet a poised detainee who was serving as compound chief. He greeted us politely in a mix of English and Arabic as if we were guests in his home, even though we were talking across a wire mesh fence. This handsome 16-year-old chatted pleasantly about daily life with manners any American parent would brag about, until he became agitated and begged the BBA to arrange a new exam

schedule at his old school so as not to delay his university entrance. He railed against his unfair detention that was derailing his life. “Of course I will do it,” the BBA agreed, although she had no intention—or standing—to intervene. “He needs to believe in his future . . . to have hope,” she said. Encouraging hope (even false hope) was an all-hands effort emanating from Major General Stone. Hopelessness was thought to be dangerous in a post–Abu Ghraib world. As Northwestern law professor Joseph Margulies (representing detainees at Guantanamo and Camp Cropper) said on October 24, 2007, “Guantanamo was built as a place to extinguish hope . . . the hope of going home, the hope of being reunited with family, the hope of family coming to you. Hope keeps prisoners alive. And if you extinguish hope, a prisoner will curl up and die.”

As I recorded the day’s experience in my notes, I wondered, who were these charming teenagers? Extremists? Thwarted university students? I got to know them over the month I worked in Iraq because they talked to me as an interesting diversion or because they thought it might speed their release, although I told them repeatedly it would not. However, I could not fully tap into their complex thinking, especially since the availability and skill of Arabic translators was scandalously low, and I had few opportunities to clarify what I thought I understood. When a detainee had mastered enough English, I found our conversations more thoughtful, which bends this account toward English-speaking detainees. Detainees could refuse to talk to me, and some did. Refusal—whether a coping strategy to avoid churning up feelings, to conserve energy, or to show their peers they were not cooperating with any American woman—was final and in their control. However, without any inducements, most detainees willingly shared details about their own and their family’s education, work, leisure time, religion, and career aims.

I also heard stories from the guards. At Camp Cropper I watched the soldiers outside the wire mesh who kept the confined detainees always in sight, wondering how they could stand the boredom. The detainees essentially governed themselves within highly supervised physical boundaries and American-devised student-council-like organizational structures. They served their own locally provisioned food, did their own laundry, shaved and cut each other’s hair in special enclosures with guard-issued implements that were counted after every use, listened to Arabic music on guard-controlled radios that produced mostly static, and played soccer in bare feet. Some prayed. Some read the Qur’an. Depending on individual temperaments, life in detention could be either unbearably monotonous or reassuringly routine, for both detainees and their guards.

Although U.S. military representatives intended their treatment of these juveniles to nourish hope, the youths' lives were a mix of hope and hopelessness. In one version of hope, detention was a novel adventure for those who had never left home and had had limited educational opportunities. This view included formal schooling, good food, and the parents' relief that their sons were out of harm's way during a raging civil war. These young men also got the best medical care in Iraq at the state-of-the-art hospital that served soldiers and detainees as equals. This picture was hopeful, sometimes even fun—when a group of detainees moved into new tents, the surveillance camera caught them exuberantly doing backflips off the stacked sleeping mats. One described his compound mates: “We are all brothers.” I thought it was psychologically healthy that the detainees reported helping and being helped by others. Those who were in this hopeful mode told me of visits from their families, recounting them down to smallest detail (the “taxi cost 50,000 dinars”). The detainees told their parents about the good food and new school—just the sort of messages the military hoped would reach families and tribes. Some argued, as did Steve Carleton Ford and colleagues, that “Baghdad teenagers showed heightened sense of self in the face of war” (Carlton-Ford et. al 2008). Being detained with others strengthened their pride, as they stood in solidarity with their tent mates. I wanted to be convinced that perhaps this sense of belonging, confidence, and optimism would help them learn.

But such impressions of detention could shift in an instant. Although detainees concealed or repressed their considerable anger toward the Americans in conversations with me, they described tears, depression, fear, sadness, and loneliness. I met bereft 11- to 17-year-olds who missed their families more than they could bear. They worried about family members who might be dead, injured, or displaced from their homes. A 12-year-old tried to control his tears: “I don't know if my father is alive, and I haven't heard from my mother.” One detainee said he had no visitors because his mother was sick and “my father and two brothers are in Bucca.” He pleaded to be transferred to Bucca to be with them. An increased burden of guilt for getting caught fell on oldest sons who were responsible for supplementing the family income. An only child of a divorced mother (both rare in the stories I heard) told me, “My mother is alone. I don't know how she gets money now, but when she visits, she tells me not to worry. My mom is sad, very lonely without me.” Some detainees were bewildered by detention. “I never thought I would be in this situation,” lamented one young man who said his family didn't know where he was. Another admitted, “I don't want my family to know that I was captured. I'm ashamed.” And even when detainees wanted to tell their families where they were, the officer in charge acknowledged that reaching a wrong phone number on the first try could end the effort. A

16-year-old detainee with sad eyes told me, “Before bed, I think about my family, especially my mother. Sometimes I cry. Most of the time I sit by myself.” Many detainees reported “keeping to myself,” which seemed unlikely, given the social interactions I observed. Perhaps they wanted their captors to think they were minding their own business and not suspect them of conspiring with others.

