



# Protection of Arts and Antiquities during Wartime: Examining the Past and Preparing for the Future

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*Shortly we will be fighting our way across the Continent of Europe in battles designed to preserve our civilization. Inevitably, in the path of our advance will be found historical monuments and cultural centers that symbolize to the world all that we are fighting to preserve. It is the responsibility of every commander to protect and respect these symbols whenever possible.*

—General Dwight D. Eisenhower, in a message to troops  
on the eve of the Normandy Invasion

**O**N 10 APRIL 2003, one day after the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Firdaus Square, representing the fall of Baghdad to U.S. forces, looters plundered Iraq's National Museum. By taking advantage of the rapid collapse of the state's security apparatus and the chaos that ensued, thieves were free to take what they wished. While initial reports that 170,000 artifacts were stolen have turned out to be wildly exaggerated, experts generally agree that at least 15,000 objects, representing priceless treasures and an integral part of Iraq's cultural heritage, were carried off without significant intervention by the U.S. military. The U.S. failure to prevent this disaster raises questions about the extent to which the military integrates cultural considerations into its planning. Historical examples from World War II demonstrate that in the past, planning for protection of arts and antiquities was an important part of U.S. military planning. Since World War II, broader cultural considerations such as language and customs have been and continue to be incorporated into military planning, but specific planning for protecting cultural objects has been conducted only on an ad hoc basis. Although there have been some recent successes in safeguarding cultural treasures during wartime, the failure to protect the National Museum of Iraq clearly demonstrates the need for a more permanent and capable mechanism to effectively integrate cultural protection measures into U.S. military campaign planning.

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PHOTO: A U.S. Soldier stands on a howitzer that guards the main entrance of the National Museum in Baghdad, 21 June 2003. The Museum was looted after law and order broke down. (AFP, Ramzi Haidar)

## Protection of Cultural Treasures: World War II

After the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, America totally mobilized for war. All instruments of national power, both public and private, joined forces to contribute to the war effort. One example of this was the university-government cooperation that occurred with the goal of protecting arts and antiquities.<sup>1</sup> In 1942, George Stout, of Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, raised the issue of vulnerable cultural sites in wartime Europe, and in January 1943, the American Council of Learned Societies convened a committee to discuss it. The committee incorporated noted intellectuals such

as Columbia's William Dinsmoor, president of the Archaeological Institute; Francis Henry Taylor of New York's Metropolitan Museum; David Finley of the National Gallery; and Paul Sachs of Harvard. Responding to this group of academic and artistic scholars, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt created the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, and appointed Dinsmoor and Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts to lead it. The military then created its own organization—the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Service (MFA&A)—which would be responsible for limiting war damage to cultural artifacts and sites and returning any looted objects found during the course of military activities.

Officers from the MFA&A were integrated into the force as early as the invasion of Italy, in September 1943, and were successful at minimizing damage to Italy's artistic treasures. For instance, MFA&A members persuaded allied commanders to avoid combat inside Florence, a city that many consider to be the cultural capital of Italy. In addition, MFA&A personnel were present for the invasion of Normandy on D-Day to ensure that cultural treasures would be safeguarded, sorted, cleaned, and restored. Later, at the direction of President Harry Truman, the United States repatriated these cultural treasures to their rightful country of origin.

After the war, General Lucius Clay, High Commissioner of Germany during the U.S. occupation, was instrumental in restoring German art treasures. When members of the U.S. Third Army rescued pieces of the Kaiser Friedrich collection, to include 10 works by Rembrandt, from the salt mines in Merkers, Germany, Clay had the collection shipped back to the U.S. National Gallery of Art for restoration.<sup>2</sup> He then thwarted an attempt by members of Congress to appropriate the paintings as war reparations. (He did, however, allow the works to be displayed during a major exposition in 1948 which toured 13 U.S. cities and raised \$2 million for German child relief.) In 1950, the U.S. Government returned all the paintings to Berlin, where they became part of the Prussian State Collection. Clay summed up the success of these efforts to protect and restore Germany's cultural heritage: "Perhaps never in the history of the world has a conquering army sought so little for its own and worked so faithfully to preserve the treasures of others."<sup>3</sup>

All of these actions clearly demonstrate the commitment U.S. leaders had to preserving cultural heritage during World War II. This dedication manifested itself in the way America deliberately planned, prepared for, and ably executed the mission of protecting priceless objects of culture.

