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Ruined, cordoned Falluja is emerging as the decade's monument to brutality



Jonathan Steele and Dahr Jamail
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Robert Zoellick is the archetypal US government insider, a man with a brilliant technical mind but zero experience of any coalface or war front. Sliding effortlessly between ivy league academia, the US treasury and corporate boardrooms (including an advisory post with the scandalous Enron), his latest position is the number-two slot at the state department.

Yet this ultimate "man of the suites" did something earlier this month that put the prime minister and the foreign secretary to shame. On their numerous visits to Iraq, neither has ever dared to go outside the heavily fortified green zones of Baghdad and Basra to see life as Iraqis have to live it. They come home after photo opportunities, briefings and pep talks with British troops and claim to know what is going on in the country they invaded, when in fact they have seen almost nothing.

Zoellick, by contrast, on his first trip to Iraq, asked to see Falluja. Remember Falluja? A city of some 300,000, which was alleged to be the stronghold of armed resistance to the occupation.

Two US attempts were made to destroy this symbol of defiance last year. The first, in April, fizzled out after Iraqi politicians, including many who supported the invasion of their country, condemned the use of air strikes to terrorise an entire city. The Americans called off the attack, but not before hundreds of families had fled and more than 600 people had been killed.

Six months later the Americans tried again. This time Washington's allies had been talked to in advance. Consistent US propaganda about the presence in Falluja of a top al-Qaida figure, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was used to create a climate of acquiescence in the US-appointed Iraqi government. Shia leaders were told that bringing Falluja under control was the only way to prevent a Sunni-inspired civil war.

Blair was invited to share responsibility by sending British troops to block escape routes from Falluja and prevent supplies entering once the siege began.

Warnings of the onslaught prompted the vast majority of Falluja's 300,000 people to flee. The city was then declared a free-fire zone on the grounds that the only people left behind must be "terrorists".

Three weeks after the attack was launched last November, the Americans claimed victory. They say they killed about 1,300 people; one week into the siege, a BBC reporter put the unofficial death toll at 2,000. But details of what happened and who the dead were remain obscure. Were many unarmed civilians, as Baghdad-based human rights groups report? Even if they were trying to defend their homes by fighting the Americans, does that make them "terrorists"?

Journalists "embedded" with US forces filmed atrocities, including the killing of a wounded prisoner, but no reporter could get anything like a full picture. Since the siege ended, tight US restrictions - as well as the danger of hostage-taking that prevents reporters from travelling in most parts of Iraq - have put the devastated city virtually off limits.

In this context Zoellick's trip, which was covered by a small group of US journalists, was illuminating. The deputy secretary of state had to travel to this "liberated" city in a Black Hawk helicopter flying low over palm trees to avoid being shot down. He wore a flak jacket under his suit even though Falluja's streets were largely deserted. His convoy of eight armoured vehicles went "so quickly past an open-air bakery reopened with a US-provided micro-loan that workers tossing dough could be glanced only in the blink of an eye," as the Washington Post reported. "Blasted husks of buildings still line block after block," the journalist added.

Meeting hand-picked Iraqis in a US base, Zoellick was bombarded with complaints about the pace of US reconstruction aid and frequent intimidation of citizens by American soldiers. Although a state