Detainees’ stories of their capture sounded rehearsed: “I was in my bed under the blanket when the soldiers came and took me away.” Only the bedtimes differed. In the one story that rang true, the teller had a sparkle in his eye as he told me, “You won’t hear from me that I was under the blanket at home. I was at the supermarket and a soldier kicked my car, and I hit him back. He arrested me.” The American soldiers told me more believable stories of how detainees came to be captured: a young man in the wrong place at the wrong time; a committed insurgent attempting to defend his country by killing U.S. soldiers; a hapless adolescent caught in the sectarian snare of meddling neighbors who reported him for some vendetta; a youngster with criminal tendencies and poor judgment; or a desperate 16-year-old earning money for his poverty-stricken family by helping insurgents. Even if detainees’ capture stories did not always ring true, I found their description of the lives they lived before being captured to be credible.

Alas, uncertainty prevailed—a powerlessness that could bury hope. Many detainees wondered, Why was I captured? What was I charged with? How long before my release? The U.S. military promoted transparency by instituting six-month case reviews, but despite good intentions, these reviews were reputed to be cursory. Detainees often did not know the contents of their capture records or—as is usual in war—have legal help to make their case. While the press and various humanitarian groups saw these reviews as being better than nothing, the detainees believed fervently that they mattered greatly. Most adjusted their behavior to present a favorable record.

But not all. At Cropper I saw a young man locked up in a security housing unit—in other words, solitary confinement in a six-foot-square wire cage. His offense seemed to be nothing more than a typical middle school dust-up. Or maybe it lost something when translated as “arm-wrestling.” The sanguine BBA noted that the detainee had water and that a guard was standing nearby to ensure his safety. The young man’s imminent release after 24 hours in the cage may have accounted for his cheerful demeanor, but it was hard to believe “he didn’t seem to mind at all.” That image of a 15-year-old caged in the hot sun still haunts me. Hope seemed a puny abstraction.

And yet the school was a source of hope. Education confers dignity and recognizes the worth of those privileged to receive it. In Iraq, as almost everywhere in the world, formal education can unlock access to a better future. These detainees had hopeful, credible career aims: to become doctors, teachers, pharmacists, translators, bodyguards for government leaders, and officers in the Iraqi army. Even those who had no previous schooling and wanted to return to village life to care for their land and livestock hungered for education. Despite the American military's ambitious plans to promote literacy, books were scarce, except for the Qur'an. Only the chief and an English speaker in each compound, chosen by the military for their leadership qualities and English facility, had access to pencil, paper, and an Arab-English dictionary. The military had permitted library books until pages ended up as "chai rocks"—pieces of paper carrying illicit messages, dipped in sweet tea mixed with dirt, hardened in the sun, and hurled over the walls or into other compounds. Discordant goals on the ground (encouraging literacy but forbidding books) foreshadowed the intractable dilemma of creating a coherent educational experience.

TEACHING DEMOCRACY IN A COERCED ENVIRONMENT

The classroom was the stated arena for "turning the detainees' world upside down" and introducing them to democratic concepts. But what classroom experience could be powerful enough to convince a teenager who was invested in a civil war to abandon it? Without any experience of democracy (making choices, seeing that one's actions matter, free elections), the democratic process could only be an abstract principle to a captive adolescent, even if he valued these ideas. Some guards believed that raising their hands to decide which DVD to watch gave detainees practice in making choices. But this mild exercise could hardly teach tolerance for other sects engaged in the bloody war or model how to settle sectarian disputes at the ballot box. For these juveniles, choosing DVDs was as close it came to demonstrating democracy.

Every good education involves transformation, so it is fair to ask whether the detainees could have been dramatically changed by any program, especially one created by an enemy. Diversified methods and novel curriculum that could have exposed detainees to another way of thinking were nowhere visible on any teachers' agenda. Teachers at Dar al-Hikmah were in fact contractually bound to keep their opinions to themselves. They could not discuss politics or reveal themselves as Shia or Sunni, and they had to promote the idea of "One Iraq." The civics teacher allowed that the Dar al-Hikmah rules were stricter than in his old

school; he said he missed teaching “outside the wire,” where he could reveal his thinking to his students and solicit theirs.