## Looting of the Baghdad Museum

In stark contrast to the successful efforts to protect art and antiquities during World War II, the plundering of the National Museum in Baghdad represented a failure to adequately plan and prepare for protecting cultural sites during combat operations. The story of the planning that did occur provides insight into where the process fell short and why a permanent structure for safeguarding cultural treasures during wartime is necessary.

In late November 2002, following in the tradition of George Stout, who six decades earlier had raised the issue of protecting cultural sites in wartime Europe, Dr. Maxwell Anderson and Dr. Ashton Hawkins published an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* entitled "Preserving Iraq's Past."<sup>4</sup> At the time, Anderson was president of the Association of Art Museum Directors and Hawkins was president of the American Council for Cultural Policy. Their article called on U.S. leaders to conduct systematic, government-wide planning to protect Iraq's religious and cultural sites. In support of this call, they argued that the land of Iraq, formerly ancient Mesopotamia, represented the cradle of civilization and therefore included not just the cultural heritage of Iraq, but of the entire world. They urged that steps be taken to protect Iraq's religious and cultural sites and monuments. They specifically called for the prevention of looting and destruction. Finally, they pointed out that scholars in the United States familiar with Mesopotamian and Islamic archaeology would be willing to help identify vulnerable sites. Shortly after publication of the article, Anderson received a phone call from an official at the Pentagon requesting a meeting.

On 24 January 2003, Anderson, Hawkins, and Dr. McGuire Gibson, a professor at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago and an expert on Near East archaeology and antiquity, met with Dr. Joseph J. Collins, deputy assistant secretary of defense for stability operations, and three other members of Collins's staff, at the Pentagon.<sup>5</sup> During

the meeting, the three art historians discussed their concerns about the vulnerable cultural sites within Iraq, going over many of the same issues Anderson and Hawkins had raised in their article. They were primarily concerned about the threat of tanks or bombs destroying monuments, religious structures, and other cultural and archaeological sites. However, they also addressed the threat of looting and noted their concerns about the National Museum in Baghdad, which they said was a repository of everything that had been excavated in Iraq since 1921, and was therefore the most important cultural institution in Iraq.

According to Anderson's recollection of the meeting, the Pentagon officials stated that they had a plan addressing these concerns and were aware of a few dozen potentially vulnerable cultural sites. Gibson responded that the actual number of sites was closer to a few thousand. Based on this discrepancy, the Defense officials agreed to meet later with Gibson to refine their list of cultural and archaeological sites.

After their meeting with Collins and his staff, Anderson and Hawkins visited the State Department to give a similar briefing. Officials at State seemed much more attuned to the threat facing Iraq's cultural heritage. Their ability to take action, however, was constrained by the fact that the Defense Department had the lead for all invasion planning. By many accounts, the Pentagon tightly controlled the reins of pre-war planning and did not successfully integrate the efforts of the government's civilian agencies. For example, at approximately the same time as these meetings, in January 2003, the Pentagon was just beginning to stand up its Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), which was supposed to integrate civilian capabilities into the post-war planning effort.

Former under secretary of defense for policy Douglas J. Feith, who along with National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley wrote the charter for ORHA, has stated that ORHA would have been a much more successful venture had it been created 20 or 30 years earlier, and not on an ad hoc basis immediately prior to the invasion.<sup>6</sup> Feith rightly argues that the U.S. Government needs to have a *permanent* mechanism for integrating civilian capabilities into military efforts. Likewise, avoiding destruction of

cultural heritage sites during wartime hinges on institutionalizing the planning to protect them.

As a result of ORHA's inexperience and inefficiency, the office never integrated well with Central Command and had only limited success. Illustrative of this problem, ORHA apparently sent a letter to senior U.S. military officials in late March warning of the threat to the National Museum. The letter reportedly stated that after the national bank, the museum was the number two priority for protection from looters.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, later events clearly demonstrated that military commanders did not heed the letter's warnings.