I learned how inappropriate political talk was when I got caught up in asking the faculty to introduce *Guernica*, Picasso’s famously anti-war 1937 painting of the Spanish Civil War.⁴ I brought hard-to-procure color copies of the painting to a faculty meeting and, with admirable good nature and Arab charm, each teacher spoke against using it. One teacher correctly pointed out that the “detainees don’t know about the Spanish Civil War, and they don’t care.” (But they did know war!) Another added, “Why raise anything dangerous and prone to cause trouble?” Another agreed: “We don’t want any topic that brings up the questions: ‘Why am I here? Why can’t I be released?’ That is all the detainees care about or express in class.” Even the linguist on duty, a young U.S. soldier educated in Iraq until she was 16, became so agitated that she stepped out of her translator’s role—with a (necessary) apology—to agree with the teachers. She interjected that in Iraq she had never been asked to discuss subjects that did not have a “right” answer and questioned how teachers could even begin to teach such things. That teachers might ask detainees to draw something in response to seeing *Guernica* prompted one teacher to argue, “Why would you even want them to draw non-Iraqi art anyway?” While teachers did not embrace—and in fact emphatically rejected—self-expression in their own classrooms, they willingly discussed these ideas with easy laughs and open-ended possibilities (“What about a piece of sculpture about Iraq?”). But open-ended discussion was not “school” in this U.S. military setting. As for what detainees should be taught, one teacher spoke for all: Iraqi curriculum. Why would you want to change it? When I raised the issue of how to meet the school’s stated goal of opening minds to the democratic process, one teacher responded, “All we can teach for now is One Iraq. Love your country. Strive for peace.” I soon became skeptical that any curriculum taught in an authoritarian manner could promote compromise and encourage the multiple perspectives needed to overcome a divided Iraq.

Teaching for democracy and One Iraq fell to the charismatic local Iraqi civics teacher. He was in his thirties, and he risked his life every time he traveled from his home to Camp Victory. Since most Iraqi schools were closed and even low-paid work was scarce, he was pleased to be at Dar al-Hikmah but nervous that, if curfews prevented him from returning to work after his day off, he could lose this highly valued job. When I visited his class one afternoon during Ramadan, he seemed relaxed and engaged, although he lectured sitting down, facing the first

4 Other than this attempted intervention, I didn’t influence what happened at school; I made recommendations after I left.

row of students across a narrow table rather than standing, as he usually did. The 27 detainees answered questions when asked and took notes on yellow legal pads using plastic safety pens, which were collected after class. The detainees obeyed on cue, perhaps because all papers, which were filed under their ID numbers, went to the board that reviewed records for their release, or perhaps because the authority of the teacher was absolute. This teacher did not have enough English, nor I any Arabic, to discuss his six-page handwritten notes, so I was beholden to the linguist assigned to me. This linguist listened for several minutes and told me the topic written on the board was, “What unites people of one country together?” The list on the board generated by detainees from the lecture included “language, culture,” and some words the linguist said he did not know. Thus the linguist translated the civics teacher’s 30-minute lecture all too succinctly as “the teacher is talking about democracy . . . and more democracy.”

The teacher’s notes, titled “The Democratic System in Iraq”—translated and summarized later by an American graduate student—included ideas for understanding democracy as we in America know it: upholding human rights, the need for a more educated Iraqi society, the importance of music and art to the public education curriculum, government by the majority party, fairness in exercising power, equal treatment before the law, and free elections. The lecture had even cited John Dewey. Democracy—this incomplete, ambitious aspiration even in our most democratic of societies—may have puzzled the students as they experienced entirely undemocratic American detainment. But even if the detainees had wanted to explore the relevance this lecture had to their lives—how they would fit into the post-Saddam One Iraq or what the future held for them and their *ummah* (community/nation)—those discussions would have been out of sync with both teachers’ obligation to avoid politics and detainees’ understanding of school. Left not only unspoken in any planning meeting but unnoticed by all (including me at the time) was the irony of teaching American-style democracy in a coerced environment. Such is the fog of educational practice in war.

LITERACY AND ILLITERACY

People in societies with strong oral traditions who memorize the Qur'an by rote develop legendary memories. I was amazed to see these Iraqi detainees—without pencils or paper or access to books—respond in detail to teachers' lectures during lively class discussions. Thus I was baffled by how often people characterized the juvenile (and adult) detainees as illiterate or incapable of independent thinking, or by written comments like “most lack reasoning skills,” which was variously attributed to living under Saddam or to a relentlessly rote, primarily oral curriculum. This demeaning of detainees' abilities seeped into conversations on the base and into press accounts. However, neither living under a dictator nor rote education wipes away the human ability to think. I saw too many classes in which 28 out of 30 detainees produced a page of written Arabic text to believe that “most” juvenile detainees were illiterate.

The illiteracy myth began before the school opened: “If only these detainees could read, they would see the Qur'an forbids violence.” The military had organized literacy classes (at great expense) for the 60 percent of adult detainees who were believed to need reading instruction. Most adults could read the Qur'an on their own—some adults were insulted by lessons in reading it—but it was too late to backtrack from a well-publicized campaign to eradicate illiteracy (and from the expensive contract behind it). By then, the image of detainees' illiteracy—cited everywhere by military higher-ups and thus in visitors' accounts in the press—had reinforced resistance to seeing the young men as smart and capable learners, some with significant prior education and skills on which to build.

One response to the civics lecture on democracy exemplified for me the tendency to consider detainees less capable than they probably were. I asked an Arabic-speaking consultant to the military to look at the civics teacher's notes; he judged them “too advanced for the intended audience . . . more like a *Foreign Affairs* article than a high school lecture . . . The teacher should simplify the material.” This call to simplify reflected the typical response to the detainees, even when there was evidence of their skill.

To divide the youths into academic tracks, the sergeant in charge of day-to-day administration collected rudimentary assessments, the results of which he carried in his pocket:

- 39% Advanced (High School)
- 17% Intermediate (Middle School)
- 23% Primary
- 13% Basic (Illiterate)⁵

Neither the assessments nor the classes yielded enough clues to support the theory that most detainees were illiterate, but the stereotype persisted. The result of this illiteracy narrative was that the school had no budget for materials above the fifth-grade level.

Teachers targeted their lectures “to the middle,” much as they would have in Iraqi schools, where only students who passed exams stayed in school. Despite experiencing a possible academic mismatch, detainees enthusiastically praised the school. Only once, when a teacher was absent and I found myself alone with the class (and guards), did an angry detainee rail at me about this “baby school.” Otherwise, politeness (or perhaps fear of a bad record) ruled. An honest-seeming detainee told me, “I want to learn, but I don’t think my peers do. They sit with their hands folded and look at the teacher, but they don’t focus or listen. They have their own thoughts.” The detainees’ willingness to appear engaged—even if they were not—bespoke remarkable self-control.

BEYOND ACADEMICS

Like many adolescents, detainees had more to say about non-academics than about their classes. No wonder. The realities of the classroom did not always match the schedule. Frequently, six teachers were assigned to six classrooms, but eight classes of detainees came to school, leaving 60 detainees without teachers. Guards took charge of the 60 and played DVDs for them. The detainees didn’t complain; on the contrary, as one said, “TV and soccer are my favorite things in school.” Another said, “At school I like to play soccer and see videos. I like the tape with songs and belly dancers most.” The cover of that favorite tape was falsely labelled “Rebuilding Iraq.” Donated chess sets and dominoes languished on the shelves, mostly unused, but detainees had more than enough screen time. The planners

⁵ This does not include the 8 percent who were classified as “extremists” and not allowed at school.

wanted detainees to have some “entertainment,” but they never thought of using educational media to occupy teacher-less classes. Detainees gorged on *Superman* and *Spiderman* with Arabic subtitles, and cheered the Iraqi soccer team’s upset victory over Saudi Arabia. But they mostly begged for Tom and Jerry cartoons. On their love for Tom and Jerry, guards and detainees agreed, as one teenager explained: “Tom and Jerry is beautiful because it is funny. All Iraqi people think it is funny. I like the way the cat and mouse fight.” The interpreter interjected without being asked that he liked Tom and Jerry too. No one ever seemed bored, even by the same cartoons: “I want to see it so many times because I like it,” one detainee said. The guards and detainees could “relax and laugh together” over this universal humor. Perhaps the films and videos, even Tom and Jerry, could have been used to spark analysis and group discussion, but this never happened because it would have fallen outside the accepted pedagogy. And no one even thought of it, including me, as I sometimes zoned out during screen time, lost in the fog of war or undone by the afternoon heat.