After the initial meeting at the Pentagon, Dr. Gibson stayed behind to share his extensive knowledge of Iraq's archaeological sites. The next day, he gave Defense officials a disk containing information on all the known sites. A week and a half later Gibson met with Dr. John J. Kautz, division chief, Operational and Environmental Analysis Division at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). At this meeting, DIA officials sought more information about the locations of archaeological digs. In Gibson's opinion, the analysts wanted the information not to ensure that the sites would be protected, but to ensure that targeting planners could distinguish dig sites from dug-in air defense artillery sites on imagery.

As U.S. forces began to converge on Baghdad in March 2003, Dr. Gibson sent emails to Defense officials warning them again about the potential threats to the National Museum. He was shocked when they responded by asking, "Where is the museum?" (they wanted specific coordinates) and other questions that Gibson had previously addressed and whose answers he had thought were already incorporated into the war plan.

Despite this last-minute confusion, it does appear that the list of cultural sites was successfully incorporated into military planners' no-strike lists or no-fire areas. Indeed, according to Dr. Collins, the minimal destruction of cultural sites by direct U.S. military action is an underreported success story. In his words, the extensive "target deconfliction activities that made sure the ziggurats were not hit by a JDAM [Joint Direct Attack Munitions] even if there were snipers in the upper spires was an incredible accomplishment."<sup>8</sup>

According to most sources, initial plans for the siege of Baghdad called for U.S. Army mechanized

infantry and armor forces to surround the city while light infantry forces cleared the city block by block. Instead, an armor brigade from the 3d Infantry Division conducted its famous “thunder run,” an armed reconnaissance mission into the center of Baghdad, on 7 April 2003. This violent, decisive action led directly to the collapse of Saddam’s defenses and the fall of Baghdad in just two days.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, the speed of the victory contributed to the virtual security vacuum that ensued. Local Iraqis began looting former government ministries and, from approximately 10 to 12 April, the National Museum. Without enough troops in Baghdad to deal with remaining pockets of resistance and simultaneously control the looting, the U.S. Army initially allowed the looting to continue unchecked. Furthermore, according to an Army spokesman, U.S. forces in Baghdad had orders to secure presidential palaces and potential WMD sites, but there were no specific orders to secure cultural sites.<sup>10</sup>

Despite pleas from National Museum administrators, U.S. troops did nothing to stop the theft of at least 15,000 objects. The list of treasures lost is a long one: Abbasid wooden doors; Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hatraean statues; 5,000 cylinder seals from different periods; gold and silver material, necklaces, and pendants; ancient ceramics;<sup>11</sup> the Sacred Vase of Warka, the world’s oldest carved-stone ritual vessel; the Mask of Warka, the first naturalistic sculpture of the human face; a gold bull’s head that had adorned Queen Shub-Ad’s Golden Harp of Ur; the Bassetki Statue; the Lioness Attacking a Nubian ivory; and the twin copper Ninhursag bulls.<sup>12</sup>

Responding to an immediate outcry from the international press, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers stated, “It’s as much as anything else a matter of priorities.” According to Myers, the need to counter ongoing enemy combat operations overrode the need to protect the museum.<sup>13</sup> Secretary of

Defense Donald Rumsfeld was blunter. When asked about the rampant looting, he memorably replied: “Stuff happens.” One of the prominent criticisms emerging from the press was that the U.S. military managed to guard the Oil Ministry in Baghdad but left the other ministries and the museum to the mercy of the looters.

Finally, on the morning of 16 April 2003, an American tank platoon arrived at the museum and set up guard. Shortly thereafter, Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, of the U.S. Marine Corps, led a joint interagency coordination group consisting of civilian representatives from the FBI, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the New York Police Department to the museum to begin an official investigation into the looting and to initiate the process of recovering lost artifacts. With assistance from Interpol, the UN Educational, Science, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other international groups, U.S. efforts to recover the stolen antiquities have been quite successful. So far, over 5,500 of the 15,000 or so missing artifacts have been located and returned to the museum. Most of approximately 9,500 artifacts still missing are smaller, easier-to-conceal items such as cylinder seals, gems, and jewelry.