The teacher shortage meant that, the longer detainees went without teachers, the more downtime with DVDs they came to expect. And the more they watched DVDs, the more removed they became from disciplined learning and the harder teachers had to work to restore good study habits. With a stable and sufficient staff, the school could have encouraged detainees to work much harder than they did. As it was, the obvious improvisation in starting this school had to raise speculation that the Americans were not capable of organizing a proper school—or did not really care to.

But school is never just about academics. The way any school demonstrates kindness carries both comfort and symbolism. The food, the living conditions, and the respectful treatment shown by adults can be as powerful as—maybe even more powerful than—classroom instruction. And in this school, food was done right. When I could I ate lunch in classrooms, rather than with the soldiers, which the detainees liked, since it validated that the Americans were treating them well. Detainees ate tasty, fresh local food, unlike the soldiers’ bland fatty fare sent from Florida at great expense. Under guard, detainees picked up lunch in large Styrofoam containers and served it themselves in their classrooms on paper plates. Utensils were mostly forbidden; we scooped thick bean and vegetable stews (mostly okra) with pita bread. The menu included fresh fruit, sweet chai, and refreshing bottles of ice-cold water (elsewhere on base we drank bottled water, hot from the sun). A teacher marveled that, unlike his “miserable Iraqi childhood” with no water at school, these detainees got cold water whenever they asked. He gestured to the bottles in huge ice containers, which were available

to both generals and detainees: “We all drink the same.” Surely the message of equality, worth, and simple humanity was not lost on the detainees and likely came across more powerfully than lectures about democracy. As I observed daily life at the school, I came to believe that exposing detainees to the best American treatment that the military could support was more likely to convince the detainees of American good-will than any specific curriculum.

TEACHING UNDER GUARD

Teacher morale was remarkably high, despite the war-zone conditions. Although teachers taught for money and the chance to work, many expressed a passionate mission to “build the new Iraq”—at least in public. Congenial colleagues chatted in animated Arabic on shared rides to quarters, at lunch, and on breaks, when they often brought pastry for each other. Local Iraqi teachers took life-threatening risks by cooperating with the U.S. military and—in a bizarre policy—were forbidden to move around Camp Victory without an escort. They had worse living conditions (cots rather than beds) and much lower salaries than the well-paid émigré Iraqi Americans doing the same teaching, and their meager pay was often late or incomplete. In order not to be recognized by detainees who might disclose their work with Americans, local Iraqi teachers taught with fake names, wore hats and sunglasses, and sometimes changed their facial hair. The satisfactions these skilled teachers got from teaching were hard to see. They rarely saw the same students; the rosters shifted as detainees were released and others rolled up; they did not know the names of their students, nor did detainees know the teachers’ (fake) names. Arabic-only speakers were sometimes assigned to teach English. Yet the teachers persisted in good spirits; their ethos was to soldier on.

Perhaps the guards helped. “It is a pleasure not to think about classroom control,” said an Iraqi American teacher, not missing a job in the U.S. Three guards sat in each classroom (each carrying pepper spray and a radio), always next to the most efficient air conditioners. They left only when they rotated for meals (20 minutes each) or to bring back a dry cereal snack. Guards kept detainees in their seats until the teacher arrived, reminded slouching students to sit up, supervised cleanup, monitored non-routine requests to use the WC, handed out water, controlled the TV, dealt with medical emergencies, and sometimes even made photocopies, thus eliminating non-teaching duties that often drain American teachers.

U.S. soldiers with a knack for language and a willingness to learn some Arabic were rewarded by respectful attention from the detainees. The students gathered around a sergeant—a truck driver in civilian life—who carried a Qur’an and had taught himself some Arabic. He was pleased that “kids want to talk to me every day about what I am reading in the Qur’an.” Detainees also surrounded an Army linguist who had escaped from war-torn Sudan. These teenagers wanted to hear—in Arabic—about life outside Iraq. But most guards distanced themselves from the detainees. The language barrier was tough, and the U.S.–Iraqi cultural boundaries were overlaid with compliance and authority issues that may have interfered with their ability to feel empathy. Some soldiers felt for “these poor kids who were in the wrong place at the wrong time,” while others seethed because they knew someone who had been killed by the Iraqi forces. The angry guards were more likely to complain about resources given to “educate the enemy” or to argue that an “uneducated enemy is easier to fight.” My first day on the job, an officer told me that “guards are not convinced these detainees are redeemable individuals.” Although doctrine discouraged engaging the guards in the classroom, I imagined that a curriculum for the guards about how to interact with the detainees in a teaching role would improve the soldiers’ military life, if not help detainees. But perhaps it asks too much of human capacity to ask guards to educate their enemy.