U.S. Air Force, MSGT James M. Bowman

**Dr. Jabir Khalil Ibrahim (left), State Board of Antiquities, and Colonel Safa Adeen Mahdi Salih, Iraqi Police, hold the Warka Mask, a marble sculpture dating from 3100 BC, 23 September 2003. The recovered Warka Mask had been missing from the Iraqi Museum since the liberation of Iraq.**



AFP, Behrouz Mehri

**U.S. Marine Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, lead investigator in finding looted treasures taken from the Baghdad Archeological Museum, directs a presentation to the press in Baghdad, 16 May 2003.**

In addition, through American assistance (including \$2 million from the State Department and the Packard Humanities Institute of Los Altos, California), the museum has been restored and even modernized.<sup>14</sup> For instance, a new state-of-the-art electronic security system with guardhouses, fences, and surveillance cameras has been installed.

## What Went Wrong?

Why does the failure to protect Iraqi art and antiquities from looting in 2003 seem to stand in such stark contrast to the successes of World War II? And how could planning for the protection of cultural heritage during wartime be improved in the future? To be fair, the U.S. mobilization for World War II was markedly different from U.S. preparations for the invasion of Iraq. In World War II, the entire country truly mobilized for war. Families cultivated victory gardens, the government issued war bonds, and the military-industrial complex went into overdrive; in short, all instruments of national power engaged in the war effort. This general mobilization helps explain why an esteemed panel of experts from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) convened in 1943 to determine how they could contribute to the war effort (thus leading the President to create a commission and the military to form the MFA&A).

In contrast, prior to the invasion of Iraq, the military mobilized, but the government's other agencies

and the private sector conducted business more or less as usual. While Anderson, Hawkins, and Gibson's exertions were noble and in keeping with the precedent set by the ACLS, they did not match the scale or carry the same weight as the academic effort that occurred during World War II.

Furthermore, in terms of timing, the ACLS prepared its assessment a full eight months before the invasion of Italy and over a year and a half before the invasion of France, whereas the meetings at the Pentagon in 2003 occurred less than three months prior to the invasion. The relative lack of preparation time for Iraq

undoubtedly hindered the integration of cultural-site protection into the planning process.

Finally, the force sent into Iraq was only a fraction of the size of the one that invaded Europe. The relatively small size of the 2003 force is probably the principal reason the U.S. military failed to protect the National Museum. According to Dr. Collins, there were not even enough troops to guard ammunition dumps and weapons caches that U.S. forces knew about, let alone cultural sites.<sup>15</sup> None of these things excuse the U.S. military's unpreparedness to guard Iraq's cultural treasures after the fall of Baghdad, but they do provide some mitigating factors.

There are several areas where planning to protect cultural sites could have been enhanced. First, the planning should have been conducted much sooner, and with much greater involvement from civilian agencies. If ORHA could have been created even two to three months earlier, there would have been a much greater chance of capitalizing on expertise in the State Department, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and intergovernmental entities such as UNESCO. As reported by Dr. Anderson, officials at the State Department seemed to have a better understanding of the risks to cultural sites within Iraq, but they were relegated to a secondary and perhaps undervalued planning role.

Another problematic aspect of the planning for Iraq was the delegation of responsibility for protecting cultural sites to the deputy assistant secretary



U.S. Air Force, SSG Reynaldo Ramon

**Iraqi employees display recovered artifacts at the Iraq National Museum, 10 November 2003.**

of defense for stability operations. In the words of Dr. Collins, who held the position prior to the war, this office was basically “the junk drawer of OSD policy,” taking on missions and responsibilities that other agencies and directorates preferred not to deal with.<sup>16</sup> At the time of the invasion, that assessment was probably accurate.

Furthermore, this office was responsible primarily for *stability operations*—in other words, for operations that are commonly understood to occur *after* the conclusion of combat operations. In essence, protection of cultural sites was not viewed as an aspect of the operation’s combat phases. Instead, it was relegated to what the military calls “phase IV,” the stability and reconstruction phase of an operation. This could certainly explain why security of the National Museum did not become a priority until after major combat operations in the city had ceased. When asked after the war why he did not order com-

manders to halt the looting of the museum, Collins responded, “We are a policy shop... We are not in the business of guiding military operations.”<sup>17</sup>

The final major factor contributing to the failure to protect the museum was that, once again, the mechanism for overseeing the mission was thrown together ad hoc. Currently, no permanent structure in the Department of Defense or the government’s civilian agencies is charged with overseeing the protection of art and antiquities during wartime. As previously noted, during World War II the president created the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Artistic and Historic Monuments in War Areas, and the military created the MFA&A, but these institutions did not endure much beyond the war’s end. The lack of an enduring structure virtually ensures that cultural site protection will continue to be ad hoc, making future destruction of art and antiquities during wartime a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## **Planning to Protect Arts and Antiquities**