Guards sometimes behaved like rowdy teenagers. I heard unassigned guards in an empty classroom guffawing so loudly as they watched a movie that they interfered with teaching in the room next door. Or paper airplanes sent over the classroom wall would suddenly land on detainees, courtesy of the guards taking a break next door. A BBA recounted how, when he asked soldiers outside his classroom to be quiet, one guard gave him the finger and cursed him. He told me, “I make \$180,000 a year. I know my culture. How can I do my job with the detainees when the guards disrespect me? I am going to General Stone about the zoo that he is trying to present as a school.” These guards may have reflected tensions at Cropper, where they faced confrontational behavior from detainees who threw bottles of urine and feces at them—but it was only the guards who erupted at school.

Perhaps the guards were not hostile but merely bored. Warriors often recount the incredible boredom they experience between battles, but no soldier about to deploy could have envisioned spending so many mind-numbing hours in Arabic-language classrooms guarding compliant 11- to 17-year-olds. The mostly young guard force, a mix of about 70 combat-trained infantry, military police, and field artillery units, did not appreciate their safe assignment. One soldier spoke for others: “I’d rather be out kicking down doors in Baghdad. Every soldier needs a

bit of danger every day.” Not that soldiers talked about their boredom; in their world, the way to wage war was to stay in your lane, put one foot in front of the other, and get the job done. But their body language told the story—their tedious expressions, glazed-over eyes, or the kind of nervous energy I associate with high schools where students are tuned out and just waiting for the bell to ring.

RELIGION

I looked for Sunni-Shia tensions, expecting that relations outside the wire would be mirrored inside. But sectarian tensions were not salient at school, although perhaps the self-control the detainees exhibited in class kept sectarian differences out of sight. The military reasoned that, although underlying tensions might erupt if they denied Sunni-Shia friction, if they treated the sects as warring groups they would be accepting or even promoting the cleavage. Thus they took no chances at Cropper: they separated the Sunni and Shia tents, Shias and Sunnis prayed in different spaces at school (oddly labeled “Study Hall” on the schedule), but otherwise students spent the school day together.

In keeping with the goal of One Iraq, the school planning officer aimed to merge Sunni and Shia tents at the “right” time, and as a first step he ordered all detainees to ride the buses and take classes together. Guards were skeptical: “Sunnis and Shias never talk to each other.” “They won’t play on the same soccer team.” “They sit together in class by sect.” “I am surprised that Shias and Sunnis can ride the buses together without fighting.” The 90 percent Sunni majority in detention—due primarily to the Sunni insurgency in majority Shia Iraq—surprised many Shias, which made the guards’ perspectives credible. As it happened, it was only accidental that I (or the guards) could even tell Sunnis and Shias apart. All the jumpsuits were marked with a large “J,” but the detainee marking the Shia uniforms wrote G for “juvenile” and then crossed it out with an X, making it possible to tell Shia from Sunni. I interpreted their separateness more benignly than the guards did. The two Shia tents at Cropper housed 25 to 35 detainees each, and thus accorded more opportunities for community than was possible for the Sunnis in their two large compounds with 350 detainees each. Buses were loaded and unloaded by tent by tent, so it seemed natural that Shias sat together when filing into class. On the soccer field, when no one was playing due to the hot the afternoon sun, I assumed that detainees hung out in the scarce shade with those they knew best.

Sectarian war seemed far away and adults connected to the school reinforced that narrative. No one there—civilian or military, Iraqi or American—publicly imagined a future other than One Iraq. Many detainees begged to be released into the united Iraq they believed (perhaps disingenuously) had already been secured by the U.S. Both detainees and Iraqi American adults often talked of how it “used to be,” when sectarian quarrels did not come between neighbors and Sunni fathers and Shia mothers could live peacefully in one family. Everyone who had experienced it yearned for this earlier era. A Shia detainee, in lively, sophisticated English—learned, he said, during his seven months in detention—recounted an all-too-typical story of a family fractured by war:

My father was an officer in Saddam’s army. He was killed in the Iraq–Iran war. My mother is a doctor—a Shia, by the way. Everyone in my family is more educated than I am. I left school after nine years. My sister is a teacher. My mother has visited me three times. She doesn’t want to leave Iraq, but my brothers and sisters have fled. Our family will only be together in Iraq when the Shias and Sunnis stop killing each other.

Even as the military worried about sectarianism, they took religious observance seriously, assuming every detainee needed a prayer rug and a Qur’an. Soon they found otherwise. Juveniles confirmed their own lack of observance, although they acknowledged praying more in detention “because I have more time” or “it is something to do.” As Ramadan approached, most Sunnis planned to fast, even if they hadn’t in Saddam’s secular Iraq. One detainee exemplified the rest: “On the outside, some days I fasted and some days I drank Pepsi with my family . . . One day, yes; other day, maybe, maybe not. Here it is no big deal to fast.” The military planned for a smooth Ramadan at Cropper, arranging for appropriate meals after sundown and before sunup. A BBA taught a 15-minute “cultural awareness” class at 3:15 (AM and PM) to impress on the 24-hour guard force not to drink, eat, or smoke near the detainees. The Iraqi youth minister brought (delicious) dates to the detainees, a traditional food to break the fast.

But at school, cultural blinders—or at least a lack of understanding—caused military administrators to either overlook or ignore local knowledge when creating a Ramadan schedule. Iraqi teachers would have embraced the usual mornings at school and time to rest in the afternoon, but the newly arrived officer charged with making the schedule imagined hungry, wide-awake detainees at loose ends hours before sundown. He chose to hold afternoon classes to reduce the time between school and sunset. Teachers often see such an ill-advised

decision coming, but they rarely have the power to contest it. So, from the first day of Ramadan, the schedule proved a mistake. School started at noon. A reporter from the *London Times* was visiting. Fasting teachers looked gray and washed out, perhaps their bodies' response to the first day of fasting. After a nap in an icy air-conditioned space they returned to class refreshed and chatting jovially, but a late afternoon English class exuded lethargy, and most detainees slept on their prayer rugs. The teacher complained, "There will be no benefit from school for a month," emphatically gesturing to the sleeping class. "I can teach comfortably in the morning, but not in the afternoon."

But however it was scheduled, Ramadan was a welcome event for some detainees. A Ramadan picnic remains a pleasant memory of the sense of community I saw among the Shias; my notes reflect this meal as the most relaxed I ever saw any detainees:

The Sunnis mostly fasted, so the military cancelled lunch, though anyone could request food. I gravitated to Shia prayers, surprised to find a picnic in progress, with 14 of 16 enjoying their Halal MREs (Meals Ready to Eat, the military rations for battle). While a guard removed the heating element in each MRE foil packet, forbidden to the detainees as a possible weapon, the detainees lounged on prayer rugs chatting amiably in groups of three or four. The two fasters happily talked to me. As the rest indulged in junk-food heaven (pretzels, peanuts, sunflower seeds), they looked like any good friends enjoying a break from the usual school routine.

SCHOOL IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Publicity—always a priority for Major General Stone—pulled in just as many directions as the other school goals. Although using scarce resources to educate possible terrorists highlighted American generosity toward Iraqi youth, it also generated unpopularity. The Arab press could construe the American effort to educate captives as brainwashing—and it did.

To mark the school opening, Major General Stone held a briefing. Tariq al-Hashemi, the vice president of Iraq, signaled his support by attending. The military gave out a document in not quite grammatical English that read, "Education can spark a fire inside Iraq's youth to continue their education and

rebuild Iraq for their future . . . The mission is to . . . give a vision of hope for the future by pursuing truth . . . The overall [school] program is meant to enlighten minds that have been darkened by extremists.”

Two weeks later, Major General Stone invited the world to see this fledgling school. For nine of the next 14 days, diverse opinion-shapers arrived in droves: the Western and Arab print press, Anderson Cooper, Martha Raddatz, U.S. congressional delegations, Iraqi politicians, the inspector general of the Army, the International Red Cross, and high-ranking officers from the Multi-National Force–Iraq. Even Iraqi soccer stars came “to boost detainee morale.” Calculated to impress, these visits demonstrated U.S. efforts to educate their enemy and showcase the school as a symbol of America’s hope for Iraq. That the war on the ground was bloody and the adult detainees at Bucca barely under control made this new school an especially encouraging, almost heartwarming “must see” for any official visitor to the war zone.

These visits, however, cost dearly. No new school can withstand such scrutiny without dedicating substantial resources to visitors, especially if the school is simultaneously educating students. This school lacked sufficient personnel, but the military staff knew more about welcoming higher-ups than fine-tuning curriculum, so it was no contest what got their attention. Day-to-day school military administrators—already few by usual school standards—prepared meticulously for these high-stakes occasions, working out routes through the school and talking points timed to the minute. Visits highlighted care and custody more than teaching and learning. The Inspector General of the Army and his entourage were taken to only one class, and the five minutes they stayed to watch students studying the Arabic alphabet could not help but reinforce a widely held image of “illiterate detainees.” Details had to be exact: staff went to great lengths to replace the old Iraqi flag featuring Saddam’s handwriting, lest some newspaper print a picture of this obsolete symbol hanging on the library wall. After almost every VIP visit, a new rule came from any high-ranking leader who happened to accompany a delegation—for instance, no soccer on VIP days because detainees playing with bare feet would track mud into the classrooms.