Through examination of the problems noted above, it is possible to formulate a prescription for improving planning to protect arts and antiquities. First, the role of cultural experts in developing plans for protecting cultural sites and coordinating those plans with operational plans should be enhanced and formalized. This step will ensure that cultural-protection planning occurs on more than just an informal basis. We should not expect our military personnel to be experts on the location and significance of art and culture in countries around the world. That knowledge resides in the civilian agencies of the U.S. Government, in academia, NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations. The military’s relationship with these organizations should be formalized so that experts can play an active role in integrating cultural considerations into military planning.

The U.S. Government has already recognized the need to enhance civilian capabilities for the type of military operations it confronts today. To that end, it has created the State Department’s Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (S/CRS), which the President has tasked to coordinate and lead all efforts to prepare, plan for, and conduct stabilization and reconstruction activities.

A complementary mission of the S/CRS is to create the Civilian Reserve Corps (based on the U.S. military's reserve) to capitalize on civilian expertise in both the public and private sectors. The S/CRS and the Civilian Reserve Corps could each contribute to building U.S. Government capacity to plan for protecting cultural sites during wartime.

The U.S. Government should create a permanent, dedicated structure within the Department of Defense that, at a minimum, ensures that appropriate cultural planning occurs and is disseminated to all levels of command. This organization should be fully integrated into the operations and policy directorates—not marginalized as an afterthought in the “junk drawer” of the Pentagon. It would also be responsible for coordinating directly with whatever civilian agency has overall responsibility for protecting cultural arts and antiquities. Perhaps most importantly, cultural planning should not be relegated to the periphery as part of “phase IV” operations. Unless such planning is a formal aspect of all phases of the operation, it will not be executed properly.

## Conclusion

Over 60 years ago, General Eisenhower stated that it was “the responsibility of every commander to protect and respect” symbols of cultural heritage during wartime. That responsibility continues today. As wars of the past attest, once lost or destroyed, cultural heritage can never be rebuilt. For the present, the treasures of Iraq's National Museum represent the collective cultural heritage of the

strife-riven Sunni and Shi'a sects in Iraq. Indeed, these treasures represent the unifying heritage of the whole world. For these reasons, the importance of protecting these sites cannot be understated. By ensuring their safekeeping and the safekeeping of art and artifacts during future wars, we will give our own cultural heritage a much better chance of remaining secure and available to posterity. **MR**

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## NOTES

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1. Richard Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the 20th Century* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books Inc., 2005), 241-242, 244-245. For this section I draw heavily on the research in this book.

2. “Last Appearance,” *Time*, 28 March 1949, <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,799936,00.html>>.

3. Arndt, 245.

4. Anderson and Hawkins.

5. Description of these meetings derived from interviews conducted by the author with Dr. Maxwell Anderson on April 23, 2007 and Dr. McGuire Gibson on 24 April 2007.

6. Douglas J. Feith, interview by author, Georgetown University, 14 March 2007.

7. Paul Martin, Ed Vulliamy, and Gary Hinliff, “U.S. Army was told to protect looted museum,” *The Guardian-Observer*, 20 April 2003, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,4651740-103550,00.html>>.

8. Dr. Joseph J. Collins, interview by author, 2 May 2007.

9. An excellent account of the 2d Spartan Brigade, 3d Infantry Division's mission is provided by David Zucchini, an embedded journalist, in *Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004).

10. Andrew Lawler, “Mayhem in Mesopotamia,” *Science Magazine*, 1 August 2003, 582.

11. *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*, eds. Milbry Polk and Angela M. H. Schuster (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers, 2005).

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13. Douglas Jehl and Elizabeth Becker, “Experts' Pleas to Pentagon Didn't Save Museum,” *New York Times*, 16 April 2003, B5.

14. Roger Cohen, “The Ghost in the Baghdad Museum,” *New York Times*, 2 April 2006.

15. Interview with Dr. Collins.

16. Casie Vinall, “Joe Collins: Career Officer, Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary,” *Armed Forces Press Service News Articles*, 23 June 2003, <<http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=2884>>.

17. Lawler, 583.