One final vignette illustrates a particularly dramatic day of cultural misunderstanding. Tariq al-Hashemi’s deputies arrived to join Major General Stone, ABC, and the *New York Times*. Everyone was watching the detainees play soccer (wearing new soccer shoes donated by the Iraqi minister of youth and sports), when suddenly Iraqi visitors began handing envelopes to any detainee who happened to be on the field or in the library. Americans assumed it was some

kind of certificate, but each envelope in fact held a U.S. \$100 bill. The Iraqis giving out money randomly was hard to square with an (often unmet) ideal of American fairness. The stunned U.S. military bystanders thought even Major General Stone was blindsided. That night a small riot in the adult detainee compound seemed connected to this unequally offered cash gift. Iraqi adults, however, saw only good intentions; traditionally, Iraqis bring gifts when they visit people they don't know, and if those people are poor, they bring money. International law required the guards to log this money as personal property, and that is how soldiers spent the rest of their disrupted day. Detainees could claim it on release or give it to their families on visitation day, which was exactly what the Iraqis who gave the cash meant to happen.

What the military meant to happen to the school after the worldwide attention it received was less clear than I had understood at the outset of my stay. I should have paid more attention to Major General Stone's admonition that he was not aiming to create a prep school but a tool of war. I was mindful of a sign, posted deep inside one of the military offices, that read, "A vision without resources is hallucination." The military pushed forward with the school, ignoring obstacles that prevented a fully realized enterprise: limited resources (not enough money to pay more teachers), distracting priorities (VIP visitors who drained energy needed to develop a stronger school), and competing pressures (learning pitted against security requirements). The war zone added its own challenges: arcane military regulations, anxious detainees, and the stress of deployment on guards. But more resources, better planning, a clearer vision, and even more latrines might not have accomplished the idealistic goal of preparing these adolescents to contribute to a new social order after at most one year of intermittent schooling.

The detainees' self-control at school was striking. These young men were too guarded, in both senses of the word: too much under guard and too circumspect to open themselves up to being transformed in this American detention center or to allow their world to be "turned upside down." Most deeply held values are not changed easily, and attempting to reshape these detainees in a coerced environment—if they indeed even needed to be convinced about One Iraq—was perhaps a fool's errand. But it was still a marker of hope that there was a school at all.

How to honor Iraqi values and yet transform the detainees to be more like "us" turned out to be a central dilemma of the entire occupation. A more competently run school with a rigorous Iraqi curriculum at all academic levels would have been a miraculous gift to these detained Iraqi youth—an olive branch rather

than a tool of war. But that would have required additional resources and Iraqi educational expertise beyond the capacity of the U.S. detainee operations. Such a school may have been even less likely to help change the detainees' world views, if indeed any school curriculum anywhere can be said to transform students. The creation of this school was couched in the language of cultural awareness: "The importance of local context in evaluating and understanding . . . cannot be over-emphasized. We must be vigilant against our own bias." But, in reality, Dar al-Hikmah was mandated to serve the American war effort.

And yet . . . Despite its haphazard curriculum, the unexamined values at the classroom level, and large doses of Tom and Jerry, I believe the effort to create Dar al-Hikmah was positive. Anecdotes filtered up that parents wanted their children to stay in detention for their own safety—perhaps one measure of success. The military everywhere cited another, more difficult measure: only 12 juveniles who attended the school were recaptured by the U.S. military. No one attempted to find out why. Was it because the school transformed the majority who were not recaptured—as the military would like to believe—or was it because those detainees were not terrorists in the first place, were smart enough to evade recapture, or were dead? In June 2009, when the U.S. Status of Forces in Iraq restricted the mandate to detain, the military gradually phased out the school.

I came to believe that the successes and failures of the school had more to do with how detainees were treated than with any specific classroom practice. I saw that it was more effective to adopt the rote Iraqi curriculum and to shift hearts and minds—if indeed they needed shifting—by treating detainees humanely rather than by pushing any particular course of study. The food, the living conditions, and the detainees' treatment by the guards (even though they were sometimes bored, hostile, or acting out) appeared as powerful as anything that happened during the school day. A school may be "serious" not because of the rigor of the curriculum or the homework or the exams, but because the adults underscore the seriousness of the meaning of "school." That would have required creating a different curriculum, not only for the detainees but for the military.

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